

Robert J. Ristino
Clark University

Cultural Warrior. Public Relations as Artifact and Agent of Culture

Cultural recognition of public relations as a significant and powerful profession began to gain prominence in popular culture with Sloan Wilson's [1955] bestselling novel, "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit." Wilson's protagonist, Tom Rath, is a dissatisfied, somewhat anxious WW II veteran with a growing family and a modest paying job as a mid-level manager at a not-for-profit foundation. Frustrated in his attempts to be promoted to the top job at the foundation and a growing need to increase his earning potential, Rath begins to look for other employment. A friend tips him off about a job opening at a growing media conglomerate where the money and opportunities for growth should be better. The position is in the public relations department.

The novel and the acclaimed movie version starring Gregory Peck [Johnson 1956] were among the first entertainment media to spotlight the growing recognition of public relations as both a profession and a powerful tool for influencing public opinion. It was also acknowledgement of this booming profession's growing ascendancy and prominent role in American life. It was no accident that author Wilson's use of public relations as Rath's entryway to corporate success came at a time when the United States was also ascendant as the world's leading industrial nation and one of its major military superpowers. As the United States had grown so had the uniquely American-born profession of public relations.

At every stage of public relation's development as a profession it came to reflect as well as help sustain and create the social, political, civic and business institutions that it represented. Beginning with its birth in the late 19th century, each stage of public relation's development has been marked by a specific approach to communication that dominated its activities and behavior. Each

stage reflected the time period's social and political tensions and the level of sophistication with communication technology. In each stage of development public relation's honed its process technology to better exploit and employ the emerging communication technologies of each period thus becoming both an artifact and an agent of the culture that gave it life and nurtured it.

1. Public relations as artifact of culture

As used here, the term *artifact* has a much broader meaning than is typically defined as an "object produced or shaped by human craft, especially a tool, a weapon, or ornament" [Free Online Dictionary]. Archaeologists have come to greatly expand the definition of *artifact* from something merely man-made to include anything that that has been shaped, altered or modified by man. Deetz included within this broader definition such human activities as topiary, body tattooing, parades and songs [Claney 2003, p. 4]. Consequently, *artifact* has been also described as something characteristic of or resulting from a particular human institution, period, trend or individual [Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary]. It is within this broader definition that we discuss public relations as an "artifact."

The activity of public relations, similar to the activities of topiary or tattooing, also creates other artifacts. For example, topiary creates ornamental shrubs and trees, and tattooing creates body art. Similarly, public relations creates numerous artifacts or what are often referred to as sub artifacts, such as print, audio and video news releases, news kits, news conferences, advertisements, brochures, videos, podcasts, news clips and a wide array of pseudo events. Another form of artifact resulting from public relations activity is what Norman [2007], writing about computer technology nearly two decades ago, termed a *cognitive artifact*. He used the term to describe any "artificial device designed to maintain, display, or operate upon information in order to serve a representational function" [p. 1]. Moreover, a cognitive artifact, similar to any artifact, reflects the "productive intentions" of its author(s) [Hilpinen 1992, p. 65]. Consequently, a cognitive artifact could be a drawing, a diagram or a model.

Public relations creates numerous cognitive artifacts that reflect the production intentions of its authors, such as a variety of models to describe both operational and communication processes, as well as planning documents for communication programs and campaigns. For example, today's public relations is guided by a model comprising a series of programmatic steps for producing communicative outputs. This four-step model has been thoroughly explicated by Cutlip, Center and Broom [2000, pp. 339–452], among others. Moreover, throughout its century-long history, public relations has been guided in its activities by various communication models or a combination of those models.

Among these the most popular are those proposed by Grunig [1989]. These four models attempt to explain how public relations practitioners employ

communication activities in practicing their profession. These are the press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical models [pp. 29–30]. Each model not only describes the dominant communication paradigm extant during various stages of the evolution of the practice but also constitute a history of the functions growing sophistication with the psychosocial aspects and evolving technology of communication.

Consequently, from an archeological and anthropological perspective, public relations may be described as a human activity that serves as an artifact and a producer of artifacts reflecting the production intentions of its authors to influence public opinion and behavior through the systematic management of communication content and media.

2. Sense Making of Public Relations as a Cognitive Artifact

To make sense of artifacts, Clane [2003] argues that they must be seen and understood in context since there exists an “active relationship between artifact and culture.” In context, artifacts can help us understand how they are used to “express as well as construct, maintain, and reinforce cultural and social meaning and to both implement and adjust to cultural change” [pp. 3–4]. So any interpretation of public relations as a cognitive artifact or of the artifacts that it produces, can only be understood in its historical context. To simplify the understanding of this historical context, public relations educators have divided the profession’s development into various periods or eras. Cutlip, Center and Broom [2000, pp. 111–112] have identified six periods: Seedbed Years (1900–1917); World War I Period (1917–1919); Booming Twenties Era (1919–1929); Roosevelt Era and World War II (1930–1945); Postwar Era (1945–1965); and the Global Information Society (1965–present). During each era, the artifact of public relations can tell us much about the society of that period.

As an example, let us examine the artifact of public relations in its Seedbed Years. The context in which public relations was born had two aspects: one was the sea change in American society occurring at the turn of the twentieth century and the other was the growing recognition of the power of the dominant mass media of the day – newspapers and magazines – to influence, if not control, public opinion.

The Sea Change in American Society

From the Gilded to the Digital Ages, public relations has played and continues to play a significant role in expressing what and how we see and think about ourselves as a society, a culture and a nation state. Public relation’s birth during the Gilded Age – that period just preceding the Seedbed Years -- reflected the rapid growth of mass communication technologies, the growing efficacy of publicity as a marketing tool, and the business community’s effort to adjust to dramatic cultural and social change. The first vestiges of true public relation’s practice

can be found in the late 1880's when the American Mutual Insurance Company formally opened a "literary bureau" staffed by former journalists whose job was to generate positive news stories for the company [Slater, p. 150]. By then, public relations' basic skills of press agency and publicity had been well honed by such entrepreneurs as P.T. Barnum, Davey Crockett, and Gustave Cuerbetin, among others [Bates, p. 8; Slater, pp. 149–150]. All had effectively used promotional stunts, pseudo-events, advertising, press releases and sophisticated social networking to promote their various enterprises.

By the end of the century, public relations had become a recognizable function – though referred to then as *publicity* -- marked by the opening in Boston in 1900 of the Publicity Bureau, the first public relations agency. In 1902, William Wolf Smith, a newspaper correspondent, opened a firm with a man named Walmer of whom little is known. *Smith & Walmer*, located in the nation's capital, declared itself to be in the business of publicity. Four years later, Ivy Lee Ledbetter, one of the founding fathers of modern public relations, opened an agency with George Parker in New York City [Cutlip, Center, & Broom, pp. 113–115]. While these firms used the term *publicity* to describe their business, the term *public relations* had had a much earlier debut in a speech at Yale University in 1888 [Slater, p. 150] and was reintroduced a decade later by the American Railroad Association in its corporate brochure [Bates, p. 9]. *Public relations* would not become the title du jour until the Twenties when it would be popularized by the other founding father of modern public relations, Edward Bernays, in his prescient book, "Crystallizing Public Opinion" [Bates, p. 13].

The period from 1885 to 1917 gave birth to public relations because of the unique juxtaposition of numerous sociocultural factors. These included rampant industrialization, advances in communication technologies, the rapid organization and concentration of corporate "trusts" in the railroad, shipping, steel, coal, petroleum and meat-packing industries and a rapidly expanding and literate population. These all combined to create fertile ground for the new practice of public relations.

All these industries were tightly held by a handful of aggressive, innovative, entrepreneurs, such as Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick in steel, Stanley Morgan in railroads, John D. Rockefeller in oil, Cornelius Vanderbilt in railroads, and Philip D. Armour, Nelson Morris and Gustavus F. Swift in meat-packing [Current, Williams, & Freidel, 1991, pp. 493–500]. They were men of a similar philosophy best expressed by financier William Vanderbilt's declaration, "The public be damned" [Bates, p. 11]. Their outlook reflected a belief in the newly minted theory of Social Darwinism, expounded by the Englishman Herbert Spencer, that was a rather shameless recasting of the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin who had published his seminal work *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. In brief, Social Darwinism argued that in the business world as in life, all

was a struggle with the weak perishing and the strong surviving. This was, the theory predicted, as it should be because society benefited when only the strong and successful survived [Current, Williams, & Freidel, p. 502].

These business tycoons did their best to live out this philosophy, using a pliable and often willing partner in state and local governments to exploit their workers and the nation's natural resources. By the 1880s push back began with the birth of the grassroots Populist movement that would lay the groundwork for the later and more politically successful Progressive movement of the early Twentieth Century. The Progressive movement would begin in what Hofstadter [1955] called *The Age of Reform*. In addition, newspapers, especially the urban dailies, saw the big corporations and trusts as easy marks for the popular yellow journalism of the day. Negative, hard-hitting stories of the robber barons' various transgressions played to a popular sentiment among the people, rapidly increasing readership, especially among the fast growing immigrant classes who worked the mines and factories of corporate America [Campbell 2002, pp. 279–280].

In response, companies began to hire journalists to write and place stories with local and national press to mitigate the negative coverage or to protect their corporate image, as was the case with the American Mutual Insurance Company. Its prescient introduction of an in-house publicity function was replicated in 1889 when George Westinghouse hired a publicist to promote his system of alternating current that was vying with Thomas Edison's competing direct current system. Likewise, in 1890, the organizers of the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago established a Department of Publicity and Promotion, issuing its first news release a year later [Slater, p. 150]. At AT&T, Theodore N. Vail, who would one day become the company's president, had begun to recognize the power of public opinion and would become a champion of employing public relations as a significant senior management tool to protect the image and identity of his company [Cutlip, Center & Broom 2002, pp. 119–120].

The mostly deserved criticism that corporate America suffered on the pages of the nation's populist press during this period was nothing compared to the excoriation it would receive at the hands of a growing array of national magazines that contended with the press for mass media dominance. Public relations began to come into its own precisely at the time when the national magazines, such as *Ladies Home Journal*, *McClure's*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Colliers* staffed by many former journalists, also recognized the obvious -- that attacking big business was good for their business. So with the turn of the century began the era of the muckrakers [Campbell 2002, pp. 313–315; Hofstadter, p. 192]. Industry leaders began to respond, often by hiring the newly emerging public relations firms, such as the *Publicity Bureau* in Boston, *Parker & Lee* in New York and *Smith & Walmer* in Washington, DC.

Growing Recognition of the Power of the Mass Media

It was also during this period of the ascendancy of newspapers and magazines that sociologists and pundits began to write about the power of the mass media to control and shape public opinion. Here European thinkers were ahead of the curve. In 1887, Tonnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* argued that newspapers had become a powerful mechanism for "manufacturing and marketing of public opinion" [Slater, p. 151]. Le Bon (2002) made a similar argument in his 1895 seminal work on the formation of public opinion, "The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind." The book would prove to be extraordinarily influential, especially among fascist dictators such as Adolph Hitler who allegedly based many of his ideas about propaganda in *Mein Kampf* on Le Bon's work [Schreiber, n.d. Ch. 3]. In a later book, "The Psychology of the Great War," Le Bon [1916] would argue that newspapers were "always potent leaders, because their ready weapons are affirmation, repetition, suggestion, and prestige, which are the real affective factors of crowd opinion" [p. 228].

While Le Bon focused on the crowd as the central focus of opinion making, Tarde focused on how consensus developed among publics. In his essay "Opinion and Conversation," Tarde argued that "conversation" or public discourse, "and the press, which at present is the principal source of conversation, are the major factors in opinion" [Glynn, Herbst, O'Keefe, Shapiro & Lindeman 2004, p. 53]. The views of these European sociologists were also shared by many of their American counterparts, as well as those who sought to influence that public opinion through well-managed publicity.

As we have seen, public relations came into being for two reasons: First, to express the culture – the beliefs, values and norms – of a business community set upon by the new forces of a populist mass media; and secondly, to exploit the increasing recognition of the power of that mass media to cultivate public favor and support. The remaking of corporate America's image, much like Ivy Lee's artful remaking of John D. Rockefeller's image [Bates, p. 11], was written in the vernacular of a belief in the ultimate supremacy of unrestrained capitalism and self-serving Social Darwinism. And often, such as with Lee, those who practiced public relations, were also believers in the righteous cause of the industrial giants of the age.

The Meaning of Public Relations as Artifact

The meaning of public relations as artifact can be interpreted on two levels suggested by Barthes [1964] taxonomy of meaning. A semiotician, Barthes, building on the work of Saussure, created two orders of meaning or signification for any given symbol [pp. 1–23]. In the first order of meaning there are three components: first, the signifier or the item itself, in this case the words *public relations*; secondly, the signified, the literal or explicit meaning of the words

public relations – maintaining good connections with the public; and thirdly, taken together, the signified and the signifier constitute the sign – *public relations*. This is the denotative level.

The second order of meaning is when those interpreting the sign give the signified an implied or associated meaning. This is the connotative level wherein the interpreter of the sign *public relations* infers a belief that through specialized techniques, the mass media could be exploited and manipulated. Expanding on this dyadic schema, Barthes [1972] argued that such connotative meanings were socially constructed since they were heavily influenced by the dominant power structure. Consequently, Barthes labeled such connotations as *myths*. The sign and how people have internalized the various meanings of that sign, create a mythology, or what some call a third order of meaning. In the case of public relations, this paper posits that mythology or narrative tale embodied the belief that through the use of the power of public relations the rich and powerful could exercise social control by influencing and manipulating public sentiment. In fact, Grunig [1989] claims that public relations practice “is dominated by the presupposition that the purpose of public relations is to manipulate the behavior of publics for the assumed, if not actual, benefit of the manipulated publics as well as the organization” [p. 29].

This proposed mythology is the legacy imparted by the artifact of public relations, a legacy still with us today. As artifact, public relations during the Seedbed Years conveyed how society viewed the growing power of the mass media in all of its evolving forms while both admiring and distrusting those practitioners who manipulated that power.

3. Public Relations as Agent of Culture

As Clancy [2002] noted earlier, artifacts have an active relationship with culture. Simply, artifacts not only tell us much about the culture that spawned them but they also help create, influence and transmit that culture. This is the public relations role as agent of culture.

Vygotsky [1929], the Russian semiotician and learning theorist, was the first to articulate this concept of agent of culture in his cultural-historical theory of learning. Vygotsky theorized that children learn principally from their interaction with the culture of their social system [Tharp & Gallimore 1988, pp. 6–7]. For reasons that will be explicated further on, his theory is more often referred to as sociocultural theory, one that has had a profound impact on education.

There are two important aspects of Vygotsky’s theory. The first is that his theory is rooted in culture. Vygotsky argued that a child’s behavior is driven or directed by their cultural knowledge [Trevarthen 1988]. The child acquires this cultural knowledge from his or her caregivers or, what Vygotsky called the agents of culture. For the child, the most influential agents of culture, at least

early on in their maturation, are parents. As the child matures, other agents of culture begin to play a significant role in their acquisition of cultural knowledge. These may include, peers, relatives, teachers, and religious, civic and political leaders. Agents of culture pass along their cultural knowledge by sharing language, symbols, concepts and ways of thinking about the world. These become internalized as cognitive processes that mediate social behaviors [Kozulin 1990, pp. 114–115].

This notion of mediated social behavior leads to the second major aspect of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, as Lantolf [2000] explains, positing that humans are mediated beings. Vygotsky argues that humans are born with natural cognitive processes and that these processes become "reorganized" during maturation as a result of the child's interaction with cultural artifacts, activities and concepts [p. 69]. Vygotsky further argues that human behavior is never free of these sociocultural influences. Hence the more commonly used Sociocultural theory name for his theory of learning.

As noted earlier, the role of agents of culture are assumed by different players in the various milieus in which the maturing individual finds him or herself. In the neighborhood it might be peers while in school it could be teachers. Once an adult enters the work world, they become exposed to still other agents of culture, those who will begin to instill the cultural knowledge -- the language, symbols and concepts -- essential for the individual to survive and succeed in a highly competitive and demanding environment. It is the practical knowledge of learning "that's how it is done around here" and of how to navigate the often treacherous shoals of work life.

Schein [1988] expands on this notion by providing a functionalist anthropological definition of culture as it applies to groups and organizations. He explains that culture is a "property" of groups that reflects the totality of what they have learned during their lifetimes. Moreover, he argues, that his definition emphasizes learning and refers only to that "accumulated learning" that is passed along to group or organizational members. Consequently, he defines culture as:

"1) A pattern of basic assumptions, 2) invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, 3) as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore 5) is to be taught to new members as the 6) correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" [p. 7].

Public Relations as an Organizational Agent of Culture

In the work setting, group learning occurs through the agency of many system actors, some naturally more influential than others. Organizational agents

of culture include fellow workers, first line supervisors, middle and senior managers, human resources and public relations functions. Arguably, among the most powerful and influential is the public relations function.

The reason for its powerful role as agent of culture is because of its unique position in managing organizational communications. No other organizational management function has such a far-reaching and intrinsic role in managing formal communication processes throughout an organization by controlling information production, access and distribution. Moreover, public relations is also that unique function given the responsibility both to interpret organizational image and identity, and to manage public discussion of organizational issues and values for both internal and external audiences [Cheney & Vibbert 1987, pp. 174–177]. In this unique organizational role public relations serves as the principal mediator of corporate culture.

As an agent of culture, public relations transmits to system members the cultural or psychological tool set that they will need to successfully manage workplace life. These psychological tools carry the “accumulated learning” people need to mediate their understanding of the world around them [Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller 2003, p. 4]. Psychological tools comprise the symbols, language, concepts, behaviors, and modes of thinking or, in Schein’s [1988, p. 7] words, “pattern of basic assumptions” that group members require to ensure the system survives and succeeds in a competitive and, often, hostile environment. It is through public relations creative, purposeful use of symbols, language, rites and rituals that culture is formed, sustained and transmitted to both internal and external audiences.

Public relations transmission of psychological tools may be both intentional and unintentional. For example, in organizational publications, such as annual reports, corporate magazines or employee newsletters, the weaving of cultural values and norms often occurs naturally in the telling and retelling of stories and myths that emanate from the organization’s philosophy, vision, mission, history and traditions. Conversely, in conducting rituals and ceremonies, public relations deliberately orchestrates such events to reflect and reinforce the underpinning values and beliefs of the organization. Often these events are pregnant with symbols or what Durkheim calls totems that are the reification of the corporate entity itself [Kozulin 1990, p. 125]. Such totems run the symbolic gamut from team mascots to the American eagle.

Public Relations as Mediator of Culture

Externally, public relations must make the organization’s culture real for other actors in the environment. Organizations, groups and individuals cannot beneficially interact with one another unless they share a common basis for mutual understanding. This basis is rooted in knowledge of the culture of all actors in the environment. For these environmental actors to successfully

mediate their behaviors with each other they rely on the psychological tools passed on to them by the public relations function. This is especially true for corporate organizations that have to be perceived as living entities, as both “being” and as a “being”.

Corporate museums are a good example of public relations engagement with external audiences. Usually sited at an organization’s corporate headquarters, corporate museums are designed to use the highly effective communication attributes of slow media to immerse audience members in the culture of the organization. Many companies, such as Hershey and Harley-Davidson, have corporate museums, as does Coca Cola, which opened a new \$96-million facility in Atlanta two years ago. Coke’s chairman and CEO accurately characterized the museum as a “manifestation” of the organization’s “mission, vision and values” [McKay 2007].

Similarly, public relations must also make real for internal system members the culture of external groups. So while sharing the organization’s culture with the external environment it also feeds back information about the cultures of those external groups it interacts with. The primary function of the public relations practitioner, as Carey (1969) argues, is to translate the “attitudes, knowledge, and concerns” of one culture into readily understood language of another culture, or what he called a “differentiated speech community” [p. 27]. Cheney and Vibbert [1987] characterize this public relations function as boundary spanning in which public relations practitioners “are continually involved in making symbolic connections between organization and environment [pp. 177–178].

Ironically, such intercultural communication occurs both within and outside of the organization. Internally, numerous functional and hierarchal groups or subcultures populate organizations. Schein [2003, p. 35] argues that one of the ways that these groups define themselves is through a common language, or what is often referred to as jargon. Public relations, using a common language, mediates between and among these groups to foster among subsystem members a sense of organizational belonging, commitment, and a commonly shared uber culture. Externally, public relations, using specially crafted language and symbols, translates and transmits the organization’s culture to other distinct cultural groups and subgroups. It also serves to mediate between and among these groups so that the organization can better manage adapting to environmental change and challenges.

4. Public Relations Goes Back to the Movies

More than a half century after the stunning success of “The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit,” another well-received movie featured among its main characters a public relations practitioner. “Hancock” starred Will Smith as a rather despondent, depressed and antisocial superhero [Berg 2008]. While performing his various “good” deeds, protecting the local citizenry from one disaster

after another, he saves a man from being crushed to death by a locomotive. Unfortunately, Hancock causes considerable damage to private property while performing this prodigious feat bringing on the wrath of the surrounding crowd. The man he saves, Ray, operates a public relations firm and convinces the ambivalent antihero that what he needs is an image makeover.

In transforming Hancock, Ray changes the superhero's language, appearance, symbolism and behavior. He provides Hancock with a new "psychological tool box" so that Hancock can successfully navigate a society that wants and needs a superhero but one with a persona that conforms to its culturally acceptable values and beliefs. And that is exactly what Hancock gives them.

In "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" public relations is portrayed as a new, emerging profession just coming into its own as America ascends the world stage as the dominant superpower. In "Hancock," public relations manifests its skillful use of language, symbols and behavior to remake a cultural icon – the superhero. These two theatrical films represent the opposite poles of a half-century of moviemaking, representing the popular understanding and appreciation for the role that public relations plays and continues to play in both reflecting, transmitting and influencing our culture.

5. A last Word

As an artifact of culture, public relations reflects our perceptions of the power of the media and those who manipulate it to influence and shape public opinion and behavior. As an agent of culture, public relations plays an active role in influencing and shaping our thinking, feeling and behavior in the world. As both artifact and agent, public relations is a warrior, forever engaged in transmitting and transforming the culture that both spawned and nurtures it.

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