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# SUMMARY OF PROPAGANDA HISTORY AND TECHNIQUES

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At the turn of the 20th century railroads and banking viewed public opinion with contempt – a disdain epitomized by John D. Rockefeller, Jr.'s remark: "the public be damned." Nevertheless, when a flurry of legislation started breaking up predatory trusts and monopolies, greedy millionaires became acutely aware that people's opinions must be considered and big business must be "liked." Journalist Ivy Ledbetter Lee entered the picture in 1903. His first approach was to give facts that told the businessman's point of view. That worked well during the anthracite coal strike and after a 1906 railroad accident that raised public outrage.

Rockefeller hired Lee in 1914 to handle media relations during labor strikes, and later to advise the Rockefeller family on a wide range of business decisions. Lee had some success in placating workers and in improving the working environment through his method of presenting facts. Nevertheless, when World War I broke out there was still a strong anti-business atmosphere.

To mobilize public support for World War I, President Woodrow Wilson appointed journalist George Creel to head a newly-created Committee on Public Information with a mandate to *sell America on the war* and to *sell the world on Wilson's war objectives*. Among Creel's 150,000 employees were Ivy Lee and a soon-to-be-popular PR counsel named Edward L. Bernays.

Creel used many techniques to conduct his propaganda campaign: patriotic posters on bulletin boards, fences, in store windows, and otherwise prominently displayed; and millions of leaflets, pamphlets, and patriotic booklets were showered globally. They all promoted an enemy image of the bloody Hun and a murderous German Kaiser. Movies were filmed to carry the same message. An outside threat always rallies a nation. Patriotic songs denigrating the enemy and glorifying our troops were chorused at public gatherings. An army of some 75,000 "Four Minute Men" delivered about 7½ million short, patriotic pep talks during movie theater intermissions and other opportune occasions. Creel has been referred to as *the mobilizer of emotion*. His techniques were picked up by Hitler in the '30s and '40s.

Learning from wartime propaganda, PR took a new tack during the 1920s. *The crowd* and *the public* became two distinct entities. *The crowd* is brutish and functions in a simple *emotional* state. *The public* is more *intellectual* and inclined to debate facts rather than act upon them. Prior to the war Ivy Lee's approach was to address *the public*. After working with Creel he switched to addressing *the crowd*, relying on "tactics of psychological manipulation, on seductive appeals to the subconscious recesses of mental life." Lee said in 1921: "Publicity is essentially a matter of mass psychology. We must remember that people are guided more by

sentiment than by mind."[1]

Walter Lippmann also made his debut in the 1920s. His approach was to *manufacture consent*." Stuart Ewen wrote: "Intrinsic to this outlook was Lippmann's firm belief that most people are inescapably oblivious to their world and cannot be expected to deal intelligently with the merits of a controversy." [2] Lippmann appealed to *the crowd* to achieve desired behavior from *the public*. He thought people understood their environment through mental images. His technique was to shape a pseudo environment in which the elite could manipulate the mass mind. The best approach was with pictures or words that conjured up pictures – motion pictures were excellent. He advocated *preemptive management* in which specialists formulated how the press handles certain issues. Ronald Steel explained:

> Without some form of censorship, propaganda in the strict sense of the word is impossible. In order to conduct propaganda there must be some barrier between the public and the event. Access to the real environment must be limited, before anyone can create a pseudo-environment that he thinks is wise or desirable.[3]

Edward L. Bernays, formerly of the WW-I Committee on Public Information, was impressed with Lippmann's ideas and spent the next seven decades of his life building and improving on them. Bernays "conceives of his profession as 'the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses' ... Through his expert control over the 'mass mind' the [PR] counselor functions as 'the invisible government.'"[4] Bernays coined the term *Engineering of Consent,* and wrote: "Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.... [O]ur minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of...."[5] Bernays added that "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses" has become an indispensable feature of a "democratic society."[6]

A key Bernays' tactic was don't deliver the message yourself, get a celebrity to do it. Rather than simply saying that eating spinach is good for you, get a doctor or dietician to say it. Screen stars and athletes also make commercials. The masses tend to follow a trusted leader.

Bernays used imaginative methods to authenticate his PR messages. In 1929 he orchestrated Light's Golden Jubilee for General Electric to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Edison's invention of the light bulb. He arranged for the presence of President Herbert Hoover, movie star Will Rogers, aircraft pioneer Orville Wright, and radium discoverer Marie Curie. With such an impressive lineup the event had powerful public relations value. Bernays encouraged clients to generate news with an overt act that wakes people up and gets their attention: "News is not an inanimate thing. It is the overt act that makes news, and news in turn shapes the attitudes and

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[1] Ewen, Stuart; *PR! A Social History of Spin*, (New York, Basic Books of Harper Collins, 1996).

[2] Ewen, op. cit., p. 158

[3] Steel, Ronald; *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (New York, 1980), pp. 42-43. Quoted in Ewen, op. cit., p. 152.

[4] Vaughn, Wayland F.; *Social Psychology: The Science and the Art of Living Together* (The Odyssey Press, 1948). Quoted in Larsen, Keith A., *Public Relations, the Edward L. Bernayses, and the American Scene: A Bibliography* (F.W. Faxon Co.; Westwood, MA; 1978) p. 279

[5] From Bernays' 1928 book *Propaganda.* Quoted in **Error! Main Document Only.**Griffith, Joel; "Fluoride: Industry's Toxic Coup," *Earth Island Journal*, Spring 1998, Vol. 13, Issue No. 2, p. 38.

[6] From Bernays' 1928 book *Propaganda.* Quoted in Ewen, op. cit., pp. 166-167

actions of people."[7]

Another Bernays technique was to make connections with social causes. When he was selling the "benefits" of smoking for the American Tobacco Company, one of his main projects was getting women to smoke. He conjured up the Torches of Freedom campaign and focused on the equality of the sexes cause, using prominent members of the feminist movement who were married to men of notoriety. The overt event was to have several young women marching down Fifth Avenue in the 1929 Easter parade while smoking their "torches of Freedom." Bernays had created a newsworthy event, enlisted a social cause, and had authorities to promote the project.

With ingenious PR experts like Lee, Lippmann, and Bernays, the post-war economic rebound of finance and industry during the 1920s was sensational, but short-lived. When the stock market crashed in 1929, public opinion shifted in a new direction. The economy was devastated. Between 1929 and 1932 the total net profits of private corporations fell from $8.4 billion to $3.4 billion, more than 100,000 US businesses failed, industrial production declined 51 percent, and American exports dropped by two thirds. Three years after the Crash, a third of the US workforce was unemployed with many more working part-time or at reduced wages. Savings evaporated as banks failed.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) became president in January 1933. Journalist Louis McHenry Howe, FDR's campaign manager since 1912, explained his simple tactic: "If you say a thing often enough, it stands a good chance of becoming a fact."[8] Howe helped FDR develop a leadership style by getting him out with the ordinary people and making himself available. Howe made radio his preferred publicity device. In 32 fireside chats, FDR delivered well-digestible bites of information and explained them soundly.

FDR's *New Deal* policies to improve the economy and provide jobs brought disenchantment with capitalism to a head. Ironically, PR techniques which had once been used to sway public opinion in favor of big business were now employed to encourage and empower people. FDR showed trust and affection for the people and stressed the greater good of humanity over the selfish interests of a few. He called for a "reanimation of America's honorable democratic roots, a return to principles that had gotten lost amid an inferno of commercialism."[9]

In 1935, Roy Stryker became head of the Historical Section of what later became the Farm Security Administration (FSA). To illustrate the goals of the FSA he produced a photo display illustrating the rampant poverty in a way that showed a resolute spirit in struggling people. He conveyed the picture of dire needs while simultaneously upholding the ideal of human rights and the common good. Stryker's exhibit pulled the people together and gave them a purpose. This *spirit-of-unity* concept was adopted by many institutions and used by commercial media up to 1940. Hollywood produced films like *The Grapes of Wrath.* Stryker's exhibit had a significant impact on photojournalism and it linked the middle and poor classes simply and bluntly.[10]

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[7] Quoted in Ewen, op. cit., p. 22

[8] Ibid, p. 243. This same approach was adopted by Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels who counseled: "Keep it Simple. Say it often."

[9] Ewen, op. cit., p. 259

[10] A similar propaganda technique was used in February 2002 to rally support for the Bush administration's war on terrorism. The State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs organized an exhibition of photographer Joel Meyerowitz's collection called "After September 11: Images From Ground Zero." These

A constant flow of sensational government-manufactured news releases continued to inundate the media. Labor unions gained ground and workers' rights became a sacred principle. The progressive income tax (the more you make, the more you pay) was institutionalized. Consumer cooperatives (Co-Ops) competed with businesses in marketing brand-name foods and other commodities. The clout of business and finance faded.

Bernays said in 1936 that businesses should transcend their individual interests and unite to protect their collective interests. Carl Byoir wrote in 1938: "American industry -- the whole capitalist system -- lives in the shadow of a volcano. That volcano is public opinion. It is in eruption. Within an incredible short time it will destroy business or it will save it."[11] The August 1938 issue of *Fortune* magazine editorialized that businesses would fare better if they presented themselves more as public-service institutions than as profit-oriented entities.

Corporate America responded to this advice during the 1939 New York World's Fair which offered the most resounding opportunity of the decade to rebut all the negative publicity they had received from the New Deal. Corporations portrayed a future in which private businesses existed primarily to serve the almighty consumer. As described by Ewen: "The fair's entire physical ambience communicated a theatrical rendition of a corporately animated tomorrow in which hardships had disappeared."[12]

PR usually claims to be educational, not propaganda, and it is difficult to tell the difference. Shortly after World War II, Max Wertheimer, a psychologist who had fled Nazi Germany, constructed a useful rule-of-thumb to distinguish propaganda from education: "propaganda tries to keep people from thinking and from acting as humans with rights; it manipulates prejudice and emotion to impose the propagandist's will on others. Education, in contrast, should provide the skills for people to stand on their own two feet and to make their own decisions; it should encourage critical thinking."[13]

In summary, critical thinking is at the heart of education. It is important to analyze many views from different perspectives and not just be guided by what we like or dislike, or what sounds sensational. Education on a topic means finding out more about that topic. Analysis and discussion with an open mind promotes the educational process which, in turn, helps one to recognize and guard against the manipulative intent of propaganda.

A final note: all the propaganda since World War I plays on emotions. It contains the propagandist's message but emotions carry that message and make it heard. The intellectual approach of merely providing facts may infuriate people and cause them to complain but only emotions motivate them to do something about it. Public relations experts today follow Walter Lippmann's counsel of appealing to *the crowd* with emotion to achieve desired behavior from *the public*.

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photographs documented the tragic aftermath of the terrorist attack that destroyed the twin towers. Twenty seven sets of the Meyerowitz collection went on a worldwide traveling tour.

[11] Byoir, Carl; "The Volcano of Public Opinion," *Public Relations 1* (First Quarter, 1938), p. 18. Cited in Ewen, op cit. pp. 294-295.

[12] Ewen, op. cit., p. 328.

[13] Pratkanis, Anthony R. and Aronson, Elliot; *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion* (New York, W. H. Freeman and Company, 2001/1992), p. 266.