Public Relations Theory
Public Relations Theory

Capabilities and Competencies

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Introduction

*Public Relations Theory: Capabilities and Competencies* offers an overview of leading public relations theories that have been built up over the last four decades. With a combined experience of more than 50 years, we have worked to summarize each theory and provide insights into key themes such as risks, crises, issues, leadership, relationships, measurement challenges, and publics and stakeholders. While it is not possible to capture the fullness of each theory and each of the related topics, we believe that this book meets the challenge of describing the most salient and significant aspects of the discipline in its current state of theoretical and conceptual development.

The field of public relations has been subjected to evolution, diversification, and merger of approach, spurred by rapid changes in society, cultural boundaries, technology, and media environments. As well as explaining the theories and key concepts, the book offers cases and challenges to help students bring theory and research to bear on solving the daily challenges of public relations practice.

Public relations practice, research, and theory building are organically interrelated and unchanging. Engagement of individuals and organizations in conflict, competition, and cooperation has defined human society since its very beginning, although how well power, control, material and symbolic resources, and quality of engagement are managed has varied throughout history. Public relations is often looked upon as a functional tool by which elites gain power and exert control. Throughout history, it has been both strategically and historically contingent on specific situations. Professionals (although not always going by the title of public relations practitioner) have employed their particular structures, tools, functions, and strategic processes to help individuals and organizations achieve their goals, missions, and visions. But as much as elites seek its service, others, including activists, have used public relations to reshape society. It can subvert public order and the will of the people (and even presume to convince the people as to what their “will” is). Private interests often have been sought at the expense of the public good, or in its name. Because the principles governing public relations practice and its roles in society are timeless, unique and ever-changing socioeconomic, cultural, media, and political conditions continue to affect professional practice.

The interaction of theory and practice is the central theme of this book: one cannot exist without the other. While the goal of both practitioners and theoreticians is to improve practice, it is clear that theory is no magic elixir that will overcome deficient practice, and even the most elegant execution cannot make up for a deficient conceptualization.

Given this history and context, Chapter 1 sets the stage by broadly asking whether public relations can be socially responsible, and if so, how. The term “public relations” is often associated with unsavory means and unethical outcomes. Yet, it is continually present in society as professional
practice and socioeconomic, political influence. Theorists, as this chapter suggests, have worked with practitioners to define the practice, refine its application, and ensure that it serves the public good.

Chapter 2 explores the ways in which theory—and theoretical assumptions—operates to improve practice. While this necessarily means increasing organizational efficiency and individual efficacy, theory can help practitioners maintain focus on a social responsibility that goes beyond one’s institutional role or organizational goals to make society as a whole more fully functioning. As Vision 2050, the Melbourne Mandate, and the Stockholm Accords propose, public relations must confront its place within global society to augment maximization of resources, foster communication on a level playing field, and augment sustainability. Fostering communicative interaction and augmenting the co-creation of meaning in order to enrich society at large is the laudable—if elusive—goal of public relations practice. This chapter identifies and explains theoretical assumptions that deserve to be kept in mind in order to improve practice, while guiding research and theory building.

Chapter 3 examines a major stream of public relations theory that emerged in the 1980s. Excellence theory, based on communication management, proposes that since each organization’s actions affect its relationship with publics, conflicts stemming from those actions can be resolved by adjusting the organization’s communication style or functions to bring it into alignment with the publics’ expectations. This theory prompted research into which of several models best serves organizations and publics. Two-way symmetrical communication became the “gold standard” of this approach. Based on the theory’s general systems theoretical underpinnings, behavioral adjustment—as opposed to symbolic or philosophical reexamination of relationships—was proposed as the means for resolving problems and building relationships. The key is that behavioral adjustment begins and ends with public relations being invested in management, so that the voice of critics can help define the qualitative dynamic of organization–public relationships.

Chapter 4 discusses the most strident challenge to excellence theory, known as contingency theory. Instead of proposing that there is a single means of correcting communicative behavior or that all publics have similar preferences and expectations, contingency theory argues that both individuals and organizations can take any number of positions along a continuum between advocacy and accommodation. The dynamics of the organization–public relationship depend on many factors and range from situations of pure agreement or alignment to ones of disagreement or conflict. Contingency theory begins as a description and mapping of the strategic choices made by the various parties involved. It then assesses the factors that can lead to changes of stance and strategic choices over time. It is expected that by developing models of greater precision, theorists can reach greater understanding of the cycle of conflict through proactive, strategic, reactive, and recovery stages. Unlike excellence theory, which reasons that mutual benefit is the universal goal, contingency theory proposes that some situations—such as interactions with irreconcilable groups—necessitate responses in which it is most ethical to adopt an asymmetrical response. The contingency theory of strategic conflict management includes game theory, coorientation, conflict, issues management, and threat appraisal model theories.

Chapter 5 examines rhetorical discourse in relation to public relations theory. Based on classical rhetorical theory, it explains how discourse and dialogue serve organizations’ efforts to appeal to individuals in order to forge relationships, debate issue positions, defend propositions, interpret information, and resolve disagreement by co-creating concurrence. Rhetorical theory uniquely emphasizes how language, the most distinct human ability, creates opportunities to define and solve problems. While discourse and dialogue can facilitate democratic institutions, they can also serve to divide factions and augment conflict and competition. This chapter explores the history of rhetorical scholarship, which has served to define public relations practice and offers insight into the way that
reality is socially constructed. Dialogue and language offer opportunities for the co-creation of meaning, but the theory acknowledges that bridging issues and value differences is not easy.

Chapter 6 examines the impact of critical theory on public relations, and even the concept of critical public relations. Critical theory argues that scholars and practitioners should be skeptical of the intellectual foundation and underlying rationale of a discipline. For instance, critical public relations theorists reason that practitioners and other theorists have avoided discussions of the relationship between capitalism and promotional campaigns: Who benefits? Who takes a disproportionate share of the resources? What strategic processes and ethical standards allow this to happen? A fundamental premise of critical theory is that each voice in an interaction should be heard, should be given just regard and opportunity to exercise power. While some may question the reasonableness of discussing a theory that seems to undercut much of the rationale for public relations as a discipline, it is important to consider that critical theory begins with the proposition that zeroing in on the areas of greatest ethical peril is beneficial to society as a whole, as opposed to a narrow segment—a hegemony. A fundamental premise of critical theory is that power differences conspire against the exercise of authentic dialogue and fairness. The goal of critical public relations is to identify and mitigate against privileged power in order to achieve a fairer, more fully functioning society and strengthen communities as a public good.

Chapter 7 looks at issues, crisis, and risk management in the context of public relations. Strategic issues management presumes the rhetorical nature of society and that organizations must be aligned with stakeholder interests if they want to gain and manage resources. Organizations, with various abilities and a sense of good will, identify issues that may have a negative impact on their ability to operate in ways that are legitimate in the eyes of stakeholders. They must use issues management to understand standards and dynamics of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as the strategic process of narrowing the legitimacy gap between what they want to do and what stakeholders believe is acceptable. This chapter emphasizes the interdependence of issues, crises, and risks as challenges to the management and motivation of strategic communication. Both avoiding and being prepared for a crisis are crucial to organizations. Public relations is at the forefront of using communication research to examine the environment and scan for potential opportunities and threats. Society can be viewed as “at risk,” as can its members. Some risks are created by organizations; often, they are expected to help community members mitigate against associated harms.

Chapter 8 discusses the various dimensions of public relations measurement. Just as planning is essential to a successful public relations campaign, so too is measurement, a means–ends logic. Public relations relies on measurement to provide a rigorous means of comparing and contrasting inputs and outputs in order to understand how society functions. Measurement asks whether the objectives of a campaign or public relations program are met because of the strategic processes employed. This chapter examines methods and theories relevant to public relations measurement, cataloguing the terminology, practical insights, and pitfalls associated with it. Most importantly, it reinforces the central theme that ethical measurement is a responsibility that practitioners bear to their clients, and to the community and society in general.

Chapter 9 focuses on theories of public relations ethics. The discussion ranges from theories of professional ethics and the responsibility that management bears to junior colleagues to the metatheoretical implication of issues management. The chapter also discusses the ethical issues associated with particular public relations theories, such as excellence theory and critical theory. The three strains of ethical theory that have most often been cited in connection with public relations theory are pragmatism, utilitarianism, and deontology. Their relative merits are weighed in connection to specific public relations perspectives.
Chapter 10 focuses on the public (as a mix of publics and stakeholders), and definitions thereof. During the late 1960s, theorists began to recognize that publics were not monolithic entities and that public opinion varied. Through the 1990s, however, public relations practitioners stressed the strategic role of organizations as disseminators of messages, focusing on targeting stakeholders according to their level of engagement. By the 2000s, scholars proposed that multiple and even marginalized publics had an important impact on organizations. Publics emerged on a footing co-equal with organizations, and theory began to stress the central role of democratic communication and dialogue beyond segmenting publics as a means for operationalizing strategies designed to achieve ends. The participation of multiple publics giving voice to their own opinions, information, beliefs, and values is seen as crucial to the concept of ethical public relations, contributing to a more fully functioning society.

Chapter 11 focuses on relationships. The concept of relationships has changed from a unidimensional one of organizations in relation to their stakeholder public, proposed in the 1920s with the formation of public relations as a discipline, to one characterized by multidimensional interrelationships. Multiple stakeholders and stake seekers are now considered in public relations theory. Drawing on interpersonal relationship scholarship, modern public relations theorists focus on a dialogic and co-creational model. In addition, the impact of theories drawn from economic, political, and social theory has cast the organization–public relationship in a broader theoretical context. The interaction of individuals and organizations is theorized rigorously in the context of power differences.

Chapter 12 looks at the radical transformation the role of the public relations professional has undergone in the last 40 years. An intense focus on ethics, pedagogy, and professional identification has remained constant, and debate continues over the distinction between licensing and accreditation and between the public relations technician and manager roles. But critical themes regarding gender, race, technology, and global identity have come to the fore, and the rise of globalism and multiculturalism—in tandem with changes wrought by new communication technologies—has emerged as a significant topic of theoretical debate. Likewise, the identity of the public relations practitioner as part of a larger movement in strategic communications has come to reshape or replace public relations as a practice.

Chapter 13 surveys salient emerging topics in public relations research. Meta-analyses conducted during the 2000s and 2010s reveal an enduring concern with the evaluation of public relations practice. Scholars have gravitated to issues of strategic communication and of ethics and social responsibility in diverse settings. For some, public relations has become increasingly defined as strategic communication, with the public relations practitioner serving as a kind of intermediary among different factions. The key is that public relations practitioners engage in deliberative, goal-oriented communication, yet play a role as social actors in a fully functioning society, beyond that of strategic managers in an organizational context. Other dominant areas of interest among theoreticians included dialogic theory, technology and new media, globalism, and diversity.
Public Relations: Socially Responsible or Work of the Devil

Introduction

Chapter 1 lays the foundation for the discussion that follows. It explores the nature and constructive role of public relations, examining its DNA and defining its professional practice—established as such in the nineteenth century. Such detective work looks for markers including purposes, strategies, functions, tools, tactics, impacts, structures, and justifying philosophies. It identifies the types of organizations, leadership roles, and contexts in which public relations is important.

In history, public relations can be seen as the means for achieving individual and organizational influence, as well as collective engagement among competing interests: strategic processes and efforts enacted by individuals, groups, organizations, and even nations in order that they can survive and thrive, enacted as forms of issues, risk, conflict, and crisis management. It searches for aligned interests, legitimacy, and the license to operate for reward. To discover what today is called “public relations” requires knowing what it does, what it is, where it occurs, and how it serves or confounds interests that encounter tensions of uncertainty and conflict. It can be a clash of perspectives, interests, identities, and identifications. It can be soothing words that allay differences of opinion. It can foster conflict and division.

Careful analysis of the discipline addresses the rationale for its professional practice as being invaluable to political economies, to the human condition, to the organizations that engage in its discourse. It looks at what defining conditions, contexts, and individual and organizational management requirements are needed to share ideas and co-create meanings, create divisions, identities, and identifications, and meet ethical challenges. Collective risk management, for instance, is the essence of public relations discourse and leadership strategies, whether in enacting emergency management or in debating contagion or unhealthy living conditions. It is inherent to clashes of interests, wrangles of ideas, and efforts to enlighten, compromise, collaborate, and accommodate.

Because of its prominence in human affairs, public relations must be subjected to descriptive, predictive, normative, and ethical discussion. Theory and research can lead to a better understanding and improved practice of public relations. Without a working definition—a detailed understanding of the practice coupled to normative theory—the profession will fail to add value to society and even decrease organizational effectiveness when trust is broken. Theory and research champion public relations as fundamental to the quality of relatedness that gives integrity to community.

Public relations is strategic (choice-driven), process-based, outcome-oriented, and guided by value-driven ethical choices. Supporters and critics debate what constitutes ethical principles, and
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whether they are situational or universal. Public relations can make organizations (and causes) more effective (or less so), more capable, and more successful in achieving their missions and visions based on core values. It entails making ideas public and worthy of consideration, seeking concurrence, fostering reputation, building alliances, engaging in conflict, and being central to competition among ideas, products, and services. It includes attention to issues of public policy and organizational identity and reputation. Public relations deals with choices—those made by organizations and their stakeholders.

Much of the scrutiny of public relations since the late 1970s has seen it as an organizational function, but a competing sociological perspective has addressed whether, how, and how well organizations make society more fully functioning. The challenge is to see public relations from an organizational perspective without losing sight of the dynamics of engaged contests in issue arenas where the more expansive conception of societal good is debated. Public relations professionals must demonstrate to journalists and others that they ethically sort and process information in a chaotic universe, fraught with uncertainty. One of the greatest hurdles that they face is to convince critics that they behave responsibly and with the public interest at heart.

This inventory of topics poses a daunting challenge to public relations professionals, academics, and students. Dirty laundry must be sorted from clean, but both must be given due consideration. Iconic practitioners such as Ivy Lee, Edward Bernays, and John Hill recognized the pragmatic value, social responsibility, and ethics associated with public relations. They put their faith in the three legs of the public relations stool. It is pragmatic: it does something useful, and well. It is strategic: process-based, choice-driven, and goal-oriented. And it is ethical: serving the larger good of society and asking in whose interest the profession is practiced.

Public relations employs rhetoric, discursive text, persuasion, publicity, promotion, relationship building, conflict resolution, adjustive behavior, and issue, risk, conflict, and crisis management. It can be propaganda, spinning, and seeking to penetrate publics’ mental defenses. It can be a means of engineering consent. It can foster relationships, and help stakeholders to make enlightened choices. It can help organizations to be “excellent” and reflective—or the opposite.

This opening chapter throws a lot of balls into the air, which will be caught and juggled throughout the book. It avoids the tendency to cherry pick by defining the discipline in glowing normative and aspirational terms while casting aside what does not fit that view as something else, something other—anything but public relations. It works to avoid demonizing definitions. It asks: can the beast be subdued by denying that it is in the garden?

Questions to Frame the Introductory Discussion

- What is public relations?
- Whose interests does it serve?
- Does it foster competing or aligned interests?
- What strategies, functions, purposes, tactics, tools, media uses, professional roles, reputation management techniques, and deliberative processes define its presence and value to society?
- Does public relations serve the collective management of risk and the social construction of shared meaning by which groups achieve sufficient concurrence and coordination to survive and thrive?
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- Does public relations advance and result from the excellence of organizations, encourage a balance of advocacy and accommodation, employ discourse to advance and align interests, and engage in ethically critical battles?
- Is there evidence of the purposes, tools, tactics, and strategies of public relations in primitive—as well as sophisticated—societies?
- Can institutions such as commerce, church, and state advance without the service of public relations?
- What impact has globalization had on the practice and conceptualization of public relations?
- How have new technologies and changes in the media landscape affected public relations?

Questions such as these help students to act like detectives, identifying the fingerprints and DNA of public relations, knowing when it is on the scene, and determining how it contributes to or frustrates people’s ability to get along, coordinate activities, and live in harmony. They suggest several important themes.

**Key Themes**

- Public relations is a timeless activity associated with the human condition and with the formation of societies, used to make individuals and groups effective in their endeavors.
- Public relations in a contemporary sense is more than press agentry and media relations; it includes all of the communications processes and symbolic actions by which groups seek to be efficacious.
- Attention to public relations as a function of (mass and social) media may be more a matter of its nature in a particular historical era than of that across all human history.
- History is replete with public relations functions, strategies, tools, and purposes, even though they may not have been named or conceived as such or be immediately apparent.
- The challenge for those who study and practice public relations is to emphasize social responsibility and collaborative decision making.
- Because public relations tends to center on controversy, conflict management, and matters of choice, it may be conceived both as socially responsible and as the devil’s work, depending on context and one’s subject position.

**Opening Case: Socially Responsible or Work of the Devil**

The title and overarching theme for this chapter come from a class designed primarily for senior-level public relations students, but which attracted students from other majors. The course was intended to prepare students, in a strategic and critical manner, to use discourse on behalf of clients and to benefit the community, and to understand the importance of social responsibility. It required them to write four papers. The first asked them to define public relations. Some took the easy route and used the definition they had learned from other courses, such as Principles of Public Relations. The instructor wanted them to go beyond that, however, and develop a definition in which they were intellectually and personally invested, or one that they could use during a job interview and to guide their professional careers. The final paper thus challenged them to explain, based on the readings and discussion, what public relations means to them—as a pre-professional, as a person, and as a member of society. It challenged
them to consider from a personal ethical perspective why they wanted to practice public relations, what responsible service to a client or employer meant to them, and what roles public relations plays in society. Can it serve the “public interest” in a socially redeeming manner? Thus, they were challenged to defend public relations as a positive force in the world.

One student, an aspiring journalist, expressed the opinion that “public relations is the work of the devil.” So much did he believe this proposition that he had written an editorial with that title for the campus newspaper. He was proud of the editorial, and distributed copies to the professor and other students. The instructor recognized this as a teachable moment. Practitioners, the student reasoned, thrive by spin, propaganda, and outright lying to serve a client’s interest. To heck with the public interest; practitioners don’t care about truth and honesty, only self-interested outcomes.

In contrast, he argued, journalists are committed to discovering the “truth” and bringing it to the public’s attention, despite practitioners’ efforts to the contrary. For this student, the entire field of public relations was built on deception, “lies, and damned lies,” pitted against journalists’ unselfish commitment to “truth, beautiful and just.” The student maintained his binary thinking: public relations represents the bête noir of professional communication—spreading falsehood and deceit—kept in check by vigilant journalists cast as white knights. His argument was compelling—evidence of spin and deception by public relations professionals is easy to find.

Most of the other students were quiet, perhaps timidly reconsidering their career choice. A few mounted defenses of the field, pointing to journalists who have deceived readers, viewers, listeners, and users—generically, “the public.” Some reasoned that quite possibly public relations practitioners have a greater incentive to be truthful (the first and best sources of information) than do journalists. Hyperbole and distortion can be good for sales of newspapers and magazines, and of television, radio, and Internet advertising. Tactics that increase media attention and coverage can be unyielding pressure points that lead to public relations crises resulting from irresponsible journalists’ behavior.

Others pointed out the good that practitioners do, the facts and opinions they provide. They raise money for the arts. They attract students to universities and colleges, easing their transition into higher education. They advocate for conservation, saving the wolves and the whales. They encourage people to contribute to cure diabetes, help children suffering from complex health needs, and convince the public and politicians that climate change is real. Nonetheless, the dissenting student was strident in his assertion that public relations meant a midnight meeting at the crossroads to make a deal with the devil.

This chapter—this entire book—challenges students to consider what they believe public relations is and whether it (and they as practitioners) deserves to be seen as a positive force in society or as a tool of the devil.

However good or bad its reputation, the practice of public relations is evident in the dynastic work of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean emperors. Was the building of the Great Wall of China a public relations statement designed to foster identification among the Chinese people, while rejecting outside influence and protecting their “superior” culture? Were emperors’ temples a statement about their magnificence and invincibility, calling for the loyalty of their subjects?

Similar questions could be asked about ancient Persia’s military, political, and agricultural might. Was the promulgation of Hammurabi’s Code a public relations strategy intended to bring order to a chaotic and lawless society, a high point in Babylonian self-governance? No study of ancient Egypt can ignore the use of symbols and pageantry, canonical wall paintings and public sculptures,
### Ancient Rome as "Public Relations"

The Roman Empire was built with the aid of public relations, including the famous discipline of its legions, technological advances, and systems of self-government. The Empire became an idea; Roman leaders created an ideology that promoted, promulgated, and translated it into a coordinated worldview of institutionalized government. Huge armies, monuments, edifices, and statues were a mighty physical force and a metaphor used to communicate Rome's power (Beard, 2015), even as Romans failed to achieve sustainable self-governance (Duncan, 2017).

Modern Europe reveals the infrastructural legacy of the Roman Empire. Forums, theaters, bridges, aqueducts, roads, and arenas dot the countryside, as do baths. These structures not only served basic utilitarian needs, but also had enduring symbolic value. Roman infrastructure represented the rhetorical enactment of an orderly "global" power. News of victory provoked spectacles, including battles among gladiators, wild animal shows, chariot races, and public executions (Meijer, 2003). These moments of pomp and circumstance played out in arenas across the Empire, including the Colosseum in Rome itself—the Indianapolis Motor Speedway of its day.

Romans became master image builders. As relationship managers, they strategically used treaties and marriages to foster alliances. They polished the discourse of self-government and the means for promulgating Roman law, order, and administration. Relationships were forged among the Roman people, by class and occupation, as well as within and among the legions. Economic arrangements became relationship management. Symbolic representation, rhetoric (oratory and writing), and propaganda were used to shape opinions, forge attitudes, create culture, and influence behavior. The Romans sought to reinforce the legitimacy of their government through public art, installing portrait busts of military and political leaders in public spaces. They recognized the salience of local customs and mores, tailoring their message to accommodate tropes familiar to those they conquered. Such is the stuff of public relations.

This discussion uses several terms that are part of the lexicon of public relations. It illustrates not only the role of public relations in society, but also the elements of it that form the basis for the theory and research to be discussed in subsequent chapters. These foundational elements are vital to understanding, studying, and practicing public relations. This example asks whether the public relations efforts of ancient Rome were socially responsible or the devil's work.

and mammoth edifices constructed to honor the “human gods” who ruled the country. Though not defined as such, public relations was vital to the promulgation of effective governance in ancient Syria (Xifra & Heath, 2015). Centuries later, it was in no small part involved in Martin Luther’s Protestant Revolution, as well as in the Catholic Church’s response, the Counter Reformation.

This rest of this chapter offers a historical and definitional overview of the purposes, strategies, roles, functions, and ethics of public relations. It provides grounding for what this book proposes to study. It does so without sanitization, in order to show the roles public relations plays on behalf of individuals, institutions, communities, and societies. Only by knowing some of the history of the practice can students appreciate why theory is developed in the way it is. What factors explain the innovation, development, and roles (functions and purposes) of public relations? The study of theory begins with knowing what concepts matter and what patterns of behavior reveal the presence of public relations. The societal motivators of the practice set the tone, scope, and purpose of its study today.
Origins of Public Relations

The examples of Rome, Egypt, Persia, and China highlight key moments in the origination of public relations. It was not the specific innovation of some individual or group, but seems to have flowed from the natural tendency of peoples to communicate “formally” within their group and to or with members of other groups in order to co-manage relationships. It may thus be central to human beings, as group-oriented, social animals seeking to manage relatedness as the essential purpose of communication (Cobley, 2008).

The markers for historical study, then, are (a) the sorts of communication tools and strategies that are characteristic of the practice; (b) the strategic rationale for such communication, which seems basic to organizational, individual, and societal efficacy (the rationale for public relations is inseparable from the need by groups of people to collectively manage risks of survival; Douglas, 1992); (c) the purposes, structures, functions, and discourse engagement typical of the practice—central to this are terms such as “reputation,” “image,” “brand,” “relationship” (quality, purpose, and type), “power” (both as structures/functions and socially constructed meaning), “interests,” “awareness,” “efficacy,” and “influences” (of behavior, as well as the results from or impact of behaviors)—conflict and competition are motivators, as are achievement and success; (d) how all of what organizations do, as they enact “management” philosophies, affects relationships, reputations, and societal efficacy. In all, however, a lot of public relations work is not actually public, but either occurs behind the scenes, is masked, or is triggered—as in the case of media relations and event planning.

DNA markers are often used to pinpoint the origins of public relations in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America and Europe. The Americentrism in this view emphasizes key personalities and moments in modern practice. P. T. Barnum, for example, has been heralded and vilified as perfecting the art of celebrity promotion. But image, reputation, and event management are timeless. So too is financial communication—between company and stockholder, between university and students, faculty, and parents. Reputation and promotion support the practice of different religions and international sporting events such as the World Cup and Tour de France. This section examines whether public relations might be fundamental to the human condition.

Antiquity and Inherency in Human Relatedness

Looking back into history is like exploring the cluttered attic of a timeless public relations practitioner. In every nook and cranny, evidence can be found of the activities, purposes, tools, strategies, discourse processes, and tactics of public relations.

One can imagine, for instance, how the experiences of the Comanche in North America and the Vikings in Europe demonstrated sophisticated strategic processes of resource management, including communication. Gwynne (2010) notes how the Comanche slowly began to dominate the Great Plains through their skilled horsemanship and ferocity. This tribal nation used strategic relationships and reputation management with other tribes, as well as sheer intimidation, to control the source of their food, lifestyle, and wealth. To reinforce social formations, they made images documenting their structural and kinship relationships. Their motive was simple: collective management of risk through relatedness—they fought to control their survival. In that regard, they negotiated with other tribes and European settlers to exchange staples and expand their gene pool. Collective myths and legends, as Claude Levi-Strauss (1978) has shown, emerged as a means of building social consent as a form of social control.

The control that the Comanche sought was no different from that of Europeans, especially the Plains settlers, who wanted land. They wanted eternal access to buffalo. They used events (raids), treaties (with other nations), image and reputation (through apparel and appearance, as well as massacre
and torture), and culture as a social glue to vanquish others to their own benefit. Modern academics might call this something other than public relations. But, for several generations, their communication, identity building, identification, and conflict management ability made them highly successful. Then a society that was stronger and even more property hungry forced them into asymmetrical negotiation and submission (by many of the same tactics that they had used to their own ends).

Ferguson (2009) tells a similar story of the Vikings—Scandinavian sea warriors. They mastered the arts and sciences of intimidation, even in the ferocious names their leaders adopted and the religion they developed. Their cultural artifacts reinforce two themes: survival and conquest—best expressed in the fearsome sea monster figureheads that adorned their raiding vessels. They managed risk by developing and mastering superior weapons and means of assault. They attacked only when they were reasonably sure of victory.

The Vikings developed a religion that accounted for their existence and for their relationships to one another and to outsiders—identity and identification. This gave them vision and purpose. It explained the mysteries that puzzled them. It helped them deal with the uncertainties of death and birth, as well as self-identity. It justified their power. It served as the means and rationale for events, treaties, associations, and adventures. It included ritual and speeches, laws and punishments, ceremonies and tributes. It offered purposeful means for the collective management of risk.

The Comanche and Vikings offer examples emphasizing not how public relations is associated with violence and pillage (which accounts for much of human history), but how it empowers a people and gives them the rationale and strategic processes for managing their affairs and associating with others. It focuses attention on the need for ritual, identity, resource management, power, symbolism, textuality, and other elements vital to organizational success. Chapter 2 will argue that various management theories are fundamental to public relations theories. Such interconnection is borne out not only in research, but also in the scope of history, as people press themselves on and form relationships with one another.

In ways too complex to easily unpack here, the Comanche and Viking stories repeat those in ancient Persia, China, India, Japan, Korea, and Africa. They reflect Polynesian exploration, European emigration to the Americas, the Moors’ advancement (and retreat) in Spain. Today’s news plays similarly, whether in politics, economics, war, peace, harmony, or violence. This narrative has implications for governance and for commerce. Similar instances involve non-profit organizations and social movements. All of this institutionalization has implications for public relations.

Such history is never separate from the science of the time, or from the culture and religion which give character, purpose, and destiny to a people. The means, rationale, and discourse of commerce, government, religion, war, peace, love, and wickedness are universal. As societies mature, so too do their management and communication systems, including public relations. Yet, the basic functions of symbolic representation remain constant. Are the ancient temples and government buildings in Persia, China, India, and elsewhere any different in function and purpose than modern examples in Washington, DC, London, Paris, Berlin, Beijing, or Tokyo? The iconographic sculpture and other adornments of ancient sites have parallels across time and space. Recall for a moment the pageantry of the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, designed to exalt the Third Reich, as captured on film by Leni Riefenstahl. Was this not similar to the spectacle of Roman legions parading through the capital following a military victory?

In many ways, the communications and technological sophistication of our ancestors rivaled that of the Facebook and Twitter generation. Pyramids, built in Egypt and across Central and South America, were symbolic reflections of complex and highly coordinated societies, as were Buddhist temples in Asia. The iconography of totem poles in the northwest of the United States and the carved ornamentation of Polynesian boats represent a complex language of symbolic form related to social organization aimed at reinforcing messages to specific publics.
Strategic management and communication provide the rationale and tools for government (and government relations), religion, self-identity/identification, and commerce. Museums around the world collect, categorize, and research cultural artifacts in order to understand how people used them to define themselves and organize societies. The concept of lobbying, so crucial to government relations today, is a new name for the timeless art of striking an inside deal. Relationship management is essential to politics. Marriages among European royalty were diplomatic public relations efforts aimed at establishing alliances and thereby collectively managing risk.

Without exception, the same sorts of strategies, tactics, purposes, and structures/functions can be found throughout history around the world. As Heath (2005) notes:

The ceremonial burial of leaders, even as deities, is part of the history of public relations. Throughout ancient societies, statues and other carved figures were widely used to capture the personas and personalities of government and religious leaders. Coins often carried some logo of the visage of some leader as a way of uniting that person or image with the national identity of a people. (p. 33)

So, too, were commercial events such as fairs a timeless public relations effort. How were they any different in purpose than Apple’s announcement of its latest product line?

Military symbolism, such as Roman victory spectacles, is also timeless. Is Arlington Cemetery in Washington, DC any more or less of a military public relations effort than the loading and firing of a Viking vessel to give a leader his last moment at sea? As Heath (2005) observes:

Once Philip II of Macedonia had subdued the regions of the Hellenic peninsula, he commissioned the creation of gold and ivory statues of himself to adorn the temples. He taught his son, Alexander the Great, similar techniques of power display. (p. 34)

Colors such as England’s red and France’s blue were carefully developed and used to communicate the character of a nation’s military, governmental, and commercial might. Recently, President Donald Trump and Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un met, greeted one another, and embraced in symmetrical harmony against alternating US and North Korean flags. Similar displays of power and prestige appear in advertisements for products ranging from Nike to Pampers. With copyrighted logos and color combinations, corporations assert their image and brand equity, crafting an identity to build loyalty and so affect people’s behavior.

Games are events, means for people to challenge others and assert their prowess. Were the ancient Olympic Games in Greece any less a matter of public relations than the modern Olympics today? National, regional, and scholastic sporting contests offer people a sense of identity and relationship. More than 34 million Germans (over one in three) tuned into the 2014 World Cup Final against Argentina.

Songs such as the “Star Spangled Banner” capture the identity of U.S. citizens, as “La Marseillaise” symbolizes modern France and “God Save the Queen” Great Britain. The chronicler, the balladeer, the wood or stone carver, the master architect—all were pressed into public relations service. Artifacts on display at the National Palace Museum in Taiwan underscore the role that artists play in imperial glory.

Contemporary analysis of the origin of public relations associates it with media, particularly mass media. Certainly, the history of the Roman Catholics, and their creation of propaganda as a means for proselytizing the faith and saving souls, is one of media. Monks created Bibles through patient artistry. One marker of media history is the creation of moveable type by Johannes
Gutenberg in the fifteenth century. Bibles and other religious texts constituted the great bulk of production during the first two hundred years following its invention. This made Bibles more readily available, although they were still tethered to churches. Later, roving ministers carried them in their packs and saddlebags. Was John Wesley, founder of the Methodist church and one of the greatest writers of Christian hymns, a public relations practitioner? Is his modern equivalent the writer of advertising jingles?

During the seventeenth century, the term “propaganda” became forever associated with efforts to communicate church doctrine. In 1622, Pope Gregory XV created the Congregation de Propaganda Fide (Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith) in response to the Protestant Revolution. It was designed to organize missionary work under the rubric of evangelism, presenting a dramatic challenge through art and rhetoric to the more staid message of Luther, Wesley, and other reformers. The intent was to strengthen the faith of Catholics and convince non-Christians to convert (albeit often under pain of torture or death). In 1627, Pope Urban VIII augmented this effort by creating a training college to strengthen the communication skills of the missionaries. From this came the word “propaganda,” or speech designed to build faith and convince. This organizational function of the Catholic Church continues today, although it was given a new name by Pope John Paul II in 1982.

Brown (2003) argues that much the same strategies, whether one wishes to call them propaganda or public relations, were used by the apostles. None was more prolific or had a greater impact than St. Paul, a contemporary of Jesus. Noting his influence, Brown writes:

> Historians of early Christianity actually regard Paul, author and organizer, rather than Jesus himself, as the founder of Christianity. Writing his epistles as much as 20 years before the authors of the New Testament’s four gospels, Paul’s influence transformed not only religion but history itself. (p. 1)

Such claims perplex those who work to define public relations. Some conclude that it and propaganda are the same. Others define it more narrowly, in an effort to claim the “good ground” in the battle to make it (and strategic communication) respectable, above reproach. This effort has led to a distorted sense of history and of the profession, and even to the development of models designed to differentiate “ethical” from “unethical” public relations. Sometimes, this strategy is strained, because the cases for (and against) public relations as a positive force end up on contested ground—in the tension between social responsibility and the work of the devil.

In a similar manner, the history of commerce is inseparable from what eventually would be called public relations by some, and marketing communication by others. Bazaars, fairs, and other commercial events involved a degree of publicity and promotion. Announcements were promulgated, and people were employed to spread the word. Such efforts made certain ports and cities both famous locally and far away. They created and advanced the interests of companies such as the Dutch West India Company, which, in concert with governments and their military might, implemented and sustained global colonialism and the exploitation of indigenous populations.

With analysis broadly drawn, many find the origins of public relations to be far more ancient than nineteenth-century America. Explicitly from a management science perspective, Croft, Hartland, and Skinner (2008) advise that those who see public relations only as a business activity miss the importance of church and government communication. Adopting narrative analysis as their historical methodology, they find evidence of communication fostering revenue streams, building military power, and getting an important segment of a population on the same narrative, leading to coordinated and purposeful activities—so-called relatedness.
Without any stretch of the imagination, this encompassing view of the precedents of modern public relations sees it as vital to humans’ timeless techniques. Croft et al. reason that this analysis extends that of Watson (2008), who finds during the Dark Ages “practitioners ... engaging in political communication, brand extension and brand creation, managing stakeholder engagement with word-of-mouth, music and publications” (Croft et al., 2008, p. 302).

Other researchers have marked the origins of public relations with great civil events. Cutlip (1995) chronicles part of its history as connected to events in North America from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. Analysis of the eighteenth would be incomplete without serious attention to the role and purpose of the Declaration of Independence. This was a public relations gambit, placing blame for the “crisis” in the colonies on the shoulders of George III, King of England, rather than on parliament. It was an extraordinary moment in the practice of public relations on behalf of a people seeking to sustain and advance their self-government. Thomas Paine’s pamphlet “Common Sense” was a further stroke of genius, justifying the American Revolution and laying the foundation for the one in France.

Public relations historians are wise to ponder Cutlip’s (1994) comments on the unseen power of public relations in society. On one hand, he is aware of the socially responsible role that it has to play, but on the other he is equally cognizant that it can be the work of the devil:

I held, and still hold, that only through the expertise of public relations can causes, industries, individuals, and institutions make their voice heard in the public forum where thousands of shrill, competing voices daily re-create the Tower of Babel. I did not and do not deny the harm done by the incompetent, the charlatan, and those who serve dubious causes. (p. ix)

Public relations strategies and tactics are increasingly used as weapons of power in our no-holds-barred political, economic, and cause competition in the public opinion marketplace, and thus deserve more scholarly scrutiny than they have had. (p. xi)

Propagandist, press agent, public information officer, public relations or public affairs official, political campaign specialists, lobbyist—whatever their title, their aim is the same: to influence public behavior. (p. xi)

The objective of such efforts is to make a group of people or an organization more effective in accomplishing its mission, vision, and core values.

“Bread or Blood”

Scholarship on public relations often overlooks how it serves ordinary citizens. Too often, it is incorrectly reserved for the work of businesses or governments. The following example indicates (a) how ordinary citizens use it to help them solve problems, (b) that it is used universally to address issues, and (c) that scholars who are not in public relations can recognize its presence.

During the U.S. Civil War (1861–1865), food became scarce and prohibitively expensive in Confederate states. By 1863, merchants’ prices, especially for corn, were so high that most families could not afford to eat. Women organized into small groups to bring attention to their problem, petitioning the governors of their states, but to no avail. They framed their case around the fact that because their husbands and older sons were serving in the military, they could not raise and harvest crops, and so their families could not be fed.
Eventually, the women armed themselves and went to the stores to demand lower food prices. They coined a slogan: “Bread or Blood.” The shopkeepers did not honor their demands, so the women brandished their weapons, took the food, commandeered wagons, and drove off. Some were arrested and sentenced to as small a punishment as 4 hours in jail. Most were not. Governors responded. Food subsidies were created. The problem was addressed as well as was possible given the general resource conditions in the South.

A historian of the Civil War writes of the food protestors in Richmond, Virginia: “The women had guns, but like the mobs in Atlanta (Georgia) and Salisbury (North Carolina), they had a public relations strategy” (McCurry, 2011, p. 40). This strategy entailed organizing on a common cause and creating a compelling rationale for their demands. In that sense, the women were willing to accommodate the wishes of the governors and shopkeepers. Once accommodation failed, they upped the ante to pure advocacy, making more pointed demands by brandishing pistols, knives, and hatchets.

McCurry observes how one woman, Mary Jackson, organized her food protest in Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy:

Her strategy for the riot confirms how she regarded the action as a culmination of a process of protest. By insisting that the rioters first make an offer to pay government price for the goods they planned to seize—and in first seeking an audience with the governor before taking to the streets—she and the others showed their deep investment in the ideas and practices of Southern white women’s new wartime political culture. (p. 40)

The point is not that public relations requires extreme measures, but that extreme measures can become public relations’ compelling rationale. The women, as argued by contingency theory (discussed in detail in Chapter 4), considered the options of accommodation and advocacy public relations solutions to a real-life problem.

These cases and examples demonstrate that public relations is timeless, not some product of Roman emperors, popes, P. T. Barnum, colonials protesting British rule, or the railroad industry offering free land to immigrants. Sometimes, theorists shun certain activities as not being public relations so that they can define what they want to study rather than being objectively honest, encompassing, and candid in the subject of their investigation. It will become clear in subsequent chapters how scholars and practitioners have defined and defended various public relations strategies, purposes, and roles. Without doubt, various applications and approaches to public relations could and did help advance interests, sometimes to the ruin of others. It is interesting to speculate whether media—and, eventually, mass media—developed to provide news and information or to serve as tools of propaganda. Did the commercial incentive to call favorable attention to goods and services and to serve the interests of government lead to, rather than merely employ, news media? Are mass media a defining moment in public relations history or merely tools relevant to an eternal practice? Modern public relations is, as in earlier times, involved in commerce, business administration, management, government, religion, social movements, and grassroots activism.

The next section explores some subtle but compelling changes in the practice, which, to some historians and theorists, suggest that if public relations did not begin in the nineteenth century, that was at least the dawn of the modern version. It was during this period that public relations was named as such.
The Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries: The Origins of "Modern Public Relations"

Those who do not see public relations as inseparable from the origins of organized society tend to place its benchmark later—much later. They often insist that a society cannot have the practice of public relations until it has been industrialized, developed sophisticated means of reaching large audiences, and adopted “public relations” as a professional title. They reason that the modern version of public relations was driven by the growth of mass media, starting in the nineteenth century. This mass-mediated bias tends to conclude that it is the product of the Industrial Revolution, the era of modern mass production and mass consumption. And, similarly, public relations has been defined as a separate discipline and art for only a little more than a century, even though publicity, promotion, and communications designed to affect public policy have an ancient history.

Modern public relations features four P’s: publicity, promotion, and public policy. It is conceptualized through the logics of commerce, business administration, management, government, religion, and social unrest (social movements and activism). It is associated with political philosophy, sociology, and civil society. It is treated as a topic relevant to media, media effects, and media practices—even media impact. And it is seen as an academic discipline subordinate to journalism.

Journalism faculty have sought to make public relations useful to journalism, perhaps fearing the opposite dynamic, that journalists should serve the purposes of public relations professionals. The eighteenth-century Philadelphia Gazette, for example, offered as much shipping news (notices of articles that had arrived by ship and were offered for sale) as other reporting, if not more. Thus, press agentry and media relations were—and perhaps continue to be—the keys to defining public relations, and enriching publishers. Such a view is far too journalistic-centric, and this is ever more true with advances in social media, and its connection to advertising. Implicit also in the nineteenth-century history of American public relations is a faith in codes of ethics based on accuracy, openness, and fairness—an ethical standard shaped by journalists.

A media bias and historical association with publicity and promotion features businessmen such as P. T. Barnum as exemplars of modern American public relations. But by Barnum’s time (1810–1891), others had already used press agentry (or “puffery” as it was called) and events to attract attention, often for commercial ends (Papinchak, 2005). This was common practice by the time Barnum issued a pamphlet narrating the life of Joice Heth. Claimed to be the 161-year-old former slave and nurse of George Washington, Heth attracted audiences enthralled by the stories they had read about her life. Was she a hoax? Did these promoters do more than just bend the truth? It did not much matter—the excitement generated, even as myth, was enough to attract widespread attention.

Although Barnum and other businessmen of his era have been tarred with the brush of hucksterism (just as public relations has been tarred with the moniker of hackery), he contributed huge sums to charity, supported his performers with better-than-average compensation, and provided a valuable service—entertaining the masses. Barnum hired those who might not otherwise be employable, because of their small size or atypical features. And customers were free to enter his show or spend their money in some other way.

Coincidental to the timeframe of Barnum’s enterprises was one of the most important eras of social movement activism. From the early 1830’s until the Civil War, activists mounted a rhetorically designed issue campaign against slavery. Hundreds of abolition groups arose in the United States and many other countries. The American Anti-slavery Society (1833–1870) was just one such organization. International societies often combined their efforts, representing one of the first coordinated communications initiatives on a global scale. They spawned newspapers and speakers bureaus. They used publicity to draw attention to the issue, and promoted resistance to it.
They created events and helped publish books such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe, in order to dramatize the horrors and suffering of “the peculiar institution.”

Frederick Douglass spoke at one such event on July 5, 1852 to condemn the traditional claims made on July 4 that America was the land of the free. Douglass’ statement can be interpreted as pointing out the paradox of the positive. That paradox is made evident by the public relations celebrations of July 4 that lauded the “freedom” gained through the Declaration of Independence. Douglass used rhetorical devices to demonstrate that the Declaration was overly praised for accomplishing liberty in a land with legalized slavery and racist restrictions on African Americans (Heath & Waymer, 2009).

Although invaluable to social movement activism, public relations is largely shaped by its association with the organizational and societal effectiveness of commercial enterprise. Public relations practitioners and “newsmen” touted railroads as being vital to the United States. Starting with George Washington, national leaders realized that transportation was the lifeblood of their vast nation. This took on new dimensions when people began to worry that such a large and unpopulated land could easily be lost to other nations. One such was Abraham Lincoln, who helped create the transcontinental railroad as the soul and glue of the sprawling nation. Hordes of publicists promoted the western frontier and railroad connections in order to sell land to raise money to build more railroads. Immigrants from all parts of the world arrived to build, advance, and use them. Thus was the heartland populated—by publicity and promotion.

During the age of industrial revolution, commerce often employed public policy to achieve competitive advantage. Here, public relations not only publicized the new electricity industry businesses, but helped define them and make them legitimate. During the Battle of the Currents, George Westinghouse and Thomas Edison used every available public relations tool at their disposal to have the public and government choose between direct and alternating current. Westinghouse had science on his side, as he reasoned that alternating current was more efficient and useful. In response, Edison argued that it was unsafe and pointed to all of the people who had been killed by it. To up the argumentative ante, he directed that alternating current be used in stunts to kill stray cats and dogs, as well as unwanted cows and horses; he has been erroneously linked to the electrocution of an elephant named Topsy. He even lobbied the state legislature of New York to use alternating current as a form of execution; William Kemmler was the first to be killed by the application of high voltage. That might have convinced people it was too dangerous to have in their homes and businesses, but Westinghouse’s science won the advocacy battle—although the war waged for years (Hearit, 2005).

This was just one of many public relations struggles to define the rationale for and limits on the burgeoning industrial power in the United States and elsewhere. Public policy, promoted by grassroots advocates, sought to use higher standards of corporate social responsibility to constrain and correct business practices thought to be unjust and even ruinous.

**Dawn of Modern Public Relations**

Without doubt, the practice was searching for an identity, rationale, and name by the time of World War I. Emerging as a leading economic and political power, the United States became a primary driver of the practice and its theory-based justification as vital to the democratic process. Some milestones marking the dawn of public relations as a discipline include:

- The foundation of agencies, primarily for the purposes of publicity and media relations.
- Practitioners joining the executive management team.
Practitioners beginning to advertise specialization in public relations, including media and government relations.

Practitioners beginning to conceive of their work as a specialized discipline.

Large corporations creating specialized public relations departments with the stated purpose of fostering communications on their behalf.

The foundation of professional organizations to forge the identity and identification of practitioners.

The offering of courses and degree programs in public relations at colleges and universities.

The beginning, by the 1950s, and even more robustly by the 1970s, of academic writing about the discipline.

The hiring of public relations specialists by state, local, and federal governments to serve key roles in the public interest.

Some of the items in this list will be featured in the discussions that follow, but the establishment of the Committee on Public Information (CPI) during World War I to generate support for the war effort at home and abroad is a good place to start the discussion of the contrasting views of public relations that arose during the twentieth century. A great deal of attention has been devoted to this government program, which, in many respects, opened the door to decades of discussion about the nature and limits of public relations (especially propaganda) in the United States and elsewhere. The CPI sought to understand what constitutes propaganda and how it can serve socially responsible purposes. In this regard, it served as a training ground for a new generation of practitioners interested not only in tactics and strategy, but in theory and ethics as well. It also spawned young communicators for the war effort, who carried on such professional activities after the war ended.

The Committee on Public Information

President Woodrow Wilson created the CPI on April 3, 1917 with Executive Order 2594. Advisors had recommended that he create a government agency to address the need for U.S. involvement in the war. Thus, the Committee began a publicity campaign to condemn the enemy, justifying U.S. entry.

One of the proponents of using publicity to sell the war was George Creel. Over time, his name became associated with the effort, and the CPI became known as the Creel Committee. As Lubbers (2005a) notes, this was probably the “earliest example of a large-scale promotional campaign” (p. 155). Its purpose was to use information to a persuasive end. However, some of the information it put out was distorted and embellished, characterized by hyperbole, or even concocted. For instance, it developed a poster depicting German soldiers skewering Belgian babies on their bayonets.

Other forms of communications available at the time were film, press relations, and public speaking. A speakers bureau offered inspirational talks by staff who came to be known as the “Four-Minute Men” (Lubbers 2005b). The Four-Minute Men were trained and scripted through a series of bulletins that explained the Committee’s goals and structure in a matter of minutes. Other messages asked audiences to contribute funds to the war effort, increase agricultural production, conserve food and other resources, or enlist and serve in the military. In total, thousands of men, women, and children—organized into Junior Four-Minute Men school groups—contributed to this communication effort, which reached millions, raised far more money than it cost, and built consent for the war effort.