

*Vernon C. Schranz Distinguished Lecture in Public Relations
Douglas Hearle – 1980*

Don't Sing For Me, Write Me a Song

I shall address you from a horizontal point of view.

As you might surmise, we at Hill Knowlton don't like to be second in size, quality or priority. But this occasion tonight is definitely an exception. Not only is being here an honor in itself, but following Ed Block – even at a distance of one year's time – is also an honor. Ed represents our profession and our professionalism at its best, and to have the opportunity to talk with you under the aegis of this Vern Schranz Lectureship doubles the honor for me.

And, since Ed spoke here about our legacy from the past, I'd like to discuss what we can do with that legacy in the face of the future – at least the future up to the beginning of the 21st Century. That task makes me somewhat uneasy. On one hand, I can describe my own vision of the next twenty years with a certain amount of security – a security gained from the fact that tomorrow I go back to New York and I don't have to face you when the result of my predictions come in. (If Jeanne Dixon can get away with it, maybe I can, too.)

On the other hand, our history as a nation and as a world has been moving and changing so rapidly that today's confident predictions quickly become tomorrow's jokes. Think, just for a minute, all of those high school and college graduation speakers in 1959, the end of the Eisenhower era, who castigated their audiences for being the silent generation and who prophesized a decade of the '60s that would bring dullness, apathy and an ever-increasing number of men in gray flannel suits. It took much less than a decade to prove those predictions wrong and less than two decades to produce a nostalgia for that very dullness as an antidote to domestic and international turmoil.

So, if you'll excuse my ambivalence about discussing the future, I will do it anyway.

In order to talk about the role of public relations in the next 20 years, it is first necessary to talk about the next twenty years. Public relations, after all, is a process, not a product, and for that reason the context in which a process takes place is critical in determining not only the success or the failure of the process but the very nature of the process itself. While I would not attempt to make firm predictions about every turn our society will take, there does seem to me to be broad trends now apparent which will continue to affect us strongly at least through the beginning of the next century.

Broad Trends Government

In government, there are a number of trends, which no affect and which are likely to continue to affect our societal environment and the communications process. Perhaps most obvious is that the American two party political system rapidly continues to break apart with no workable replacement for it yet visible. This breakup has, in part, occurred because of television, which has allowed every political leader and would-be leader to create his own electorate, regardless of party affiliation. John Anderson is currently the most prominent manifestation of this phenomenon. His power rests in neither the major party nor an established party. It rests solely in the arms of the television networks.

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The breakup has also occurred, ironically, because political reformers removed most of the ways by which party leaders could discipline rebellious party members. But, perhaps most important in the disintegration of the party system has been the continued growth, in numbers and influence of pressure groups that are interested only in a single issue and that oppose any elected or appointed official whose position differs from theirs, no matter how good his or her record is in other areas. Such activist single-mindedness on issues is diverse, as abortion, women's rights, or tax reduction has forced politicians increasingly to respond to the special interests of their constituents, disregarding, when necessary, the official positions of their party leaders. And when competing special interests reach a stalemate, too often politicians have responded with busy-looking activity. Doing nothing, after all, offends fewer voters than doing something. Indeed, it has been observed that the winner in many elections is the candidate who makes the next-to-last mistake.

The result of this continuing trend in government policy-making, whether domestic or international, economic or social, has been inconsistency and indecision. We don't lack a national energy policy, a consistent nation defense policy, a national environmental policy because we have lost most of our collective policy-making ability. This situation looks likely to continue.

This irresolution is best seen in what many have heralded as a growing conservatism in public mood and public philosophy. It is certainly true that the three candidates for president this year would all have been seen as conservatives a decade ago. The language and rhetoric of conservatism can be heard throughout the nation. What is not clearly evident is the reality of conservatism. For example, in some recent polls, only 41 percent of the American people felt that it was up to the government to see to it that all Americans get adequate health care. Yet, in a later poll, 75 percent polled favor major cutbacks in federal spending if it meant cutting back spending for health care. Almost 70 percent polled favor major cutbacks in federal spending, but equally impressive majorities opposed major cutbacks in spending for education, environmental protection, defense or aid to the unemployed. What this seems to mean is that I want liberalism for my interests and conservatism for yours.

In fact, what is widely heralded, as a conservative trend is really a desire for less taxes – not at all the same thing. The continued majorities in favor of legalized abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, gun control and environmental regulation are hardly reflections of conservatism. Nor is the continued suspicion of the motives, operations and intentions of large corporations, along with all the other institutions of American life.

Whatever these public attitudes herald politically, they certainly herald continued public confusion, frustration and volatility. And those public attitudes seem to mean, for our government, continued inconsistency in policy direction and continued incoherence of legislation and regulation. This inconsistency and incoherence on the part of legislators and the executive branch of government will continue to be reinforced by growing independence of government bureaucracy – both the executive and regulatory. These agencies and staffs have been busy building their own independent constituencies among those who benefit from the programs they administer. The Highway Administration has always been able to muster support from construction companies and

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construction unions around the nation; now the teachers can be counted on to aid the Department of Education; the handicapped to the aid of the Department of Health and Welfare; the environmentalists to the aid of the EPA, and on and on. Any proposal to revise (and revive) Social Security will have to deal with the powerful and entrenched constituency of our senior citizenry. What all this means is that we now no longer have the three branches of government, each with guaranteed independence and with identifiable constituencies. We now have four branches: the executive, the legislative, the judiciary and the bureaucratic. And the fourth branch may well have more power than the other three – it can count on its own power base more consistently and it survives. Above all, it survives. Communications in the next decades will have to deal with this fourth branch of government.

That is how I see the environment of the 1980s in terms of government. What about the general public?

The General Public

As I mentioned, more and more, the general public is becoming single issue oriented, but in a very confused fashion. In an opinion roundup of the 1970s published in Public Opinion Magazine, the American public was revealed to have these opinions:

- The federal government spent too much money in general, but too little on specific programs.
- The government was too powerful, though it should impose wage and price controls.
- Government had gone too far in interfering with free enterprise, but regulation of business should continue, at least at the same level.
- A happy family life was most important, but marriage was not the key to happiness.

As an aside, my favorite poll result in this vein comes from Europe. People were asked if they believed in the existence of God. By a large majority, those interviewed answered, “No.” Later in the same poll, the interviewer asked, “Do you believe that Jesus Christ was the son of God?” By an equally large majority the respondents said, “Yes.” (I’m not sure if that’s a comment on the state of religion in Europe, the state of education in Europe or the state of opinion polling everywhere.)

Litmus tests for political candidates can be seen everywhere on the political spectrum as well as in the national party platforms, and in New York State, often thought of as a bellwether state, a single issue party, “The Right to Life Party,” has becoming the fourth largest political party and may well overtake the third in this election. The growing national single issue orientation on both sides of the political aisle coupled with the continued disillusionment with political institutions has meant more independence of mind for the voter – or, fickleness of attitude, depending on your point of view. And when you add to that the growing effect of intractable economic problems – inflation, unemployment as well as energy – effects. Which are as much psychological as they are material – we are likely to continue to have a public, which is highly volatile, and its attitudes as voters and as consumers. Despite that volatility, however, some things seem to have taken hold for the long term. There is no question but that Ralph Nader and his organization have lost considerable power and influence in Washington and in our state capitols, as well as their hold on the attention of the public. But “consumerism” as a philosophy and as a state of mind is clearly here to stay. I remind you that this is National Consumer-Education Week. Consumerism has been institutionalized in the media, in business and in government, and has been established in the public mind through the forced of economic necessity.

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Nader's loss of influence has mirrored the loss of influence of a number of once powerful special interest groups – the environmentalists and the anti-nuclear forces. The recent vote in favor of nuclear energy in Maine is one evidence of that decline. But while the power of such special interest groups has declined in the public arena, they have found a new avenue to enforce their ideas. The picketing and sit-ins of the 1960s and early 1970s has given way to the lawsuit and the legal injection of the late 1970s. The courtroom is increasingly where the action is and will continue to be. In that legal arena special interest groups like the environmentalists do not have to win by getting a judgment in their favor, by convincing the judge and jury the correctness of their point of view or by getting a damage award for their cause. All such groups have to do is keep the suit going through enough courts for a long enough time that the target institution – whether a government or a business – finds giving up less costly than upholding their cause.

Communications and Business

There is one more trend affecting the public as voters and as consumers, which is critical to mention here, for it, too, is likely to last into the next century. There is an increasing resistance to all forms of communications. This resistance is being caused, I believe, by two factors. The first of these is one I've already mentioned, a distrust of all institutions. The second is the sheer quantity of information with which the public is bombarded from all sides. The increasing tendency has been either a simplification of issues and positions to "get through" and "be noticed" on the part of those that are seeking to be heard or a turning away or turning off by the public. Confusion is threatening to pile on distrust and that will only worsen our social, political and economic situation. I'll get back to this critical trend in a few minutes.

There is one other major force that I want to discuss because it, too, affects the environment in which our profession must work – the private business sector. The 1970s saw an increasing recognition on the part of business institutions and business leaders that they had to become involved in the communications function of their organizations.

The most dramatic evidence of that involvement is that, in a conference board survey, the corporate chief executive officers pooled stated that they were spending more than 50 percent of their time on what was once considered non-business matters. And much of that time was being spent in Washington, testifying in front of legislative and regulatory committees, talking to congressmen and meeting with legislative and regulatory staffs.

There has also been a noticeable increase in sophistication in lobbying. Business has finally learned the political process as the labor movement learned it 25 years ago. Credible, objective information and expertise now form the basis of lobby activity and government relations.

A lesson also learned from the labor movement has resulted in the growth of corporate political action committee. There are now over one thousand PACs as they are called, which are contributing money to political candidates. Note, however, that money does not buy influence nor does anyone expect that its will or should. What it buys is access, access to make one's views known.

A third major area of business involvement, which is likely to continue stems from the results of a court case in 1978 in Boston. In a suit, the state of Massachusetts challenged the right of a number of Massachusetts based corporations to advertise their position on a referendum issue. The court

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upheld the first amendment rights of corporations – within some limitations – thereby spurring on corporate advocacy advertising. The best known of these advocacy efforts is, of course Mobil's, which preceded the Massachusetts case. But Mobil's success in getting people to read and pay attention to their ideas and positions – if not necessarily convincing to all – coupled with the court decision has led more and more corporations to address critical issues and to speak directly to the public.

Business, then, has become convinced that its success – and even its survival – depends on its actively entering the public debate, not as the predominant American institution – though a case can be made that it is – but as one important interested party among many.

Before finishing this self-imposed task of prognostication, there are two other factors that will affect us and our society profoundly that must be mentioned – the new technology and the new people.

The New Technology and the New People

We are on the brink of a communications revolution that we have never experienced before. We sometimes like to think of television as radically altering American life, and in many ways it did and does. Yet, looked at closely, I contend that, until now, television has acted more as a logical extension of radio than as a device that is different in quality and kind. Of course the addition of pictures to words makes a dramatic difference, but in terms of what is available to the audience and how much the audience is allowed to react, not much has measurably changed – nor has the content altered in kind.

There is no quantitative or qualitative leap between Kojak and Dragnet or between Three's a Crowd and Fiber McGee and Molly or between the Johnny Carson Show or the Jack Benny Show. More sophistication, certainly. But the audience remains relatively captive and surely passive. The new technology has begun to change that. From the current boom in cable television, to the still exploratory two-way cable system being tested in Ohio, from the potential explosion in television channel availability proposed by the FCC, to video cassettes and discs to home satellites receiving capability, the communications audience is being presented with options that can be actively responded to, that can be chosen or refused and that can be tailored to immediate, personal, individual need and desire. That's going to provide us with a real revolution the implications of which are far from clear. Will it mean the demise of the movie theater? Will it mean the end of the newspaper, as we know it? Will it drastically alter the television network system? Will it change the way we shop, work, or even safeguard health and safety?

I don't know. But one thing I do know. The new revolutionary technology will certainly add to the communications and information's overload at the same time it allows individuals to escape from that overload by giving them more control over what they see or what they may hear.

Our society will also, for the next decades, continue to be profoundly affected by the energy and economic situations, two crises which are not to be solved soon or easily and which are in the midst of altering the basic American attitudes towards their own lives and their own institutions. Keeping up with those changing attitudes will probably be our largest challenge politically, socially, and economically. And those attitudes are now producing what must be called the new Americans, a

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generation of Americans with entirely new experiences. David Broder's column in a recent Newsweek says it better than I could. Let me read to you from it.

Meantime a new parade is forming, just over the horizon of the November election. It is made up of the next generation's politicians, the men and women from 30-50 whose shaping experiences – from the founding of The Peace Corps and Young Americans for freedom to the anti-war, equal rights and right to life demonstrations – are strikingly dissimilar to those which formed today's politicians. The new generation has been raised in affluence, not deprivation. It has been shaped by television more than the written word. Its military experiences have ended in frustration, not victory. But it has been the source of sweeping social change at home. The marchers are a varied lot. There are more than blacks and browns and Asians – and many, many more women among them than ever before. They are the best educated in our history. They acquired more organizing experience on the streets than most politicians ever get in public office.

These then are the publics in which public practitioners will have to communicate in the next twenty years, and those communications will have to take place in the kind of confused, near chaotic, frustrated social, political and economic environment in which the trends I brushed out have created and will continue to create. Will this new environment and these new people require a new public relations and new public relations professionals?

The answer is definitely “yes” and decidedly “no!” Many years ago one of the founders of public relations defined our profession: “Have a good story to tell and then tell it well.” John W. Hill's principle remains valid today and will remain valid tomorrow even beyond.

Yet, the difficulty with that principle lies in its seeming simplicity. Think about it for a minute.

Have a Good Story to Tell and Then Tell It Well

Almost every word in that sentence encapsulates a world of theoretical and practical difficulty for our profession in the coming decades.

Let me go over that sentence slowly. First, “have” a good story – not “construct” a good story or “concoct” a good story or “prepare” a good story, but “have a good story.”

That very verb suggests what I know to be John's fundamental belief that no public relations man can do for his client what that client has not already done for himself. He must conduct his business in such a way that the story whether it be a story about products or services or community relations or government regulation or research and development or environmental controls or whatever – the story is in hand. That's neither obvious nor easy – now or in the future.

Moreover, “having” a story depends heavily on two things. The first of these is already happening – the active involvement of the CEO or the institutional leader in the communications process.

I discussed this phenomenon briefly a few minutes ago. The CEO is increasingly aware that he (or she) must be at the hub of much of the communications activity of the business. Part of being that hub means being an active force for policy making within the corporation in areas once thought peripheral to business decision making – from hiring and employment practices to environmental policy and practices from product liability decisions to marketing practices. The whole of what has

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come to be called corporate social responsibility can only be instilled within an organization if it emanates from the top in a realistic and credible way. That's part of "having" a good story. Also, part of being at the hub means that business, and in particular the public relations business, will have to turn its back on the euphemistic rhetoric current in the past several decades. For too long, we have all shuddered at the word "problem," as in "Gentlemen, what we have here is not a problem, but a challenge and an opportunity."

This is more than a semantic nicety. It is also more than my personal repugnance for mindless boosterism. This substitution, which probably began as an account executive trying to please a difficult client, has had, in my opinion, some severe ramifications for American institutions. We interpret the word "opportunity" very different from the word "problem." The words have very different connotations, and each comes with a very different set of values and a very different sense of urgency. Opportunities can be taken advantage of. They come and go. If one is missed, an alert individual can find another. An opportunity does not create a crisis but can be dealt with according to the nature of the opportunity as time allows.

But "a problem" – a problem does not go away. It is, to a greater or lesser extent a crisis. It must be dealt with and dealt with in such a way that you can move on. It cannot be overlooked or dodged or stalled. It is urgent and it must be confronted.

The energy situation and the economic situation in this country – and in the world – are not opportunities. They are problems, which are being treated as opportunities. Solving those critical problems may present us with new opportunities, but we have to solve them as problems first. That brings us to what exactly a "good story" is. In a world of new values and old dilemmas, of new attitudes and old frustrations, of new technologies and old disillusionments, what constituted a good story ten years ago may well constitute a bad story today.

Are you going to build a new manufacturing facility in my community that will bring lots of new jobs? That's nice, but my community really doesn't need the jobs and certainly doesn't want the pollution.

Is a new chemical waste dump going to solve our state's toxic chemical problems? Good, but how will that affect my grandchildren's grandchildren? Are you going to hire more women? I'm all for it, but what about your older workers and your younger minority employees?

A new product? It seems like a waste of precious natural resources. Is a new government regulation threatening your profitability? How else do we guarantee safe workplaces?

In an era of single-issue oriented publics and street-wise, organizationally sophisticated community leaders, knowing what a "good story" is will not be easy.

Having the good story, then, will mean increasingly, for the public relations practitioner, being involved in the organization at the policy-making level. Having means being involved at the first stage of the communications process, not at the last stage, and it means being able to assist top management on its own terms and with its own sophistication. As more and more chief executive officers become involved in all aspects of the communications process and become comfortable

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with that involvement, they will need people around them who can help them make decisions in this new world of theirs, people who can help bring focus to problems and sharpness to solutions. The CEOs of the next 20 years will not need people to speak for them, they will speak for themselves. They will need new thinking, new ideas, new ways of conceptualizing alternatives and foreseeing professional help in the creation of the song American industry will sing, and the accent is on the song, not singing. Yet – it must be sung!

If the first half of John Hill's principle seems too tough, so too, does the last half – "telling it well."

The new communications technology will present us with an array of means to tell the story – perhaps a bewildering array. Choice, in case you've never noticed, usually makes life more complicated, even if in the end more effective.

And while we will have more choice in the method of communications, we will have an equally wide array of people with whom to communicate. The increasing proliferation of interest groups, as well as interests, will make it even more necessary to target our communications, to segment our audience just as any good publisher or marketer does today. Such segmentation will mean that our profession will require a great deal of sensitivity to the audience, a great deal of monitoring of that audience and its opinions and a great deal of research into what we are doing and how well we are doing it. These things are going to be necessary not only to communicate well in a very complicated, fragmented environment, but also to stand up to the kind of management scrutiny we will be increasingly receiving – scrutiny that will require some measure of cost effectiveness and message effectiveness. Public relations has for years evaded such measurements on the grounds of what we did could not easily be measured, if it could be measured at all. However, that argument would not hold water much longer, particularly if we are to gain the position in top management that I think we must, a position at the center of the corporate decision making.

Yet telling the story well has traditionally meant telling it effectively in a formal way. We must also realize, now more than ever, that there are informal systems of communications that speak just as loudly and just as effectively – if not more so. What a company does is as loud of a statement of its policies and practices as what it says it does in press releases or how well its products perform or its services produce. (Here, again, we're back to "having" a good story to tell.) A company's position on investment in South Africa or its record in hiring and promoting minority groups will be just as important as the efficacy of its products and will become increasingly more important throughout the coming decades. And whether a company tacitly condones or ignores sexual harassment on the job speaks far louder than any corporate policy statement on equal opportunity. This informal communication, too, is part of "telling it well."

"Telling it well" also means finding ways to get through the information overload. That, too, means finding the right medium for communications and the right message to catch the attention of a particular part of the audience – and be convincing, once that attention is caught, in ways which resolve confusion and frustration, not add to them.

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All these aspects of “telling it well” contribute to the last aspect – enhancing the organization’s credibility. No amount of effectiveness in communicating will compensate for a loss of credibility; an elusive quality that is hard won and not easily lost. Credibility is not only the key to telling it well; it is also the product of it. In this sense communications is the equivalent of Ambrose Bierce’s definition of a chicken. “A chicken,” he said, “is just an egg’s way of producing another egg.” Thus Hearle’s law of public relations: “Communications is just a credible company’s way of producing more credibility.”

John Hill’s first principle of public relations, then, holds up well for the coming decades. But are we ready to follow that first principle? What kind of people will we have to be?

At Hill Knowlton, we have been asking that question for a long time. One way we have asked that question has been, “Do we want specialists or generalists?” Our answer, not too surprisingly, is that, now and for the future, we need both.

We need public relations generalists who can understand client’s problems and needs both in terms of his overall business strategies and in terms of the communications programs and activities, which will enhance his ability to make those strategies work. It is this kind of generalist that can act as account manager – not account executive – pulling together the range of communications resources and directing their work.

I used the term account managers, realizing that most public relations practitioners do not work in agencies. However, the trend in the corporate world has been increasingly to treat the public relations department as a separate profit center which acts as an agency for its various clients – the different divisions and functions of the company.

These generalists, however, are not superficial traffic cops and client pacifiers. Even as generalists, we need and will continue to need people with depth of theoretical knowledge of our profession and a breadth of practical expertise. Managers, after all, must be able to understand the complexities of what they manage.

The generalists, however, can no longer work without the strong support of specialists. Communications and the world in which that process takes place is far too complicated for the old-fashioned generalists. The new generalist manager will have to have sophisticated backup and specialized support from a variety of sources.

First, he or she will need research, monitoring and evaluation specialists who can assist him in assessing the effectiveness of his efforts, in planning further efforts or in counseling his client or employer on his policies and activities.

Second, given the complex nature of the issues to be communicated, he or she will need specialists in a wide variety of disciplines. Just look at the kinds of problems with which my own firm has become involved in recent years:

- Air and water pollution

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- Chemical waste disposal
- Product defects and alleged defects
- Strikes and labor boycotts
- Nutrition in the Third World
- Equal employment and affirmative action planning
- Foreign investment promotion
- Public referenda on nuclear energy and gun control
- Mandatory retirement legislation
- Import quotas

A full list would be almost as long as the list of problems and public policy dilemmas confronting society at large.

A generalist must have the detailed knowledge and expertise of the specialist when dealing with problems like these, which have far-reaching legal, social, political and economic implications. Only the specialist can know in full detail what interest groups will be aroused by a particular stand on an issue or by a particular decision. Only a specialist can know how a specific social issue is affecting a country in Europe and might, therefore, affect the United States or a country in the Pacific area.

Yet, only the generalist can integrate the knowledge of the specialist into an overall communications plan and program.

This combination of generalist/managers and specialist/counselors is what will characterize a successful public relations profession over the next decades. So, too, will an increasing diversity from where our professionals will come. Professional schools in public relations will be more and more important in producing the generalists, skilled in the theory and practice of the profession. Yet, other generalists as well as most of the specialists, will come from far different professions: philosophers, behavioral scientists, historians, scientists, lawyers, engineers, educators, political scientists, politicians, international affairs scholars, television producers and writers. I know this is true, because at Hill and Knowlton, representatives from each of these fields are now an integral part of our organization.

can being to write the song for the rest of the 20th century. I wish you well on your challenging mission.

But if these new people, fresh from new fields or fresh with advanced degrees in public relations, are indeed new, they have, like John Hill's first principle, some very old tested qualities, indispensable in the coming decades.

First: Sharply honed minds capable of clear, logical thought and oriented to the solving of problems. At the very heart of public relations and public affairs, and at the heart of all the techniques we employ, is clear, insightful and foresightful thinking.

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Second: Flexibility, not only in terms of working long and hard when the need arises, but also in terms of the ability to recognize and respond to instantaneous changes.

Third: An ability to communicate clearly in terms that can be understood without ever simplifying to distortion.

Fourth: An ability to work with the most senior corporate executives.

With these old abilities...

With these new people...

With John Hill's old first principle...

And with its newer meanings...

We