

Vernon C. Schranz Distinguished Lecture in Public Relations
Tim Traverse-Healy – 1998

It was with a feeling of some pride—one of the most treacherous of human emotions—that I received Ball State University's invitation to deliver this 20th Schranz Memorial Lecture, one of the intellectual markers in our professional calendar. Noting the names of the previous 19 lecturers—many of them personal friends—I am truly sensitive of the honor implicit in this invitation.

But I have an extra reason for being “chuffed” because it adds to my list of “Personal Firsts” in your country. If in this great, vast land any Irishman can be called a “foreigner,” then I was the first in the early fifties to address the Public Relations Society of America; later, when you were celebrating the anniversary of your Independence in Boston, I was the first stranger to present to the Public Relations Foundation Lecture, more recently to be honored by your prestigious Page Society, and now by Ball State.

Some might surmise the reasons for my mentioning these four firsts are entirely egotistical, for I am not noted for my reticence. Not so. It is because I wish to make a particular point. On those previous occasions I behaved as a dutiful guest conforming to the wishes of my hosts as to subject, title, general content, style of delivery and so on. I spoke on such daunting titles as “The Fundamental Role of the Public Relations Person on the World Wide Scene;” “A Declaration of Interdependence;” “The Professional Responsibilities of Riding Corporate Point;” “The New Social Agenda.” Fairly heavy, if not exactly heady stuff.

Thoughtfully, I was given by the organizers of this evening's event the printed lectures of previous distinguished lecturers to guide me in preparing my presentation. I was also sent the following written instruction. Quote. “Your lecture should be especially prepared for this occasion making points that are important to the understanding of public relations in a way that has not previously been formally presented, providing an opportunity to educate and call for action.” Unquote.

Now the good news or the bad news, depending how you look at it, is that I intend to claim the privilege of age, of being an elder with over 50 years professional practice behind me. I propose to ignore the values implicit in my instructions. I propose to depart in the matter of style. On those past occasions listed earlier, I struggled to address my audience strictly on a formal, professional, even abstract level, and certainly not on the personal or the emotional. This evening, I intend to be subjective, anecdotal and very, very personal. And I make no apology that my remarks are aimed at the professionals in this audience, especially the younger ones, and certainly the students here present. In doing so, I ask the academics, educators and other honored guests here tonight to serve as witnesses to my concerns and confessions. And if, in the ultimate, the organizers do not approve or are upset at my approach to this assignment, then so be it. I am a moving target and within hours I will be three thousand miles away back in my isolated village in the depths of my beloved France.

In 1942, 56 years ago—as a very young, aspiring doctor of medicine—a Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries and Surgeon-Barbers, no less—I shattered my Hippocratic Oath forever by becoming a professional killer. I will not bore you with the moral agony and ecstasy of the making of that decision. I joined the Royal Corps of Marines and was posted to the newly formed Commandos

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mustered by Churchill to “set Europe alight.” I served in Special Forces in the enemy occupied zones.

The first time I ever encountered the term “public relations” was years later, in early May 1945. I was huddled in a slit trench behind the German lines on the Baltic Coast outside the City of Kiel, a mighty naval port, itself crowded with refugees, and beleaguered and battered from land, sea and air. Cut off, we had to be supplied by an airdrop. By some obscure military reasoning, the canister that fell nearest to my hideout contained packets of boiled sweets, a quantity of green berets, contraceptives of a dubious French manufacture and a selection of paperback books.

One very slim volume was published by an American religious group I had not heard of then, and have not since: “The Christophers.” I have forgotten the title, but it listed the jobs one could do if you wanted to be on the side of the angels and presumably against sin; the activities one could undertake that involved working with people, helping communities in particular and society in general. Amongst the teachers, social workers, probation officers, nurses and paramedics there was a small paragraph about public relations officers.

Like so many of my contemporaries starting out at that time to work in our field, I had witnessed at first hand the deprivation, devastation, degradation and misery of war and was seeking the pathway to that brave new world we had heard and dreamt about. Against the backdrop of my early Jesuit education, perhaps I was seeking atonement for having broken my solemn oath. A form of penance. In any event, the idea of public relations as a career appealed.

Whatever: 12 months later in London I purchased three items. A brass plate with just my name on it, which I nailed up amongst the lawyers. Then I acquired the only book on the subject of public relations I could find. It was titled “Blueprint for Public Relations.” The author was Glen Griswold whose widow, Denny, became the legendary owner-editor of PR News and was incidentally an earlier contributor to this series of lectures. And finally, I bought a cabin class return ticket on the “Queen Mary” to New York.

There, I met, was welcomed and influenced by the exciting thinking of such pioneers in our craft as Bernays, Newsome, Page, Hill, Byoir, Ross, Fairman, Hammond, Lipscomb, Chase and Burson, to mention just a few. Of course, I was already in touch with their European counterparts: Sir Stephen Tallents, Sir Tom Fife Clark, and Alan Campbell-Johnson in the UK; Odd Medboe in Norway; and Malcolm Bjorkman in Sweden; Rein Vogels in Holland; Georje Zedwitz-Arnhem; Albert Oekl in Germany; Guido de Rossi in Italy; Pierre Janssen in Belgium; Manos Pavlides in Greece and Lucien Matrat and Jean Coup do Fre’jac in France.

These pacesetters without the exception of all subscribed to the same sentiments, held the same set of beliefs, were guided on their course by the same galaxy of stars. Only marginally did they differ in the manner in which they expressed themselves, as I was able to judge, being at the time virtually the only link between all concerned.

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Maybe their beliefs were the expression of intellectual effects of the workings of such propagandists as the Nazi Dr. Joseph Goebbels or the Stalinist Munzenberg. Perhaps it was merely concern bred by the very success of the various wartime propaganda machines or the emergence of psychological warfare in its various guises, “dirty tricks” claiming legitimacy. Recognition, to paraphrase the titles of the group of books well worth reading by serious students, that in the fog of war, truth is the first casualty in a game played by intrepid men acting like foxes, and in any event history is written by the victors.

Their “Credo?” They believed—simplistically you may now feel—that the world would be a better place if understanding and dialogue between individuals and in situations in conflict could be achieved. Recognizing that in reality no such animal as the “General Public” exists, they believed that a free flow of information, aided by effective, but above all honest communications between persons and groups, was essential to the dialogue process. They believed that publicity was not necessarily information and that propaganda was not public relations. That for an activity to be correctly described as “public relations.” It had to possess three ingredients in equal measure; truth, concern for the public interest and dialogue. They were fully aware that like “Beauty” in the eye of the beholder, “Truth” was a variable, not an absolute. As Sir Peter Ustinov, the international actor and satirist once quipped: “Truth. The French add to it. The Germans subtract from it. The Italians modify it. The Irish ignore it. The British change the subject and the Americans think they own it.” But these pioneers were all adamant that “Truth” had to be respected and that in the ultimate their performance in this regard would be critically examined and independently judged. They fully understood that although given a big enough budget, enough people could be fooled to do a lot of damage in the end truth would come out and their professional future would be destroyed.

They appreciated that the currency of contact, essential to the creation of understanding and thus dialogue, was truthful information and the price to be paid for dialogue was controversy. They recognized that implicit in the dialogue process was the preparedness of an individual or an organization to modify its policies and its practices in the light of that dialogue. They all expressed the belief that whereas professional counselors, we had very real obligations and responsibilities towards our employers and our clients, if ever push came to shove; our duty to the public was paramount. Pro Bono Publico. You will appreciate that to them, unlike communications that justifiably perhaps could claim to be an amalgam of art and science, public relations was a philosophy, a personal and corporate mind-set based upon the precept that what people think and want matters. Those practitioners believed those things then, and so did I. And so I do still. I see no reason today to modify my support for what I consider to be the fundamental tenets of our calling, so firmly held and so eloquently, often elegantly, expressed to me in person by those leaders. Their tenets are now reflected, in some instances enshrined, in the codes of conduct of the various national professional associations and societies. And at that international level too. In the Mexico Statement for which the Englishman Professor Sam Black, long associated with this very university, was the architect; the International Public Relations Association’s Code of Athens, authored in 1965 by the Frenchman Lucien Matrat; the international organization of consultancies’ Rome Charter drafted by me in 1991; the Confederation of European Public Relations Professionals Codes of

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Venice and Lisbon, and the more recent Helsinki Charter compiled by Goran Sjoberg and his colleagues.

In fact, the experiences of the intervening 50 years has only served to harden my support for their philosophies, because whereas in the early years we were more or less “loners” expressing these thoughts—often like disciples or evangelists subjected to rejection and ridicule—increasingly society, driven by political and societal pressures, has gradually come around to not only accepting many of these ideas, but also even developed them further and now demands that they have to be applied. No longer do we public relations specialists have any call to be self-conscious, or defensive about our daily work. Indeed, we have every reason to be proud of what we do, of our contribution, because we are doing exactly what our fellow citizens want from us. Indeed, if as a group, we did not exist, then society would have to invent us. The beliefs of those early practitioners accurately articulate the social justification for our existence, and I suggest that society will not only continue to demand our services, to accept our merits, but will be prepared to welcome us, to even title us “professionals” if we perform according to those beliefs.

In short, then, which are these forces that I claim I have created us and justify our societal existence? There are five of them. Back in 1947, few envisaged the intense global demand for information that would escalate so rapidly, putting the establishment under siege. The public requirement for more and more, deeper and deeper, hopefully better and better information has reached the point where the mere task of gathering, storing, analyzing, interpreting, presenting and releasing information of record has in itself become a professional one. Incidentally, it may soon be the position that more trained journalists will be working within this area of communication activity than in the mainstream media.

Few, then, forecast that two concepts would gain credence. Firstly, that the so-called “Shareholders” in any form of enterprise—private, voluntary, non-profit or state—were not only those with the obvious vested interest in it, but were often as not outnumbered by other groups of “Stakeholders.” And, furthermore, that it was the job of leaders and managers to attempt to balance the inevitable conflicts involved. The second concept: the increased recognition of the obvious, namely that what on bloc, nation, community, corporation, institution, entity does inevitably affect another. All those years ago, John Donne put it simply in one phrase: “No man is an island.” The policies of one element have a domino effect on the operations of others. Certainly, their prosperity, sometimes their lifestyle, occasionally their very existence. So complex have the considerations involved in these two concepts become, that the task of auditing the social impact of institutional actions and the task of conflict analysis and resolution have also become professional specialisms.

The fourth force: the paradigm shift in human values that we are witnessing is causing greater emphasis to be placed on “Individualism” at the expense of “Institutionalism,” forcing corporate bodies to match their values with those of the public and to be seen more responsive, transparent and accountable in the process. I do not feel that my fellow Athenaeum member Gore Vidal would agree with that statement, but he would concur that the accepted structures of government are being subjected to erosion with the mental, even physical retreat of citizens into enclaves, opting out

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of the political process and engaging in interest group non-politics or issue-driven consensus politics only when they consider it personally essential. I would agree with him, however, that there also seems to be a conspiracy between the media and the forces of reaction to deflect public attention away from politics and public affairs to focus on personalities by providing a diet of triviality and superficiality; the media justifying the commercial drive for readership and viewership on the spurious grounds of public interest and the people's right to know. Understanding the behavioral cause and effect of these changes comes within our professional remit.

Fifthly, and finally, the so-called "Communications Explosion" and "Information Super Highway" has vastly enlarged and complicated the choice of media and method of talking with, rather than at, the many and varied audiences we need to address just to keep society ticking over. It used to be that "Information is Power." It then became "to withhold information is to infringe a civil, even human right," then, "if people have a right to information, then they also have the right to respond." The debate now gathering strength is "if they have the right to respond, then they must be accorded the resources necessary to respond."

My claim that respect for the truth and concern for the public interest underpins all our work leads me directly into the nub of my talk, which I have titled "Spin Doctor—Term of the Moment."

A couple of weeks ago, I tuned into the BBC to an excellent in-depth interview in a series called "Resigning Issues," by an experienced Irish broadcaster, Fegal Keane. Keane was interviewing an impressive American, Robert Reich. Inter alia, Reich abhorred what he described as the invasion of the Washington political scene by public relation practitioners. Almost in the same breath, he referred to them as "spin doctors." His remark just added fuel to my inner fire because, courtesy of a media content analysis firm, I regularly receive clippings and transcripts of significant mentions.

Over the past 12 months, the use and misuse of this term "spin doctor" has mushroomed. The British Prime Minister is accused of employing one, as is the Royal Family. The fact that the Minister's a skilled political strategist and that the Buckingham Palace's new adviser is the respected immediate past president of the Institute of Public Relations seems to have escaped the attention of the media. My refined Internet search of the term threw up 2,756 items, and a reading of the dossier on my desk indicates that whereas in the good old days it used to be lovers, now according to the journalists, every political leader worth his salt has a spinner in his closet, to say nothing of industrialists, entrepreneurs, bankers, bishops, even ladies who lunch and the occasional Queen.

As a group I thought we had survived the era of books with sensational titles—"The Hidden Persuaders" and "The Unseen Power"—but now we have "Spin Doctors—The Invisible Persuaders," by David Michie and a biography of Edward L. Bernays written by a Boston Globe reporter, Larry Tye, entitled "Father of Spin." In passing, I should record that I have never been a particular fan of Bernays, for I think he did us no favor by coining the description, "the engineering of human consent." Even I know what he really meant and I do not believe that he deserves to be posthumously so labeled because at no time did he advocate or practice lying.

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For some time now, politicians and commentators wishing to denigrate an activity with which they were not in sympathy or agreement have adopted the habit of dubbing it “a public relations exercise.” Although this irritated me, it did not really disturb me, but this latest twist does concern me, because “spin” is a distinctly pejorative word, employed in this context to clearly imply news management, misinformation, disinformation and manipulation aimed at misleading the public. The word “comment” has been replaced by “spin” and for “spin” read “lie.” Planned and deliberate lying.

But in that broadcast, it seemed to me Robert Reich made more than a point. He hoisted a storm signal. He said that his worry was that “spin doctorship” was a dangerous phenomenon in that over time it could destroy the public mind, the credibility of public figures, and erode the confidence of the people in the structures, instruments and processes of government and state. Few public relations practitioners of my acquaintance would disagree with him on that score and so perhaps this so-called phenomenon deserves closer examination and comment by us, the very people wrongly accused of this practice.

I think you will find that spin doctors rarely actually lie, if only for the pragmatic reason that it would prove counter-productive to their cause. They do use the devices of information selection, message repetition and timing. They do seek to present their “product” in the best light possible.

“So what?” I see you think. “So do legitimate practitioners,” you might respond. And you would be right! But I suggest with a difference. We understand that there can be lying by planned omission, as well as by conscious commission. We know that without resorting to actually lying, just by consistently “accentuating the positive and eliminating the negative,” a totally misleading, even distorted picture can be presented. We know that for good or evil “timing is everything.” We know that not only the selection, but the “de-selection” of target audiences for our messages can have an unbalancing effect on opinion. We know that the cumulative effect of the release of a series of slanted stories, or the steady drip of information featuring the same theme, can have a dramatic effect on attitudes. We know it is possible to raid moral philosophy and to adopt and adapt comforting words like “trust” and “care” or to misappropriate words and invest them with different values. Spin Doctors know these tricks and practice them. We know them and do not. That is the vital difference.

For professional public relations practitioners have learned that by behaving in such a fashion we might make short-term gains, but that sooner rather than later we would be faced with the extraordinarily difficult task of changing the erroneous perceptions thus created in a climate of distrust and suspicion caused by expectations raised and unfulfilled. The long haul versus the short.

So, what it comes down to is that the factors that distinguish Spin Doctors from those of us who lay claim to the title “public relations practitioner” are cause, ethic and method. For us, the cause we espouse must be defensible in public and social interest terms. The case we build in support of the just cause must be based on truth. The methods we employ to promulgate the case must not be manipulative. Indeed, our code of conduct instructs us to ensure that we present a balanced picture

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of the organizations we represent and it specifically bans the use of manipulative methods and techniques.

It is fact that the original logo of the old American Public Relations Association, forefather of The Public Relations Society, was the Torch of Knowledge, and that of its contemporary, the British Institute of Public Relations, was coincidentally the Torch of Truth. Along the years, in pursuit of modernity, these meaningful symbols were changed, one to an anvil and the other to a monogrammed lozenge. Perhaps the time has come to rekindle them, in spirit if not in form.

But the part played by the media—so quick to condemn—also calls for comment. Journalists have a distinct professional responsibility to expose untruths and attempts to manipulate opinion when they come across them. But reading through my clippings file and talking around, I have formed a strong impression that some of the reportage by some of the reporters is motivated by a mixture of envy and spite. Envy at the growing status in society of spokespersons. Spite because they find themselves having to deal with such an animal. In a bar in London frequented by working journalists, the oft heard toast is “Feed the Brute,” referring to the insatiable demand of their masters for usable copy, and in the light of the economic and moral pressures which members of this craft are under, I find this attitude understandable while not commendable. But whilst pillorying the Spin Doctors, some of these very same journalists are featuring material they know to be suspect and making deals for exclusives with noted exponents of the art of spin, willing pawns in the “negative PR” game, and a euphuism for “Dirty Tricks.” In this way they are aiding and abetting the process of misleading their own readers in particular and the public in general. Members of the press are quick to call “Freedom.” The other side of that same coin is “Responsibility.”

Social responsibility and corporate ethics can sometimes be grand terms for what are in effect matters of individual conscience. I am sensitive of the written instructions I referred to earlier, namely that tonight I should “Make points never formally expressed previously.” As far as I can ascertain, no one to date has listed the various dilemma of conscious they have had to face, although my much admired friend John Budd, also a previous lecturer, has gotten close to it. Since in the Anglo-Saxon, rather than Napoleonic setting, laws are developed case by case, I thought it would be of value if I listed for the record the only 10 decisions I have had to face during half a century of public relations practice covering hundreds of client cases:

- In the mid-fifties, refusing to act for the tobacco companies on the grounds that the link with cancer was a fact.
- Resigning a global household name account because, with reason, it was suspected of laundering monies of organized crime.
- Resigning an industry that was clearly—but not obviously—rigging the international market.
- Refusing to act for a corporation whose marketing methods in the Third World had justifiably come under criticism because they showed no intention of changing them.
- Resigning a corporate client whose pro-green program was intended to deflect interest and provide a smoke screen to hide serious environmental infringements.

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- Refusing to act for the Trade and Tourism Ministries of a repressive regime with a record of contravening international human rights standards.
- Agreeing to advise the Uranium and Nuclear industries.
- Agreeing to send a team to Bhopal after the tragic disaster with watching a brief for consortium of chemical industry concerns.
- Instantly resigning the account of a well-known media proprietor who deliberately lied in my presence on a financial matter on the record and for publication to two of his own senior editors.
- On oath before a government tribunal, and under real threat of being committed there and then to goal (jail) for contempt, refusing to list the names of individuals in public life who had been consulted in order to assess a situation and provide counsel to a client, a well-known and highly respected financial concern.

To “spin’ or not to “spin.” Looking back and also sensitive to Robert Reich’s genuine concerns, I wonder whether or not I did enough defense of my chosen vocation. Perhaps I should have made these decisions public, at the time of being prepared to give reasons. At least I would have been openly putting my mouth where my reputation was.

In the fifties in Norway, the newspaper industry solved for itself a very real problem affecting its credibility, and in a very simple way. The “Red Hand Committee.” Every day editors received copies of their previous editions with various items bearing a red hand imprint. This indicated that the committee felt that the particular item so stamped really belonged in the advertising columns! The editors took note.

I just wonder if in each country in regard to programs showing a tendency to be manipulative, we public relations practitioners could do something similar. At least it would put the perpetrators of such activities under notice and warn them that their actions were being professionally monitored. A sort of “Spin Watcher Vociferous.” The prosecuting defending lawyer analogy for public relations in today’s conditions is increasingly untenable and sooner rather than later public relations associations and professional bodies will have to grapple with the issue of manipulative practices and their policing. But first, the profession will have to understand more about them, learn to recognize them, and develop procedures for discussing, judging, and exposing malpractice. Academics have a role to play in this process. Maybe in the future a practitioner’s public reputation will be formed by the clients it becomes known he refused or resigned rather than acquisitions he proudly announces!

And so tonight’s show is over because this fat man has finally sung his final song. I do not consider I am a Spin Doctor, but sometimes I like to think of myself as a doctor of sorts, practicing from time to time a form of preventative medicine: delaying, stemming, and stopping the onslaught of conflict by professionally applying the healing balm of information. Anyway, it does my conscience a power of good to believe that I have substituted the Socratic Oath for the Hippocratic. Like the teacher who fears that one fine morning he might awake to discover that in reality he was nothing but a political agent, I guard against being that happy communicator who too late comes to realize late that in fact he is a propagandist.

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At my age, I am sought after by the media to write obituaries and by widows and offspring to give soliloquies at memorial services. Indeed, this talk of mine tonight was billed as a Memorial Lecture. An Irishman traditionally is never supposed to be too serious about death. But occasionally I have thought what an inscription I would like on my tombstone. I am prepared to settle for the term “Seanachie.” A “seanachie” according to the Irish dictionary is a “rural spinner of country folk tales.” I would go along with that in the belief that the tales I have spun have never been hurtful, more often than not been harmless, always meant to be helpful, hopefully humorous, and never tales out of school.

I was delighted to be invited to be here this evening, but I appreciate that each one of you in this audience attended as a result of one of three forces. You wanted to come, you were persuaded to come and some of you were told to come. Whatever the motivation, thank you for coming and I only hope that you found your journey—I wager a far shorter one than mine—even as fractionally worthwhile as I have.

I am grateful for your friendly welcome and for your courteous quiet reception of my rambling remarks.