Although the history of public relations tends to be presented unproblematically and chronologically, this inaugural conference suggested otherwise. Karen Miller Russell, one of two keynote speakers, argued that public relations needs to claim embarrassing moments—such as its association with PT Barnum and the Klu Klux Klan—as part of public relations’ legitimate history and to recognise that public relations did not emerge suddenly in the corporate sphere in the twentieth century. Public relations theory, according to Russell, is flawed because we don’t properly understand public relations history.

Jacquie L’Etang, the other keynote speaker, called for more contextualised and reflexive approaches to public relations history writing. L’Etang maintains there is a need to distinguish between a broad understanding of public relations in all its forms (as, for example, propaganda, promotion, rhetoric, activism, international relations, and public diplomacy) and a narrow definition (where public relations is a US invention exported to the rest of the world). Echoing Russell’s call to claim the embarrassing moments in public relations history, L’Etang argues it is wrong to maintain the simplistic and unconvincing distinction between propaganda and public relations. Historical writing which pays closer attention to context will help relocate public relations.

Apart from the keynotes, the conference was run in two parallel streams. Inevitably, this meant I missed half the papers. The provision of abstracts and authors’ biographies on a CD-Rom rather than in the printed program did not aid my decision-making. However, this did mean there was an element of surprise about several presentations, some of which were gems.

Given the dominance of US scholars at the conference, and generally in the field, it is not surprising that many papers did focus on US public relations. For example, several presentations revisited historical figures: Edward Bernays (Burton StJohn and Meg Lamme explored the paradigmatic shifts in his writing, and Tom Hove and Richard Cole re-examined his controversial work for the United Fruit Company); John Hill (Robert Heath considered Hill & Knowlton’s founder’s role in the establishment of the Tobacco Industry Research Council and its significance for issues management); and Arthur W. Page (David Remund analysed his editorials from 1913—1927 regarding the social obligations of corporations). Other presentations explored the evolution of the community right-to-know legislation in the US (Michael Palenchar and Bernardo Motta), the history of public relations education in the US and Canada (Donald Wright), and surveyed public relations scholarship through an analysis of themes in almost 3,000 papers at communication association conferences (Bonita Neff).

Two papers from US scholars stood out for me in that they contested the evolutionary model of US public relations history. Patricia Curtin and Lisa Forster’s “Creating Counternarratives: Harvey Company Publicity and Native Americans (1902—1936)” offered local, contextualised narratives and competing discourses in the promotion of the Wild West and ‘authentic’ Native American culture which convey the complexity of public relations and demonstrate the
contradictions in presenting public relations history as linear and cohesive. Diana Knott Martinelli linked public relations to feminist social movements by examining women’s use of public relations to spur early-to-mid twentieth century social change.

Papers from non-US scholars also offered alternative histories. Perhaps most revealing for me was the reconceptualisation of public relations history from scholars from mid- and eastern Europe, in particular from former socialist countries. Günther Bentele and Sandra Muhlberg argued the role of public relations in East Germany (GDR) was not to inform but primarily to meet political objectives and in this way was more like propaganda. The authors noted that propaganda did not have negative connotations in the GDR and was viewed as a legitimate form of communication in socialist society. Antje Berg examined navy propaganda in the German Empire 1890—1914 in relation to a specific campaign to get proposed labour laws adopted by parliament; she concluded that this campaign was groundbreaking in the way it was organised and funded partly by industry, and in media relations.

In a US—USSR co-presentation, Mark McElreath, Lyudmila Azarova and Olga Markova agreed propaganda was not seen as a negative term; the version of history which places public relations origins in self-promotion and show business is unfortunate as in the USSR public relations started as a political function. Similarly, Kaja Tampere started teaching public relations in Estonia in 1986 using a US textbook; she said the students were bewildered to learn that public relations started with circuses as this was not their experience; instead, their history of public relations is bound up with the history of political parties and movements. In order to understand public relations history, Tampere argued, it must be considered in terms of how it is entwined with societal and political history i.e. its relationship with propaganda and political ideologies must be considered. Lee Edwards achieved this with her significant paper, “Empire, Economy and Exploitation: A ‘Raced’ View of PR History,” where she addressed the functionalist orientation of much public relations history writing through a postcolonial and critical examination of the specific social and political contexts that underpinned public relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Presentations by two Australians (my bias is showing) were delightful, well-researched and significant. Peter Sekuless reported on the “History of Government Relations and Lobbying” oral history project commissioned by the National Library of Australia. He believes the recordings with key participants offer a useful insight into the extent to which business groups shaped the government agenda in Australia, and an alternative version of history to industry-generated case studies. Although a work-in-progress, some of the interviews are already available via the National Library of Australia website; these offer a fantastic resource for researchers of Australian public relations history. Jane Johnston has catalogued 124 film and television depictions of public relations dating back to 1933. Her analysis demonstrated surprising shifts in popular representations of public relations practice across a range of genres.

The first day concluded with a panel of journal editors. While the focus was not history of public relations, it was nevertheless relevant as the editors of Public Relations Review and Journal of Public Relations Research echoed Anne Gregory’s (Journal of Communication Management) comments regarding publishing trends. These trends include double the number of submissions from two years ago, with a greater diversity of views and geographical spread. However, Gregory is concerned with the apparent obsession with ‘old’ themes such as roles, evaluation, status of public relations, the methodological divide between quantitative and qualitative research and the bifurcation in scholarship between defending or denigrating old paradigms. Gregory maintains these all prevent the innovation and development of public relations scholarship. She also lamented the lack of engagement with significant, real-world social issues.

Eighty delegates attended this inaugural conference, which opened up the space for new kinds of scholarship and new ways of conceptualising public relations history. The keynote addresses and the “Meet the Editors” sessions are available online (see http://blogs.bournemouth.ac.uk/historyofpr/). Proceedings will be published after the end of August and a special issue of Journal of Communication Management will contain selected papers in 2011.

Author biography

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