



**OUR  
FUTURE  
IN PUBLIC  
RELATIONS**

**Ken Kerrigan**

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A Cautionary  
Tale in Three Parts

KEN KERRIGAN



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Leonor, Matt and Emily

*You are the past I will always remember, the present I cherish each day, and the future I can't wait to explore. Thank you for your patience and encouragement in making this book possible.*

A Deep Thank You to The Museum of Public Relations

*Understanding the history of any profession is critical to envisioning the path it can take in the future, and without question that is true of the profession of public relations. The service that The Museum of Public Relations plays in helping working practitioners and the next generation of leaders understand the profession's history is of paramount importance. This book could not have been written without the help of Shelley Spector and the museum's archives.*

“Don’t throw the past away, you might need it some rainy day. Dreams can come true again, when everything old is new again.”

Carol Bayer Sager and Peter Allen

“The past is the father of the present.”

Agatha Christie

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## PROLOGUE: PAST IMPERFECT, FUTURE INDICATIVE

I'm an accidental public relations (PR) professional. Back in the 1980s, as I roamed the hallways of New York University (NYU), I didn't even know PR was a profession. I wanted to be a lawyer. However, after an academic advisor from the university's law school had a look at my grade point average (GPA), and was finished chuckling, it was clear that the only bar I was going to pass (and occasionally drop by) was Greenwich Village's famous Peculiar Pub on Bleecker Street.

So, I changed gears. "I'll be a journalist!" I declared. I enrolled in NYU's journalism program, and each day I would go to class and bang out a story on one of the school's aging typewriters. After several strokes of a professor's red pen I soon learned how to make my writing crisp and to the point. I was certain this was going to be a great career choice where my skills would shine. But, after I met with another academic advisor, to map out my course plan for the next semester, I learned a career in journalism was not in the cards either.

My grades were there, but time wasn't on my side. I paid a significant amount of my out-of-pocket college costs by working the night shift in a secure underground vault at The Depository Trust Company, counting municipal bond deposits various brokers had made that day. (Speaking to colleagues in the vault was seriously frowned upon lest it should

interfere with the required counting – hardly an auspicious start for a career in communications.)

I needed to “clock in” to the vault by 4 p.m., but if I was to continue in NYU’s journalism program, I needed to be in class at the same time. With a dwindling bank account and a need for a steady flow of cash, my pursuit of a degree in journalism was sadly going to come to an end.

The topic of PR was mentioned – once – during one of my journalism classes, so I asked my advisor if there were classes in PR that I might pursue; classes that ideally would allow me to transfer my credits into a communications degree that would allow me to graduate on time, which was my priority.

Happily, there was. My first class, *An Introduction to PR*, was taught by an outstanding adjunct professor named Angelo Parra – I still have the notebook from that class. I soon learned the names of Ed Bernays and Ivy Lee, the practitioners many consider to be the founders of the profession. In so many ways that class changed my life. I was hooked and never looked back.

Nearly 30 years later I’ve had the opportunity to work for some of the most respected PR agencies in the world while spending just over a decade as a communications counselor at the Big Four accounting firm Ernst & Young. It’s been a wild ride, teaming with some of the world’s most admired companies, with amazing colleagues by my side every step of the way. But this is not a memoir – that may come later. This is also not a history book, despite the title. Well, not entirely.

Many academics argue over the origins of PR – did it start with Ivy Lee in the early 1900s, Bernays in the 1920s – sometime earlier in Europe? In America, many will agree that the profession, as we know it today, really came of age in the 1920s as Bernays, the so-called “father of public relations” offered his services to clients as PR counsel. In fact, the first

college-level course in PR was taught in 1923, also by Bernays, at NYU and the first books about the profession were published during that decade, as well.

So, we can say with some confidence that as we enter the 2020s the profession of PR is about to celebrate its centennial of sorts. If Bernays were still alive, he'd surely issue a press release declaring as much. So, what better time to look back at the profession's past, to pause and reflect on where we are in the present and map out where we may go in the future.

But where, precisely, is PR today? I'd suggest we are at a crossroads. Many no longer even use the words public relations to define the profession, opting instead for phrases like integrated communications marketing or communications management. Others say traditional media relations, once the foundation of the profession, no longer matters, at least not the way it once did, and organizations can now (and should) communicate directly with stakeholders via their own web sites and social media platforms. Renowned PR counselor Richard Edelman has called this approach "collaborative journalism" – saying companies can fill in the gaps that exist in public discourse as a result of a steady stream of media outlets closing their doors. Still, others have gone so far as to suggest that PR is dead! So, where are we exactly and more importantly where are we headed?

As I began writing this book, toward the end of summer 2019, the Business Roundtable, an association of chief executive officers (CEOs) of America's leading companies, declared that the impact publicly traded companies had on society was now more important than their share price. The idea of moving away from the long-held, Milton Friedman-inspired, management tenet of "shareholder primacy" – which stated that maximizing shareholder value was the primary objective (and responsibility) of the management of a publicly held company (as long as the company didn't do anything illegal) – was

being challenged. Pundits quickly labeled this new idea “social capitalism.”

The statement from the Business Roundtable was startling to many and front-page news across the country – generating well over 1,000 news stories in the days following its release. Many PR agencies seized on the moment by issuing position papers on the topic. The case the profession was making was clear: If “social capitalism” was going to work, it would be driven, in a significant way, by the PR (or whatever other name we chose to use) discipline.

But was this really a new idea? Decades ago, management guru Peter Drucker famously said, “Management is about doing things right; leadership is about doing the right thing.” And even Adam Smith, the father of economic theory, wrote about the idea that moral norms found in the “impartial spectator” guide human, and yes, even economic behavior. And the academic R. Edward Freeman advanced that idea further with his views on stakeholder theory in the early 1980s (the decade often defined by corporate greed), arguing that companies that are not actively engaging with all stakeholders are soon to be businesses in decline.

So maybe the idea isn’t so new, but the sheer volume of CEOs rallying behind the concept certainly was. The question then really is whether PR is ready to be a driving force in something that is as potentially game changing as social capitalism. Can the profession serve as a true management function or will it continue to embrace the moniker of a new form of brand marketing? Can it be both?

To be sure, change is happening all around the profession. In certain respects, PR truly is becoming a management function today. In fact, in their list of 2018 predictions, the global communications agency Ketchum predicted that PR finally would emerge as such, and perhaps they were right. But in a mad dash for budgets and revenue to support the function,

especially at the agency level, will PR get trapped in the mud of being a sub-set of the marketing function and its deep-pocketed budgets?

If social capitalism really takes hold, then the PR discipline may more fully serve as the corporate conscience and moral compass of management, guiding decision making and the impact those decisions will have on stakeholders. There seems to be violent agreement today around the idea that corporate brand purpose matters. In fact, as millennials increasingly vote their conscience at the cash register – “boycotting” brands that support their views on social issues of the day – taking a purpose-driven approach to communications may be more important than ever before, as long as it can be done authentically.

However, a strange new dynamic is taking shape. Marketing dollars, once managed by advertising agencies and targeted toward mainstream media outlets, have been increasingly redirected toward other so-called PR activities – like Edelman’s collaborative journalism approach. As a result, the media landscape has been turned on its head. “Content” once created by seasoned, independent journalists in the most respected news outlets is now increasingly coming directly from outside business “experts” and “Big Business” itself. This paradigm shift has placed a great deal of power and responsibility in the hands of PR professionals. But is that a good thing?

With too many segments of the public primarily getting their news from outlets like Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms, let alone highly partisan cable news networks, it should come as no surprise that “fake news” is a label easily affixed to almost any form of media today. And this is hardly a new trend. A July 2015 Pew Research Center study found that a majority of Twitter and Facebook users said that both platforms served as their primary source for news about events and issues. Reliance on these sources is

only increasing, and of course much of this content is created by PR professionals.

If the media – the fourth estate in a democratic society – continues to decline, then the lines that once clearly helped us separate what was false from true and fake from real are disappearing. With more so-called “owned” content getting created by companies and other enterprises every day, and fewer media outlets reporting actual news to an increasingly fractured public, we need to ask, as *Time* magazine did in a 2017 cover story: Is truth dead?

Truth, like virtually everything else, needs a financial backer, and as the PR and advertising functions drive more money away from the traditional advertising that once kept news outlets afloat – in a move toward new platforms that are promised to deliver direct engagement between consumers and brands – is truth left to die by the roadside?

As we search for ways to adapt to this changing landscape, perhaps finding solace in proposed “new models” for practicing communications (often driven by data-driven algorithms and new “commtech” solutions) are we doing enough to ensure we don’t forget the core characteristics that have established the foundation of the modern day PR professional?

Academics tell us that modern-day PR evolved years ago to embrace a form of “two-way symmetrical communications,” where an organization and its publics share a mutual interest in an organization’s goals and objectives, in balance with the interests of society. So, surely, we must be ready for PR to take its place as a true management function in the decade ahead. It really seems overdue.

Interestingly, pioneering management theorist Henri Fayol, often called the “father of management,” may have suggested as much at the turn of the nineteenth century. Fayol is well known among business students for his 14 Principles of Management. While most focus on organizational structure

and things like chain of command, one of Thayol's principles talks about the "subordination of individual interests to the general interest." Yes, at the time Thayol was focused on the general interest of the enterprise, but if we placed him in a time machine and transported him to a boardroom meeting today, he might say the individual interest of the company must be subordinate to the general interest of society. If only we had a time machine.

But today's PR function, especially due to its increasing reliance on paid "content syndication," is hardly an expression of two-way communications. In an era of fake news and diminishing trust, it's time to ask exactly what our future in PR will be. Is PR dead and now merely a new form of marketing or is it more alive and important than ever before – a driver of social capitalism? In the pages that follow, I'm going to try to answer that.