

Third edition

RETHINKING PUBLIC RELATIONS

Persuasion, Democracy and Society

KEVIN MOLONEY AND CONOR McGRATH



ROUTLEDGE



Rethinking Public Relations

This new (third) edition of *Rethinking Public Relations* continues the argument of previous editions that public relations is weak propaganda. However, while earlier editions focused on PR as representative of the uneven power distribution in society, this book goes further, conceiving the power of PR as more than just structural but also as having an important rhetorical component.

In this extensively revised edition, Moloney and McGrath dissect the nature of the modern PR industry, arguing that its idealised self-presentation should be replaced by a more realistic and credible defence of the societal value produced by advocacy and counter-advocacy. This book includes expanded coverage of PR's impact on society (through areas such as CSR, sponsorship and community relations), its relationship with stakeholders, and its role in democratic debate and public policy making. It also considers the ways in which journalism has capitulated to PR in an era of 'fake news' and 'churnalism' and, in this new edition, the role of digital and social media is examined for the first time.

Maintaining the rigorous and critical stance of previous editions, this new edition will also prove accessible to Master's level and final-year undergraduate students studying public relations, media and communications studies. Additionally, it will be of great value to practitioners who seek to widen PR's 'voices'.

Kevin Moloney was a PR teacher and researcher from 1985 to 2018, most recently at Bournemouth University, UK. He was also a journalist with regional and national papers and spent over a decade working in public relations.

Conor McGrath is a lecturer in PR and lobbying at Ulster University, UK. In addition, he has worked as an MP's researcher, a self-employed lobbyist, and a public affairs director at a PR agency.

Praise for the previous edition:

“Kevin Moloney analyses the relations of PR propaganda and democracy with a very wide intellectual and professional horizon. The style of his text is clear ... even entertaining. All those who are in or close to the profession of public relations will read Moloney's book with enthusiasm.”

European Journal of Marketing, 2009

“Moloney's book is colourful and polemic, positioned as a project of 'PR watch'. He conveys something of a 'Niagara of spin' in his fast moving prose which makes extensive references to US sources on propaganda and public relations.”

*Jacquie L'Etang, Department of Film and Media Studies,
University of Stirling, UK*

“Like Shakespeare's Caesar, public relations 'bestrides the world like a colossus', and the wider world urgently needs a more mature understanding of what it really is. For this reason alone, Kevin Moloney's thoughtful, balanced book deserves a large readership, certainly inside and, even more importantly, outside the public relations community. But there are other good reasons also. First of all, the author is extremely lucid; second, he does what many scholars should do but too often do not: propose realistic solutions as well as identify core problems and questions. Some of those solutions are far-reaching: all of them should be heard.”

*Simon Moore, Associate Professor, Bentley College,
Massachusetts, USA*

Rethinking Public Relations

Persuasion, Democracy and Society

Third edition

Kevin Moloney and Conor McGrath

Third edition published 2020
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2020 Kevin Moloney and Conor McGrath

The right of Kevin Moloney and Conor McGrath to be identified as authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

First edition published by Routledge 2000
Second edition published by Routledge 2006

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-1-138-59365-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-31300-5 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-48931-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Taylor & Francis Books

**To Alicia, Pat & Mairead, Claire & Charlie, Emma &
James. CMG**

To Muriel, Rachael & Paul. KM



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	viii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xi
1 Paradoxes, paradigms and pillars	1
2 PR: dignified, efficient, self-delusional?	22
3 Rhetoric, framing and PR messaging	40
4 Stakeholders and society	57
5 Journalism and PR – conflict, complicity, capitulation	81
6 Digital evolution or revolution?	92
7 PR, politics and democracy	108
8 Lobbying and public affairs	124
9 Conclusion	147
<i>Bibliography</i>	155
<i>Index</i>	186

Preface

This third edition follows *Rethinking Public Relations: The Spin and the Substance* (2000) and *Rethinking Public Relations: PR Propaganda and Democracy* (2006), both of which were written entirely by Kevin Moloney. This third edition – *Rethinking Public Relations: Persuasion, Democracy and Society* – marks one obvious change in that it is co-authored by Kevin Moloney and Conor McGrath. Each new edition has been extensively rewritten with much new material, and so the two earlier versions remain well worth reading as they focus on different elements of PR from each other and from this third edition.

That said, this book obviously builds on the foundations of its predecessors. The previous argument that public relations is weak propaganda is continued here, with that thought of in terms of persuasive communication for competitive advantage, and further nuanced by a more explicit defence of persuasion as ethical and even two-way communication. And while the two earlier editions focused on PR as representative of the uneven power distribution in society, this book extends that by conceiving of PR's power as more than just structural but also having an important rhetorical component. The previous editions were controversial and unconventional. We hope that this new edition maintains that rigorous critical stance and will be useful to PhD candidates and scholars. But we hope too that this new text will prove to be accessible to Master's level and final-year undergraduate students, and to practitioners. Examples of PR campaigns are given, and much new Internet material relevant to the practice of public relations is referenced. This is certainly not a textbook and does not seek to offer a 'how to' guide to public relations. But we do believe most strongly that those students and practitioners who approach their work with a critical stance can learn much here which could filter into their PR studies and everyday practice. We have in the endnotes to each chapter, for instance, provided references to much material of real practical value such as examples of PR campaigns and tactics, practitioner blogs and reports from professional bodies.

Some find significant differences in the terms 'PR' and 'public relations'.¹ We do not, and use them interchangeably here to avoid constant repetition and to aid readability. One style note is more important, however. We most often talk about 'organisations' and sometimes about 'groups', but we essentially mean the full range of entities and individuals who produce PR material. The

term 'organisation' is generally used when discussing PR (and we discuss some problems with this in Chapter 1) but no single term fully and properly represents all those firms, groups, associations, charities, trade unions and so on which undertake public relations. Unless it is obvious from the context, any mention of 'organisations' or 'groups' simply signifies any PR producer. Similarly, unless we are specifically discussing companies then mention of 'corporate communication', 'corporate reputation' and so on applies to all bodies and not just corporations. And when we talk of PR messaging, we mean oral, written and visual messages.

All Internet links provided were checked and found to be live on 26 January 2019.

We would like to acknowledge the contribution our colleagues in the PR academic community have made to our thinking through illuminating agreement and dissent. While it is invidious to single out one person, Richard Bailey (Leeds Beckett University) has been an always enthusiastic and insightful supporter, and through his promotion of PR student bloggers and his editorship of the PR Place website, he has done more than anyone else to connect students, academics and practitioners in a constant (and constantly enlightening) conversation. We have benefitted enormously from the work of exceptional scholars and teachers of public relations, and their friendship too, including: Andy Purcell, Francis Carty, Kevin Ruck, Ann Pilkington, Danny Moss, Phil Harris, Craig Fleisher, Ian Somerville, Scott Davidson, among many others.

Our undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral students have been a wonderful and perceptive source of ideas and questions, and we have both certainly learnt more from them than we have taught over our combined forty years at Bournemouth and Ulster universities. It's impossible to name all those to whom we are indebted, but it has been a genuine pleasure to help them a little during their studies and then to watch their careers flourish. In particular, Conor McGrath thanks the students who have written for the Ulster PR Student blogsite and have contributed their opinions and experiences of PR there. Indeed, social media has been a tremendous aid in the writing of this third edition, as it has extended our academic and professional networks so much. Conor McGrath has benefited enormously from online relationships developed with genuine thought leaders such as Ella Minty, Stephen Waddington, Stuart Bruce, Sarah Hall, Orlagh Shanks, Marcel Klebba, Jessica Pardoe, Helen Reynolds, Lucy Hayball, Arianne Smart, Livi Wilkes, among many others – I don't know many of this group well, and may never meet some of them, but I have found their blogs, tweets and other writings immensely stimulating. Kevin Moloney has learnt well how PR can be practiced well from David Wood and Chris Moore when he worked in industrial public relations, and from Barry Richards when he thought about it academically. We are both fortunate to work in locations well served by an especially vibrant PR industry and have found our personal relationships with local practitioners very helpful, as well as those CIPR or PRCA members, and non-members, who have shared their experiences and expertise with us and our students.

We have been supported enormously in the making of this book by an exceptional team of editorial and production colleagues at Routledge. Many thanks to Jenny Guildford, Sophia Levine, Emmie Shand and Sandra Stafford for all their efforts which have immeasurably improved this work.

Obviously, only we are responsible for any errors of fact, and for all opinions, in this book.

Kevin Moloney and Conor McGrath
January 2019

Note

- 1 Others just find the contraction unattractive. So, for instance the father of public relations education in Ireland, Francis Carty, has written: "I am not one who wants to get rid of the term 'public relations' because it has become 'user-unfriendly'... I abhor the nickname 'PR' which is so commonly used" (1995: xii).

Abbreviations

AI	artificial intelligence
AMEC	Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication
AVE	advertising value equivalent
CEO	chief executive officer
CIPR	Chartered Institute of Public Relations
CR	community relations
CSR	corporate social responsibility
DSM	digital and social media
EU	European Union
GE	genetic engineering
GM	genetically modified
IPR	Institute of Public Relations
LSN	Life Sciences Network
MAGA	Make America Great Again
MP	Member of Parliament
NYPD	New York Police Department
PA	public affairs
PESO	paid, earned, shared, owned
PR	public relations
PRCA	Public Relations and Communications Association
PRP	public relations practitioner
PRSA	Public Relations Society of America
RBS	Royal Bank of Scotland
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
TUC	Trades Union Congress
TV	television



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

1 Paradoxes, paradigms and pillars

There are paradoxes at the heart of public relations. It is widely used, and yet most people do not like it.¹ One of the pleasures of teaching or studying PR is that it is such a part of everyday life;² the downside is that because PR is so prevalent and ordinary, we can fail to recognise it as PR. Most people do not generally stop to really think about PR's construction or effect, or to talk about it from a solid theoretical foundation of first principles. Public relations has an enormous impact on our opinions and decisions as citizens and consumers, and yet most people rarely consider what lies behind the PR messages on which we rely. As Leigh (2017: 2) says: "PR is silently present in near enough everything we read, watch, listen to and consume in the media".³ Many of us distrust public relations when it emanates from one type of source, but set aside our concerns when the PR comes from other preferred sources.

According to the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), in 2018 some 71,000 PR practitioners worked in the UK (up from 58,000 only four years previously). Also in the UK, the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) paints an even rosier portrait, claiming that same year that there are 86,000 PR/communications practitioners, and that the UK industry is worth £13.8 billion.⁴ These highly educated and skilled workers pour over the rest of us a Niagara of spin:⁵ lifestyle features; ideological messages; sound bites; kiss-and-tell tales; press conferences; news leaks; special events; stunts; staged photos; consumer leaflets; corporate brands, brochures and apologia; competitions, exhibitions and incentives; road shows; conferences; policy briefings; lobbying campaigns; demonstrations; corporate reports; product launches;⁶ community support; sponsorships; managed issues; reassuring communications during crises; and messages about their social responsibility.⁷ This Niagara swells and rises as more businesses, organisations, groups, interests, causes and individuals pour more money and effort into PR efforts. This great swirl of communications catches millions of voters, media audiences and consumers in its sweep; and is read, believed and acted on. It sweeps by millions of others, unread, unbelieved and unnoticed.⁸ Some of the Niagara's most powerful currents are pointed at ministers, MPs and civil servants so that public policy is carried off in the right direction. Often these currents are hidden from us and are therefore dangerous to our democracy. The rising flood also sweeps up

2 *Paradoxes, paradigms and pillars*

nonentities and lands them on small islands of uncertain fame known as celebrity, as well as buoying up aggrieved individuals, waving their protests at us.

Yet despite the volume and variety of this flood, PR has a low public reputation everywhere and is dismissed by most of us as just 'spin',⁹ or is disdained as a 'PR job'. While it thrives, PR does not enjoy a positive perception among the general public or with some professional groups. Reputation is the social prestige or dislike that a person, job or institution attracts. High reputation can be seen as large amounts of 'credit' in the 'bank' of public opinion. This asymmetry of usage to reputation is an extraordinary irony, for PR has to endure the fate that it seeks to avoid for those in whose name it works. An industry which attempts to enhance the credibility and reputation of clients/employers can apparently not achieve that on its own behalf. When many of us hear about 'PR', we have instinctive concerns about manipulation of opinion, promotion of the rich and powerful, puffery, slick presentation, hidden persuasion.¹⁰ The public relations of public relations remains in a poor state: PR generates low opinion about itself. Compare this state of affairs with other activities. It would be as if medicine did not increase health, teaching reduced knowledge, or gardening meant fewer flowers. For the producers and sources of PR, there are beneficial outcomes and operational advantages. But despite its pervasiveness, the PR of PR is bad, and through tense relationships with journalists, the low reputation is reported widely. All these factors combine into an unusual asymmetry – a voluntary, legal, universally practised activity, devoted to raising the reputation of what it represents, generating disquiet about itself.

Both earlier editions of this book (Moloney, 2000a, 2006) explored this blighted reputation and concluded that historically public relations in the UK and USA has been weak propaganda which on balance does more good than harm – but only just. PR is produced by government, business and other dominant interests to maintain their positions. It is unknowable, unquantifiable, how many millions of audiences, consumers and voters have been swept along by the great Niagara, have believed and acted on PR propaganda; but our witness of life in a liberal democracy tells us that our fellow electors, consumers and citizens have believed and acted on it some, much or most of the time. Indeed, each of us probably have felt (and still feel) the experience of being propagandised. It is these observations about others and our own experience that produce a culture of suspicion and mistrust about PR, and so generate its low reputation.

This book is critical of many PR practices and consequences (such as its impact on the political process; unequal spread of resources, invisibility in the media) but it does not deny the right of others to do PR. It is futile to lament the presence of PR, because public relations is expressive of foundational features of liberal democracy in its representative variety – its pluralism and promotional culture. One cannot legislate to abolish PR: the task rather is to assess its effects, good and bad, and examine arguments that make it at least a neutral influence on democracy. This book, therefore, is not an apologia for, nor an indictment against, its subject. It seeks to be an even-handed critique of PR

practices and consequences. It even ventures – beyond balance – to argue that in a liberal egalitarian society, ready to redistribute communication resources inside a strong civil society, PR makes public debate more equal, more vigorous, more appealing, more likely to conclude with some truth. This venture rests on two beliefs. The first is that greater communicative equality is a realisable goal in liberal democracy. The second is that greater communicative equality and communicative transparency neutralise some of the dangers in PR propaganda for democracy and society. But a Niagara of PR propaganda is bad for democracy and society, and for its politics, media and markets. It is thunderous, incessant, noisome, not easily controlled or contained. Our principal themes here are the impact and consequences of unrestricted public relations operating within a free democracy, a liberal society, a pro-market economy.¹¹

Definitional obfuscation

It is instructive to consider what is actually meant by the phrase ‘public relations’.¹² Rex Harlow (1977a, 1997b) examined 472 definitions of PR, and many more have been developed since.¹³ According to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), public relations is “a strategic communications process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (no date: no pagination). Similarly, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations in Britain (no date: no pagination) defines public relations thus:

Public relations is about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say, and what others say about you. Public relations is the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.

And one of the UK’s most thoughtful practitioners, Stephen Waddington (2016b: no pagination) has proposed that: “Public relations is the practice of understanding the purpose of an organisation and its relationships within society. It is a management discipline that relates to planned and sustained engagement designed to influence behaviour change, and build mutual understanding and trust”.

What statements such as these are intended to convey is how the PR industry thinks of itself. They assert that PR is not an accidental or random activity; rather, it requires planning, research, analysis, evaluation. They position public relations as a form of dialogue or two-way communication, professing that PR involves not only an organisation expressing itself but additionally appreciating how and why its key audiences receive and react to each message. This also implies that one function of an organisation’s PR manager is to serve as a conduit of external opinion back into the internal decision-making process. Indeed, it is important to the PR industry’s self-identity that it is regarded as a core management function within an

organisation, that it has a seat at the top table and is involved in developing overarching organisational strategy. Practitioners then commonly develop this idea by suggesting PR that acts the ‘conscience of the organisation’, but fail to adduce much in the way of evidence for this assertion (Bailey, 2018b; L’Etang, 2003). A striking commonality between the PRSA and CIPR definitions is the use of the word ‘publics’, to which we will return in Chapter 4. But if we take the CIPR’s definition at face value – that PR is about everything an organisation says and does – we quickly descend into a circular and ultimately meaningless quagmire. If everything an organisation says and does is public relations, then it becomes literally impossible to understand what the particular function or value of public relations actually is.

Another widely used definition of public relations was formulated by the World Assembly of Public Relations Associates in 1978. Known as the Mexican Statement, it asserts that: “Public relations practice is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders, and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organisation’s and the public interest” (cited in Morris and Goldsworthy, 2008: 98). This formulation is perhaps a more explicit and comprehensive definition than that offered by the CIPR. It presents public relations as both an art and a science – an art because it requires fine judgement, awareness of nuances, the crafting of language and images, and creativity; but also a science to the extent that it is based upon detailed research and evaluation,¹⁴ analysis of a given situation and the production of a set of objectives designed to meet an organisation’s particular needs. As with the PRSA and CIPR definitions, the Mexican Statement emphasises the two-way nature of communication in its view that PR managers have a responsibility to counsel and advise their groups and organisations about the external events and attitudes which will affect the organisation’s performance.¹⁵ Too often, though, in reality this responsibility is neglected. The major advance proposed in the Mexican Statement lies in its notion that PR is not solely concerned with PR producers and their direct ‘publics’ but that organisations engaged in public relations also have some obligation to the public interest, to wider society. Weiner (2006: 35) insists that, “the role of the public relations person is to represent the public’s interest within the organisation” – but this too appears not to be forefront in everyday PR practice.

In an earlier edition of this book, Moloney (2006: 101) offers a robust view on ethics in PR: “There is some amusement to be had from the phrase ‘public relations ethics’. It is, indeed, a risible oxymoron when it describes much past and present PR practice”.¹⁶ In PR’s mingling of concepts such as ‘mutual goodwill and understanding’, ‘mutually beneficial relationships’, publics/stakeholders, reputation, corporate social responsibility¹⁷ – all of these then further amalgamated with ethical concerns¹⁸ – what is conventionally concluded is that public relations acts as the ‘conscience of the organisation’. It is suggested that groups and organisations can only operate at all for so long as they retain society’s permission to do so. As Daugherty (2001: 390) notes: “A widening gap between the performance of an organization and society’s expectations of it

causes the organization to lose its legitimacy, thereby threatening its survival". This presents organisations with the challenge of not simply behaving as responsible corporate citizens but being seen to do so. Heath and Ryan (1989) argue that a key function of PR practitioners is to discern, through their dealings with stakeholders, what values and standards the organisation is expected to operate by. The internal–external boundary–spanning nature of PR is said to give it a vantage point on society in a way which is true of no other organisational department. It is through communication and dialogue with its publics that an organisation can be both responsive and accountable for its actions. Harold Burson, one of the most influential PR practitioners of the 20th century, summarised this thus – “PR has 3 roles: monitor, communicator, conscience” (cited in Gunning, 2007: 9). Bowen (2008) found that while public relations may be where corporate conscience ought to be located, in reality too often PR practitioners are reluctant to assume this function.¹⁹ One obstacle to PR acting as the corporate conscience which Bowen encountered in her research was a sense held by some practitioners that in the real world ethics can be nebulous and so should be the responsibility of those who are particularly skilled at making ambiguities and nuances more concrete. This often means that corporate lawyers assume responsibility for the organisation’s ethical sense. On the other hand, Bowen interviewed many PR practitioners who strongly believe in the connection between ethics and reputation and who therefore see ethical questions as a natural part of PR’s role. These professionals tend to see ethics as being more than strict legality; Bowen quotes one respondent (2008: 286) who notes that apartheid in South Africa was legal, in support of the idea that legal does not necessarily or invariably equate to ethical or right.

The public relations industry chooses to frame its purpose in terms of ‘strategic communication’ within a ‘management function’ which is responsible for ‘relationships’ and ‘reputation management’. In doing so, it rests its case on pillars which cannot adequately support its weight. As we see in Chapter 2, it is difficult to operationalise ways of usefully measuring or evaluating these concepts. And in any event, consumers and citizens everywhere find PR’s claims for itself to be self-serving and duplicitous. Why then is the PR industry so determined to cling to these cloaks of respectability? White (1991: 4) suggests that, “Some idealized views of public relations which claim noble purposes for the practice attempt to avoid accepting that the main aim of public relations is to influence behaviour.” Public relations, at its absolute core, is concerned with language and images, with words, with oral and written narratives, with visuals. It is existentially about persuasive communication. This reality is downplayed in official accounts of PR: we don’t find persuasive communication featured in the common definitions of PR or in those promoted by the key trade associations. Mallinson suggests that among the range of PR definitions, the fact that almost none mention persuasion means that, “it is tempting to think the word has been studiously avoided” (1996: 16). For most public relations scholars and practitioners, the idea that PR is concerned with persuasion lies uncomfortably close to the criticism that PR is simply a socially acceptable

form of propaganda. Indeed, the CIPR (no date: no pagination) insists that, “Issuing a barrage of propaganda is not enough in today’s open society”. Nonetheless, it is fundamentally true that when a public relations practitioner (PRP) issues a press release, drafts a speech for their CEO, writes a newsletter, chooses an image, or responds to an organizational crisis, she is engaging in an act of persuasive communication (Skerlep, 2001). Public relations certainly involves the production of information, but it is often – usually – information which is not neutral, and which encourages the receiver to act in a particular way: to accept the group or organisational perspective, to write a news story for their paper, to drive more carefully, to support a policy or politician, to be a more motivated and productive employee. Public relations is a form of persuasive communication, of weak propaganda. That does not in itself require us to reject public relations outright, but it suggests a need to pay attention to how it operates. The Niagara needs to be damned.

Public relations idealisation

The PR industry’s efforts to promote itself as being concerned with reputation, dialogue, relationships, are bolstered by an academic tradition centred around one man. It is deeply ironic that the most effective public relations for public relations has been undertaken by a scholar, James Grunig, rather than by a collective of practitioners. PR textbooks and teaching around the world overwhelmingly rest on a single, dominant, set of ideas. This Grunigian paradigm has, over the last four decades, become the basis for how PR thinks of itself.

As a relatively new academic field, public relations does not have the same historical tradition of many professional specialisms. So, for instance, the academic field of political studies has always been associated with what are termed ‘essentially contested ideas’, and has debate and argument at its core. However, public relations education settled very quickly into an overwhelmingly monolithic consensus – grounded almost exclusively in the teaching of practical skills such as how to write a press release, how to prepare a crisis communication manual, how to plan an event, how to write material for internal communication. These are all useful skills to possess, and there is certainly nothing wrong with learning them. When new graduates enter the job market, PR employers are looking for these skills, particularly writing ability, above all else.²⁰ Our point here, though, is that this sort of technical know-how is all that was being taught.

As PR struggled to create a place for itself in universities, what it needed badly was to develop a sense of self-confidence, of professional status. And it found that in 1984 with the publication of *Managing Public Relations* by James Grunig and his then collaborator Todd Hunt – without question, the single most influential work on public relations ever published.²¹ This book has dominated PR teaching (and therefore PR practice) for over three decades to an extent which can scarcely be exaggerated. While the idea seems to have originated in the UK’s Institute of Public Relations, it was Grunig and Hunt

who brought to global attention the respectable rationale that public relations is about developing ‘mutual understanding’.²² This focus served to rehabilitate PR’s image away from persuasion and propaganda and orient the practice towards a more professional, public interest, role. It allowed Grunig and Hunt to contrast ‘good’ modern PR with ‘bad’ historical PR. Naturally, this then led to PR educators teaching students the practical skills needed to achieve ‘good’ public relations – higher education as an elevated form of vocational training (L’Etang and Pieczka, 1996). Moloney notes the “uncritical enthusiasm of [Grunig’s] disciplines” among PR educators who “seized on [*Managing Public Relations*] as an admired academic text, a theoretical template for a new subject” (1997: 139 and 140). And so generations of PR students – who have gone on to be generations of PR practitioners – have been taught that effective public relations must be, as Grunig and Hunt put it, symmetrical communication. This entailed learning practical skills which would promote mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics, which would develop relationships and promote corporate reputation (L’Etang, 2004a).

Grunig and Hunt’s landmark textbook is perhaps most famous for the four models it presents to explain the historical evolution of public relations practice.²³ The first of these – Press Agency, or perhaps the ‘age of manipulation’ – was essentially to do with the growing use of propaganda from the 1830s onwards. Popular folk heroes like Davy Crockett and Buffalo Bill sprang up, and their renown was often based on the accounts of press agents whose function was simply to generate publicity.²⁴ This model of PR involved solely one-way communication from the source to the receiver, and all too often was misleading if not downright untruthful. The classic quotes illustrating press agency are, ‘There’s a sucker born every minute’, ‘There’s no such thing as bad publicity’, and ‘The public be damned’.

The second model – termed Public Information, or perhaps the ‘age of information’ – came to the fore at the end of the 19th century. While PR here was a one-way form of communication, it had moved away from obvious propaganda and was more focused on the provision of accurate information. The exemplar of this sort of PR practice is Ivy Ledbetter Lee, a former journalist who established a PR agency in New York in 1904. His intention was to employ journalistic skills on behalf of large corporations like oil and railroad companies in order to help them achieve more favourable press coverage. It is here that we perhaps see the beginnings of PR as a professional activity with its roots firmly embedded in media relations. In 1906, Lee formulated a statement of the principles which underlay his approach to public relations and went so far as to append it to all the press releases he issued. His declaration stated that:

We aim to supply news. This is not an advertising agency.... Upon inquiry, full information will be given to any editor concerning those on whose behalf an article is sent out.... Corporations and public institutions give out much information in which the news point is lost to view.

Nevertheless, it is quite as important to the public to have this news as it is to the establishments themselves to give it currency.

(cited in Ewen, 1996: 77)

The third of Grunig and Hunt's models – Two-Way Asymmetric, or perhaps the 'age of persuasion' – was largely a consequence of the First World War. Government agencies (particularly in Britain and America) then faced an unprecedented need to persuade their populations to accept and support the measures being taken. This communication was indeed a two-way flow in the sense that there was the facility for the public to respond to it positively – so, perhaps the most enduring image of that conflict is the poster of Lord Kitchener pointing his finger under the slogan 'Your Country Needs You', which was designed to harness every man and woman in the country into some element of the war effort. This model is said to be asymmetric in that organisations and groups here are using public relations as a means of influencing people but the flow of information remains largely imbalanced because the organisations themselves do not change as a result of being influenced by their publics. Following the war, governments continued to use this model of PR as a means of educating the general public about the raft of social welfare schemes which were created in the 1920s and 1930s. And it was employed as never before during the Second World War. Corporations also began employing public relations professionals in large numbers from the 1920s and 1930s onwards, as we saw the rise of the consumer society. PR began to be taught at university during this period, and the first textbooks appeared.²⁵ Edward Bernays, dubbed 'The Father of Spin' (Tye, 1998), regarded PR's task as "engineering public consent" (Bernays, 1947: 115) – a company could maximise its PR effectiveness by first determining what values or attitudes the public held and then moulding the company's narrative around those views.²⁶ Bernays famously persuaded women to break the then social taboo on them smoking in public by organising a march through New York at which he piggybacked on the movement towards female political suffrage by equating cigarettes with 'torches of freedom'.²⁷

Finally, Grunig and Hunt have characterised modern PR practices as a Two-Way Symmetric Model (or perhaps, the 'age of dialogue'). By this, they mean that PR is now based upon the development of mutual understanding between a group or organisation and its publics, that it involves some form of partnership, and that it is concerned with establishing a more balanced relationship between the organisation and all those people with whom it seeks to communicate with on a basis of dialogue, so that the organisation will respond to the messages it receives from its publics. Grunig and Hunt would lead us to believe that contemporary PR practice is symmetrical, balanced, two-way.²⁸

These four models – or some variant of them using a chronological periodisation to show PR practice ethically maturing over time (Hoy *et al.*, 2007) – have been used to place the public relations activities of any given organisation into one of four delineated categories, though in reality a single group or