

A STUDY OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF RECENT CHANGES
IN THE PRACTICE AND MANAGEMENT
OF CORPORATE PUBLIC RELATIONS
FOR THE PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION
OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF COMMUNICATION

BY

BASSEY ASUQUO EYO

A Thesis Submitted In Partial Fulfillment
Of The Requirement For The Degree Of

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

COMMUNICATION

At

University of Wisconsin
Stevens Point, Wisconsin

1980

Report on Oral Defense of Thesis

TITLE: A Study of the Implications of Recent Changes in the Practice and Management of Corporate Public Relations
For the Professional Preparation of Undergraduate Students Of Communication.

AUTHOR: Bassey Asuquo Eyo
1980

Having heard an oral defense of the above thesis, the Advisory Committee:

A) Finds the defense of the thesis to be satisfactory and accepts the thesis as submitted, subject to the following recommendation(s), if any:

none

B) Finds the defense of the thesis to be unsatisfactory and recommends that the defense of the thesis be rescheduled contingent upon:

Advisory Committee:

Date: July 25, 1980

William J. Craft, Advisor

William C. Denison

John Goldberg

DEDICATION

To Atim Joshua Eyo and Asuquo Okon Eyo, my
mother and father, for their fortitude and parental
affection I will never forget.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply indebted to several people for their advice, assistance and inspiration in the preparation of this thesis, particularly the three members of the thesis committee:

Dr. Albert Croft for devoting considerable energy and a lot of time and thinking to advising me on the conception and development of this thesis; Dr. William Davidson for taking time to read, edit and provide thoughtful criticism which was helpful in the overall structural development of the thesis; Dr. Toby Goldberg, who in a rare gesture, postponed her vacation plans in order to be available to give suggestions and witness completion of this thesis. My humble thanks to them all.

I am also indebted to the following people for their assistance: Sandy Misiewicz, for kindly typing the final copy; Kathleen Schmoeckel, my friend and colleague, for typing earlier drafts of the thesis; Mr. Nesi Unanaowo and Mr. Evans Abedi-Boafo, for interest, encouragement and useful suggestions; Mr. and Mrs. Esu and Akon O. Esu and Mrs. Lucy Oyeboy, for their unfailing hospitality during my days of research in Madison, Wisconsin. Thank you all.

Inspiration for writing this thesis came from Mr. Etim James Anim, my friend, and Dr. Okon Asuquo Eyo, my brother, who I consider skilled craftsmen in the art of expository

writing and look upon as my "literary security blanket."
They were fondly remembered during the preparation of this
thesis. My special thanks to them.

Bassey Asuquo Eyo

July 25, 1980

Stevens Point, Wisconsin

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
ONE	INTRODUCTION	1
	The Subject of the Study	1
	The Purpose and Method of the Study.	5
	The Organization of the Study.	6
	Significance of the Study.	8
TWO	REACTIVE-FUNCTIONARY PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD, 1945-1970	9
	The Business Environment From the End of World War II to 1970.	10
	Perceptions of Corporate Management Responsibility.	14
	The Management Decision-Making Mix	16
	A View of Corporate Efficiency: The Closed System.	18
	Public Relations and the Adaptive-Disposal Subsystem	21
	Communication Processes Required by Corporate Public Relations in the Post-War Period	26
	An Era of Reactive Public Relations: The Functionary Approach.	30
THREE	INTERACTIVE-FUNCTIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE DECADE OF SOCIAL CHANGE, 1970-1980	33
	Management Philosophy in a Turbulent Environment	34
	The Youth Movements.	36
	The Consumer Movement.	36
	The Ecology Movement	39
	The Impact of Social Change on the Business Decision-Making Mix	41
	The Practice of Corporate Public Relations in the Decade of Change, 1970-1980	46
	Public Relations Professionals Call for Re- Evaluation of Role.	47
	Top Management Officers Call for Re- Evaluation.	52
	Functional-Interactive Public Relations as a Communication Process	59

CHAPTER		PAGE
FOUR	THE PREPARATION OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN COMMUNICATION FOR PROFESSIONAL CAREERS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS	71
	Introduction	71
	A Summary of Findings on Public Relations Practices Since 1945.	72
	The Contemporary Pattern of University Programs in Public Relations	76
	Shift in Emphasis Required for an "Interactive" Approach.	81
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	86

LIST OF TABLES

	PAGE
TABLE 1. Key Factors in Public Relations Change. . . .	74

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1. Corporate-Public Consensus of Understanding Model.	66
--	----

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Subject of the Study

This study describes the changing role of corporate public relations and examines the implications of these changes for the professional preparation of undergraduates in communication studies. More specifically, for those who plan to enter the practice of public relations in contemporary business, this study attempts to clarify the relationship between current trends in the business practice of public relations and the growing field of study in "organizational communication." "Public relations is first and foremost a communication function."¹ A theoretical as well as an applied knowledge of the human communication process has long been thought to be a first principle for acquiring proficiency in the practice of public relations.² Rex Harlow (1976) argues that public relations in business is defined as "a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication...between an organization and its publics."³

¹Edward J. Robinson, Communication and Public Relations. (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1966), p. 23.

²Ibid., p. 23.

³Rex F. Harlow, "Building a Public Relations Definition." Public Relations Review, Vol. 2 No. 4 (Winter, 1978):36.

From the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the study of communication has been used in very different ways to prepare students for the practice of public relations. Corporate public relations has a long history of special relationships with journalism, with the mass media of communication and with persuasion and rhetorical theory. Especially since the end of World War II, corporate public relations has been largely looked upon as a tool for business product and service publicity. In a larger sense, it has also been perceived as a means of building a positive image for the business organization itself. Such a conception of corporate public relations was based on the belief that, a continuous flow of well planned persuasive messages to the public, mostly via the media, could mold a favorable public attitude, clear the way for a continuous sale of organization's products and services. Eventually, a favorable image of the corporation in the minds of the general public was believed to be retained. Thus, in terms of communication training, the public relations person was seen as skilled in the rhetoric of mass media persuasion.

In recent years, however, the growing complexity of the relationship between the business organization and its environment has changed this view, and public relations has assumed new dimensions. As part of the growth and increased scope of the study of communication and specifically of organizational communication, the public relations function has increasingly been recognized as a process for adaptation of the business organization to a continuously changing environment.

It has been clear that contemporary business organizations increasingly face new and critical internal and external challenges and must regularly make large and rapid changes if they are to prosper. In this context, the role of public relations in business has begun to move beyond the publicity and image building function of the post-war era. Public relations has come to be perceived as the main agency in the organizational communication process through which adaptation to rapid changes in the organization environment can be accomplished. Thus, public relations is fast becoming a much more important element in an effective organizational communication network or system. It is for this reason that communication studies as preparation for the professional practice of public relations must be re-examined.

As we look at a total communication system in operation in a complex business corporation, and focus on the role of public relations in it, three main elements seem to converge and to determine how public relations will be conducted. These elements are: the business environment, the philosophy of management decision making, and the communication processes demanded by the first two elements. The main argument of this thesis is that, as these three elements change, the total role of public relations in contemporary business organizations is thereby changed. In the same way, then, the communication studies upon which preparation for the practice of public relations in business is based should also change. The central theme of this study is that we have been, since

about 1945-70, in the midst of such a major change in this whole complex of related elements.

A reading of the professional and academic literature on the role of public relations in business organizations produces considerable historical evidence of change from a period of "reactive public relations" during 1945-70, to a period of "interactive public relations" from about 1970 to the present. A further definition of these terms, and the nature of the change, will be explored further in this chapter and developed in detail in Chapters Two and Three. Such a change from a reactive to interactive public relations carries significant implications for university training programs in public relations.

On this score, it should be noted that:

In an important sense, this world of ours is a new world in which the unity of knowledge, the nature of human communities, the order of ideas, the very notion of society and culture have changed, and will not return to what they have been in the past. What is new is new not because it has never been here before, but it has changed in quality. One thing that is new is the prevalence of newness, the changing scale and scope of change itself, so that the world alters as we walk in it... We need to recognize the change and learn what resources we have.⁴

This study of recent changes in corporate public relations functions should be perceived as an inquiry into the realm of broad social change, described historically, "to recognize the change and learn what resources we have."

⁴Robert Oppenheimer, "Prospects in the Arts and Sciences," Perspective USA 11 (Spring, 1955):10-11. As quoted from Francis J. Goldsmith, "The Challenges of Change." Journal of Environmental Health, Vol. 34 No. 1 (July/August, 1971):97.

The Purpose and Method of the Study

This study begins with the premise that broad social change will alter corporate behavior and thus force changes in public relations function. The historical evidence indicates that since 1970 this change has occurred. Social activists and popular movements such as Consumerists, Environmentalists, Equal Rights Activists, and others, have exerted growing influence on corporate management behavior and thus on the role of corporate public relations. The central purposes of this thesis, therefore, are: (1) to describe the social changes that have occurred since about 1970, the influence they have exerted on business management and the change they have produced in the role of public relations in business; and (2) to describe the subsequent new demands placed on communication training and on university communication training programs as professional preparation for the practice of public relations in business.

This thesis, therefore, fundamentally depends on an historical description and interpretation of the relevant literature on the changing role of public relations in business organizations and the changes which follow in the communication training for professional public relations practice. This method attempts to give a direct account of these changes in the role of public relations and constructs historical hypotheses on why and how they have occurred. It is hoped that this effort will thus provide some added insight into an understanding of the consequent implications for

university communication studies as preparation for professional public relations practice.

Thus, it has been necessary to survey the recent literature of social and business history of the relevant aspects of professional business management and of the professional practice of public relations as reported in their journals. The trends identified in this historical search show how they have been related to the academic literature in communication and organizational communication and to a survey of current communication curricula available to students entering communication-related jobs in business companies. Through this study method, the first main effort of this thesis has been a review and summary of the historical literature to provide evidence for the hypothesis of the change from reactive to interactive public relations, from the period 1945-70 to that of 1970-80.

The second main effort in this thesis is a critical contrast of the two periods to highlight the varying demands on communication theory and training, thus, to draw inferences with respect to the directions which university training should take in communication, as preparation for professional public relations practice in contemporary business organizations.

The Organization of the Study

Because this study is based on an historical review and interpretation of the relevant literature, the organization