Public Relations in the Publishing Industry: Shaping Public Opinion through Problem-Solving in the 17th-20th Centuries

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COM 3460: Public Relations

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September 10th, 2023

As public relations (PR) emerged as a formalized practice at the start of the 20th century as a result of the work of Ivy Lee, and later, Edward Bernays, it began to grow in every sector of American society. Like most rising American industries, the book publishing sector recognized the necessity of enhancing its public image through PR efforts. As articulated by the Ohio State University Press, "the partnership between author and publicity machine has always been necessary, above all since the rise of mass literacy." When analyzing the development of PR in the context of the publishing industry, it becomes clear that a company's efforts to offer solutions to the public's problems have a positive influence on public opinion. Throughout the 17th to 20th centuries, prominent publishing houses successfully positioned their publications as answers to problems related to educational discrimination, monotonous train rides, and language barriers, growing favorably in the eyes of the public.

The industry and, as a result, its PR practices, flourished with the rise in mass literacy. At the end of the 17th century, education became more readily available to the middle class, especially women. Literacy rates among Americans increased, creating a need for a market of readable content. The prose novel was developed in the 18th century as a response to widening readership, and soon to follow was the emergence of many small and large presses. With a public thirsting for knowledge, enhanced literacy, and self-improvement, publishers tapped into the market of educational books. Macmillan, a publishing house founded in 1843, began to issue schoolbooks to nurture the education of those who had once been denied it. Their public image improved significantly as their efforts became connected with the concept of empowerment for previously marginalized individuals. When demand for not only enriching reads but entertaining ones emerged, many publishing houses expanded their publications to a wide variety of categories from academic to juvenile.

The 19th century saw the emergence of the railway system, which lent itself to a wonderful PR opportunity for publishing companies. The railways reduced the cost of a cross-country journey by 85% (Kiger, 2023), which made travel more accessible. As a result, Americans began to spend a considerable amount of time idly sitting on lengthy train rides. Publishing companies utilized this need for entertainment on long journeys and promoted purchasing reading material to occupy travelers. Publishing company, Penguin, released affordable books in paperback, smaller sizes, and with soft jackets to make them "the perfect accompaniment to a train journey" (Penguin Random House). They worked to promote the train as the perfect location to sit and read and sold these travel-friendly copies at railway stations, grocers, and department stores for the same price as a pack of cigarettes.

Between 1900 and 1915, more changes transformed the industry's landscape. The public of potential readers shifted as more than 15 million immigrants arrived in the United States (Library of Congress). As a result, many American houses published and promoted translations of works originally printed in English so they could be read by all, working to build their credibility as inclusive, customer-oriented companies. In 1914, as many authors felt ill-prepared to take the endeavor of promotion on themselves, literary agents emerged to serve as PR practitioners for their author clients. The literary agent assumed the job of selecting sample chapters that would best play into a publisher's emotions or curiosity, as well as drafting and delivering pitches for unpublished manuscripts and unrecognized talent.

PR practices in 20th-century publishing have strong connections to early pioneers of the field, such as circus owner, P.T. Barnum. In the late 19th century, he often staged events to gain the attention of the press and dominate news headlines. Although he is not widely respected for his deceitful tactics, his stunts drummed up large support for his enterprise, signaling the power

of using media coverage as a tool for publicity. The publishing industry took a page out of Barnum's book in 1972 when author Georges Simenon accepted a challenge from a newspaper to write an entire book in the span of only 72 hours while suspended in a glass cage outside of a nightclub. It was one thing to market the content of a piece, but refreshing and intriguing to market the writing process behind it as well. The high-stakes publicity stunt dominated the news for a full week, raising Simenon's profile and merit immensely and driving traffic to his 75+ crime novels (Boone, 2016).

The evolution of PR becomes evident when examining the transformation of Penguin Random House between 1925 and 1946 as a case study, particularly in response to changing dynamics in the book industry. In 1925, The Viking Press, an early precursor to Penguin, was established with both its name and logo deliberately chosen to symbolize the spirit of adventure and exploration. This marked an early attempt to establish an emotional bond between the public and a company they support. Viking appeared to not only sell people books but *adventures* as well. The Penguin logo was then developed in 1930 by Allen Lane as a "dignified but flippant" symbol, hoping to appeal to both the serious, scholarly reader as well as the causal one.

Three years later, Penguin made note of the untapped market for children's books. Viking Children's Books was created with the objective of encouraging customers not only to buy books for themselves but also for their families. This promoted reading as a unifying family activity and allowed the public to tie Penguin to their values of family. 1935 ushers in the official establishment of Penguin Books, whose founder hoped to make all titles available for anyone with a desire to read them. He informs the public of his vision for a collection of "quality, attractive books affordable enough to be bought as easily and casually as a packet of cigarettes" (Lane, 1935), thus earning the company a reputation for accessibility.

In 1941, Penguin played a large role in the support of the war effort as a part of the Victory Book Campaign. The campaign was a response to Germany's burning of books containing viewpoints that opposed the Nazi platform. American librarians and publishers decided to fight back by encouraging Americans to read more and make books weapons in the "war of ideas". They published, collected, and distributed books to service members to provide entertainment and a morale boost (Scutts, 2014). The success of this campaign and Penguin's willingness to engage with a social issue allowed it to be perceived as more than a for-profit company and as an agent for social change. By the late 20th century, Penguin, rooted in its founding ideals, introduced "The Penguin Classics" series, aiming to democratize previously exclusive and sophisticated literary classics. Penguin released this series with the copy, "Because what you read matters," suggesting their wish to connect readers with meaningful content, rather than prioritizing profitability.

Viewed through the perspective of the book publishing industry, the evolution of public relations demonstrates the remarkable success of companies that can adjust to their publics' changing needs through innovative and timely solutions.

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