# Editorial 29.1: History (and professionalization) of public relations

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Studying history helps us understand how societies developed and how our present affairs are shaped by historical events. In a nutshell, if we knew history, we would be less prone to repeat mistakes and perhaps we would have created a better world by now. Sadly, this is not often the case, and we still live in a world of war, hatred, environmental destruction, inequality and poverty, to name just a few issues. Equally, complex policy issues are placed on the public agenda without any explanation, or at least not an adequate one, on how things have developed and ended up on the agenda, which results in problematic voting behaviours that perpetuate inequality and destruction. According to Tosh (2019), historians do not always get involved to uphold their scholarly integrity and thus do not always correct anyone's views, however, "to know that the past can illuminate the contours of the present is to be better equipped to make intelligent decisions about difficult public issues" (p. viii).

In the same way, if we studied the history of disciplines, we would be able to understand our own professions better, avoid mistakes and get creative inspiration for work. What is more, developing a history of the discipline helps in professionalizing the field and gaining wider recognition. According to the Encyclopedia of Knowledge Organization, discipline stands for "1. the practice of training people to obey rules or a code of behaviour, using punishment to correct disobedience and 2. a branch of knowledge, typically one studied in higher education" (Hammarfelt, n.d., pp. 3–4). When it comes to academic disciplines, this usually entails a form of specific and rigorous training of practitioners who will have been "disciplined" by their own discipline "for their own good" (Krishnan, 2009, p. 8). Foucault also argued that discipline often polices certain behaviours and excludes those behaviours that deviate from established norms or "the disciplines characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate" (Foucault, 1995/1975, p. 223). To be a discipline, Krishnan (2009) argues that one field needs to have six characteristics.

1. A particular "object of research",

2. A body of "accumulated specialist knowledge" referring to their object of research,

3. "Theories and concepts" that can organize knowledge effectively,

4. Specific "terminologies or technical language",

5. Developed particular "research methods",

6. An "institutional manifestation" in the form of a subject taught in universities' academic departments and professional organizations" (p. 9).

This leads to the question of professionalism. To be a profession, organizational scholars have argued that professions are distinguished from trades because they require "specialized knowledge, continuing education, codes of ethical conduct, and ability to enforce these codes (i.e. accountability)" (Sager, 2003, cited from Sha, 2011, p. 121). Professions also require "theoretical knowledge, professional association, institutionalized training, testing of competence, licensing, work autonomy, a code of ethics, and

self-regulation" (Sakagami *et al.*, 1999, n.p.). Similarly, some authors argued that to be a profession, a field needs to be characterized by "specialized educational preparation of practitioners, a body of theory-based knowledge, developed through research, codes of ethics, personal accountability, and public recognition that the occupation provides the community a unique and essential service" (Broom, 2009, cited from Sha, 2011, p. 122).

Public relations (PR) has struggled with recognition of the field as a profession. In some countries, the field is trivialized with my work based on research conducted in the UK showing, for example, that women who work in PR do not feel they are recognized, and this is because PR is not recognized and is often seen as fluffy, raising also a question of whether things would have been different had PR not feminized (Topić, 2021b). This view is not isolated from a wider context because both practitioners and scholars in the UK denounce PR as a profession and argue it is an occupation, with these opinions being voiced by some senior practitioners. For example, in an online magazine *PR Moment*, the majority of practitioners argued that PR is not a profession because practitioners in the UK do not engage in "professional qualifications and conversion into practice, continual professional development, operation within an ethical framework and a code of conduct, an open exchange between research and practice, and a sharing of knowledge" (PR Moment, 2016, n.p.). In addition to that, practitioners emphasized that one does not need a degree in PR to work in PR and some practitioners who do hold a degree in PR said that other practitioners laugh at them for having a PR degree (ibid). Scholars from the UK argued that PR is an occupation quoting similar arguments and practitioners including a lack of barriers to entering the field and the lack of adequate training (Edwards, 2018). However, Tsetsura (2010) argued that, in the Russian context, PR is a profession and practitioners she interviewed said they see PR as a profession in Russia despite constantly having to prove their value to organizations, which speaks of the lack of recognition of the feminized profession, however, they still see it as a profession, nonetheless. In the US context, PR is often referred to as a profession due to activities of professional organizations in standardizing curriculum and the long history of seeking recognition of PR, which started with Edward Bernays who was teaching PR in 1923 arguing against focussing only on technical skills, calling for the inclusion of scientific research and its application. According to Bernays (1978), "Medical college students who want to become surgeons are not taught how to wield scalpels and knives before they are taught basics about the human body . . . To put emphasis on writing skills in public relations is comparable" (p. 18). This recommendation was put into practice by the Commission of Public Relations Education in 1981 when recommendations for standardizing PR curriculum were put forward and PR education started to include PR principles, PR ethics and law, PR research, PR planning and management and PR writing and production (Sha, 2011). There is also a process of accrediting practitioners which was established to enhance the professionalization of the field (Brody, 1984, 1992; Broom, 2009). The Universal Accreditation Board introduced the accreditation for PR in 1998 and in 2003, standardization of accreditation was agreed upon among all PR associations (Sha, 2011).

However, there is still more work to be done for PR to achieve the full status of a profession that would be recognized everywhere. Studying history can indeed help in this path because establishing the history of the discipline would prove the long-standing existence and contribution of PR to societies and also contribute towards one of the usual requirements to become recognized as a profession, which is knowledge creation. This goes along with learning from history, not repeating the same mistake, particularly with ethics and professional conduct which has arguably been a problem for PR as a field and drawing creative inspiration from past campaigns. What is more, there is a historical problem of the lack of recognition of PR and an accusation that PR is only about propaganda, due to its origins, but PR has grown into so much more than that and has historically contributed to

societies, for example, through empowerment campaigns that were historically led by PR departments. It is enough to think of campaigns such as Proctor and Gamble's #LikeAGirl or Nike's historical women empowerment campaigning to see how PR has also contributed towards opening difficult questions and arguing for good (for an analysis of important empowerment PR campaigns, see Thompson and Margulis, 2015). Whilst some criticize PR departments for these campaigns and cynically argue this is just PR, Coombs and Holladay (2013), argued that PR is indeed not just PR and that the profession has also contributed to the marketplace of ideas and living in a society where everyone has a voice, which is to a large extent credit to the profession. Therefore, studying history of the discipline can and should be established in scholarly journals and in wider academia.

PR has all predispositions to have a history of the discipline drawn. Historians trace PR history to the establishment of the Publicity Bureau in Boston in 1900 as the start of the modern PR profession with some scholars also tracing PR activities in ancient civilizations such as cave drawings, Egyptian Hieroglyphs, Moses and Ancient Egypt, Kong Qiu (Confucius) and the Age of Empires and analysing how public opinion was influenced, for example, during the time of Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle who engaged crowds in public debates conducted in public areas. The examples of these early practices are numerous, including the Age of Print when numerous organizations and individuals started to publish written work to instigate behavioural change such as the Catholic Church's committee on spreading Catholicism and efforts to overthrow the British Monarchy in the US, to mention just two (PR Museum, n.d.). Modern PR started in the Age of Mass Media in 1917 when, for example, President Wilson created the Committee on Public Information (CPI) or Creel Commission, to influence public opinion about supporting the US's entry into First World War, which used posters, billboards and talks in movie theatres and one of the founders of PR as a discipline, Edward Bernays was active in the CPI's Foreign Press Bureau and continued his work on public opinion thus also influencing the formation of PR as a two-way communication with his influential work on *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (Spiegel, 2005; Topić, 2021a). This eventually resulted in the rise of corporate PR, from 1927 onwards and large corporations started to do in-house PR, thus the age of Mass Media also gave rise to PR. This includes the work of Edward Bernays, but also other PR pioneers such as Betsy Plank, Paul Garrett, Dorothy Gregg, Marilyn Laurie and Arthur Page (PR Museum, n.d., Heath, 2013) whose work has influenced and developed PR as we know it today.

Despite the richness of PR history, the discipline of the history of PR is relatively new. The creation of the PR history research is largely led by the International History of Public Relations Conference (IHPRC) organised by the British Bournemouth University since 2010 with a large support from American PR scholars who regularly attend the conference and contribute to this international endeavour in creating history of PR as a sub-discipline of PR scholarship. The conference has resulted in several special issues and edited books, which have contributed towards the development of the discipline (IHPRC, n.y) and the *CCIJ* has also supported this conference with a special issue published in Volume 25, Issue 4 guest edited by Anastasios Theofilou (lead conference organizer), Dustin W. Suppa, Kate Fitch and Anastasia Veneti, a group of scholars based in the UK, US and Australia. In that first *CCIJ* PR history collection, scholars analysed issues such as fascist propaganda (Thompson, 2020), the writing style of a prominent Irish PR educator (McGrath, 2020), open diplomacy and the link between diplomacy, PR and journalism (Gellrich *et al.*, 2020), 19th century PR campaign to defend national sovereignty (Tantivejakul, 2020), a historical account of creating Chartered Institute of PR in the UK contributing to writing the history of institutionalizing PR (Gregory, 2020), the post-war television and PR in the context of family planners (Borge, 2020), PR measurements in the 1920s (Anderson, 2020), the history of teaching PR in Saudi Arabia (Zamoum and Gorpe, 2020), history in the PR curriculum (Fitch and L'Etang, 2020) and the role of PR in sponsored national narratives (Kinnear, 2020). The issue alone has made a

meaningful contribution to the emerging discipline of PR history scholarship; however, other papers have been published from the same conference in other journals.

*CCIJ* continues in this tradition and has supported IHPRC again with the special issue we present as the first issue of 2024; we start a new year with a history issue looking back to move forward. In this issue, we are making a further contribution by looking into issues such as the PR education debate in scholarship, the propaganda work of Bernays and Goebbels, the historical development of promoting the most popular sport in the world, pedagogy of PR teaching and learning UK Government's news management, developing historical PR methodology for studying women's individual experiences in PR and the origin of tourism PR. Thus, both issues of *CCIJ* contributed not just to the knowledge of PR history but also to an inclusive view of what constitutes PR as papers published look at PR history within and outside of the corporate world, a somewhat contentious issue in PR scholarship where not all scholars agree on the beginning of PR as a practice. In addition to that, as IHPRC has moved to a bi-annual conference, a special issue will also occur every two years and *CCIJ* is happy to continue to support this conference and the emerging discipline of the history of PR, thus the next issue will also be published by the *CCIJ*, and the proposal is currently under preparation.

Studying history is important for the history of the discipline, and it can contribute towards professionalism of the field. However, and perhaps even more importantly, it can contribute towards stronger identity-building in PR. Whilst the nature of PR is constantly changing, recently also with the rise of AI, the history of the discipline remains important, and PR needs to continue to build professionalism as well as its own cultural and professional identity. In the words of Hall (1994), Cultural identity . . . is a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being." It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture, and power (p. 225).

**Martina Topic**

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