

## Public Relations, propaganda, and the art of the organized lie. ACM

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### The Coal Mine and Sigmund Freud

On April 20, 1914 the Colorado National Guard, and private security working for Colorado Fuel and Iron company, attacked striking miners and their families at the GF&I coal mine at Ludlow Colorado. GF&I was substantially owned by John D. Rockefeller Jr, and Rockefeller is understood to have organized the attack. The miners, who were represented by the United Mine Workers of America, and their families, had moved out of the company housing when they went on strike to protest poor working conditions. The strike-busting ‘militia’ aimed a Gatling Gun at the tent city, then burned it to the ground. At least 21 people, including 11 children, were killed in one of the worst cases of labor violence in US history. It came to be known as the Ludlow Massacre.

The Ludlow Massacre cause a national outrage at a time when unions were ascendent, and there was significant political pressure to reign in the Robber Barrons of the Gilded Age. It was a nightmare for Rockefeller’s public image, and he hired a fixer named, Ivy Ledbetter Lee, to pacify the miners, calm the public, and burnish his tarnished reputation. The result was a clever ploy to create toothless ‘company unions’ to replace true union representation, an extensive media campaign to portray all of the good things that the mining company was now doing for the miners, and the beginning of an ongoing campaign to turn Rockefeller into a beloved, lovable, philanthropist.

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On Easter Sunday 1929, a group of women, recruited by Edward Bernays, the entrepreneurial propagandist and nephew of Sigmund Freud, walked in the New York City Easter Parade smoking cigarettes: dubbed “Torches of Freedom”. Bernays organized this spectacle for the benefit of his client Luck Strikes, and it initiated a cascade of women smokers into public life. Bernays believed, or said he believed, that “*the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society.*” and thus he was performing a public service. He understood well that the human mind could be manipulated to achieve the goals of capitalists, and he unselfconsciously put that knowledge to work for his clients.

Bernays at first called his new discipline propaganda, recognizing it for what it was. He later reframed his work as “Public Relations” as he realized that the word propaganda carried social baggage that he did not want to carry. And who could criticize benevolent relations with the democratic public!

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Lee and Bernays are variously called the fathers of the discipline Public Relations. Both understood that ‘truth’ was fungible and that the human mind was vulnerable to having its frame of reality replaced by a new reality created by the Public Relations Counselor. The PR practitioner could make the facts disappear, and in their place, appear a version of the truth favorable to their clients. From these auspicious beginnings, the PR industry has become increasingly sophisticated and expanded to be the primary lever of control for the ruling class in democratic societies.

### **The re-making of John D Rockefeller Jr: lipstick on a pig**

Ivy Ledbetter Lee successfully transformed a hated capitalist into a kindly and beloved philanthropist. He did this through manipulation of Rockefeller’s public image. The work of Lee, and the anti-unionist William Lyon Mackenzie King undermined the social momentum of the labor movement by minimizing the optics of the Ludlow Massacre and the following “Coal War”. A primary tool was the subversion of the labor movement utilizing what were called “Company Unions” –as a required alternative to independent labor unions. Melissa Aronczyk and Maria I. Espinoza describe these efforts, in their book *A Strategic Nature*:

*“...he [Lee] sent Rockefeller Jr, along with Mackenzie King and a team of reporters, to glad-hand with the workers in their homes, ask questions of their wives, and visit CF&I facilities, including housing and a school. Such PR events were closely covered by local journalists in addition to the national coverage they received. By dispatching company information, representatives, and journalists to key sites at the mines, Lee’s campaign helped to reimpose industrial power over strike power, defusing the coal mining infrastructure as a site of protest.”*

Lee and Mackenzie designed what became know as Employee Representation Plans (ERPs) that were touted as a democratization of the workplace, and these ERPs were rapidly rolled out across all of Rockefeller’s company holdings in heavy industry and resource extraction.

*“...these “company unions,” as they were known, were promoted as a site for the practice of democracy. Within the plants, mills, lines, and mines, the ERP provided workers with deliberative councils, representative elections, and participation in major decisions taken by the firm. This company union bore the appearance of rights to collective bargaining for workers in support of claims to autonomy. Yet the existence of a seeming democratic structure within the walls of the company’s property in no way diminished the authority of its owners. ‘The employer retained unilateral control over final decisions, manipulated elections to ensure compliant employee representatives, and blocked intra-union communication by which the rank and file could form its opinions and monitor and instruct its representatives’*

*The ERP served as a legitimating device—an object of compromise”*

Lee also gave the predatory capitalist Rockefeller a personal image makeover, first by parading him around Ludow, continuing with many other carefully staged photo opportunities, and by providing the cover of philanthropy. By the time of Rockefeller’s death in 1960 his image makeover was complete, and his philanthropic legacy image assured.

Lee was the first professional makeover man, and he was remarkably open and cavalier about his intentions. Again from *A Strategic Nature*:

*“Lee concluded that the only way to put information in front of the public was to provide ‘my interpretation of the facts.’ This is not propaganda’ he stressed; or at least, not the negative associations of the term. The potential taint of propaganda can be avoided by the public’s use of judgment in making sense of the information received. Was it not a fundamental democratic principle, he argued, to give each person the right to judge and evaluate the value of facts for themselves?”*

It all sounds very reasonable, but who determines the ‘facts’?

### **Torches of Freedom: making bad things good**

In 1929, public cigarette smoking was not a socially acceptable behavior for women. This situation presented two issues: first, it was an affront to the equality of women who had recently gained the right to vote, and second, it presented a barrier to the growth of the cigarette market. Edward Bernays was hired by Luck Strikes to assist them in breaking down the social barriers to women smoking, as a way of expanding their market for cigarettes. Bernays successfully conflated the issue of women’s equality and public smoking, and even appropriated the women’s movement by recruiting prominent feminist leaders to the cause. And he framed that cause with “touches of freedom”. Bernays had taken a social idea (women’s equality) and a social movement, and abused it to the benefit of capital.

*“Bernays consistently applied what he favorably called ‘semantic tyranny’ to existing phrases and concepts, retooling them into ideas he could use for his emerging PR practice.”*

Bernays also cleverly retooled the concepts of democracy and the democratic public, creating illusions of publics, in support of “public goods” created by his capitalist clients.

*“What Bernays understood deeply was the power of “the public” as a cultural form. In his eyes, the public could be invoked as a strategic resource—not as an end in itself, but as a means for other ends. If you retain the ideals of publicity as a principle of democracy, consensus as the desired outcome of reasonable debate, and communication as the feeder for social integration, you can conduct your affairs in “the name of the public good. Whether advancing the public good was your actual motivation became less important than maintaining the ideals that surrounded it.”*

Beyond this, Bernay’s great legacy was the professionalization of the creation of corporate propaganda, personified in Public Relations Counselor.

### **Keep America Beautiful: our pollution is your problem.**

In 1953, the same year that the state of Vermont passed a bill forbidding the sale of beverages in non-returnable containers, and with other states considering similar bills, the trade group Keep America Beautiful was formed, and began a decades-long campaign to manipulate the public into accepting responsibility for the packaging industry’s waste. This effort has resulted in some of the most successful Public Relations coups, including “Don’t be a litterbug” and, ultimately the sham of recycling.

From an excellent online article about Keep America Beautiful:

*By creating terms like litterbug and shaming them through ad campaigns with the likes of Susan Spotless, the very same companies that encouraged Americans to toss aside tedious tasks and embrace the carefree lifestyle of post-war America were now manipulating the public to believe trash is solely a consumer's responsibility. That effectively absolved many of these industries from the problem they helped create.*

In Keep America Beautiful, the public relations industry took what was an industry problem (pollution), and created a societal problem (litter), that could only be remedied by the public taking responsibility. And, all of this was couched as a public service.

( the actor was Italian)

### **Green Business: the death of environmentalism**

In the 1970's the public relations counselor E. Bruce Harrison introduced the idea of 'green business' as a propaganda response to the effective environmental activism of the 1960s that began with Silent Spring and ended with the Environmental Protection Act and the Clean Water Act. Harrison used the tools of Public Relations to undermine further regulation in Congress, and to begin the decades-long campaign of subversion of the messages of the environmental movement into a reality favorable to Capital.

His message was: business is on the side of protecting the natural environment... really.

Again quoting Aronczyk and Espinoza:

*"Through his network of associations with "folks on the Hill," Harrison discovered that industry-friendly members of Congress and some major labor unions were also unhappy with the outcomes of hearings on environmental legislation. To Harrison, it became evident that multiple groups could use some collective representation...."*

*It was on this basis that the National Environmental Development Association (NEDA) was formed in 1972. Drawing together colleagues from the chemical, petroleum, and mining industries; market-minded members and former members of Congress; labor groups; and agricultural interests, all with a bone to pick over the restrictions of environmental standards"*

NEDA was a sort of meta-trade association bringing together the major industrial polluters, corrupt politicians and fearful labor leaders, all for the purpose of bringing down the Environmental Movement. And their primary tactic was pretending to care about the environment -but in a 'responsible' way that did not interfere with economic growth (i.e. the profits of polluters). In 1973, the president of NEDA, testifying before congress stated:

*"National Environmental Development Association (NEDA) is a non-profit, non-political, non-stock corporation comprised of labor, agriculture, industry and other private and public interest organizations and individuals. NEDA was established for the purpose of promoting the conservation, development, and use of America's resources to enhance "the quality of its human environment". NEDA endeavors to do this by encouraging public awareness and informed input on such proposed or prevailing public policies as may serve to attain or impair that overriding human goal."*

NEDA methodically used the tools of Public Relations to hijack the national political agenda, away from the grass-roots environmental movements and towards the interests of capitalism; specifically, the interests of polluting industries and the capital that financed them.

*“The NEDA executive committee carefully monitored pending environmental legislation, preparing in-depth analyses of recent research and polls about the issues as they played out in Washington. Regular newsletters, issues workbooks, briefings, guides to legislation, fact sheets, and printed reports all allowed NEDA members to communicate about the issues to employees, investors, and state and local representatives in the communities where they operated. NEDA also created contacts at media organizations, delivering information with the industry viewpoint on environmental issues to media outlets and specialized trade publications.*

*The group also played a lobbying role, with members of the NEDA executive committee testifying before Congress to call for reduced constraints on environmental rules in the name of economic growth.”*

Public Relations had taken Washington by storm and the great and ongoing battle of polluters fighting any meaningful environmental action had begun in earnest.

### **Creating reality and manufacturing consent**

Among the most significant accomplishments of the Public Relations Industry has been the manufacture of consent: the transformation of an elite agenda, into the agenda of the public; a hijacking of the public will into a vehicle for the enrichment of the few. Manufacturing consent is the art of convincing the populace to act in ways that are counter to their well-being, all the while believing in the virtue of their actions.

The 20th century is ripe with examples of Public Relations interventions in public consent that significantly impacted US foreign policy, the economy, the environment, and the democratic governance of the United States. In each case, the socially and environmentally destructive activities of Capital are covered by the ‘consent’ of the people; a consent manufactured by Public Relations. Here is a small taste of the consent legacy of the PR Industry:

The Federal Highway System -a need manufactured to meet the business objectives of the oil and automobile industries that resulted in the dismantling of the public transportation system and a growing dependence on the burning of fossil fuels. Billions of public dollars spent to enable corporate profits. And, it was all about freedom!

Plastic Recycling -a system that costs local governments hundreds of millions of dollars a year, and accomplishes almost nothing. We have been conned into believing that we are virtuous when we recycle, and yet we are in actuality going through a mostly meaningless charade designed by Public Relations to distract us from the problems of plastic pollution. (I have written about it in this post.)

The 1970s Energy Crisis -which, in fact, was not an energy crisis at all. The reality is that, there was a surplus of oil, and there is evidence that the Nixon State Department and the oil companies colluded with the Persian Gulf producer states to keep oil prices, and profits, high. The ‘Energy Crisis’ was in fact a PR coup - a massive deflection that allowed capitalists invested in oil to reap unprecedented profits.

Timothy Mitchell, in chapter 6 of his 2011 book *Carbon Democracy* tells the story of this monumental deception:

“The world “energy crisis” or “energy shortage” is a fiction’, argued the oil economist Morris Adelman. ‘But belief in the fiction is a fact. It makes people accept higher oil prices as imposed by nature, when they are really fixed by collusion.’ He presented evidence that there was a surplus of world oil supply, that demand was rising less quickly than it had been in the 1960s, and that the State Department and the oil companies were indeed colluding with the producer states to benefit jointly from a large increase in the oil price.”

He goes on to pinpoint the ultimate tragic outcome for US democracy:

*“As oil companies prospered in the boom, a handful of families in the United States turned their fortunes from oil into windfall funds for the neoliberal movement. Richard Mellon Scaife, heir to the Gulf Oil fortune of the Mellon family, used these funds to become the country’s largest benefactor of neoliberal free-market political organisations, giving at least \$340 million over four decades to such organisations as the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Hoover Institution, the Manhattan Institute and the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Charles and David Koch, whose company Koch Industries was the largest privately held oil company in the US, played a similar role, and Charles Koch co-founded the Cato Institute in 1977. These think tanks and policy organisations oversaw the neoliberal movement, with a programme assembled since the late 1930s to remove from the state its role in regulating the economy and replace this public regulation of collective life with its private regulation by the market.”*

And, all of these machinations are the fruit of Public Relations: the hacking of the minds of the public for the benefit of the American Kleptocracy; telegraphing the myth of the self-made man, the job-creator, the lazy un-deserving poor, the smart hard-working rich, the inevitability of corporate dominance. In this created reality the rich deserve to be rich, and the rest of us are just not quite smart enough, or industrious enough, or deserving enough.

### **What happened to our democracy?**

Our democracy has been subverted by the PR industry and its evil spawn, mass-media political consultants, and lobbyists; it has been hijacked by propaganda and corruption. The media manufacture consent and broadcast the messages that Capital wants to be heard. The lobbyists and political consultants assure that the politicians line up to the messaging and live in fear of the withdrawal of capitalist support.

The media, as currently constituted, are the mouthpiece of the elites and the range of acceptable dialog is controlled by these elites. Noam Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent* puts it succinctly:

*“The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfill this role requires systematic propaganda.”*

The media, on behalf of the elites, inculcate the populace with a value system that supports their continued domination of society. That same mass-media is owned by the elites, and funded by the propaganda of advertising (itself a tool of PR), constantly generating needs for more consumption, and ever-increasing profits for Capital. As the lines between journalism and public relations have steadily blurred, and public relations has become increasingly dominant, we exist in an information environment that is increasingly driven by the manufactured reality of the Public Relations Industry.

These same forces, in turn, have corrupted our politics via the lobbyists and political consultants who are the political twin of corporate public relations. Organizations like ALEC feed corporate friendly model legislation to lazy legislators. Think tanks such as the Federalist Society feed corporate-friendly judges to presidents and congress to populate the judiciary. And Republican Party politicians parrot the bullshit created by political consultants (also Public Relations professionals), designed to undermine democracy for the benefit of Capital.

While it would be unfair to blame all of society's troubles on a single discipline, it is fair to say that the best interests of our society have been consistently betrayed and undermined by an ever evolving, and increasingly sophisticated practice called Public Relations. We are meaning-makers, and our minds are being hacked. We do not control our own social destiny.

The good news is that this is being increasingly recognized, and there is a growing body of research that is pointing towards successful strategies for countering the propaganda of Public Relations. In a second part of this article, I will talk about some of this research and an efforts to counter the impact of public relations propaganda on society.