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Theorizing public relations history: The roles of strategic intent and human agency

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ABSTRACT

This historiographical essay argues for a set of standards that can be applied across time and place to determine whether a historical initiative is part of public relations history. After analyzing the concept of function in relation to public relations, we argue for an alternative focus on both the strategic intent of the practitioner and the role of human agency. We thus propose a way to identify what public relations is and, to borrow from Ivy Lee (1925), what it is not.

1. Introduction

Public relations historians “come to historical texts with different philosophies of history, different social, political, and moral philosophies, and even different assumptions about epistemology and ontology,” Ron Pearson has written (1990, p. 28). As a result, he said, “there is no single, privileged interpretation of public relations’ past” (Pearson, 1992, p. 113). More recently Vos (2011) argued that public relations historians make even more basic decisions about historical explanation, which he classifies as functionalist, institutional, and cultural logics of explanation, frequently without questioning or even realizing they are making a decision. In this essay we address another layer of decision-making that we believe must be excavated: choosing what qualifies to be part of public relations history.

2. Materials and methods

This essay is based on recent efforts to theorize the rise of public relations, particularly Bentele (2013), Lamme and Russell (2010), Raaz and Wehmeier (2011), and Salcedo (2008). Building upon the literature examined by Lamme and Russell (2010), the authors identify key characteristics of public relations that can help scholars determine what should or should not be included in public relations history.

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3. Results

A fundamental problem for public relations historians is the lack of a clear definition of the field. “The difficulty in defining public relations has led to differences among historians in identifying the historical arrival of public relations as a social institution,” Vos (2011, p. 121) has written. Some think current approaches are too broad; while others think they are too narrow. For instance, Brown (2015) described current definitions of the field as creating “*a suit much too small for the realities of PR*” (p. xvi, emphasis in original). Are there standards that can be applied across time and place to determine whether a past initiative is part of public relations history before it is analyzed by historians, regardless of their approach? How do we know what public relations is and, to borrow from Lee (1925), what it is not? Building on Lamme and Russell’s (2010) monograph that reviewed secondary literature about public relations history, in this essay we propose an answer to these questions.

One of the stumbling blocks to defining public relations has been an almost constantly changing series of names for the field, imposed as much by the historical actors as by scholars seeking to categorize and explain the work and ideas of those actors and of the modern field of public relations. For example, press agentry, publicity, propaganda, advertising, and press bureau are terms that arise among historical actors to label similar initiatives while more recently terms such as public affairs, public diplomacy, strategic communication, and public information have entered the field’s professional jargon. “A key issue is that of nomenclature,” L’Etang (2008, p. 329) noted, asking: “is it appropriate to describe an activity as ‘public relations’ prior to the existence of the term?” Perhaps not, but we do not know enough yet as a global field of inquiry to understand what common terms might have emerged over time to assist historians in identifying public relations in the past. Moreover, even if we use terms that emerge from the historical evidence, we are bound to then employ the definitions of those terms from that time, within historical context, rather than impose modern definitions. The conundrum of public relations history is that without labels that can apply across time, we cannot be sure of common understanding; however, attempts to impose labels via periodization have had the effect of limiting historical inquiry rather than explaining and expanding it (Lamme & Russell, 2010). This dilemma is further compounded by the fact that any definitions or standards developed today in thinking about public relations historiography also need to be relevant to today’s public relations practice because today’s initiatives will roll into the landscape of inquiry for future public relations historians.

Perhaps, then, the term—the label—should not be the defining factor. Myers (2014) has demonstrated that at least in the United States, the term “public relations” was already being used in the press as early as the 18th century; by the 1830s it was being used in the same context as today’s meaning, building reputation and relationships. These findings support Lamme and Russell’s (2010) contention that public relations did not emerge whole cloth in US corporations around the turn of the 20th century (and even then it should be pointed out that Ivy Lee, the US “father of public relations,” called his work corporate publicity, not public relations; see Russell & Bishop, 2009). Instead, they found, public relations existed across time in deliberate approaches to influencing public sentiment toward an intended result in non-corporate sectors. People who employed such efforts before the 20th century had *not*, as Bernays concluded, “unconsciously practiced the principles of public relations” (1927, p. 286). Therefore, to exclude them from consideration in public relations history is both inaccurate and unfair. As Coombs and Holladay (2012) argue, “Agencies and corporations named public relations in the US, therefore, they get to control the field by dominating its history” (p. 350), and, they add, “Public relations strategies and tactics developed by activists are co-opted by corporate interests and attributed to corporations. Activists become marginalized actors. . . rather than driving forces.”

3.1. Meanings of function

The primary purpose of Lamme and Russell’s (2010) monograph was to debunk once and for all the theory of a progressive rise of public relations based on periodization of the field, apparently first promulgated by Bernays (Hoy et al., 2007). In that 2010 study, we examined English-language literature on global public relations prior to 1900 – allowing the historians themselves to determine what constituted PR – and concluded that the field developed in a variety of sectors and across times and places; that there are no clearly defined periods of development except by the field’s context in larger historical eras; that the field did not progressively improve; and that corporations and agencies were neither the creators nor necessarily even the culmination of the field’s development. Additionally, we found that across the literature, the primary drivers of public relations efforts, the strategists, included institutions (e.g., for-profit, nonprofit, government) as well as individuals.

In the five years since publication of the monograph, several more attempts to define what PR is and what it is not have emerged, focusing especially on function. Brown (2015, p. xv) proposes that scholars think about public relations not just as “a container for managerial abstractions—objectives, strategies, and tactics—but as the lived, dramatic experience of human beings in the social world,” offering a set of (at least) 20 principles in which “PR comprises not only some things but *everything*, *everyone*, *everywhere* and *every time*” (Brown, 2015, p. 3, emphasis in original). In referencing Coombs and Holladay (2012), Brown is not subscribing to the cynically dismissive idea that “everything is PR” so much as challenging us to consider public relations as “multidisciplinary, extra-organizational, suprafunctional” (Brown, 2015, p. 20). Similarly, Edwards (2012, pp. 13, 21) calls for moving beyond function to “flow” in thinking about public relations and, in so doing, escaping from the confines of “organizational context.” Even in its process to create an official definition, the Public Relations Society of America in 2012 rejected the word *function* in favor of *process* to avoid the top-down implications of the phrase “management function.”

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Nevertheless, a key aspect of decades of attempts to define the field has been the concept of "function." Lee (1925) explained that the actions someone takes in public relations are equivalent to the field: what public relations *is* equals what it *does*. "In my judgment the function is the whole thing," Lee said (p. 26). However, Cutlip and Center (1958), authors of one of the longest-running, best-selling introductory textbooks in the United States, warned of confusion caused by referring to public relations as both the means and the ends. Public relations, they said, is a management function, an "integral part of the administrative function," similar to "personnel management or budgetary control" (p. 12). It is distinctive from the tools of the practice that are often considered to be synonymous with it, specifically, "publicity, press-agentry, propaganda, and institutional advertising," it is "*an operating concept of management*" that essentially applies to anyone in an organization, and it is a "*specialized staff function in management*" for which "managers hire skilled practitioners" (Cutlip & Center, 1958, pp. 5–6, emphasis in original). The idea of public relations as "a management function" is not unique to these authors; the idea pervades other US textbooks as well (e.g., Aronoff & Baskin, 1983; Griswold & Griswold, 1948; Heath & Coombs, 2006; Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth, & Van Leuven, 2004; Marston, 1963, 1979; Simon, 1976; Wilcox, Ault, & Agee, 1986; Wilcox & Cameron, 2012). The concept of what constitutes public relations—its function, its purpose—is, as Lee (1925), observed, not necessarily clearly delineated from what it does, especially outside the world of textbooks.

This separation of what PR is from what it does correlates to Bentele's (2013) separation of functional public relations from PR as a practice or profession. He asserts (e.g., Bentele, 2013, 2015) that there are two primary historiographic approaches to PR history, "fact or event-based" and "model and theory-based" (Bentele, 2015, p. 23). The former demands some common understanding of "public relations," which, he argues, is problematic in its broad reach, whereas the latter systematizes facts through a social scientific filter, seeking to explain them through "a clearly defined theoretical foundation" that describes and explains the "evolution of public relations ideas, practices and structures" (Bentele, 2015, pp. 26–27). In this approach, Bentele cites Grunig (1996) yet echoes Raucher (1968) in concluding that such an approach treats the history of PR as a history of ideas. Neither approach, however, satisfies questions of origin, differentiates between "prehistory" and "'real history,'" identifies phases of public relations development, or differentiates between PR, advertising, journalism, and propaganda (Bentele, 2015, pp. 27–32). Although PR "evolved historically from interpersonal forms of human communication" (Bentele, 2013, p. 250), human communication, he warns, is not interchangeable with public relations. Nor is it appropriate, he says, to examine public relations history without attention to larger social systems, including politics, economics, culture, and science. Finally, he argues that PR is an organizational function, not an individual one. His functional-integrative stratification model, then, emphasizes PR as "public communication" grounded in communication history and those larger social systems (Bentele, 2015, p. 33). In turn, PR developed within organizations, where leaders fulfilled the function of practitioners and where, gradually, that function was delegated to "independent and specialized departments" (Bentele, 2015, p. 38).

Similarly, Raaz and Wehmeier (2011, p. 270–71) suggest that scholars should start with the function itself, arguing that we can study "certain PR-instruments in their historical evolution, knowing that these instruments can only be termed 'public relations' if they are found in the specific arrangement with other elements, which together, form the PR system." And, they argue that it is important to differentiate between what public relations is, "a social system consisting of a specific set of aligned communication techniques and programs," from what public relations does, "the single PR techniques and attitudes within this set" (2011, p. 270).

In both cases, however, the precondition of PR as an organizational function rather than an individual one is problematic. Although an evolutionary approach demands a baseline from which to begin evolving, such as Bentele's human communication, the implication is that over time, organizations alone mastered those interpersonal skills and developed ways to build them into an integrated communication system of public relations. However, we know that many individuals and marginalized groups also mastered these skills outside of the dominant systems of their times, communication, social, and otherwise—and, sometimes, created their own (e.g., Cutlip, 1994, 1995; McBride, 1993; Pinsdorf, 2002). Furthermore, an "organization" does not practice PR, individual people devise and implement that function within organizations. For example, if we include AT&T only in PR history, we lose Arthur Page or Theodore Vail. If we examine the Glastonbury Abbey, we miss Aethelwold (Watson, 2008). If we consider 19th-century Siam only, we overlook King Rama IV (Tantivejakul, 2014). AT&T in the 1930s America was not only its own national system but it was also well grounded in the communication system of its time, media and otherwise. Nineteenth-century Siam or 10th-century Glastonbury were not so grounded, but no less effective in employing public relations functions in the context of the larger social systems in place, using the tools of their times. It is individual initiative that drives organizational PR, so it must be acceptable to examine individuals outside of organizations as well. As such, embracing human communication—interpersonal skills—is an appropriate characteristic of public relations history.

Lamme and Russell (2010) also used the term "function," but in reference to the functions *of* public relations rather than public relations *as* a function. That is, we identified common functions over time and across sectors of practice—evidence of media relations, for example, or community outreach or reputation management. We suggested that *who* performed the function varied widely, but that a clearly identifiable, common skill set emerged: "those who understood the power of persuasion, who realized the importance of identifying and engaging key publics as allies, who understood the value of reaching those publics through messages and channels that would be meaningful to them, and who understood the strategies involved in doing these things effectively, such as choosing between pathos and logos or interpersonal and mass communications" (p. 352). Furthermore, we identified these activities as "precedents" – as opposed to "antecedents" (Cutlip, 1995); "proto-PR" (Watson, 2013, p. 3); "precursors" (Salcedo, 2012, p. 280); or "pre-history" (Bentele, 2015) – defining these efforts as legitimate parts of public relations history, not merely early attempts at developing what would later become "public relations."

Historians have also made a distinction between doing public relations and having a PR mindset. In a follow-up to the monograph, Russell and Lamme (2013) then analyzed 20th century US business responses to the civil rights movement and offered the term "public relations mindedness" (a term also used by Tedlow, 1979, p. 14) to describe how sophisticated and strategic public relations efforts emerged within the civil rights movement from people who were not educated to be nor self-identified as public relations professionals. Cutlip and Center (1958) similarly identified "public relations thinking" as a way of understanding a need that could be fulfilled with deliberate strategic and persuasive communication efforts. All of these concepts also appear to correlate with Bentele's (2013) notion of functional public relations.

There are several problems with defining public relations around function, not the least of which is the different ways the word "function" has been used. Focusing on PR *as* a function creates a false division between nonprofessional and professional public relations. In so doing scholars may inadvertently discount or delegitimize nonprofessional public relation practices in the political, reform and religious sectors around the world prior to the institutionalization of public relations. There *is* a difference between having a PR mindset and creating a PR department. However, the difference is in the degree of institutionalization and professionalization, in "the rules of engagement" that developed over time (Lamme & Russell, 2010, p. 354), not in the ability, strategic thinking or tactics of the practitioner, past or present. Perhaps Ivy Lee said it best in a slightly different context in 1925: "The main point is, not the name, whether you call him publicity man, or what not. . ." (1925, p. 26). A rose by any other name *would* still be a rose.

Focusing on the functions *of* PR can be equally problematic. Doing so can give too much emphasis to its tactics (Bentele, 2015), which tend to be time- and place-specific. Myers (2014) argues that practitioners use the tools of their time; what is cutting edge in one time or place may be old news in another, but people either use what is available to them or innovate something new. Raaz and Wehmeier (2011) are correct when they say that the use of particular tactics does not a profession make. As they rather colorfully put it, scholars should not confuse attempts at religious persuasion with public relations for God (Raaz & Wehmeier, p. 270). Yet Salcedo (2008) argues, "the study of PR must, simultaneously, be a history of ideas and a history of praxis, an examination of the relationships between ideas and action" (p. 281).

3.2. Shifting to strategic intent

Lamme and Russell (2010) pointed to a solution to this conundrum, one which emerges from global scholarship on public relations history. Our review of the literature indicated that the adoption of PR-related activities was driven by five motivations: profit, recruitment, legitimacy, advocacy, agitation; a subsequent study added reducing fear (Russell & Lamme, 2013). Yet a motivation can also be considered an anticipated outcome. For example, if the driving motivation is to increase profit, then the essential measurement of effectiveness of public relations efforts to do so is that outcome—whether or not profits actually increased. Thus, we argue that rather than focusing on PR as a function or the functions of PR, public relations historians should consider the *strategic intent* of the practitioners, whether they are paid or unpaid, institutional or grass roots, trained or untrained, and holding or not holding an office, title or credentials. Strategic intent is a distinguishing characteristic of public relations; that is, communication tactics are employed with a specific outcome in mind, and activities are not random but actively selected based on the results a communicator hopes to achieve. To return to Raaz & Wehmeier's illustration, there is a middle ground between religious persuasion and public relations for God: a strategic campaign undertaken for a specific religious purpose with defined, planned outcomes, such as those outlined in Lamme's (2014) *Public Relations and Religion in American History*. Focusing on strategic intent, therefore, levels the playing field in understanding origins and effects of public relations initiatives over time. It is the domain of organizations or individuals and of their stakeholders in reacting to those initiatives, which in turn, could launch or contribute to an ongoing conversation. Whereas a model of effective modern public relations is grounded in research-driven, strategic communication targeted to stakeholder communities, it is also true that non-strategic communication can prompt strategically intended reactions. For example, organizational leaders or spokespersons communicate non-strategically when they fail to realize a microphone is hot, offhandedly make a bad joke or insensitive comment, or simply misbehave such as sexting with a constituent; such behavior can prompt stock sell-offs, boycotts, protests, and engineered counter-campaigns.

However, strategic intent alone cannot define public relations because other forms of persuasive communication, most notably propaganda, may also have highly strategic intent. Moreover, focusing only on strategic intent may have the unintended effect of privileging the organizational perspective (Toth, 2009). We recognize that communicators gauge the effectiveness of their work based on some level of response (positive or otherwise) from those to whom the messages are directed and, sometimes, from those indirectly affected by those messages. Efforts to boost legitimacy, profit, or recruitment, for example, *must* engage others, as do letter-writing campaigns or self-published advocacy newspapers. Even when fear was the motivating factor that drove the adoption of public relations, those efforts were found to result in community outreach and new business models or hiring practices (Russell & Lamme, 2013).

3.3. Overlaying with human agency

Therefore, in addition to considering the strategic intent of the communicator, we add a second factor, human agency. We argue that people must have a choice in how they respond to persuasive messages in order for a program to qualify as public relations. Like Tedlow (1979), we see public relations as an alternative to violence or coercion. For communication to be persuasive instead, its audiences must have the ability to respond, reject, seek alternative information, share their own opinions, and make independent decisions without coercion or fear of violence. As Taylor and Kent (2014) proposed, persuasion falls along a continuum, and propaganda's purpose is limiting "individual freedom and choice" and constructing "messages designed to generate adherence and obedience." At the other end of the continuum they place dialogue, which puts "emphasis on meaning making, understanding, cocreation of reality and sympathetic/empathetic interactions" (p. 389). We agree with Taylor and Kent that public relations lies closer to this end of the continuum. It is tempting to expand this approach to a discussion on the ethical dimensions of a past public relations event but given that ethical conduct is a comparatively modern concern in the public relations field, it should be noted that such historical considerations must encompass the context of the time under examination.

Therefore, much like Marsh's (2015) Cartesian grid of Peitho and persuasion in which he presents a continuum of respect/disrespect intersecting with one of personal/community gain, we argue that a continuum of strategic intent intersecting with one of human agency (freedom to choose) similarly represents a construct for understanding aspects of public relations. Like Taylor and Kent, we agree that the extent to which people are free to choose whether or not to attend to or comply with a message is a key distinction in distinguishing propaganda from other kinds of persuasion. We do not mean to suggest that people will always make the best choices, or even take the opportunity to initiate or respond to communication, only that they have the chance to make a choice or have a role. Looking at the past, then, we argue that for people, cases or campaigns to be included in public relations history, they must have both high strategic intent and high human agency. High strategic intent with low human agency is propaganda (see L'Etang, 2008). In contrast, stand-alone tactics, such as parades, even if conducted by PR people and even if accompanied by a high degree of human agency among intended stakeholders nevertheless represent low strategic intent. An extreme point on this continuum, of course, would include the previous examples of nonstrategic communications: unplanned incidents that prompt reactions from intended and unintended stakeholders. It should be noted, though, that such unintended events can prompt PR initiatives with high strategic intent and high human agency, often among an expanded set of stakeholders.

3.4. Benefits

We argue that combining strategic intent of communicators with the human agency of publics allows scholars to identify what belongs in public relations history as opposed to what is part of the larger field of persuasive communication. We recognize that scholars such as Salcedo (2008) have argued that there can be no universal history of public relations and that it should be studied in the context of national histories, but we believe that defining public relations by its practitioners' reliance on expected outcomes offers a way to build a more global understanding of the field's history because it allows for the development of "real" public relations outside of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century United States. The overrepresentation of US history, especially US corporate and agency history, in the global story of the rise of public relations is well documented (L'Etang, 2008; Miller, 2000; Salcedo, 2008). To overcome this problem, scholars must be willing to adopt a broader definition of public relations than people and organizations who self-identified as engaging in "public relations." That is, because paid, institutionalized public relations has been documented as early as the mid-19th-century Germany at Krupp (Bentele, 1997) and along a similar timeline in the US with P.T. Barnum and the railroads, then it could appear that "professional" public relations originated in big business. Yet the literature examined in Lamme and Russell (2010), not to mention much of the research presented at the International History of Public Relations Conference during the last six years, indicates that this is simply not the case, and theories about the history of PR must take this into account. As Salcedo (2008) concluded, "By admitting an American origin for the discipline, we may forget the phenomena in other countries, which, under different titles, were true predecessors" (p. 280), and, we would add, in the United States as well.

Therefore, in addition to departing from the institutional (and often, for-profit) grounding that drives "professional" public relations, we believe that the strategic intent/human agency approach can apply to many national histories. As an example, Halff and Gregory (2014) reviewed the PR historiography of Asian countries, asserting, ". . .Asian-Pacific practices are not anomalies. They are a product of a unique history and have their own characteristics" (p. 403). In particular, they point out that governments and public administrations were more pivotal in the development of public relations in those countries than in the West. Our approach can encompass this difference because we are less interested in who practiced PR or what they called it than in the how and the why—what did they set out to do, why they did it, and how they knew how to do it.

There are other strengths to this approach. Including campaigns and programs prior to 1900 allows historians to include non-professional communicators and people outside formal institutions, which in many cases means people outside of traditional sites of power. For example, it allows us to consider the advocacy press, advertising, religious proselytizing, and other areas of persuasive communication that did not ultimately become professional public relations but that may have contributed to its development. It thus helps us to avoid the pitfalls of "historical inevitability and determinism" (L'Etang, 2008, p. 322); as Tedlow (1979) reminds us, the adoption of public relations as a business strategy was a choice. It is likewise a choice for those outside traditionally powerful institutions who choose persuasive communication campaigns over rioting, political assassination, or other forms of violence that could also have been employed to create change.

3.5. Power and meaning making

A final strength of strategic intent/human agency is that it dovetails with critical-cultural approaches, which focus on issues relating to power, violence and hegemony, and gender, and rhetorical analyses, which see public relations as a process of meaning making. "There is some difficulty in defining Critical Theory due to its broad and varied development," L'Etang (2005, p. 521) explains; it is best seen as an interdisciplinary approach that aims to transform structures that limit human potential. In public relations, generally speaking, critical perspectives "focus on the symbolic processes of organizations" for the purpose of disrupting "our beliefs about organizations and publics" (Toth, 2009, p. 53). Thus, from a critical perspective public relations is usually seen as part of a system of powerful institutions, primarily corporations (Edwards, 2006; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2009). However, some critical scholars, including Holtzhausen (2002), argue that we should not look at public relations strictly as a function of organizations, and Curtin and Gaither's (2008) analysis of the Arla Foods crisis following the controversial publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad concluded, ". . .power does not always lie in the hands of the large multinational corporation" (p. 131).

A strategic intent/human agency model can also encompass rhetorical approaches to the study of PR history. "The study of rhetoric," Toth (2009, p. 50) explains, "concerns itself principally with how individuals, groups, and organizations make meaning, through argument and counter-argument, to create issues, resolve uncertainty, compete to achieve a preferable position, or to build coalitions – to solve problems." As with critical-cultural research, rhetorical scholars tend to focus on "the symbolic and relationship-building aspects that organizations engage in to achieve specific political or economic goals" (Ihlen, 2011, p. 456). However, Toth asserts that rhetorical scholars also pay attention to publics "as active participants in constructing the meanings of their relationships with organizations" (p. 51), which meshes well with our approach of considering both strategic intent and human agency.

It was not our purpose to address the problem of what constitutes PR history from a rhetorical or critical-cultural frame; in fact, this approach emerged from an analysis of historical scholarship that utilized many different ways of understanding. Not surprisingly, then, our approach does not always fit with critical-cultural or rhetorical approaches. For example, de Certeau (1984) in *The Practice of Everyday Life* defines strategy as the use of power relationships emanating from a subject with both will and power, giving as examples a business, an army, a city and a scientific institution. He argues that strategic decisions help delimit one's place in the world. By contrast de Certeau sees tactics as calculated actions that move the subject into the outside world; he claims that "a tactic is the art of the weak" (loc. 707) determined by the absence of power. However, by defining strategic intent as expected outcome, we believe it can be adopted by any group or individual, even and perhaps especially those without power.

4. Conclusion

In sum, in this essay we propose a way to determine what should be included in public relations history: a person, campaign or program should have high strategic intent and the intended public must have a high level of agency. Such an approach strengthens public relations historiography because it provides a clear approach *within the historical evidence* to identify public relations in the past. Additionally, this approach enables historians to capture the broad sweep of the public relations field and to identify not by label or function but by degrees of strategic intent and stakeholder choice whether an initiative is "public relations" and, if not, where else an initiative might fall within persuasive communication history. It is a tool, then, for separating public relations history from persuasive communication more broadly.

Strategic interaction between communicators and publics is a distinguishing characteristic of public relations throughout history. We argue, then, that the degree of institutionalization or professionalization of the practice is less important than the strategic intent of the practitioner, whether individual or institutional, top-down or grassroots, mainstream or marginalized. In this way, we seek to remove the organizational bias from public relations history. At the same time, our approach encompasses the stakeholders as well as the communicators, claiming both as part of the field's history.

Our proposal for theorizing public relations history based on strategic intent and human agency does not bind public relations to a particular place or time, nor does it demand that public relations history be limited to those efforts that demonstrate access to and masterful integration with the established systems of the societies in which they operate. By emphasizing strategic intent and human agency, we offer a globally applicable standard for identifying public relations in the past.

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