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Edward L. Bernays Biography

Edward Bernays (November 22, 1891 - March 9, 1995) is regarded by many as the "father of public relations," although some people believe that title properly belongs to some other early PR practitioner, such as Ivy Lee.

Born in Vienna, Bernays was a nephew of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, and his public relations efforts helped popularize Freud's theories in the United States. Bernays also pioneered the PR industry's use of psychology and other social sciences to design its public persuasion campaigns. "If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, it is now possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it," Bernays argued. He called this scientific technique of opinion molding the "engineering of consent."

One of Bernays's favorite techniques for manipulating public opinion was the indirect use of "third party authorities" to plead for his clients' causes. "If you can influence the leaders, either with or without their conscious cooperation, you automatically influence the group which they sway," he said. In order to promote sales of bacon, for example, he conducted a survey of physicians and reported their recommendation that people eat hearty breakfasts. He sent the results of the survey to 5,000 physicians, along with publicity touting bacon and eggs as a hearty breakfast.

Bernays's clients included President Calvin Coolidge, Procter & Gamble, CBS, the American Tobacco Company, General Electric, Dodge Motors, and the fluoridationists of the Public Health Service. Beyond his contributions to these famous and powerful clients, Bernays revolutionized public relations by combining traditional press agency with the techniques of psychology and sociology to create what one writer has called "the science of ballyhoo."

PR industry historian Scott Cutlip describes Bernays as "perhaps public relations' most fabulous and fascinating individual, a man who was bright, articulate to excess, and most of all, an innovative thinker and philosopher of this vocation that was in its infancy when he opened his office in New York in June 1919." Much of Bernays's reputation today stems from his persistent public relations campaign to build his own reputation as "America's No. 1 Publicist." During his active years, many of his peers in the industry were offended by Bernays's continuous self-promotion. According to Cutlip, "Bernays was a brilliant person who had a spectacular career, but, to use an old-fashioned word, he was a braggart."

"When a person would first meet Bernays," says Cutlip, "it would not be long until Uncle Sigmund would be brought into the conversation. His relationship with Freud was always in the forefront of his thinking and his counseling." According to Irwin Ross, another writer, "Bernays liked to think of himself as a kind of psychoanalyst to troubled corporations." In the early 1920s, Bernays arranged for the US publication of an English-language translation of Freud's General Introduction to Psychoanalysis. In addition to publicizing Freud's ideas, Bernays used his association with Freud to establish his own reputation as a thinker and theorist—a reputation that was further enhanced when Bernays authored several landmark texts of his own, most notably *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923, ISBN 0871409755), *Propaganda* (1928, ISBN 080461511X) and "The Engineering of Consent" in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (March 1947).

Bernays defined the profession of "counsel on public relations" as a "practicing social scientist" whose "competence is like that of the industrial engineer, the management engineer, or the investment counselor in their respective fields." To assist clients, PR counselors used "understanding of the behavioral sciences and applying them—sociology, social psychology, anthropology, history, etc." In *Propaganda*, his most important book, Bernays argued that the scientific manipulation of public opinion was necessary to overcome chaos and conflict in society:

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. ... We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in

which our democratic society is organized. Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society. ... In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons ... who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind.

Bernays's celebration of propaganda helped define public relations, but it didn't win the industry many friends. In a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt, Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter described Bernays and Ivy Lee as "professional poisoners of the public mind, exploiters of foolishness, fanaticism and self-interest." And history itself showed the flaw in Bernays's claim that "manipulation of the masses" is natural and necessary in a democratic society. The fascist rise to power in Germany demonstrated that propaganda could be used to subvert democracy as easily as it could be used to "resolve conflict."

In his autobiography, titled Biography of an Idea, Bernays recalls a dinner at his home in 1933 where

Karl von Weigand, foreign correspondent of the Hearst newspapers, an old hand at interpreting Europe and just returned from Germany, was telling us about Goebbels and his propaganda plans to consolidate Nazi power. Goebbels had shown Weigand his propaganda library, the best Weigand had ever seen. Goebbels, said Weigand, was using my book Crystallizing Public Opinion as a basis for his destructive campaign against the Jews of Germany. This shocked me. ... Obviously the attack on the Jews of Germany was no emotional outburst of the Nazis, but a deliberate, planned campaign. Bernays is held in high regard even today, and was even named as one of the 1000 most influential people of all time.

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