



PHOTOGRAPHER: NICK MCGOWAN-LOWE

Discovering the history of PR

In her new book, Jacquie L'Etang sheds an historical light on the British PR industry in the 20th century. Gro Elin Hansen reports

WHEN I started working for the IPR, I imagined PR was a new profession. 'New' in the sense of 20 years. Although I'd studied history at university, I had no idea about the history of this particular industry. When I talked to practitioners, a confusing picture emerged. No, it wasn't as young as 20 years, some would say, it's actually 30 years old. Totally wrong, said others, PR is far older than that, at least 60 years. In her new book *Public Relations in Britain – a history of professional practice in the 20th century*, Jacquie L'Etang seeks to address this confusion.

"I was curious. I didn't know anything about the history of public relations in the UK. There was nothing I could refer to. So I had to start from scratch," says Jacquie. It proved an enormous task and it did take more than a decade to complete. It started in 1991 with a couple of pilot interviews, and following the 1996 publication of the provocative *Critical Perspectives in Public Relations*, it became Jacquie's full-time project. A fellow of the IPR and a lecturer and course director at the MSc in Public Relations at University of Stirling in Scotland, Jacquie interviewed almost 70 key figures, some of whom had been

active since the Second World War. She describes the book as narrative in its style "The book is a story – it's not a dry academic account," Jacquie says.

The research took her – surprisingly, according to herself – back to the 1920s, when the public relations concept was frequently discussed in the journal *Public Administration*. The journal was published by the Institute of Public Administration, an independent organisation focusing on public sector management and issues such as 'external and internal intelligence' – today better known as issues management.

The public sector dominated the PR profession before the Second World War, with a strong focus on information about public health and democratisation. "There was a heavy emphasis on community relations. Public responsibility and public service was the top priority for the practitioners," explains Jacquie. One of the off-springs was the British Documentary Movement, in which film-makers and practitioners together sought to create an 'informed and reasoned public opinion' by producing documentaries about social issues. Fearing the current international tension and revolutionary ideas, the aim was to

'educate the masses'.

During the war, the Ministry of Information (MoI) was established, dealing with specific propaganda issues of concern to war-time Britain. In the beginning, the MoI was criticised for being a 'slow-motion, muddling machine...a warmed-up corpse...staffed with nearly 100 people...what on earth are they doing?' was the familiar refrain. "Many distrusted the MoI press officers for not being capable of understanding the subtle intelligence needed to attack the enemy," says Jacquie. After the war, the MoI was closed down, not without a debate though. "It did a good job, but many didn't like the idea of having a Ministry of Information in peacetime – it seemed a bit 'un-English' and didn't quite fit with the democratic ideals."

PR consultancies were rare until the 1950s. Prior to that, some of the first private sector PR consultants had sprung out of the advertising industry. "Often advertising agencies would have a PR consultant as well, it was seen as a cheaper version of publicity. Many of those consultants were either advertising men (women in PR were a rarity), former journalists or ex-Army types who had taken the leap into PR."

The post-war years were filled with communication opportunities for both public and private PROs. "Consumerism was on the rise. There was a great need to inform citizens about their legal rights in the new welfare state and to get their feedback," explains Jacquie. She discovered how market research became a crucial tool to find out 'what the masses thought and (dis-)liked' "Sadly the PR industry gave this tool away to market researchers and marketers, instead of taking ownership of it themselves. One can't help but wonder where PR would be today if the industry hadn't given it away?"

The launch of broadcasting in the 1950s and the de-/renationalisation of business, gave way to more PR activities and organised lobbying by special interest groups. Equally, de-colonisation of the former British colonies and increased business involvement with the European Community all required PR support. The expansion of PR initiatives meant new entrants were making their way into the profession. "The pre-war generation didn't take too kindly to the new group of practitioners. I sensed a certain disregard when I did my interviews. They had tried to be restrictive of who could enter, but they couldn't define the term 'publicist' in comparison to 'PRO'," says Jacquie. "In many ways, it's similar to the on-going debate on the distinction between practitioners with a formal PR degree and those without."

The critics of the new entrants were, amongst many, some of the founders of the Institute of Public Relations. The IPR was established in 1948 and by 1953 it had 376 members. In 1990, the figure was 2910 and today it stands at 8,000 members. In the early days, PR consultants could not join the IPR – partly because there were so few of them, as well as a lack of recognition of their role. In 1954, Rene Elvin of Crawfords Public Relations complained that PR in the UK had 'not yet acquired the full status of advisers to management which they enjoy in the United States, where they have contributed to the startling development and efficiency of industry'. The findings of last year's IPR/DTI report on best practice in the UK, confirms that this is still an issue, although improving. The big expansion of PR consultancies came in the 1960s, when business managers realised it was a cheap way of gaining media coverage compared to advertising.

Already in the 1950s and 1960s the tension between journalists and PROs was evident, with the former criticising the PR industry for incompetence, lack

of ethics and an over-reliance on lavish hospitality. There was even a Society for the Discouragement of Public Relations! The 'poacher turned gamekeeper' was as common a career move as it is today – and with it followed the criticism that 'anyone can work in PR'. Jacquie admits that the question of whether PR is a profession is a debatable one, especially among sociologists. "We use the phrase 'PR profession' constantly, but in strict sociological terms, PR is *not* a profession. Anyone can practice PR today – the skills are not exclusive and there is no real entrance barrier," she argues.

Over the years, there have been several unsuccessful attempts to impose more rigorous systems of entry by educational qualifications. "The emphasis on personal qualities has distracted the PR industry from determining the knowledge base required to monopolise the practice," says Jacquie. When concluding her book, the key story she was left with was that of an industry which has failed to professionalise. In her view, none of the professional bodies has been able to ascertain any sort of control of the practice. It's been difficult to establish a clear jurisdiction and the reluctance to enforce educational standards and regulatory frameworks have meant that it has been impossible to distinguish between members and non-members in terms of the quality of service on offer. Hopefully the history of PR in the 21st century will be of an industry that is *also* a profession. *



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Meticulous and compelling

Jacquie L'Etang

Public relations in Britain: A History of Professional Practice in the 20th Century

Lawrence Earlbaum Associates (2004)

IN this meticulously researched history, Jacquie L'Etang has sought to do two things. First, to provide a chronicle of the development of PR, concentrating on its roots in war-time and inter-war propaganda and to show the pivotal role of local government in the growth of practice. Second, to express a deep, yet partially convincing pessimism on the barriers that public relations needs to overcome if it is to assert itself as a professional occupation.

In her first aim, L'Etang has succeeded admirably, not least because she uses the detailed account of British public relations' earlier years to refute the idea, so often implied in American writing, that there is a standard model, encompassed in stunts and propaganda that kicks off development. The amount of research that has gone into this work is considerable. *Public Relations in Britain* is not a snapshot – it's a definitive history.

In her second aim, in which she seeks to gauge public relations' status as a profession, L'Etang is much more uncertain. She is also hard-pressed to find any convincing move towards the adoption of a deontologically-formulated ethical code that could be regulated by the IPR.

The other major source of pessimism is the failure of the IPR to press home the demonstration of relevant professional knowledge by applicants for membership. There is also one major omission, namely the examination of evaluation. It scarcely receives a mention, save for the PRCA's early outlawing of payment by results.

That said, *Public Relations in Britain* should have multiple copies in university, consultancy and organisation libraries. The author is to be commended for her invitation to media sociologists to eschew their disparaging treatment of PR and to join in the debate as to its future as a profession. It will become a standard reference and deservedly so.

This review was written by our dear colleague, Alan Rawel, IPR Head of Education. Alan sadly died last month after a battle with cancer. Typically of Alan, he wrote the review although he was ill, and we think it's appropriate to use it in its entirety, while paying our tribute to Alan. To read his obituary, turn to page 9.