# UNIT 12 : PUBLIC RELATIONS & SOCIETY

## UNIT STRUCTURE

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## 12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- understand the need underlying Public Relations as a social practice and its emergence
- describe the concepts employed in the realm of Public Relations
- know Public Relations is related to the Public Opinion, Journalism, Economy, Media, and ultimately, Society
- explain the methods underpinning Public Relations, and it's relation to other disciplines such as Sociology and Psychology

## 12.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit will introduce you to the concept, history, practice, and relevance of Public Relations (PR) in society. Special attention will be given to the relationship between PR and other key facets of society such as public opinion, truth in media, the creation of consensus, and factors that underlie the collective behavior of individuals which PR seeks to control.

A large part of PR, it would seem, is formed by narrative building. Or in other words, the telling of a story. The story in question is crafted in such a way that it has a certain posture to it, whereby it appeals to certain individuals, a group of people, or both, for whom the story is meant to influence. We will see how this form of narrative building with a certain aim in mind actually goes into the creation (and maintainance) of social relationships which is the ultimate goal of PR.

## 12.3 CONCEPT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

The common sense notion that is invoked when one hears the words '*Public'* and '*Relations*' together, may be of a person that serves people in the manner that a waiter, a receptionist, or a public speaker would. A person who provides a certain kind of service to foster relations whereby the said service can be forwarded. That is one way to think about it, in terms of relating to people and providing a service. But, as has been hinted earlier, PR generally involves another element, apart from the *building of relations* and *providing a service* (material or immaterial), and that is *publicity*.

We may look into each of those key words (for eg. Publicity) to have an understanding of what PR generally deals with. Another way to understand what it is, is by looking at how it works. But before we go into looking at these aspects, it would be more lucid if we have a general working definition of PR.

According to the Institute of Public Relations, United Kingdom (2003), PR is " *[…] the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and understanding between an organisation and its publics."*
So from this definition, we can infer as to the type of endeavor that PR is supposed to be. Some of those key characteristics of this endeavor are –

- That it is dynamic, that is it serves to have a continual effort being made
- The effort is directed and deliberated with certain aims in mind
- It is in most cases a bilateral engagement, between an organization and a part of the public

## 12.4 A BRIEF HISTORY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

PR is not a phenomenon of the modern era. Efforts to influence the perception of the larger crowd have been observed throughout history, especially those relating to propaganda, politics and state. But the discipline as such became more crystallized with the work of Edward L. Bernay, sometimes also called the Father of Public Relations.

**LET US KNOW**
**Edward L. Bernay**



Sigmund Freud, who pioneered the study and understanding, of the subconscious and unconscious forces of the mind, stated that there were primitive and aggressive sexual forces deep in the psyche of human beings. These were seen by him as a means to control the human subject, which otherwise, when left unchecked, could lead to chaos and the destabilization of society in general.

Edward L. Bernay, Freud's nephew, is the first person to take his uncle's theories and knowledge to manipulate the masses towards achieving a certain end. By satisfying people's inner desires, one becomes happy and docile, and hence control becomes a possibility. This realization has led to the successful campaign to sell cigarettes to a female demographic in the post-World War Two era in the United States of America. Up until then, cigarettes had been a product which is usually targeted to males. Bernay achieved this by subconsciously linking the cigarette smoking with the notion of liberty for women, which at the time was an emerging social phenomenon.

Thus, we see that the history of PR is largely linked to the rise of *consumerism* and *advertising* in the early 20th century, although PR in a more amorphous form had been utilized in the pre-World War Two era especially in the efforts of Nation States to foster domestic support for War efforts through the use of Propaganda.

## 12.5 CONCEPTS AND PROCESS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

I t has been seen that there aren't any hard and fast concepts that work like an exact mechanism for PR. But, certain few concepts are utilized in the process of carrying it out.

In a very general sense, the process entails the following –

- A survey of the context that is the internal and external environment. We mean by this the situation inside of the PR organization, and that of the Audience, Public that it is trying to reach out to. The perception of the PR organization of itself and how the public may perceive it is of vital importance for any degree of success in carrying out the work. In a similar fashion, the organization's understanding of the target demographic is of course vital and obvious.
- Setting clear objectives – that is, managing within the bounds of a limited budget, gauging and forecasting on the desired response from the target demographic, choosing the appropriate media for the work, and having the right story or message to carry the PR campaign out.

Besides these process, there are a few concepts that may apply to any general PR campaign-

- News Worthy Factor – looking for elements in the PR campaign that is appealing to the public, hence news worthy.
- Commercial Messaging – by stating the message, regarding a particular product/idea that the PR organization wants to sell, in a roundabout way (rather than directly) demonstrating the efficacy of the product, thereby improving the chances of it being sold.
- Media Targeting – choosing the right media that suits your PR campaign for maximum and effective exposure.
- Audience Targeting – tailoring the PR campaign in such a way as to increase its appeal to the target demographic. This will work hand in hand with media targeting.

## 12.6 PUBLIC RELATIONS AND SOCIETY

There is another activity which most people confuse with PR, and that is advertising. While it is not true, one can see the similarities between the two. But it would serve us well in understanding that advertising may be seen as a subset of PR, the difference being that advertising is geared

more towards an economic bent, that is the selling of a particular product or idea.

By extension, we can see that PR is related to Publicity as well. The deliberate and periodic propagation of a certain image to the public so as to create an impression in the minds of people is very much an exercise in PR, without the necessity or goal of ultimately buying or selling. It would seem that a big part of PR is ultimately geared towards the selling of a certain kind of idea/product to a certain target demographic. That idea/product may be of the organization that is carrying out the PR, or it may be of a person or groups that the PR in question is working for. Thus, we see these characteristics that cross distinct disciplines, practices, and approaches –

- Being different (i.e. a sense of competitiveness is assumed to be a requirement for the success of the said campaign)
- Fostering social relationships (between the PR organization and the Public) for the sake of pushing an idea/product via those relations.
- Economic activity and political posturing (as seen in scenarios where a PR firm is hired to optimize the public image of a company that is lacking in funds for advertising and that has a poor image in the public.)

One may ask, why the need for PR? Basically PR as an agent in social action comes into being when **a**) a demand or potential in the target demographic exists, **b**) the need of an individual, group or organization to put forward a certain idea or product, **c**) the problem of connecting the first two together in a way that the demand or potential (as stated in **a**) is met or satisfied by the idea/product (as stated in **b**) by the creation of favorable relationships between them.

The bigger point however is to create a favorable image and tenable relationships between the PR agency and the target population. This is one of the main drives behind a social phenomenon which we know as Consumerism, which is the consumption of goods and services which need not necessarily be life necessities but rather luxuries, and to do so in ways that allude and affirm to one's status and socioeconomic standing.

Consumerism relies largely on this invisible relationship that people have with corporates, whereby certain brands compete for the market share.



**ACTIVITY 1.**

What would cost more: Advertising for a Product, or having a PR team create buzz for it?

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**ACTIVITY 2.**

Think about this statement: No Publicity is bad publicity!

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## 12.7 JOURNALISM, PUBLIC RELATIONS, AND PUBLIC OPINION

When one is confronted with the question of what journalism is and ought to be, it becomes notably clear that the engagement with truth is

one important aspect to it. There are other aspects as well, such as the need to have a certain immunity and isolation from outside influence on the process of attaining this perceived truth. In brief, we may say that journalism is the pursuit of truth and its eventual presentation, without any outside influences that may subvert or modify that truth.

This statement, “News is something somebody, somewhere doesn’t want printed. All the rest is advertising.”, by The Northcliffe Doctrine, point to one crucial ground reality about the nature of journalism and news-making, that is the information that we receive from various channels of the media are by and large shaped and sized to the visions of particular interests. Do journalists really present their stories as they are, or do they compromise with the needs and requirements of the news organizations for whom they work? This is where the question of PR in the shaping of *public opinion* comes into the picture

Journalism, in its essence, is today largely supplanted by the work of PR. Stories or information are usually influenced by individual or corporate interests to the point that public opinion is more or less in line with the narrative of the organization that those interests represent. One of the reason why this occurs can be attributed to the nature of the market in particular, and capitalism at large. PR organizations handling such information get paid more and produce more output that is readily churned out through privileged channels, in contrast to the more traditional approach to journalistic practice.

However, it would be naïve to assume that true journalism does not utilize PR. In the pursuit of information that is more difficult to receive, such as those for high ranking individuals, or institutions, journalists may refer to the respective intermediaries of such individuals or organizations to get desired information. Many a times, those intermediaries happen to be PR organizations managing the public image of the said personalities. Also, it would be worthy to note that in the modern era, journalism has largely been replaced by information that is provided by PR organizations.



**ACTIVITY 3**

Look at any newspaper, and try to see the ratio of advertisements to that of news.

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## 12.8 PUBLIC RELATIONS AND SOCIOLOGY

An interesting question one may ask is, what is the relationship between PR, and the discipline of Sociology. We can gauge this question only after we have a general understanding about what Sociology is or what it aims to do. Bearing that in mind, for our present purpose, let us have at least one general understanding of what Sociology is. According to Sociologist Michael Burawoy (b. 1947) Sociology is like a mirror set before the social context, where we can look at ourselves in relation to our society.

With that understanding in mind, do we see the role of public relations in the context of our immediate society? Public Relations then would seem like a form of Weberian social action, *Instrumental Rational Action* to be precise. We can also look at it from the Durkheimian perspective, whereby PR serves the *functionalist* role of bringing about social integration and consensus, albeit that the nature of the consensus is based on the ruling class' vision for society, which may not be very egalitarian or necessarily the views of the public as it is. The opposite case may also be true, whereby the *conflict perspective* of a Marxist persuasion shows that narratives provided by competing PR agencies with definite ideological stances could be in opposition to other groups in society.

In any case, we can see the sociological relevance of PR and how it's understanding can lead to a more informed utilization of this form of institution or social action. PR as an approach to addressing the problems,

which sociology tries to understand and deal with, could also borrow from the latter's knowledge and methodology for a more effective engagement with the public. This understanding of PR in relation to society could also be understood when one considers the questions that are ethical in nature.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q1.** Who is known as the 'Father of Public Relations'?

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**Q2.** What is meant by 'audience targeting'?

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**Q3.** What are the elements that constitute PR?

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## 12.9 LET US SUM UP

- Public Relations as a discipline has emerged as a phenomenon that is characteristic of a post WW2 society, although it has existed in some form or the other previously.
- It has been influenced deeply by Freud's theories about the unconscious mind and has been expounded upon practically by Edward L. Bernay who crystallized the discipline.
- The processes and concepts employed in PR largely involve an understanding of the organization that heads the PR endeavor and that of the target demographic that it is working to influence. Ultimately, it is about the creation of favorable relationships between a client and the target demographic.
- PR has many implications on society. It has been shown to have economic, social, and political implications as seen in the example of *consumerism, journalism,* and *public opinion.*

- PR has also been understood as a form of social action that serves a functional role. That role may be seen from the perspective of a competing society as well.
- All in all, when utilized in an ethical way, it could prove to be an effective way towards a better society.



## 12.10 FURTHER READING

1. A damas, B.N. & R.A. Sydue; (2001); Sociological Theory ; Pine Ferze Press.
2. Journalism – A Very Short Introduction (Oxford); (2005); Oxford University Press.
3. Theaker, Alison. (2004), The Public Relations Handbook; Routledge by Alison Theaker (available on Library Genesis)
4. Yaverbaum, E & Benun, I, (2007); Public Relations for Dummies; for centuries.

## 12.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Ans to Q No 1:** Edward L. Bernay

**Ans to Q No2:** Audience Targeting refers to the process of tailoring the PR campaign in a way so as to increase its appeal to the target consumers

**Ans to Q No 3:** Building of relations, Providing a service, Publicity.



## 12.12 MODEL QUESTIONS

**Short Questions** (Answer each question in about 150 words)

**Q1.** What is meant by public relations?

**Q2.** Define consumerism.

**Long Questions** (Answer each question within 300-500 words)

**Q1.** Briefly highlight the Northcliffe Doctrine.

**Q2.** Briefly discuss the relationship between PR and Sociology.