

EVALUATING PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A PROFESSION
AND LICENSING AS A PROPOSED SOLUTION TO THE
APR CREDENTIAL

by

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Thomas Bivins

The approaching 50th anniversary of the Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) credential highlights the debate over licensing for public relations practitioners. As this thesis will show, the current system of credentialing fails to effectively regulate the practice, and public relations lacks the exclusivity and moral obligation needed to professionalize. While many critics of the current APR credential are proponents of licensing, there is dispute as to whether or not public relations could effectively become a licensed profession. The dispute, more broadly defined, inherently lies in determining whether or not public relations is, in fact, a profession.

A Profession is defined in the most classical sense of the term, and it should not be confused with modern-day adaptations that complicate its use in the vernacular. In the most general sense, a profession distinguishes itself from an occupation by offering a technical skill, acquired by an exclusive group of practitioners through extensive training, that provides an indisputable need to

society. Examples of professions, in this sense, include law, medicine, and engineering.

This thesis evaluates public relations as a profession and works to determine whether or not licensing is a feasible alternative to the APR credential. It defines the prerequisites of a profession, and it evaluates public relations accordingly. It explores public relations' early prophecies that romanticized an autonomous profession intended to serve the public interest, and it traces the decline of professionalization throughout the 20th century. Ultimately, this thesis argues that the public relations fails to fulfill the requirements of a profession and that licensing, consequently, is not an effective solution.

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Introduction

Occupations expediently adopt professional norms in attempt to attain the prestige and income of established professions. As a growing number of occupations claim professional status by crafting professional societies, adopting elaborate codes of ethics, and implementing credentialing programs, the term *profession* loses its staying power in the vernacular.¹ Because there is no single, legal definition in the United States, the lay public, academics, and even professional groups themselves widely dispute the exact parameters that constitute a profession. The most conservative definitions, however, commonly require two indisputable characteristics: A profession requires exclusive technical competence based on systematic knowledge acquired through extensive training, and it serves a moral obligation to society as defined by the service ideal.²

The service ideal is the crux around which the moral claim to a professional status revolves. It places the client's interests over commercial profit and measures the claim of professionalism based on the degree to which practitioners contribute maximally to society.³ Professionals gain exclusivity and respect through society's recognition of the service ideal, and licensing and codes of conduct work to uphold its moral obligations.⁴

¹ Wilensky, Harold L. "The Professionalization of Everone?" *American Journal of Sociology*, volume 70, 140-141

² *Ibid*

³ *Ibid*

⁴ *Ibid*

As occupations increasingly adopt professional norms, discerning established professions from occupations becomes challenging. In “The Professionalization of Everyone,” Harold Wilensky proposes criteria for professionalization that differentiates established professions from mere occupations seeking a professional status. Wilensky suggests a sequence of five events over the course of professionalization that is typical to established professions:⁵

1. An obvious first step is to start doing full time the thing that needs doing... Professional practitioners come of necessity.
2. The question of training soon arises... if training schools do not *begin* within universities, they always eventually seek contact with universities, and there is a steady development of standard terms of study, academic degrees, and research programs to expand the base of knowledge.
3. Those pushing for prescribed training and the first ones to go through it combine to form a professional association... All this is accompanied by a campaign to separate the competent from the incompetent.
4. There will be persistent political agitation in order to win support of law for the protection of the job territory and its sustaining code of ethics.
5. Eventually rules to eliminate the unqualified and unscrupulous, rules to reduce internal competition, and rules to protect clients and emphasize the service ideal will be embodied in a formal code of ethics.

Wilensky asserts that occupations that expediently adopt professional norms, “will adopt new titles, announce elaborate codes of ethics, or set up organizations on a national level long before an institutional and technical base has been formed.”⁶ In order to determine whether or not an occupation is capable of becoming an established profession, and whether or not implementing licensing regulations would improve the quality of the practice, the occupation’s exclusive technical competence and service ideal must first be established.

⁵ *Ibid*

⁶ *Ibid*

This thesis evaluates public relations as a profession to determine if licensing is a feasible alternative to the APR credential. By applying Wilensky's framework, it assesses whether the function of the practice is capable of becoming an established profession or if it is merely an occupation seeking professionalization. It examines public relations' history, discusses the ways in which events throughout the 20th century changed its path to professionalization, and shows how the practice compromised its technical competence and service ideal in order to increase its economic utility. Ultimately, it evaluates the current status of public relations today and assesses the debate over licensing as a proposed means to increasing professionalism and regulating the practice. This thesis will argue that public relations falls short of being an established profession and that licensing, consequently, is not an effective solution to the APR credential.

Early Prophecies of a Profession

Industrialization changed the face of American society and created a need for communication that would serve a democratic function. Between 1875 and 1900, industrialization doubled the population, expanded urban cities, created rail and wire communications, and allowed for the development of mass media.⁷ This unprecedented growth resulted in powerful monopolies, concentrated wealth, and poor labor conditions that provoked a new wave of protest among the American public.⁸ The turn of the century sparked a new age of journalists, muckrakers, who moved away from sensationalism and focused on providing truthful information aimed at social reform.⁹ Muckraking sought to expose the dangers of big business and government in order to promote social justice, and the movement championed reform in the nation's food and drug laws, railroad legislation, and trust busting.¹⁰ The success of the muckraking movement increased awareness of the corruption between government and big business, and it evidenced the public's desire for truthful and accurate information.

The Birth of Public Relations: 20th century changes in communication

In line with Wilensky's framework, public relations emerged from a need to court public opinion and provide communication between the growing business sector and the American public. Catalyzed by the muckraking movement, the new

⁷ "City Life in the Late 19th Century." Library of Congress.

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ "Muckrakers." Independence Hall Association.

¹⁰ Cutlip, Scott. "The Unseen Power: A History." Lawrence Erlbaum Associates." 1994.

wave of protest and reform brought about political changes in the early 20th century that marked a momentous shift toward laissez-faire capitalism.¹¹ The shift disrupted the alliance between big business and government that historically afforded industries economic success, and it consequently required that businesses won public favor rather than manipulate government policy.¹² As Scott Cutlip asserts in his acclaimed history of public relations, “The Unseen Power: A History”:

The emergence of a popular national forum and its use by the muckrakers to expose the widespread abuses of power on the part of big business and government caused the institutions under public assault to turn to former newspapermen to tell their story to the public and rely less on their lawyers and lobbyists to “fix things”.¹³

The practice of public relations therefore emerged to provide businesses with a powerful communications tool to court public opinion in a way that would satisfy the public’s growing demand for truth and accuracy in information.

Unlike earlier forms of press agency, the need for public relations also offered the prospect of the technical competence and the service ideal required of a profession. Before the turn of the 20th century, press agency largely dominated business communication and publicity. The practice aims to attract attention rather than to gain understanding, and it is commonly associated with staged events, publicity stunts, spinning, and hype.¹⁴ As Cutlip identifies, the birth of

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ Daughtery, Emma. “Press Agency.” *The Encyclopedia of Public Relations*. 639-640

public relations proposed a democratic function that went beyond press agency's economic utility:

The social justification for public relations in a free society is to ethically and effectively plead the cause of a client or organization in the free-wheeling forum of public debate.¹⁵

In this sense, the public relations practitioner could contribute to the self-righting process of democracy by ensuring that every idea, individual, and institution has the right to be heard in the public forum. Early practitioners recognized the potential for public relations to evolve into a profession because of the unique democratic service it could provide. Influential practitioners sought to differentiate public relations from the earlier practice of press agency and worked to advocate for the technical competence and the service ideal needed to professionalize the practice.

The Publicity Bureau: A new need to court public opinion

The Publicity Bureau paved the way for public relations by evidencing the need for a new form of communication brought about by the changes in the 20th century. George Michaelis, Herbert Small, and Thomas Marvin founded The Publicity Bureau in 1900 and it is commonly accepted as the first predecessor of the public relations agency.¹⁶ The Publicity Bureau's work on behalf of the railroad industry in 1905-1906 exemplified the growing need for public relations. In the absence of an alliance between big business and government, the railroad industry faced threatening legislation at the turn of the 20th century. After failed attempts

¹⁵ *Supra 10*

¹⁶ *Supra 10*

at lobbying, the railroad industry commissioned The Publicity Bureau in a final attempt to court public opinion. Although The Publicity Bureau failed to do so and the legislation ultimately passed, the event nonetheless evidenced the new need for big business to win public favor in order to accomplish objectives that were once attainable by manipulating government.

The Publicity Bureau also set a precedent for the new wave of communication that boasted truthful information and sought to distance itself from press agency. The founders of the Publicity Bureau wanted to distinguish their work from press agency and outlined their guiding concepts in a letter signed by Herbert Small and addressed to President Eliot of Harvard:

The idea of publicity as we have learned to hold it... is entirely distinct from the idea either of advertising or of a press agency. In brief, it is the extension of the proposition that certain public institutions may properly hand to the newspapers certain statements as to the work they have done, or which they hope to do... the very fact that The Publicity Bureau had extended this idea so greatly makes its work very different from anything which has ever been attempted before. Publicity, as we conceive it, is not advertising in that it intends to deal only with such subjects as would be suitable and interesting for newspaper treatment.¹⁷

The Publicity Bureau set a precedent for a long history of public relations practitioners that would tirelessly try to rid the practice from its pejorative roots in press agency.

¹⁷ *Supra 10*

Ivy Lee: Declaration of principles

Regarded as one of the first and most influential pioneers of the practice, Ivy Lee's work offered the prospect of an established profession and began to define the emerging practice of public relations. Working in the nascent practice of public relations at the turn of the century, Lee was one of the first practitioners to prove the practice's success in shaping public opinion before the term public relations emerged.¹⁸ Some of his earliest and most successful campaigns worked on behalf of the railroad industry and the Rockefellers to overcome the distrust of big business that the muckraking era instilled into the public.¹⁹ Lee believed that the success of public relations in courting public opinion and impacting society was contingent upon gaining trust in the public and in the media.²⁰ Like the Publicity Bureau, Lee wanted to disassociate public relations from press agency and establish a new practice based on "Accuracy, Authenticity, and Interest."²¹ In defining the emerging practice of public relations, Lee issued a Declaration of Principles in 1906:

This is not a secret press bureau. All our work is done in the open. We aim to supply news. This is not an advertising agency; if you think any of our matter ought properly to go to your business office, do not use it. Our matter is accurate. Further details on any subject treated will be supplied promptly, and any editor will be assisted most cheerfully in verifying directly any statement of fact... In brief, our plan is, frankly, and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to supply to the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information

¹⁸ *Supra 10*

¹⁹ *Supra 10*

²⁰ *Supra 10*

²¹ *Supra 10*

concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about.²²

Lee's Declaration of Principles profoundly influenced the evolution of publicity into public relations. He envisioned a practice that would be composed of an exclusive, educated group of practitioners who would provide a democratic service to society. He saw a need for public relations practitioners to be broadly educated and attuned to the public opinion environment. He identified the growing demand for a practitioner who could serve as a buffer between big business and the press, and he thought that practitioners should have a prescribed experience and education in journalism.²³ He called for transparency in the practice and demanded that practitioners reveal their sources and withhold payments from the press. Rather than paying for information to be inserted into media, Lee stated that public relations is newsworthy and aims to "present topics of real interest so as to attract attention of both editors and readers- never sensational, never libelous, always accurate, accountable, and readable."²⁴

Ivy Lee pioneered a profession that would serve a democratic function by providing truthful and transparent communication between big business and the American public. He envisioned public relations practitioners as well-educated individuals with extensive training in journalism who possessed a skill set that could uniquely serve society. His Declaration of Principles served as a landmark in

²² Otis, Baskin. "Public Relations: The Profession and the Practice". *Brown & Benchmark publishers*. 1997.

²³ *Supra 22*

²⁴ *Supra 10*

the evolution of publicity into public relations, and the success of his work inspired a generation of practitioners to come.

Edward Bernays: Crusade for professionalization

Edward Bernays, “the father of public relations,” realized the powerful impact public relations could have on society and likened the practice’s technical competency to that of medicine or law. As the nephew of Sigmund Freud, Bernays understood the complex processes of the mind in a time before the accepted practice of psychology emerged.²⁵ Capitalizing on his unique insight into human desire and motivation, Bernays paradoxically worked to mask his uncle’s psychological findings. He realized that society could unconsciously become susceptible to wanting things it does not need by linking consumer goods to cultural desires. Labeling this practice as, “the engineering of consent,” Bernays proclaimed his ability to control human desire through invisible strategies that could engineer a new, contrived culture aimed at fulfilling the interests of his clients.²⁶ His book *Crystalizing Public Opinion* was the first to define the mature concept of public relations as interpreting the institution to the public and more importantly, interpreting the public to the institution’s executives.²⁷ Bernays orchestrated some of the most influential public relations campaigns throughout the 20th century that permeated American society and proved the practice’s ability in shaping public opinion. Some of his most famous campaigns successfully

²⁵ Sproule. “Propaganda and Democracy.” Cambridge University Press. 1997. 31

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷ *Ibid*

changed the taboo against women smoking in public, introduced new foods into the typical American breakfast, and shaped public opinion around new government policies.²⁸

In line with Wilensky's ideal, Bernays advocated for formal education and licensing in order to define public relations' service ideal, maintain the exclusivity of the practice, and reach the status of an established profession. In an article published in the *Public Relations Quarterly*, "Viewpoint: Let there Be Licensing," Bernays suggests the need for practitioners to possess a profound technical competency:

Academic training of the social sciences, of psychology, social psychology, sociology, economic, and history are basic to rendering sound advice to client or in public relations. He or she who does not that academic knowledge would be as dangerous to a client or employer's welfare as a physician who knew how to use surgical instruments but had no knowledge of anatomy.²⁹

He argues that the lack of a formal education program fails to restrict the technical competency of the profession, and he advocates for a standardized liberal arts degree with two years study of the social sciences that would allow practitioners to attain a degree in public relations.³⁰ To restrict the technical competency of the practice and maintain exclusivity among its formal practitioners, Bernays identifies licensing as an imperative complement to education and professionalization. He argues that public relations needs to implement a legal

²⁸ Meyers, Bill. "Edward Bernays, 'Father of Public Relations' And Leader in Opinion Making, Dies at 103." *New York Times*.

²⁹ Bernays, Edward. "Viewpoint: Let There Be Licensing." *Public Relations Quarterly*.

³⁰ *Ibid*

definition that would prevent the incompetent from eroding the service ideal of the practice:

Already the term is a pejorative one in many quarters due to its exploitation by the ignorant and unscrupulous... People must get the two words, public relations, defined by law with licensing and registration of practitioners, as is the case with lawyers, medical doctors and other professionals.³¹

In many ways, Bernays' prophecy of public relations promised the possibility of growth into an established profession. Both Bernays and Lee envisioned an evolution of the practice based on a defined technical competency that would allow educated practitioners to fulfill the service ideal by providing the communication necessary to a democracy. The issue, however, lies in Wilensky's identification that occupations expediently adopt professional norms in search of prestige and income. Public relations failed to gain the trust of the American public and clearly define itself as a profession before seeking professionalization. Rather than working to define its technical competence and service ideal throughout the 20th century, even the greatest proponents of public relations, including Lee and Bernays themselves, compromised the practice's crux of professionalism in order to increase economic utility.

³¹ Bernays, Edward. "The Case for Licensing PR Practitioners." *Public Relations Quarterly*.

An Expedient Attempt at Professionalization

The evolution of public relations suffered under the weight of two unfortunate hands: the shadow of propaganda from two world wars, and a dark history of press agency that it was never able to escape. While public relations can serve as a powerful catalyst to social change, its function can prove just as dangerous as it can be beneficial in shaping public opinion. As the government awakened to the power of public relations, it called on the use of the practice to aid wartime efforts throughout the 20th century that would erode the service ideal and inhibit the trust of the American public. Other journalism disciplines easily transferred the burden of wartime propaganda onto nascent public relations by portraying the practice as a mere guise of press agency. This marginalization resulted in an expedient attempt at professionalization in order to differentiate the practice, but it did so before the technical competence and service ideal offered by the profession was recognized by the American public.

Wartime Propaganda: Lost trust in the American public

The timeline of the 20th century places the emerging practice of public relations against an ominous backdrop of two world wars and consequent turmoil that would persist throughout the time period. To win public sentiment in favor of the war effort, WWI gave rise to the Committee on Public Information (CPI) in 1917.³² Established two years before Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays would open

³² Heath, R.L. "The Dynamics of Change in Public Relations Practice." *Handbook of Public Relations*. Thousand Oaks Sage. 1992.

their public relations agencies, the CPI greatly complicated the definition of the emerging practice. The CPI saturated the American public with wartime propaganda aimed at creating enthusiasm for the war and enlisting public support against foreign attempts to undercut America's war aims.³³ Despite the unanimous agreement that the success of public relations was contingent upon disassociating itself from press agency, both Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays departed from their own prophecies in order to satisfy the needs of the American war effort.

While the CPI was formally disestablished by an act of Congress following the end of the war, the Office of War Information (OWI) during WWII paralleled similar effects that impaired the evolution of public relations into a profession. Following attempts of public relations practitioners to disassociate the practice from propaganda in the wake of WWI, the OWI only continued to complicate the evolution of public relations by creating more wartime propaganda.³⁴ Unlike advertising, public relations lacked a recognized function in society that allowed it to overcome the burden of wartime propaganda. While the War Advertising Council changed its name to the Advertising Council following WWII to "focus its efforts on peace and tolerance," public relations was unable to take effective measures in disassociating itself from the communication efforts, mostly propaganda, of WWI and WWII.³⁵

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) emerged in 1947 but was pre-emptively established before the public recognized the technical competency

³³ *Supra* 32

³⁴ *Supra* 32

³⁵ *Supra* 10

and service ideal of public relations. PRSA emerged only two years after WWII, and its consequent developments of professional norms came about in the midst of the Cold War and the political turmoil of the late 20th century.³⁶ As PRSA worked to develop a code of ethics during the 1950s, the government worked to form the US Information Agency, yet another propaganda powerhouse to aid in the Cold War.³⁷ When PRSA declared the modern definition of public relations in 1982, the practice was already plagued by a century of wartime propaganda and marginalization that impaired the American public from recognizing its value of a profession.

Marginalization of Public Relations: The rush to legitimacy

Throughout the 20th century, public relations practitioners compromised the technical competence and service ideal of the practice in order to aid American war efforts and increase economic utility. This departure from the crux of professionalization impaired public relations from establishing a definition that would bring exclusivity to the practice, and the service ideal it offered was eroded by publicists acting under the guise of public relations. The inability to define public relations also resulted in the marginalization of the practice by other journalism disciplines in order to place the burden of wartime propaganda on the nascent practice. Consequently, 20th century efforts to professionalize public relations can be seen as an attempt to expediently legitimize the practice before its technical competence or the service ideal was clearly established.

³⁶ *Supra* 32

³⁷ *Supra* 32

The evolution of public relations throughout the 20th century is in line with Wilensky's assertion that occupations will seek expedient adoption of professional norms in order to increase the legitimacy and prestige of the practice. Following wartime propaganda efforts, public distrust of information in general grew³⁸. The media sought to combat the effects of the war and regain trust in the American public by transferring the burden of propaganda onto the nascent practice of public relations. As Thomas Bivins asserts in his article "‘And so there developed a special profession’: The effect of early journalism codes and press criticism on the professionalization of public relations":

The confusion over terms and the blatant antagonism toward propaganda and publicity contributed to an environment in which any new attempt to redefine these practices was bound to meet with resistance... It was within this environment of confusion and antagonism that Edward Bernays began his crusade to professionalize public relations.³⁹

While Bernays renamed the practice of public relations and began a crusade to professionalization that aimed to overcome the effects of wartime propaganda, public relations failed to maintain the exclusivity needed to develop the technical competency and service ideal that Bernays envisioned. Bernays and other proponents of professionalization did win success in adopting professional norms throughout the 20th century: formal training programs for public relations practitioners were created, PRSA was established, and codes of ethics and

³⁸ *Supra* 22

³⁹ Bivins, Thomas. "‘And so there developed a special profession’: The effect of early journalism codes and press criticism on the professionalization of public relations."

credentialing systems came about by the end of the century.⁴⁰ However, the adoption of professional norms was brought about in an effort to overcome the marginalization of the practice and departed from the original need that lent public relations its democratic function. Public relations failed to establish the technical competency and the service ideal needed to reach the status of an established profession in the eyes of the American public.

⁴⁰ *Supra 10*

Is Public Relations a Profession?

While public relations' crusade for professionalization can be seen as an expedient attempt to legitimize the practice in the wake of marginalization, many proponents of the practice argue that it is, in fact, a profession. The dispute once again is traced back to an inherent dispute over what constitutes a profession and how it differentiates itself from an occupation.

The Dispute: Competing definitions of a profession

As discussed in the introduction, no single, legal definition exists for a profession. The lay public, academics, and professional groups themselves widely dispute what constitutes a profession. Betteke Van Ruler, a professor in the Department of Communication Science at the University of Amsterdam School of Communications Research, identifies a central problem in defining public relations as a profession: "Practitioners and scholars live in different worlds. Coherence in views on professionalism can be seen as a prerequisite for development of practice."⁴¹ As the growing trend of occupations wanting to professionalize increases, the lines of professionalism become increasingly blurred. While Wilensky proposes a definition of a profession that is commonly accepted among lay people and scholars alike, Van Ruler identifies four definitions of a profession that have complicated its use in the vernacular.⁴²

⁴¹ Van Ruler, Betteke. "Commentary: Professionals are from Venus, Scholars are from Mars." *Department of Communication Science, Amsterdam School of Communications Research*. 2005.

⁴² *Ibid*

1. Knowledge model
2. Status model
3. Competition model
4. Personality model

The knowledge model is the oldest model and the most commonly accepted. From this model, occupations seeking professional status have minimized the requirements that they see fit to professionalization. The status model is similar to the knowledge model in that it emphasizes a professional group that matures the practice into a professional state, but it measure the success of the profession on economic rather than social success. The competition and personality models are more commonly held views among occupations seeking professional status. They are commonly rejected by scholars because they focus solely on the output rather than on what a professional group requires: "The first two models emphasize the structure by which professionals themselves can develop their profession. The competition and personality models are aimed at the occupation itself and what is needed to satisfy the client."⁴³ Where occupations seek expedient professionalization in the absence of an adequately defined technical competence and social ideal, they fail to evolve beyond the limitations of the status model.⁴⁴

Van Ruler acknowledges the changing definitions of professions that have emerged and complicated the use of the term in the vernacular. Her descriptions explain the dispute over whether or not public relations is a profession in the modern day, and why practitioners advocate for its professional status as vehemently as scholars oppose it. Ultimately, however, she asserts:

⁴³ *Ibid*

⁴⁴ *Ibid*

In summary, for public relations to achieve professional status, there must be specialized education programs, a body of knowledge, community recognition, individual accountability, and commitment to abide by established codes that protect the public interest and spell out social responsibility.⁴⁵

Van Ruler's assertion recognizes the need for the professional job to demonstrate the technical competence and, most importantly, the service ideal. While there may be a general tendency for occupations to seek professional status, a remarkable few of the thousands of occupations in modern society attain it. According to Wilensky, "perhaps no more than thirty or forty occupations are fully professionalized."⁴⁶ Few occupations provide an obvious social function that covers the whole of society with services it needs to exist within a complex, social environment like law, medicine, or engineering. It is much harder to define a social function for a profession if the occupation itself cannot define it adequately, and society fails to discern it immediately.

Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, *profession* will continue to denote Wilensky's most classical definition that requires both the technical competence and the service ideal. Van Ruler acknowledges that the professionalization of an occupation can be seen as the interaction between two parties, "on the one hand you have practitioners, associations, and clients, and on the other hand, scholars."⁴⁷ Because professional status can only be attained through the whole of society's discernment of the service ideal, the other definitions discussed above are merely introduced as means to understanding why such a dispute exists.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*

⁴⁶ *Supra 1*

⁴⁷ *Supra 41*

Defining Professionalism within the Practice: Can the technical competence and the service ideal be clearly defined?

While this thesis shows that the expedient attempt at professionalization throughout the 20th century departed from the early prophecies of professionalism that public relations offered, it needs to determine the current social function of public relations. Proponents of public relations as a profession, and of licensing as an alternative to the APR credential, argue that public relations is an established profession. However, this thesis argues that the technical competence and the service ideal of public relations fail to meet the requirements of an established profession.

The Technical Competence: A vague body of human-relations knowledge

The technical competence of public relations is grounded in human-relations skills, and its body of knowledge is too vague and too broad to be revered as a profession in the eyes of the American public. As Wilensky asserts, “If the technical base of an occupation consists of a vocabulary that sounds familiar to every one, then the occupation will have difficulty claiming a monopoly of skill or even a roughly exclusive jurisdiction.”⁴⁸ Human-relations professions have only weak claims to technical competence and fail to maintain exclusivity because the lay public cannot recognize the need for a special competence in an area where the service does not appear to require expertise. Wilensky asserts that in most established professions, “the belief that the professions offer superior opportunity

⁴⁸ *Supra 1*

for service is widespread... the client is particularly vulnerable because he is both in trouble and ignorant of how to help himself out of it.”⁴⁹ In a large sense, society does not yet value the technical competence of public relations.

For public relations to reach a professional status, its technical competence must be clearly defined and offer society a service ideal that is easily discerned. Despite PRSA’s success in inculcating a standardized curricula in colleges and universities, the practice lacks a mandatory system of credentialing that requires practitioners to participate in a formal education program.⁵⁰ Consequently, in practice, public relations often fails to mandate the technical competency provided by its theoretical framework. In *Managing Public Relations* James Grunig and Todd Hunt state, “Public relations will not become a full-fledged profession until its practitioners approach their work as intellectuals... until theory building becomes a more prominent role, public relations will remain in a metaphysical state.”⁵¹ The inability of public relations to create autonomy among its practitioners throughout the 20th century has resulted in a large volume of practitioners who claim to practice public relations, and who have consequently eroded the practice’s technical competence.

The Service Ideal: A broad and un-recognized social function

The large volume of practitioners who claim to operate through the vague technical competence of public relations also serves to erode the practice’s service

⁴⁹ *Supra 1*

⁵⁰ *Supra 1*

⁵¹ Gruning, James; Todd, Hunt. *Managing Public Relations*. New York: Hilt, Rinehart and Winston.

ideal. Ethicist Michael Bayles builds on Wilensky's notion of the service ideal and shows why public relations faces issues in professionalization. As Bayles discusses, professions are supposed to have strong ethical standards that set them apart from other occupations and serve society as a whole. The professional is not motivated by a desire for compensation, but rather by a desire to provide a direct service to society: "The animating purpose of a profession is to contribute maximally and efficiently to human welfare, not desire for compensation."⁵² As discussed earlier, human-relations occupations struggle to provide an obvious social function that covers the whole of society with the services it needs to exist within a complex, social environment. Public relations practitioners may serve individuals, groups, or organizations, and the moral obligation to the client is not always placed over the practice's market orientation.⁵³

While the need for public relations arose from changes in the 20th century that required democratic communication between big business and the American public, the practice evolved far beyond its original social function. Bayles asserts that a profession such as public relations, "ideally serves the public interest by providing citizens with the information necessary to participate in a democratic society."⁵⁴ Early prophecies of public relations failed to define and restrict the practice before wartime propaganda and marginalization compromised the service ideal and placed economic utility over moral obligation. The crusade for professionalization throughout the 20th century adopted professional norms but

⁵² Bayles, Michael. "Media and Professionalism." 31-36

⁵³ *Ibid*

⁵⁴ *Ibid*

failed to elevate the practice to an established professional status recognized by society. As Wilensky asserts:

Many occupations will assert claims to professional status that find that the claims are honored by no one but themselves. I am inclined to place here occupations in which a market orientation is overwhelming- public relations, advertising, and funeral directing.⁵⁵

In short, the technical competence and service ideal of public relations fail to meet the requirements of an established profession. The technical competence is too vague to be defined as an exclusive profession, and the service ideal is focused too broadly on the marketplace rather than the client. Proponents of increasing the professionalization of public relations advocate for licensing as a means to regulating the exclusivity and moral obligation in order to help restrict the practice to its original democratic function.

⁵⁵ *Supra 1*

Licensing as a Proposed Alternative to the APR Credential

While this thesis argues that public relations falls short of being an established profession, the crusade to professionalization throughout the 20th century undoubtedly served to increase professionalization within the practice. The Institute for Public Relations Research and Education estimates that there are approximately 250,000- 300,000 people employed in public relations.⁵⁶ It is regarded as one of the fastest growing industries, and PRSA is the largest professional organization in the U.S.⁵⁷ The Public Relations Society of America sets forth the following definition for public relations: “Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.”⁵⁸ PRSA encompasses more than 21,000 members, and works to promote the professional development of the practice.⁵⁹

The PRSA maintains a body of knowledge, education programs, a code of ethics, and a system of credentialing to increase excellence and ethicality in public relations. PRSA maintains a “body of knowledge” of public relations that consists of scores of books on the profession.⁶⁰ To promote this body of knowledge, PRSA has attained success in accrediting a standardized curricula in colleges and universities.⁶¹ In October of 2000, PRSA also adopted a code of ethics to replace the original code of professional conduct. Created and maintained by the PRSA

⁵⁶ *Supra* 41

⁵⁷ *Supra* 24

⁵⁸ “About PRSA.” *Public Relations Society of America*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*

⁶⁰ *Ibid*

⁶¹ “PRSA Member Code of Ethics.” *Public Relations Society of America*.

Board of Ethics and Professional Standards, the code “sets out principles and guidelines built on core values. Fundamental values like advocacy, honesty, loyalty, professional development and objectivity structure ethical practice and interaction with clients and the public.”⁶² Together with the Universal Accreditation Board (UAB), PRSA administers the APR credential in an attempt to regulate the practice and adhere practitioners to its professional norms.

The APR Credential: An inefficient attempt at regulation

PRSA created the APR credential by partnering with other public relations agencies in a unified attempt at professionalization. In 1998, four professional associations formed the UAB to implement the APR credential and solidify their programs under the APR banner: “This new entity became the administrator of the voluntary certification program, bringing the groups together with the common goal of Accreditation.”⁶³ The UAB is made up of 21 board members representing eight participating organizations that span the practice of public relations in the various economic sectors.⁶⁴ The UAB’s responsibility is: “To grant Accreditation to professionals, develop and update the Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations in consultation with third-party psychometricians, and oversee the Accreditation process.”⁶⁵

Despite the prospect the APR credential offers in increasing the professionalization of public relations, few practitioners attain the credential or

⁶² *Ibid*

⁶³ “Accreditation in Public Relations.” *Public Relations Society of America*.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*

⁶⁵ *Ibid*

recognize its value. The PRSA website says there are four primary reasons why practitioners would want to earn their APR credential: because it is a recognized standard, it promotes lifelong learning, it serves as a career enhancement, and it is positive for the field of public relations.⁶⁶ However, the value of the credential continues to be questioned. The *Handbook of Global Public Relations* shows that, “In the US only a fraction of those who claim to be engaged in public relations work belong to one or both of the two major public relations organizations, and only a minority of practitioners seek to be accredited by either PRSA or IABC, which is regarded as a status of professionalism attained by meeting established standards and passing a series of examination.”⁶⁷

In recent years, the number of professionals taking the APR Examination has fallen. While the UAB continues to survey APR candidates and participating organizations’ membership, no one, clear answer explains the phenomenon.

According to results from the UAB survey:

Some have speculated that because the reengineered process is not restricted to two test periods a year (like the previous examination), practitioners feel no deadline pressures and can thus put off taking the Examination. Others cite personal factors, like financial costs and time. A prolonged economic downturn also may continue to play a role. Another frequently stated reason is that practitioners don’t see the APR being recognized among hiring authorities or the human resources community. Regardless of the possible reasons, there is concern among the UAB and its participating organizations that the credential is undervalued.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *Ibid*

⁶⁷ *Supra* 41

⁶⁸ “Accredited in Public Relations: Does it serve its purpose?” OPG Study.

The results of the study also show that public relations is negatively perceived by the public, contends with negative stereotypes about the profession, and is regarded as more of an art than a science. The results show that the number of PRSA members seeking the APR credential has declined from 25% in 1994 to 18% in 2012, and the credential is not seen as a good investment of time or money.⁶⁹ The researchers believe that one explanation for the results is that employers are not using APR as a hiring guide, and only 63% of employers said that APR has not influenced their hiring decisions.⁷⁰ The main issue concerning APR is that it is a voluntary practice that does not serve to adequately heighten the accountability of the public relations profession.

Licensing: An inherently flawed alternative to the APR credential

While the APR credential is clearly ineffective, the debate for licensing is inherently flawed because public relations does not fulfill the requirements of an established profession and a license would not increase professionalism within the practice. Licensing of the government requires some demonstration of a minimum degree of competency within a profession. The state usually creates a nongovernmental licensing board with political appointees, public members and members of the occupation to oversee the regulated occupations.⁷¹ The main benefits of licensing involve restricting entry into a profession and improving the quality of service.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*

⁷⁰ *Ibid*

⁷¹ Wright, David. "Enforcement Dilema: Voluntary Nature of Public Relations Codes." *Public Relations Review*. Volume 30, 13-20.

However, because public relations is not an established profession and does not focus on providing a service to an individual, licensing would not serve to increase professionalization within the practice.

According to Bayles, the chief function of licensing is to uphold the moral obligations of the profession and insure the service ideal. Building on the idea that professions offer a vital service to society in which the client's need is both indisputable and vulnerable, Bayles asserts: "The granting of a license and privilege in effect creates a trust for professionals to ensure that activities are performed in a manner that preserves and promotes values in society."⁷² Licenses serve established professions by directly pertaining to regulating the service ideal. Wilensky asserts that in the absence of a service ideal, a license no more elevates an occupation to the status of an established profession than the occupation's weak claim to professionalization itself. He argues that a license alone cannot serve to determine whether or not an occupation is a profession:

The first state licensure usually comes toward the end of the professionalization process, but the professions clearly cannot claim this is a unique feature of their development: for some time egg-graders have been licensed in Indiana, well-diggers in Maryland, horse-shoers in Illinois, plumbers and midwives in many places, notaries public everywhere.⁷³

Therefore, while licensing may lend yet one more professional norm to an occupation, it will not elevate a practice to the level of an established profession without a clear recognition of the service ideal that it upholds.

⁷² *Supra* 52

⁷³ *Supra* 1

Conclusions

As the 50th anniversary of the APR credential brings the regulation of public relations to the forefront of conversation, public relations must first work to define the technical competence and the service ideal of their profession before any lasting improvements can be made. In the absence of a clearly defined technical competence and service ideal, licensing will not prove an effective alternative to the APR credential. The technical competence and the service ideal of public relations are too broadly defined within the skills of human-relations, that the expertise of the public relations professional is unrecognized by society and excluding his practice would prove an impossible task. The most lasting improvements at regulating the practice of public relations, and any true strides towards reaching a professional status, will first necessarily come from defining the crux of professionalism within the industry- if one can even be defined.

While the 20th century gave rise to political changes that evidenced a need for public relations and the promise of the technical competence and the service ideal needed to professionalize, the practice departed from its original democratic function. Wartime propaganda and marginalization of the practice resulted in an expedient crusade to professionalization that came before society recognized public relations technical competence or service ideal. Despite early prophecies, public relations failed to maintain an exclusive group of practitioners armed with a technical competency that would serve society by creating a public forum for two-way communication between big business and the American government. By the time PRSA emerged and

implemented professional norms by the end of the 20th century, the practice of public relations had already evolved beyond its democratic function.

While modern day adaptations complicate the definition of a profession, the lay public, scholars, practitioners themselves must reach a congruent definition in order for public relations to be recognized as a profession in society. As long as practitioners remain proponents of the status definition, the declarations of public relations as a profession will never earn recognition by society. However, the evolution of public relations into an established profession rests on a clear definition of the technical competence and the service ideal. Until public relations can define a technical competence and a service ideal that contributes maximally to society, that serves an indisputable and vital need, and that earns recognition among all members of society, this thesis argues that public relations does not offer the possibility of evolving into an established profession.

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