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“Public Relations and the Progressive Surge, 1898-1917”

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I

In the early twentieth century, Americans were discovering all kinds of things. The progressive movement, deeply influencing both parties and led by men of the caliber of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, was throwing open exciting concepts of politics and of the relationships between politics and other aspects of living. Corporations, trade unions, farm organizations -- all were feeling their way to new structures.

The lanterns of change, of discovery and re-discovery, were lighting up every corner of American civilization. Duchamp's cubist nude zigzagged down the stairs at the New York Armory Show, while the recently founded National Association for the Advancement of Colored People proclaimed the startling doctrine that Negroes had a right to equality. In a whirl of freely flowing robes, Isadora Duncan revolutionized the dance, and announced, after the birth of her second illegitimate child, that marriage was an oppressive superfluity. Alfred Stieglitz freed photography from the daguerreotype, young Walter Lippmann was elected President of his college Socialist Club, Harvard founded a Men's League for Women's Suffrage and Vassar girls broke dates to picket in New York City's garment district.

All of these new ways of thinking and acting were trumpeted full-blast. But one of the most important things Americans were learning was coming into the national life with little discussion and even less fanfare. In the early 1900s, Americans were discovering an instrument which was to affect the national life almost as much as any other single factor -- the conscious and controlled use of publicity.

II

Of course there is nothing new -- there can hardly be anything new -- in the mere use of publicity. Moreover, publicity in the form of the press agent is at least as old as the medieval fair and it had long been in full flower in the United States.

Other men were even reaching for broader conceptions of mass persuasion and the discussions were confined to no one group. As early as 1827, the Reverend O. P. Hoyt emphasized "correct" public opinion as the safeguard of desirable institutions. As early as 1882, Lawyer Dorman Eaton was using the term public relations and using it to mean relations for the general good, in an address before the graduating class of Yale Law School.

The most striking of these earlier excursions was the speech which Hugh Smith, Rector of St. Peter's Church in New York City, made to the alumni of Columbia University in 1842. Pointing to the evils of the press agent, Smith insisted that public opinion would always be made by human beings whether or not they used publicity for a desirable purpose. Efforts to influence opinion, the Reverend continued, were entirely legitimate, provided only that they avoided the employment of falsehood, appeals to "prejudices" or "passions," and "the proscription of those who will not fall in with particular opinions and practices." There was even a touch of the most modern public relations techniques in the Rector's remarks. Opinion was often influenced, he commented, by the "power of association," and the association was more likely to be "*implied* than *expressed*" [the italics are his].

But whatever the discussions, most of them did not concern the conscious and controlled use of publicity and, when they did -- as in the case of the Reverend Smith -- they were vague theorizings. In nineteenth century America, the atmosphere was simply not congenial to a full-blown doctrine of mass persuasion. Methods of communication were too little developed, group relationships were too localized. And once the Civil War was over, a situation soon developed which militated directly against the emergence of any genuine doctrine of influencing the public mind.

Large-scale commerce and industry, shouldering aside agriculture, became dominant over the life of the nation and big business was committed to the proposition that the less the public knew of its operations, the better. Professor N. S. B. Gras, an expert in the history of American industry, believes that the secrecy policy traced back to the exclusiveness of the medieval guild. Whatever its origin, the police permeated American business thinking so thoroughly during the later nineteenth century that the greater the potential public interest in an industry, the more attention the firm was likely to give to secrecy. Of all the large-scale enterprises, the railroads were in most direct contact with the public. In 1917 the Railroad Editor of the *Cincinnati Enquirer* was scarcely exaggerating when he wrote: "It wasn't so many years ago that a newspaperman was as welcome in the office of a railway official as a secret service agent is in the cabin of a moonshiner. The reporter sent to ... run down a railroad story had to be an improved edition of Sherlock Holmes to get the facts in the case."

Except for minority groups, the public objected only sporadically to this secrecy. Not prying into business affairs was accepted as a part of the prevailing laissez faire. Demands for publicity were further lessened by the esteem, almost awe, in which the big businessman was held by large sections of the population. The "captain of industry" was the American glamour figure, to be excused his frailties as a later generation was to forgive movie stars their divorces. Was he not lacing the continent together with rails, bringing old hopes like a bathtub and newfangled

wonders like the sewing machine within the reach of the middle classes, suffusing the nation with a sense of bustle and general prosperity such as it had never known?

Thinking back to the Delaware town of his boyhood, Henry Seidel Canby remembered that if A-B-C marks had been given, the ratings would have run something like this: a radical thinker, E; a lover of the arts, D; an inventor or scientist, C; a good parent, B; a good salesman, retail, B, wholesale, A; a first-rate businessman with all that implied, A++. A journalist rated the same dim C that was given a good lover or the civic-minded. Business, Canby added, "was much more than an occupation -- it was a philosophy, a morality and an atmosphere," breathed in as naturally "as a Londoner takes in his November fog." The businessman was on a honeymoon with his public and the blinds could be kept drawn with few raised eyebrows.

III

All the while a revolution was under way, a revolution essential to the emergence of a doctrine of publicity.

The world of communications was undergoing a spectacular development. In the 1880s, so few telephones were in use that the person who asked for the White House was likely to hear, "Hello, Mr. Cleveland speaking." Between 1900 and 1910, the number of phones leaped from 17 to 82 per thousand of population. As the turn of the century neared, the postal rates for first-class letters went down sharply and special delivery service was added. For a long while, Congressmen had thundered that proposals for rural free delivery were "socialism." In 1896, the R.F.D. was established and was soon expanding to bring cheap messages, not to speak of mail order catalogues, to the most remote farm or ranch.

Magazines and newspapers were entering an entirely new phase. Many of them were becoming in fact what they had long liked to call themselves -- the people's press. Great improvements in the mechanics of manufacturing made possible cheap, swift printing. Men like S. S. McClure, in the magazine field, and William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer, in the newspaper arena, were introducing a type of newspaper and magazine avidly read by ordinary men.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the popular-priced, popular-oriented magazines had enlarged the number of magazine buyers from about 500,000 to nearly 3 million. Between 1880 and 1900, the number of dailies went up from 971 to 2,226 and the weekly and semi-weekly newspapers -- reaching mostly into the rural areas -- advanced from less than 9,000 to almost 14,000. At the turn of the century, the United States had become the home of more than half the newspapers in the world and the growth of subscribers was outstripping even the increase in the number of publications.

The communications revolution meant a new, wide-open boulevard to the public mind and, as always, there were men to recognize it and to travel it. The rise of the progressive movement in the early 1900s meant that the honeymoon period of business was over. Large segments of the population were now irritably questioning the whole role of large-scale industry and commerce in American society. They believed that big businessmen made too much money, exercised a

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baleful influence in politics and operated usually as a force against the general welfare. A powerful popular movement, new means of communication -- it was inevitable that these facts should be joined and the union came spectacularly in the progressive movement.

The sense of the potential in publicity was strong among the reformers. "From whatever point of view the trust problem is considered, publicity stands as the first step in its solution," the University of Michigan's crusading professor of economics, Henry C. Adams, quite typically declared in 1902. The fiction of the widely-read dissident novelist, the American Winston Churchill, was usually a thinly veiled application of the same principle. Asked to address the National Municipal League in 1907, the longtime scourge of spoilsman, Attorney General Charles J. Bonaparte, chose as his subject, *Government by Public Opinion*.

The two reform Presidents of the early nineteen hundreds were the first Presidents to emphasize publicity. Theodore Roosevelt, a born publicist, used to try to release certain types of statements on Sundays in order to give them the greatest possible chance at the headlines. Woodrow Wilson had made one of the earliest pleas for the use of publicity in improving representative government -- it was as early as 1879 -- and his Presidential reform program, the New Freedom, relied heavily on the power of public opinion. "The best thing that you can do with anything that is crooked," Wilson declared, "is to lift it up where people can see that it is crooked, and then it will either straighten itself out or disappear."

IV

S. S. McClure was watching it all from the hectic offices of *McClure's* magazine. McClure was part genius, part madman and part inexplicable. He once spent hours telling an explorer what the explorer had seen in the Antarctic and so fascinated himself by his story that the man was immediately signed up for a long series of articles. When the McClure editors received this high-priced mass of dullness, S. S. was off to Europe. He was always off to some place, and always coming back with a valiseful of incomparable, world-shaking, history-making articles. One time the valise contained Kipling's Kim; another time, a year's headaches for his staff. But if the editors failed to dissuade S. S. from an obvious mistake, the obvious mistake often turned into a triumph. McClure would put to work the technique he had learned peddling merchandise on the Mississippi and the housewives would be sure they were abysmally behind the times until they read that article.

In 1902, McClure's antennae told him that something was astir in the United States which no magazine was covering and which would make the housewives feel very much up to date. He was not sure what it was, but he was certain that his editors would never discover it in a New York office building.

"Get out of here, travel, go -- somewhere," McClure told one of his ablest men, Lincoln Steffens. "Get on a train, and there, where it lands you, there you will learn to edit a magazine."

Steffens headed west. For a while, he came upon only routine stories or ones that were off the record. St. Louis was a different matter. There a wispy Southern Puritan, Joseph Folk, having

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stumbled into the District Attorney's office by an accident of machine politics, was creating a storm by insisting on performing the duties of the District Attorney. Folk badly needed publicity to help him. The Missouri papers were hostile or afraid and he poured out his story to the editor from New York.

He was hardly seated in his office, Folk told Steffens when the St. Louis boss sent a representative to tell him whom to prosecute and whom to let off. When Folk ignored the boss, he found that the trail of corruption led from politicians straight to businessmen, many of them honored figures in St. Louis. Folk's eyes spurted anger as he added: "It is good business men that are corrupting our bad politicians It is the leading citizens that are battenning on our city."

Steffens left Folk's office in a froth of excitement. Here was the kind of story, timely, detailed, sensational, that would certainly lure the Housewives from *Ben-Hur* and really score against corruption. The October 1902 issue of *McClure's* carried, "Tweed Days in St. Louis." The following issues of the magazine contained more exposés. By January 1903, McClure knew he was getting what he had been fumbling for. He was ready for an editorial, "Concerning Three Articles in this Number of *McClure's*, and a Coincidence that May Set Us Thinking."

Here was Steffens, McClure wrote, extending his municipal studies into "The Shame of Minneapolis," a chapter of Ida Tarbell's devastating history of the Standard Oil Company and an article by Ray Stannard Baker on abuses by a labor union. Three articles that seemed quite different, McClure asked his readers to note, but really all on the same theme: the corruption of American life. "Capitalists, workingmen, politicians, citizens -- all breaking the law, or letting it be broken. Who is left to uphold it? ... The judges? Too many of them so respect the laws that for some 'error' or quibble they restore to office and liberty men convicted on evidence overwhelmingly convincing to common sense. The churches? We know of one, an ancient and wealthy establishment, which had to be compelled by a Tammany holdover health officer to put its tenements in sanitary condition. The colleges? They do not understand.

"We all are doing our worst and making the public pay We forget that ... the debt is only postponed; the rest are passing it on back to us. We have to pay in the end, every one of us."

McClure and Steffens did not invent muckraking -- a dozen other writers and editors, jealous of their place in history, have made that quite plain. But *McClure's*, by common admission, was the most influential pioneer in the sudden vogue for indignant, fact-packed articles of exposure. *Collier's*, the *American Magazine*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Munsey's*, *Hampton's*, the *Independent*, *Everybody's* -- scarcely a mass circulation magazine failed to follow the trend. In thinly disguised fiction as well as factual magazine articles, the muckrakers rummaged their way into every major industry, into all parts of the political machinery, even into the women's clubs, the universities and the churches.

It was quite a campaign. Some of the best writers in America were engaged in it in the United States, reform can usually command the cream of literary talent -- and they were enormously effective. "Time was," the redoubtable Mr. Dooley pointed out to Mr. Hennessy, when the magazine "was very ca'ming to the mind. Angabel an' Alfonso dashin' f'r a marriage licence.

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Prom'nen't lady authoresses makin' pomes at the moon. Now an' thin a scrap over whether Shakespear was enthered in his own name or was a ringer, with the longshot players always agin' Shakespear. But no wan hurt. Th' idee ye got fr'm these here publications was that life was wan glad sweet song. . . .

"But now whin I pick me fav-rite magazine off th' flure, what do I find? Ivrything has gone wrong All th' pomes by th' lady authoresses that used to begin: 'Oh, moon, how fair!' now begin: 'Oh, Ogden Armour, how awful!' Read th' horrible disclosures about th' way Jawn C. Higgins got th' right to build a bay-window on his barber-shop at iliven forty-two Kosciusko Avnoo, South Bennington, Arkansaw Graft ivrywhere. 'Graft in th' Insurance Companies,' 'Graft in Congress,' 'Graft be an Old Grafter,' 'Graft in Its Relations to th' Higher Life,' be Dock Eliot; 'Th' Homeeric Legend an' Graft; Its Cause an' Effect; Are They th' Same? Yes and No ...'

"An' so it goes, Hinnissy ... till I don't thrust anny man truly more ... I used to be nervous about burglars, but now I'm afraid iv a night call fr'm the prisdint iv th' First National Bank."

The muckrakers had a favorite story. It was about the wealthy Alaskan miner who walked into an editor's office and demanded a crusade.

"Well!" the editor remarked, "You certainly are a progressive, aren't you?"

"Progressive!" the miner roared. "Progressive! I tell you I'm a full-fledged insurgent. Why, man I subscribe to thirteen magazines."

Successful, so brilliantly successful in their reform aim, the muckrakers also did something that had significance quite removed from reform. Sweeping beyond the press agent, beyond vague theorizings about public opinion, they seized hold of the general progressive awareness of publicity and discovered conscious, controlled publicity as a major instrument of modern America.

V

Shortly before the muckrakers launched their assault in 1898, a slim, quiet-mannered young man arrived in New York with \$5.25, a Princeton diploma and an intense craving for success. Ivy Lee was very much a child of nineteenth-century America; to him success meant succeeding in business America. He had learned this even in the Georgia parish house that was his home. His father, the Reverend James Lee, and his father's friend, the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, filled the house with talk of the glories that would come to the South if it joined the march of industrialization. Nothing Ivy Lee heard in Georgia was diluted by his student years at Princeton University, then in a stage of high assimilation to business America.

Ivy Lee counted out \$5.00 for two weeks' rent at a New York boarding house, spent another 20 cents on a sandwich, pie and coffee and used his last nickel for a ride to the office of the only man he knew in the city -- the night editor of the *New York Journal*. The editor had a job; financial reporting and Lee settled into it happily, delighting in the opportunity it gave him to

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meet what he called "big men," by which he meant successful businessmen. Lee's first freelance writing was about banking and it was written from the banker's side of the cage. It was important for the poor, he said, to make money available for the productive needs of the community by opening savings accounts. "Those public spirited men," Lee added, "who are struggling to instill ideas of savings in the minds of the poor, giving time and thought to the problem, have made themselves creditors of civilization."

For a man who wanted to help civilization in the manner of a bank president, who was soon a husband and a father as well, writing at \$10.00 a column was not likely to seem the right job for long. Besides, there were those muckrakers, now thundering away on every newsstand Ivy Lee passed.

Others had been thinking it and it occurred to Ivy Lee too. Was business' traditional policy of secrecy really a wise one? If publicity was being used so effectively to attack business, could it not be used with equal effectiveness to explain and defend business? The difference between Lee and the other men who were mulling over these questions was simple: Lee acted. In 1903 he quit his reporter's job and set himself up as a publicity man for business.

At first, businessmen hardly flocked to the youthful freelancer who was saying, however politely, that their longtime policy was absurd. Lee eked out a living press-agenting for politicians and for a circus, helping some unimportant bankers buy right-of-ways, trying to replete the badly tarnished reputation of Thomas Fortune Ryan. But Lee was also polishing his techniques, he was meeting more and more "big men," and the rising tide of muckraking was daily giving his arguments new force. In 1906, a major industry, anthracite coal, summoned Lee to its aid.

No industry had been more contemptuous of public opinion; none was being taught a harsher lesson. When a major coal strike broke in 1902, the coal owners had folded their hands in feudal defiance. They had nothing to say to the press -- nothing cooperative to say to the President of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, when he intervened. Their one widely-circulated statement came from that master of the malapropos, owner George F. Baer, who announced that "God in His Infinite Wisdom has given control of the property interests of the country" to the George F. Baers. The miners, on the other hand, were led by John Mitchell, who had a progressive's sense of the power of publicity.

Mitchell saw to it that not only President Roosevelt but the reporters were given a maximum of cooperation. The President and the reporters, in turn, saw to it that the miners had one of the best presses labor has ever enjoyed in American history. Public opinion moved overwhelmingly to the side of the workers. They ended up with terms which represented a real victory and the coal owners became a favorite subject of muckraking as well as a frequent target of strike threats.

By 1906, even George F. Baer was learning. As soon as Lee was appointed, an "authorized statement" signed by Baer and other leading operators made sure that everyone understood how completely the appointment meant a reversal in policy. "The anthracite coal operators," the statement began, "realizing the general public interest in conditions in the mining regions, have

arranged to supply the press with all possible information." On his part, Lee took the occasion presented by the interest in his appointment to send to city editors a "Declaration of Principles."

"This is not a secret press bureau," Lee stated. "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 concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about."

This 1906 Declaration marks the emergence of a general doctrine of public relations in the United States. The public was no longer to be ignored, in the traditional manner of business, nor fooled, in the continuing manner of the press agent. It was, Lee declared, to be informed.

Late in 1906, when the Pennsylvania Railroad retained Lee, the meaning of the new public relations was given dramatic specifics. Shortly after Lee signed his contract, an accident occurred at Gap, Pennsylvania. Automatically, the customary machinery of news suppression was thrown into gear, and just as quickly, Lee reversed it. Reporters were invited to travel to the scene at the expense of the railroad; facilities were promptly set up for the gathering of facts and the taking of photographs; information which reporters had not thought to ask about was offered. Angry protests came from some of the road's highest executives, but when the commotion settled down, Pennsylvania Railroad found itself basking in one of the few good presses it had enjoyed since the turn of the century.

As Lee went ahead with his work for the Pennsylvania Railroad and other clients, he was soon adding another element to his public relations. If publicity was to win a favorable audience for a business, obviously the material publicized had to contain something which the public thought good. An intelligent man could hardly concern himself long with interpreting a business to the public without becoming involved in interpreting the public to the business.

When the Rockefellers retained Lee, some of their policies ran so counter to general feeling that no amount of semantics could have explained them into any appreciable favor. It was in this circumstance that Lee apparently first conceived of public relations as a dual function and by 1916 he was maintaining: "Publicity in its ultimate sense means the actual relationship of a company to the people, and that relationship involves far more than *saying* -- it involves *doing*. *An elementary requisite* of any sound publicity must be, therefore, the giving of the best possible service" [the italics are his]. As Lee's prestige grew and his thinking became more sophisticated, he talked of himself less and less as a publicity expert and more and more as an advisor on policy that concerned the public.

Alongside Ivy Lee, a whole group of able men were developing the field of public relations -- among others, Edward L. Bernays, Pendleton Dudley, James Ellsworth, Guy Emerson, Frank Fayant, Francis Sisson and Theodore Vail. Resistance collapsed most quickly among the public

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utilities, the special targets of public criticism. But by 1917, Swift, as well as the Rockefellers, had joined the railroads and street car companies in extensive public relations. The National Bank of Commerce was spending \$250,000 a year on an "interpretative" bulletin to its customers and that longtime bastion of the public-be-damned, the Bethlehem Steel Company, was announcing in full-page ads: "We have allowed irresponsible assertions to be made for so long without denial that many people now believe them to be proven facts. Henceforth we shall pursue a policy of publicity."

American entrance into World War I brought a brilliant publicity for publicity ("This is the first press agents' war," the *New York Times* declared as early as 1914), and interest in the whole opinion field whirled ahead. "Propaganda" quickly passed from an esoteric term associated with church activities to a common idea. Though a coinage of the eighteenth century, the phrase "public opinion" made its initial appearance in *Webster's Dictionary* in 1920, and the next year the Library of Congress officially welcomed public relations into respectable literature by publishing a bibliography of it. In 1923 came the first book-length writing devoted exclusively to public relations, Edward L. Bernays' *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, which summoned public relations to join the list of America's professions and offered the profession a name -- "public relations counsel." All the while public relations was refining its techniques and expanding its scope so that it served not simply business but a wide variety of institutions in American life, some of them decidedly anti-business.

The progressive surge, by discovering conscious, controlled publicity in an assault on business, had produced a counter-assault and then a new occupation deeply involved in the whole society.

VI

The history of a human being, institution, or occupation, historians like to believe, illuminates its problems in the present and in the future.

The history of public relations is inextricably entangled with the fact that it emerged as a defense of one particular part of society -- business -- against the assault of the muckrakers. Many of its leading firms were founded for precisely that purpose. Many of the great names in its pantheon made their reputations largely in this way.

Because it started as a defense, it originally had a special tone and was inclined to use one approach much more than other possible avenues. Ivy Lee may have talked -- and no doubt sincerely -- of public relations as a dual function, in which the practitioner was to be as much concerned with creating policies that the public would like as he was with selling the corporation's point of view. But Ivy Lee was a human being, and his interests and his emotions were directly involved.

In the same essay in which he called for doing as well as persuading, Lee reserved bold-face capitals for the sentence: "I BELIEVE IN TELLING YOUR STORY TO THE PUBLIC." The "greatest" service public relations could perform, he emphasized, was to do for a business "what Billy Sunday has done for religion" -- to sell its policies.

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Similarly, Lee was as ready as the next man to resent any implication that he was a glorified press agent and to insist that his occupation required attention to a broad area of knowledge. But in moments -- perhaps moments of over-confidence or irritation -- he could talk differently.

Toward the close of Lee's career, at a hearing of the United Transit Commission, the Commission's Special Counsel, Samuel Untermeyer, asked him: "What is the difference between the vocation you follow and that of the publicity agent?"

Lee replied: "I don't know, sir."

Untermeyer pressed again: "Is there any?"

Lee repeated: "I don't know, sir. I have never been able to find a satisfactory phrase to describe what I try to do."

At times during his career, Lee described what he was doing as an "art" -- an art so personal and intangible that he could find no phrase to describe it accurately.

Needless to say, Lee was an early practitioner and in some ways his conception of public relations was relatively undeveloped. But he points up the tradition in which the occupation was founded and, because of the nature of the field, some of its inherent tendencies.

These tendencies are frequently checked in the 1960s, but when they are not, they hardly increase the esteem in which public relations is held. The American public today is certainly the most learning minded public that has ever existed any place at any time. The learning industry, in all its aspects, is expanding so rapidly that it bids fair to play the role in our society which the railroad industry did in the late nineteenth century or the automobile industry has been doing during the twentieth century. To the extent that a public relations practitioner permits himself to slide over into the easy feeling that he is engaged solely in an art -- a matter of instinct requiring no special preparation and no need to turn to the rapidly mounting knowledge about man and his institutions -- he is as passé as George Baer's conception of the divine rights of property.

The 1960s are making a still more insistent demand. This is a pragmatic generation. It knows men like to make money and it is quite aware that human beings are not saints. But it is just pragmatic enough to realize also that societies do not flourish from men of excessive self interest, or as a result of occupations which attach themselves to one institution or group with a blindness for other considerations.

The temper of the generation is expressed in the widespread popularity of the businessman who is not simply the businessman, the labor leader who is not merely the labor leader, the candidate who is not too partisan and the ideology which is more a consensus of interests than a contention for what one bloc wants. The call is for doctors who, in addition to making a good living, will remember the Hippocratic oath; for teachers who are ready to lay aside their research long enough to teach the student -- and it is for public relations men who do not forget that in

representing a client, whether business, labor, or the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, there is such a thing as the community and the national interest and that it is the duty of a public relations man not only to persuade, but to bring closer identity between what his client does and the larger needs.

Most of the discoveries of the rambunctious early twentieth century have presented us with a series of opportunities and a series of headaches. The discovery of publicity is no different -- except perhaps that the problems publicity presents have been so publicized that we tend to yawn and forget that they are problems indeed.