Foucault, Discourse, the Birth of British Public Relations and the Creation of Corporate Identity

Introduction

Over the last thirty years there has been an interest in the history of public relations (PR) in Britain.[1] Whilst this history has located the emergence of PR in the interwar period, it is one that has focused on its political and cultural aspects. It has failed to examine its corporate characteristics, both in the public and private sectors, and has not explained its emergence within this field. This article will attempt to do this by drawing on the thought of the French philosopher Michel Foucault.[2] Central to Foucault's philosophy is the concept of discourse – the creation and organisation of statements, which create domains of human knowledge and practice.[3] Since Foucault argues that human discourses are not based on timeless, metaphysical truths, but are historically constructed texts, there is clearly a link between history, corporate PR, and discourse. PR can be seen as a historically constructed discourse, whose role is to create statements that legitimise government and corporations, and influence public opinion. The history of PR can accordingly be told from the theoretical perspective of discourse, creating a link between theory and content, and its impact on corporate development.

This article will first adumbrate historical research on PR. It will then discuss Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and examine how this relates to PR. The article will next explain the reasons for the emergence of corporate PR in the interwar period. It will then discuss its discursive formation drawing on Foucault's writings on discursive concepts, discursive strategies and discursive objects. Discursive concepts will be analysed from the perspective of the emergence of ideas of corporate responsibility and public goodwill in the interwar period. The development of corporate narratives and corporate communication will form the basis of the discussion of discursive strategies, and the creation of corporate identity will be the focus of the analysis of the formation of discursive objects. Four corporations will be examined to map these developments, two in the private sector, the Prudential

Assurance Company (PAC) and the oil company Shell-Mex, and two in the public sector, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the General Post Office (GPO).[4]

PR and History

For the purposes of this article , the literature on the emergence of PR in the twentieth century in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) will be discussed. PR in its modern form emerged in these two major western democracies in the twentieth century, though this is not to deny developments elsewhere. [5] In relation the US, the history of the emergence of PR has been comprehensively mapped in the first half of the twentieth century. Tedlow and Marchand have located PR in the rapid growth of large scale corporations at the turn of the twentieth century, such as AT&T and Standard Oil, and the widespread opposition that met them from federal and state government, trade unions, liberals, local business and the media.[6] Under what became known as 'mudracking', these new corporations were portrayed as monopolistic, soulless and 'Un-American'. PR was a defensive function within these private corporations, pioneered by individuals such as Ivy Lee, Edward Bernays, Bruce Barton and Arthur W. Page, which attempted to sell them to the American people, develop corporate reputation, and fend off attacks and anti-trust actions.[7] Bird, for example, has shown how corporations in the US utilised the new medias of radio, television and cinema to create a new, dramatic narrative, which emphasised that big business, and not government, was responsible for 'better living' in the US. [8] It was this unprecedented rise in living standards, corporations argued, which legitimised their size and role within American society.

In the UK research has focused on the rise of PR within the public sector in the interwar period. Much of this has focused on how the development of full democracy in Britain, the emergence of mass, popular media and the provision of social welfare and a more interventionist government, led to the state and local authorities developing communicative techniques to interact with publics and stakeholders and influence public opinion. L'Etang has noted the emergence of PR and public relations officers in central and local government in Britain in the interwar period.[9] Grant has focused on the

increased role of propaganda by the State, examining areas such as the GPO and public health campaigns. [10] Anthony has charted the pivotal role of the civil servant Sir Stephen Tallents in pioneering PR, particularly in his roles at the Empire Marketing Board, the GPO and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in the 1920s and 1930s.[11] Attention has also focused on the activities of the GPO in the 1930s, particularly its Film Unit under John Grierson, the *auteur* of the British documentary film movement. [12] Whilst this work is impressive and has opened up new vistas of historical research, it has neglected the functions of PR in both its corporate aspect and role in the market. PR is primarily discussed as political propaganda, or has been analysed in terms of its creative content – PR *qua* art or corporate design. Little has been said regarding its role in developing corporate identity and corporate communication, and its commercial features and rise in the private sector has remained virtually ignored.

Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault's influence has spanned beyond philosophy into a broad range of subjects in the social sciences and arts. He wrote on a number of subjects including mental illness, medical practice, prisons, epistemology, sexuality, governance and power.[13] Most of what he wrote was historical in nature, though a unique form of historiography which blended a study of the past with philosophical analysis and critical thinking. Principle themes in his writings are an attack on the privileged position of the autonomous, rational subject in western thought, a dismissal of the Enlightenment ideal of a progressive history and a refutation of the belief that knowledge automatically leads to advancement and freedom. In their stead Foucault posited regulating discourses that determine what can be thought and said in any given period, a history of discontinuity and epistemological breaks, and the power-knowledge principle which argued that rather than liberating, knowledge disciplined and controlled the subject.[14]

Foucault's impact on history has not been due to the content of his writings, but rather the philosophical principles which underlay them. His emphasis on the role of discourse in regulating and

3

determining thought and behaviour in areas such as health, sexuality and crime, his historical approach of linking together modes of thinking with institutional practice, and his account of power as an essentially positive rather than negative phenomenon has provided historians with a very different interpretation of modernity.[15] It has contributed to the emergence of a historiography, often referred to as the linguistic or narrative turn in history, which has emphasised the role of cognitive structures, constructed ideologies, meaning, and identity in determining and explaining historical agency over macro socio-economic structures and events.[16] This has had an impact not only in social and cultural history, but also in business history.[17] Foucauldian concepts have been used to analyse the development of disciplinary structures in large-scale organisations, the career, employee motivation, bureaucratic power and accounting history.[18] His work has also had a similar impact on PR. Academics such as Motion, Weaver and Leitch, have emphasised the role of PR in constructing discourses, whose aim is to influence public opinion and behaviour, and construct individual and corporate identities.[19] These writers have applied Foucault's concept of power-knowledge to demonstrated how PR is concerned with constructing 'truths', which privilege certain discourses over others, and which further governmental and corporate influence and power.

At the core of Foucault's though lay the concept of discourse. These makes possible statements and are the basis of all forms of knowledge. In the *Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault defined discourse as, 'the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation; thus I shall be able to speak of clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse.'[20] He also referred to discourse as, '…sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualisable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements.'[21]These two quotes demonstrate that discourse does not simply relate to statements or speech, but that it refers to fields of expertise and practice. They organise speech, thought, knowledge and behaviour. They describe and constitute the world, creating our macro and micro environments and interpretive and behavioural domains. Furthermore, in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault made three important points about discourse; they are dispersed, they follow

4

rules of formation and regulation and they are fundamentally historical. I shall briefly discuss each of these three points.

For Foucault discourses are always dispersed. A discourse of crime included judges, lawyers, the state, doctors, probation officers, psychologists, criminologists, social workers, journalists, courts and prisons. Discourses can be dispersed through knowledge, experts, institutions, government, popular culture and civil society, each coalescing around 'discursive domains' or 'enunciative fields'.[22] Discourses follow rules which regulate their statements and relationships. Foucault referred to these as the rules of 'discursive formations'. In the *Archaeology of Knowledge* he referred to four rules, the formation of objects, the formation of enunciative modalities, the formation of concepts and the formation of strategies.[23] This related to the formation of phenomenon that discourses create and espouse, the positions that individuals can take within certain discourses, the concepts that they produce and the themes and approaches that they engender. Furthermore, all discourses are historical. In any given period there will only be a certain number of discourses, which can only make a limited number of statements. In the classical period, for example, the discourse of natural history related to life, and general grammar language. In the modern period these had been replaced by biology and philology.[24]

Discourses are not simply concerned with the articulation of statements, but with the creation of systems of knowledge.[25] This lays at the heart of Foucault's power-knowledge principle, which was elaborated in works such as *Madness and Civilisation*, *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish*.[26] Foucault rejected the Enlightenment belief that knowledge was empowering, that the 'discovery' of truths could liberate mankind from the shackles of religion and superstition. Instead he argued that knowledge was indelibly linked with power and control. In modern societies, discourses create knowledge that define what is right and wrong, and which rigidly determine appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. Authorised by the state and 'legitimate' institutions such as courts, hospitals, universities and academies, regimes of truth are created that regulate behaviour and legitimise

control. In addition, these newer forms of power are far more effective than older models, which had depended on force and physical punishment. New scientific discourses are readily imbibed by individuals, who learn how to control and regulate themselves according to their precepts. Discourses such as psychology, criminology, education and modern medicine are accepted as scientifically proven routes to better living, and underpinned by the creation of a number of anti-social, deviant types such as the madman, the criminal and the sexual pervert. In turn, those that reject these discourses, whose behaviour appropriates to these asocial types, can be legitimately controlled and placed in the new institutions that modernity has created such as prisons, hospitals and asylums.[27]

The Emergence of PR in Interwar Britain

PR emerged in interwar Britain as a result of the criticism which met the rise of the large-scale corporation.[28] Criticism of corporations was not new in the interwar period.[29] Companies such as Lever Brothers and the PAC had been attacked by the press in the 1900's. What was different was its extent and depth. Criticisms against corporations became more frequent. All the organisations examined in the article experienced sustained criticism. The PAC in the 1920s, for example, continued to be criticised by the national weekly *John Bull*. In 1911 the paper had ran stories accusing the PAC of pressurizing customers into buy bogus policies, of encouraging gambling and of failing to honour payments to families on the death of insured customers. The PAC successfully sued *John Bull* for libel in 1912, but after the First World War the paper simply turned its criticisms to the entire life assurance industry. Its campaign, which claimed that the sector was the 'World's Biggest Swindle' and 'Soulless and Unsympathetic', spanned the entire decade.[30] In the interwar period Shell-Mex Limited was accused of polluting the English countryside by placing its advertisements along country roads and in villages. The conservationist movement, the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE), in the 1920's launched a national campaign against such practice. In addition, oil companies were accused of being global, sinister and bent on world domination. In 1935, Adrian Corbett, a member of the American Department of the Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company, argued in a speech that the oil

industry had become a reviled sector that attracted unfair and unsubstantiated criticism. He pointed to 14 books which over the past decade had attacked the sector.[31]

Criticism was also evident in the public sector. From its inception as a public corporation in 1927, the BBC was subject to a barrage of attacks which accused it of being arrogant, out of touch, undemocratic and patrician.[32] The BBC was accused of being a monopoly, anti-competitive and limiting choice. It was argued that the BBC did not reflect or even care about the tastes or views of its listeners. While most people wanted light entertainment, sport and popular music, the BBC was said to be more intent on providing classical music, talks on ancient civilisations and other highbrow material. Under the leadership of its director-general, John Reith, and his policy of 'moral uplift', the corporation was perceived as giving people what it thought they needed rather than what they wanted, and was said to reflect the views and tastes of the ruling classes and not the people. In 1933, for example, *The Daily Mail* commented, 'We want, perhaps, two B.B.C.s. We might have one really independent and the other the official mouthpiece of our rulers.'[33]

Equally serious were criticisms in the 1920s and early 1930s against the GPO, the largest employer in Britain with 280,000 workers, and a government department, whose head, the Postmaster General, sat in the British Cabinet.[34] The GPO was widely criticised for its failure to expand the British telephone network. In the 1920s the US, Scandinavia and Germany had far higher telephone penetration rates than Britain. This was felt to be socially and economically disadvantageous to Britain, and was seen to be a national disgrace. Much of the blame was put at the foot of the post office, which was accused of being overly conservative and bureaucratic. Its failure to adopt modern advertising and marketing practices was seen to be a cause of this. The GPO did not advertise and engage in publicity, unlike other major contemporary British organisations.[35] In 1920, for example, *The Times* was scathing in its attack on the GPO for its failure to market the telephone,

> The Post Office telephone system has not a friend from Land's end to John O'Groats … because the Post Office has failed in its capacity of telephone authority, and no telephone user in the

7

country has any other opinion. There are many square miles of houses in every big English city where a telephone, or perhaps two or more telephones, could be placed in every house. But nobody has been to those houses to tell the occupants how useful the telephone is; or advertised to them the advantages of the telephone service and its low cost or sent them pamphlets illustrating and describing the varied uses of the telephone.[36]

What was also new was the depth of these attacks. While criticism persisted in the press, it also emerged from other sources. Attacks on the PAC and the life insurance industry began to surface from the government, politicians, trade unions and the British Medical Association. In 1919 the Parmoor Committee, appointed by Lloyd George, published a report castigating the life insurance industry for excessive profits. In 1923 an Industrial Insurance Commissioner was appointed by the government, whose role was to receive and investigate complaints from the public.[37] Attacks on Shell came from conservationists, who were supported by well-known artists, writers and public figures.[38] Criticism against the BBC was voiced by the press, the Radio Manufacturers Association, senior public figures such as Sir William Beveridge, and even within the BBC itself.[39] This was also the case with the GPO. Attacks came from the press, the telephone manufacturers association and senior politicians. In the 1920's and 1930's several official public enquiries were established to investigate the failure of the GPO to encourage Britons to adopt the telephone. It was as a result of these enquiries that the first official PR department was established at the GPO in 1933.[40]

The Discursive Formation of PR

PR was thus developed in the interwar period as a mechanism to protect corporations from public criticism. It was created to influence public opinion, and to create an environment that was more amenable to big business. In the remainder of this article the historical emergence of PR will be analysed from a discursive perspective. PR was a script, which structured and enabled the enunciation of corporate ideas, statements and behaviour. This will be analysed and described from the perspective of discursive concepts, strategies and objects.

Discursive Concepts

For Foucault, discursive concepts create rules, systems and order, which allow statements to be made and applied. They are the building blocks of discourse. As he argued, '… the rules of formation operate not only in the mind or consciousness of individuals, but in discourse itself; they operate therefore, according to a sort of uniform anonymity, on all individuals who undertake to speak in this discursive field.'[41] In relation to PR, two discursive concepts emerged over this period. These were responsibility and the creation of public goodwill. Responsibility lay at the heart of the discourse of PR, and remains so today in the guise of corporate social responsibility. Under its rhetoric big business transformed themselves from economic agents who produced goods and services, to social institutions which served the nation. The phenomenon drew on three distinct areas. These were responsible advertising, industrial welfare and the Victorian discourse of public duty.

In relation to the first, the cultural historian D.L. LeMahieu has shown the opposition during the interwar period by British elites to the rise of a mass, commercial culture.[42] This manifested itself in newspapers, modern music, cinema and advertising. It was criticised for its American origins, its egalitarian nature and its appeal to 'crass' commercialism. Mass advertising was singled out as one of the worst symptoms of this development. It provoked a movement to raise the standards of advertising in the country in an attempt to augment the visual landscape and improve the aesthetic standards of everyday Britons. Responsibility amongst corporations increasingly became defined in terms of the quality of their publicity.

In the interwar period corporations increasingly employed artists for commercial work. A pioneer of this was Frank Pick and the London Underground. Pick employed major British artists and architects to design poster advertisements, train stations, logos and maps. He believed that art could be found in everyday life and that companies had a responsibility to provide this to their customers. Pick transformed the London Underground into a mass art gallery for the enjoyment and improvement of its customers.[43] The patronage of artists was adopted by other organisations, who developed PR in

9

the interwar period. Shell-Mex, for example, was hailed as the modern Medici in its sponsorship of British art. [44] This began under its head of publicity, Jack Beddington. Beddington commissioned leading British modern artists such as Paul Nash, McKnight Kauffer, Rex Whistler and Duncan Grant to produce painting that were used in advertising campaigns, such as 'See Britain First on Shell' and 'You Can Be Sure of Shell'. These paintings depicted the British countryside and famous heritage sites such as Stonehenge and Bodiam Castle. These campaigns did not publicise a particular product or service, but rather promoted the company as a whole.[45] Shell advertising was shown in exhibitions across the country, including the Royal Academy of Arts in the West End of London. The company developed an association between modern art and tasteful advertising. This was evident in the introduction to Shell's catalogue for its 1931 exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts by the art critic Robert Byron. Entitled, 'Responsible Publicity', it argued that Shell's use of advertising was salutary in the tastefulness of its content, its efforts to improve its audience, its care for the countryside, and its depiction of rural England in a genuine and aesthetic manner.[46]

The national movement for industrial welfare originated in Britain towards the end of the nineteenth century. The movement argued that big business should focus on developing relations with its workers in an age of mass production, bureaucratisation and the increasing impersonal nature of work.[47] Focusing on the 'human element' in production was argued to be the chief responsibility of business. This was attempted through a series of industrial welfare programmes such as pensions, sickness and health benefits, regular rest breaks, and amenities such as canteens, wash rooms and recreational facilities. By the 1930s most major companies in Britain were engaged in industrial welfare. This was facilitated by the establishment of the Industrial Welfare Society in 1918. They provided member companies with support in developing programmes for their employees. Companies were also keen to communicate their industrial welfare programmes to external publics to enhance their reputation by demonstrating their responsibility to their workforce.

An example of industrial welfare as PR can be seen in the spread of company magazines amongst large-scale employers, which became commonplace by the 1930s.[48] Company magazines enabled employers to communicate with workers, to create organisational cultures and to project the organisation internally. They appeared at the turn of the twentieth century in Britain. A key factor in their rise had been the rapid growth of companies in sectors such as the railways, banking, and insurance, and the need by organisations to bind their workers together so as to prevent corporate anomie. In sectors such as the railways and banking, where expansion in workforce was paralleled by an increase in branches and stations across the nation, the need for a unifying force was keenly felt.[49] Magazines attempted to humanise the working environment by making it more meaningful and collective, a key aim of the industrial welfare movement, and something which the critics of big business claimed they were the very antithesis of. As Sir David Milne-Watson, managing director of the Gas Light and Coke Company, an employer of 21,000 workers stated in 1932 at the IWS's Eleventh Conference on Works and Staffs Magazines,

> The difficulty is … to make the company a unity. The man in Wick must be made to feel that he is the part of the same undertaking as the man at King's Cross; the man at Staines, working in a rural area, must be associated with his fellow worker at Beckton many miles away, working under entirely different conditions. These works magazines seem to me to focus the idea of the company as a whole. They circulate everywhere and give cohesion and a feeling of comradeship … Therefore, I believe that they are of the greatest possible value, and I think that a conference of this sort can do nothing but good.[50]

The Victorian principle of public service was increasingly adopted by corporations in the interwar period. This concept was based on the belief that the ruling and middle-classes had a moral duty to improve society. Part of this lay in a programme of cultural and behavioural reform, which was to be achieved through educational and moral campaigns.[51] This discourse, which had initially been adopted by government institutions, spread to corporations in the public and private sectors in the 1920's and

11

1930's. Corporations began to initiate social programmes, many of which were educational in character. The PAC, for example, became a major provider of public health. One element of this was its public health booklets, *The Road to Health Series*. These were distributed through its sales agents and sick visitors and also at exhibitions and national health events across the country. These books were primarily educational and filled with advice, tips, and medical facts and information.[52] Shell-Mex held exhibitions of its commercial art across the country. The company also provided art to the Victorian and Museum Department of Circulation, which lent it to colleges and schools.[53] The BBC was a major provider of education through its talks shows that covered a number of topics on the arts and sciences. It also collaborated with the British Institute of Adult Education and worked closely with schools in the provision of radio educational broadcasts.[54] Such work was replicated by the GPO, which collaborated with schools across Britain, providing telephone demonstration sets, posters, films and lecture and lesson packs for teachers.[55] A report in April 1936 demonstrated the extent of its pedagogical activities. The GPO was working with the London Chamber of Commerce in the postal education of junior clerks in commercial houses, posters showing air mail routes by the artist E. McKnight Kauffer, had been sent to 27,000 schools, and it was preparing posters for schools in Birmingham that re-produced facsimiles of official forms, such as applications for money orders, which the public had to fill in. It was also co-operating with the education authorities in Manchester in the production of maps showing the volume of telephone and telegram traffic between that city and the rest of Britain, it had 290 telephone demonstration sets in circulation amongst schools, it supplied forms to schools to be used in the teaching of civics, it had shown GPO films in the past year to 48,000 children and 2,000 teachers, and it had exhibited at the annual conference of the National Union of Teachers.[56] Both the BBC and the GPO also provided a lecture service that gave talks to civil associations such as the Women's Institute and local chambers of commerce.[57] Finally educational provision was provided in the publications that these organisations produced such as Shell-Mex's *Shell Aviation News* and the BBC's *Listener*, and also in documentary films.[58]

12

The concept of public goodwill lay at the heart of PR. It was discussed by Sir Stephen Tallents, then Director of Public Relations at the GPO, in 1934 in a speech on publicity.[59] Tallents argued that the need for publicity had arisen due to a growth in the size of organisation and the development of democracy. Organisations had become too large to be grasped instantly by the public, but the growth of democracy had led to the demand for more information. The role of PR was to inform publics about the operations of organisations and the goods and services they provided. It also served to promote them. Tallents termed these roles as 'foreground' publicity. The third function was 'background' publicity. This, according to Tallents, was the creation of public goodwill, which was vital to the smooth running of the GPO. This was due to three factors, the reduction in complaints from customers, the enrolment of public support, and the creation of word of mouth recommendations. 'Everything,' Tallents stated, 'which increases the prestige of the Post Office in the public eye tends to make Post Office operations more efficient and less costly.'[60] The BBC echoed many of Tallents arguments in its explanation of the roles and functions of PR at the Corporation in 1936. The BBC explained, 'This is happening partly because the goodwill of the public is coming more widely to be recognized as an important economic asset, and friction between any undertaking and its public as a costly feature in the running of any machine.'[61] In addition, the size and complexity of modern undertakings meant that they now had a responsibility to explain themselves to the public to garner trust. The BBC claimed that it was fulfilling this responsibility through its new initiative of listener research that attempted to discover the tastes, habits and needs of its listeners. This was all couched in the language of public goodwill.

Discursive Strategies

Foucault referred to discursive strategies as the themes that discourses address and the theories that they utilise.[62] In the interwar period PR followed a discursive strategy of creating narratives around corporations, based on selected corporate activities, which attempted to create positive corporate imagery and deflect criticisms. These narratives were disseminated to the public through a number of

communication tools and media channels. They integrated the discursive concepts of corporate responsibility and goodwill, and were central to the implementation of PR in the UK. In this period three narratives emerged; narratives of care, narratives of national identity and narratives of science and progress.

Narratives of Care

Narratives of care were widespread amongst corporations in the interwar period and can be found in all the organisations examined in this article. Through these narratives, corporations created stories that demonstrated corporate responsibility. In them organisations adopted the role of corporate citizens who acted altruistically for the benefit of others, and went beyond the profit motive in terms of corporate behaviour. This has already been referred to above in relation to responsible advertising by Shell-Mex, in the development of industrial welfare in the interwar period, and in the provision of education by the organisations examined in this article.

An example of this narrative is the work of the PAC in healthcare in the interwar period. The Prudential transformed itself from a company which sold life insurance to the working classes to a national public health provider through its work in administering the National Insurance Acts of 1911, its support of hospitals and charities, its publication and dissemination of health booklets, and its provision of visiting nurses to its customers.[63] In the 1920s and 1930s, for example, the Prudential was responsible for administering National Insurance for one in four people in Britain, who were members of the Prudential Approved Society (PAS), a non-profit making organisation, which was a separate entity from the PAC. This was by far the largest approved society in Britain. The PAS expanded the welfare provisions of the National Insurance Acts for its members, in areas such as dentistry and ophthalmology (eye care). At its peak in 1946, the PAS had 4,827,000 members and in that that year had paid out £7.5 million in welfare benefits on behalf of the state.[64]

In its drive to improve public health, the Prudential's main goal was to portray itself as a public institution that provided a national service. This became a central plank in its corporate narrative. In 1934, for example, the President of the Board of Trade Robert Runciman stated that the PAC was much more than a company, it was, 'an institution playing a part unrivalled in the country'.[65] In 1948, the centenary year of the company, the PAC published an official history. Its title, *A Century of Service. The Story of the Prudential, 1848-1948*, provided a clear statement of how the organization perceived itself, its past, its operations, and how it wanted to be perceived.[66] It was in its own words, 'a leading national influence for the betterment and conservation of human life.'[67] This narrative was told to a number of its key publics, including its staff, its sales teams, its customers, approved societies, the public, the media and the government.

Another example of a narrative of care can be seen in the development of Listener Research at the BBC. Criticism towards the BBC's broadcasting increased markedly in the 1930s with the rapid rise in the number of licence holders in Britain. Between 1929 and 1933 this doubled, and by 1937 there were eight million.[68] By this stage, the BBC's policy of 'public uplift' became increasingly untenable. Competition from continental radio broadcasters such as Radio Luxembourg and Radio Normandie, who primarily provided popular entertainment, also put this policy under pressure By the mid-1930s the BBC's output progressively began to reflect its listener's demands. There was an increase in light entertainment and popular music, and its Sabbatarian policy of only broadcasting religious services and chamber music on a Sunday was gradually abandoned.[69] The BBC also began to carry out listener research. This was developed with the establishment of a PR division under Sir Stephen Tallents in 1935.[70] Whilst listener research in this period was limited, consisting of two panel groups and one basic survey, and its application circumscribed, its public impact was considerable. The development of listener research lay at the centre of the BBC's PR strategy. It was developed to show both publics and critics alike that the Corporation cared about their wants and tastes. Public announcements in its broadcasting, articles in its publications such as the *Listener* and the BBC Annuals, and press releases

and press conferences, contributed to this narrative.[71] In July, 1937, for example, the BBC wrote in an article on listener research in *The Listener*,

> Experience has shown that the listening public is not homogeneous, but rather an aggregate of many sections, each with its distinctive tastes and preferences, and usually with a sound claim to some share in the programmes. The reconciliation and adjustment of these claims is the B.B.C.'s greatest task, to the performance of which the collection of reliable information about the views and tastes of one particular section is a valuable auxiliary.[72]

Rather than being an adjudicator of taste, the Corporation was now claiming that its chief responsibility lay in listening to its multiple audiences, caring about their needs, and ensuring that the demands of each was catered to.

Narratives of National Identity

In 1932 Sir Stephen Tallents published *The Projection of England*, where he argued that in an age of globalisation and mass media, it was vital for Britain to construct and project a positive image to maintain its global interests and great power status. This impacted on her international political influence, her trade, her science and her reputation. He argued that in a global world, power was no longer only projected physically through armies and navies, but also psychologically and emotionally through reputation and the media. International relations should concern itself not only with diplomacy and military power, but also with image management. Tallents claimed that such a projection should consist of a number of elements of Britishness that included the traditional such as monarchy and parliament, national qualities such as a reputation for fairness, justice and law and order, and everyday elements that included sporting events and the English home. It should also consist of Britain's industry, her science and educational institutes. Finally Tallents proposed that such a projection should make use of different forms of media, laying particular emphasis on the cinema and exhibitions, and that it should be executed by a cadre of specialised artists.[73]

Tallent's text lay at the heart of the second PR narrative of national identity. Corporations projected national identity by creating stories that enabled them to claim that they represented Britain. This could either be claimed metonymically through the corporation itself, or it could be suggested through its products and the services, which were claimed to be fundamental to the welfare of the nation. Britain needed the postal and communication services of the GPO, for example, the petrol and oil of Shell-Mex, the broadcasting of the BBC or the sense of security and well-being, which the Prudential's life assurance provided. In his talk at the GPO on publicity, Tallents stated that, 'We need to build up, piece by piece, a picture for our own people, and also for others, of what this country has done, is doing and seeks to do in its endeavour to equip itself … to meet a wholly new range of modern conditions.'[74] In the 1930s much of the PR work at the GPO focused on this narrative in its projection of Britain and of Empire. Its poster series 'Outposts of Britain', for example, depicted the different locations across Britain and Northern Ireland which it delivered post to.[75]

Of particular note were the films that the post office made under the GPO Film Unit. One film, *Calendar of the Year*, stands out in its attempt to project the nation. The film took the viewer through the four seasons and showed how in each the GPO was central to Britain. In so doing, it celebrated the nation and the British way of life.[76] In the winter the GPO kept ships safe at sea from storms, in the spring it helped farmers to market their products. The spring was also the season when the Post Office began to lay its cables, and the GPO was seen laying the first television cable between London and Manchester. Summer was announced by people swimming and enjoying themselves in an outdoor lido. The scene then shifted to London and showed the Trooping of the Colour, the London fashion season and the Russian Ballet at Convent Garden Opera House. Next the sporting events of the summer were shown; yacht races, dirt track motor racing, cricket and the Derby. All depended on the GPO for their results to be broadcast to the nation. Following this the focus shifted to people going to the seaside for their holidays. The GPO was vital for sending postcards back home to loved ones. In the autumn people were shown returning to work. Scenes portrayed lambs being sold at a market in Lanark in Scotland, docks receiving ships from all over the world, Lloyds of London, the London Stock

17

Exchange and the Bank of England busily transacting the finances of the country. Finally, winter arrived, people flocked to football matches and Christmas approached. People were shown shopping in Oxford Street, London, fathers grumbled that they were not millionaires, children became mesmerised by toys, and the GPO continued working throughout the holiday to make all this possible.

Narratives of Science and Progress

In the *Projection of England* Tallents wrote of the importance to Britain in communicating its scientific achievements to global audiences. Its centrality lay not only in prestige, but also in the responsibility that the nation had in communicating its scientific discoveries, so that these could be made use of by others.[77] This theme was taken up by corporations within Britain. They created narratives that portrayed themselves as pioneers in scientific research. This was claimed to result in progress, national invigoration and the betterment of people's lives. It portrayed big business as harbingers of modernity and technology. Timothy Boon, for example, has noted in relation to the 1920's and 1930's that, 'Particular technologies were widely considered to be emblematic of modernity in this period: the telegraph and telephone, railway and car, photograph and cinema, heavy electrical technology, broadcasting, ocean liners and steel-framed buildings.'[78] Images of these technologies dominated the PR narrative of science and progress and can be found in the publicity of the GPO, Shell-Mex, and the BBC.

Narratives of Science and Progress were particular prevalent at the GPO in the interwar period. This is no surprise as the post office was one of Britain's most technologically advanced organisations. It was particularly innovative in the interwar period in areas such as microwave technology, international radio-telephony, the development of airmail, teleprinting and picture telephony.[79] A major theme in its PR was the strengthening of empire and imperial unity through its development of international telecommunications such as airmail and global telephony. The opening of a new international telephone line or the launch of a new airmail service was often marked by ceremonies involving ministers, dignitaries, businessmen and the royal family. This was skilfully broadcasted

through press editorials and newsreel productions that reached millions.[80] In addition, the GPO heavily promoted its research work and technological achievements. In 1933 its film unit produced the documentary *The Coming of the Dial* that focused on the pioneering work of the post office in telephone research and its development of automatic telephone exchanges. The film was highly modernist in production and style.[81] It was filled with images of technology – of laboratories, circuits, wires, electromagnetic relays, control boards and automation. The social progress that the GPO rendered through this work was a central theme of the documentary. Such narratives can also be found in Shell-Mex. The company was keen to emphasise its scientific work, and the benefits which this accrued to society. Its work on developing international air travel through along with its research in air fuel, and its development of global aeronautical infrastructure, was a particularly strong theme of the company. This can be found in its publication *Shell Aviation News*, in its company magazines, in its press editorials and in two documentary films it made in the 1930s, *Contact* (1933) and *Airport* (1935).[82]

Strategies of Corporate Communication

Dissemination of these narratives was achieved by the development of a complex system of corporate communications. In the 1930s British corporations became highly creative in this field. This was when prestige advertising, the promotion of the organisation, developed into a form of communication distinct from product advertising.[83] Such communication encompassed a number of tools such as advertising, direct marketing and third-party editorials in the press. It also utilised innovative mediums such as films, art, exhibitions, sponsorship and publications.[84] Big business learnt to integrate their communication so as to enhance its effectiveness. Shell-Mex, for example, sponsored high speed car racing and aviators performing record breaking feats. This benefitted Shell by demonstrating the effectiveness of its oils and fuels, and by associating its corporate brand with modernity, glamour, speed, and Empire. In the first week of May 1937 Shell sponsored the record breaking flights of H.F. Broadbent, who flew from Australia to Britain in 6 days and 11 hours, and H.L. Brook, who flew from

South Africa to Britain in 4 days and 18 minutes. Both planes used Shell aviation petrol. News and information about the flights appeared in the Shell publication, *Shell Aviation News*. This was replicated in reports of the flights in the national daily newspapers, and much of their content was taken from the former publication. Advertisements appeared in most papers that reported the events, stating that the planes used Shell aviation fuel. This was highly-complex integrated communication, which used sponsorship, event management, press-releases and advertising.[85] By the 1930s several corporations began to practice integrated marketing communication including the GPO and the BBC.

Discursive Objects

Foucault noted that objects do not create discourses, rather the object is a creation of the discourse. For example, the body did not create medical science in the nineteenth century, but was a product of medecine that emerged in that period.[86] All phenomenon in the human world are a product of discursive formations. This idea is vital to a historically discursive study of the emergence of PR in the interwar period. What this discourse created in the 1920s and 1930s was corporate identity. Before 1918 this barely existed within business. Organisations rarely systematically created corporate images or defended corporate reputation, and nor did they develop corporate communications. This began to take place only in the interwar period. Corporate identity was thus the object that was created by the discourse of PR.

Corporate identity relates to the persona of an organisation that is communicated to external publics. It relates to the ethos, aims and values of the organisation as they are constructed and communicated to targeted audiences and stakeholders.[87] Corporate identity, what the corporation claims it is, should be differentiated from organisational identity, what it actually is and what is normally only visible to those inside the organisation. In the interwar period, British corporations began to systematically plan and engineer corporate identity as they began to develop PR. This was done through the creation and dissemination of corporate narratives, which has been outlined above. In so doing, the aim was always to deflect criticism, to create trust and legitimacy, and to assist in the marketing of products and

services. As we have seen, through the development of corporate narratives, big business transformed its public face and attempted to change its relationship with stakeholders. The PAC became a provider of healthcare. Shell-Mex created a corporate identity that was based on art, culture, national identity, the British Empire and science. The BBC became a provider of media that still informed, educated and entertained, but also cared and listened. The GPO became the emblem the nation and the harbinger of science and modernity. Via PR, corporations portrayed themselves as progressive and caring institutions, that connected people and communities together, that provided education and information to the nation, and who utilised the wonders of modern science for the good of all.[88]

Conclusion

In the interwar period PR emerged amongst corporations in Britain. It became institutionalised as it became more established. PR began to act as a normative structure, as a set of instructions, which told corporations how they should interact with stakeholders, how they should communicate, and how they could influence public opinion.[89] It became a discourse that gradually disseminated itself amongst big business. PR created corporate identity and in turn corporate branding. This was based on concepts of responsibility and public goodwill, and utilised a complex array of communicative devices to create narratives of care, national identity and science and progress. It was a discourse that aimed to create corporate legitimacy.[90] This legitimacy was essential for large-scale organisations, which at the time represented a novel form of production and distribution in terms of their size, reach, and managerial-bureaucratic structures. PR enabled them to exist, function and demonstrate purpose. The survival of the corporation was not only based on its transactional costs, its superior forms of production or its organisational behaviour, but also on its symbolic interaction with publics.[91]

It can be argued that a discursive approach is appropriate as PR is primarily about power. It occupies itself with the defence of big business, with the legitimisation of corporate influence, and with the engineering of consent through its attempts to manipulate public opinion. It does this not through physical force, but on the basis of argument and persuasion via the creation of discourses that appeal

to purportedly superior truths over those of their opponents.[92] The corporate discourses, discussed in this article, relied on science and culture to support their arguments. Industrial welfare, for example, depended on the new Human Relations movement, a scientific discourse pioneered by Elton Mayo, which focused on the relationship between individuals and groups at work, and with motivation.[93] Responsible advertising was based on high-brow theories of art from cultural elites such as Clough Williams-Ellis, T.S. Elliot and F.R. Leavis.[94] The BBC's listener research drew on the new statistical science of sampling, probability and validity, and media psychology, that was being pioneered in Britain by the statistician, Sir Arthur Lyon Bowley, and the psychologist, Professor T.H. Pear, who researched radio listener psychology at Manchester University.[95] These discourses attempted to create regimes of truth that justified the use of power and made it appear natural.

Finally while PR initially appeared in the US, in the UK its development followed a different trajectory. This was due to the distinct conditions of its emergence. Its emphasis on art and documentary films, for example, was a result of the discomfort that its elites felt towards the rise of a mass, commercial society. This was never as fully endorsed by its corporations and leaders as it was in the US. The importance of its monorchical-artistocratic traditions and the centrality of class and empire meant that PR in Britain adopted a unique socio-cultural form.[96] Britain's liberal political culture also resulted in a form of PR that was neither purely propaganda, as was the case in many parts of Europe, nor purely commercial as in the US.[97] It was one that depended on consensus, plurality and co-operation with external stakeholders such as educational institutions, civil society and public figures. Finally PR emerged in both the public and the private sectors in Britain. Whilst it was adopted and developed by private companies such as the PAC and Shell-Mex, it also emerged in local and central government and in public enterprises such as the GPO and the BBC. Much of the emphasis in its discourse on civic responsibility, education and the provision of public information was a result of this. Whilst PR may not have originated in Britain, its genealogy meant that the discourse and narrative that it created was never simply an import from overseas.

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