

Public Relations is not the Devil After All

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Johanna Quinney reflects on a visit by Ed Amory of freuds Communications for the October #PolisTalks

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The practice of public relations is suffering from a public relations crisis. The irony here is too rich to be lost on anyone but upon reflection, I would warrant that most people can think of a time where they regarded this profession with absolute contempt. As a former Spokesperson and Press Secretary to Cabinet Ministers in Canada, I was often called an evil spin doctor, a liar, a propaganda machine, a partisan hack and once I was even compared to the devil.

The bad reputation of public relations is by no means a new phenomenon. Cultural theorist, Habermas, once described publicity as symbols to undermine the public sphere used by those in authority to exercise control. On his visit to LSE, Ed Amory from freuds communications, argued that PR can in fact be a force for good in the world and professionals need to do a better job at making this case.

[Ed Amory – “greed is NOT good” clip](#) from [Polis Video](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Effective altruism, perhaps driven by increasing public distrust, means that many companies are now trying to evoke positive charitable change in the world. Companies will often turn to PR agencies to make sure this good behaviour gets the recognition it deserves and in some cases boost their double or triple bottom lines.

PR agencies like freuds provide examples of public relations as force for good. The reality is that not all agencies chose to represent companies that are widely viewed as moral exemplars. There are many different, perhaps less altruistic types of PR that deserve to be acknowledged and should not necessarily be viewed as negative.

One example that comes to mind is crisis communications. At the very heart of PR is the notion that practitioners facilitate the dissemination of information to the public sphere. Sometimes companies or individuals find themselves in difficult situations and they should not shy away from telling their side of the story in the face of controversy. In most cases, their stakeholders and bottom lines simply won't allow silence. Whether everyone deserves a chance to tell their side of the story is a topic routinely debated in the PR field. What we can agree on is that not all companies or individuals who are publically accused of doing bad things are guilty of the charge.



Propaganda is the executive arm of the invisible government.

(Edward Bernays)

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Regardless of how many resources are put into a PR campaign, when the public is presented information, they are the ones who ultimately decide if something is good or bad and whether the campaign has been successful. This is a marketplace of ideas and we should never forget that the public is clever and will reject even the most sophisticated PR campaigns when they are bad.

PR agencies can indeed play a practical role for facilitating good in the world but they are not the ethics police. Practitioners have the right to choose who they want to represent but should stay clear of trying to interfere in the freedom of the marketplace of ideas, the very heart of our democracy.

The reality is that there are different types of PR and not all of them work on issues or with companies that are widely viewed as 'good'. We must never forget that 'good' is a subjective term and the discourse about the PR industry should not be limited to discussions of normative ideals.

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