

Present Tense

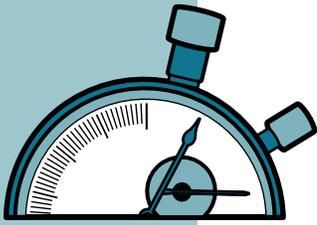
A Journal of Rhetoric in Society

PR Guns for Hire: The Specter of Edward Bernays in Gadhafi's Libya

Sharon J. Kirsch
Arizona State University

Present Tense, Vol. 2, Issue 1, 2011.
www.presenttensejournal.org | editors@presenttensejournal.org





PR Guns for Hire: The Specter of Edward Bernays in Gadhafi's Libya

Sharon J. Kirsch

In 1928 with the publication of his *Propaganda*, Edward Bernays, the self-fashioned father of public relations, delivered the keynote on a new social, political, and corporate endeavor in the United States: the field of public relations. The ostensible purpose of *Propaganda*, as Bernays notes, is “to explain the structure of the mechanism which controls the public mind, and to tell how it is manipulated by the special pleader who seeks to create public acceptance for a particular idea or commodity” (45). Implicit in Bernays’s statement is the assumption that the public mind can be controlled en masse, and, further, that a well-trained “special pleader” can do so with machine-like precision. The provocative opening lines of *Propaganda* predict how central and far-reaching the work of public relations is in contemporary democracy: “The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society” (37).

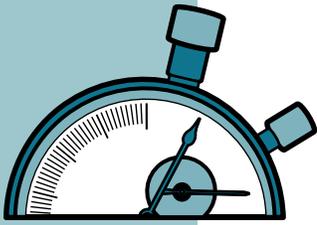
Nearly a century later, Bernays’s troubling defense of anti-democratic communication as a central component of democratic governance reverberates in a recent public relations campaign led by the self-described “global management consulting firm,” Cambridge, Massachusetts-based [Monitor Group](#), to “enhance” the image of Muammar Gadhafi¹ and Libya. Monitor Group’s multi-year, multi-million dollar efforts to shift

international public perception of a dictatorial government and its leader remained behind the scenes until the spring of 2011 when protests broke out across Libya and confidential documents detailing Monitor’s campaign were leaked by the National Conference of the Libyan Opposition.

This essay places Gadhafi’s image management campaign within the history of the rise of corporate public relations in the United States in an effort to draw public attention to the “special pleaders” who reimagined Gadhafi’s Libya - and also to contextualize Bernays’s influential theory beyond the transnational industry he helped to create. In order to contextualize public relations, I will first describe it within the disciplinary fragmentation of rhetorical studies and then trace the prevailing logic of the public relations industry and its employment as a means of statecraft. I attempt to think through the continued political power of PR messaging and the necessity for transparency while addressing specific publics.

PR: Across the Disciplinary Divide

The relative lack of attention by rhetoricians to the rise of public relations in the United States is due, in part, to the disciplinary fragmentation of rhetoric toward the end of the nineteenth century, which pulled the study of rhetoric away from its theoretical, multidisciplinary, and civic



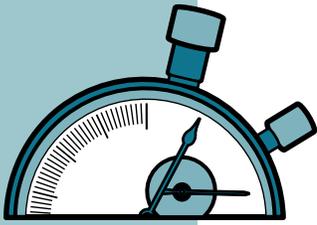
roots. A brief history of the formation of what Steven Mailloux calls “disciplinary identities” helps to explain how public relations and the broader functioning of public discourse were lost in this disciplinary shuffle, particularly in the early twentieth century as the rise of corporate public relations gained momentum in the United States.² By the early twentieth century, the realignment of humanities disciplines relegated the study of rhetoric to departments of English, reduced to the teaching of writing, and to departments of speech, reduced to the teaching of public speaking. As these burgeoning fields of study attempted to legitimate their institutional place, speech communication scholars wrote histories of public speaking that dominated rhetorical studies for the first three-quarters of the twentieth century until historians of rhetoric in English departments began to examine the history of writing instruction and the rise of the modern-day composition. Although pioneering studies by James Berlin, Sharon Crowley, and Nan Johnson, among others, offer important additions to the history of rhetoric, their particular historical and institutional moment required grounding their research in the teaching of writing and classroom practice, not in broader studies of rhetorical theory and practice applicable to public discourse and public relations.³

Though late twentieth-century communication studies scholarship considers aspects of public relations such as crisis communication and media relations, the focus tends to be on image management, practical strategies, and analysis of best practices with little attention given to the social,

political, and economic conditions in which particular discursive strategies are employed. Robert L. Heath’s introduction to *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations II*, a collection of essays geared toward communication studies scholars, identifies “the dawn of a new era” in public relations scholarship, particularly in the United States, where scholars will move beyond social scientific approaches and consider “judgments of meaning and the ways it is formed” (1). This new era incorporates consideration of “the assumptions and principles of the rhetorical heritages, social constructionism, discourse analysis, and critical theory”—topics that have long been addressed in rhetorical scholarship by scholars on the English side of the disciplinary divide (1). To clarify the use of the term *rhetoric* in the title of his book, Heath finds it necessary to explain that “rhetorical theory has its own body of ideas and principles” and means more than manipulation or spin (3). The fact that his intended audience may not be aware of the “rhetorical heritages” he mentions, let alone their applicability to their work, makes clear how deeply PR is caught in the institutional fragmentation of rhetoric. While contemporary rhetorical theory returns the theory and practice of rhetoric to its multidisciplinary and civic roots, much work remains to close the gap between English and communication studies to better understand the magnitude of the rise of public relations in the early twentieth century and its impact on contemporary public discourse.

PR: Behind the Scenes

However, it is not just the splintering of rhetoric in the academy that led



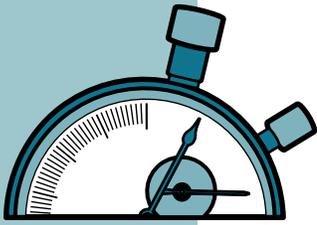
PR Guns for Hire

rhetorical scholars to overlook the role public relations and propaganda play in our contemporary world and in our histories of rhetoric. For rhetoricians, no less than for “the masses” imagined by Bernays, PR creates public images “privately,” in corporate centers of invention. Those who founded the field of public relations described themselves, in Bernays’s words, as “shrewd persons operating behind the scenes” who constituted an “invisible government” (61, 37). Because much of the work of the public relations counsel is strategically hidden, creating circumstances that appear to have occurred spontaneously, we need a fuller sense of how public relations became what Mark Dowie calls “a communication medium in its own right [and] an industry designed to alter perception, reshape reality and manufacture consent” (2).

Recent global events bring to light the theory and practice of behind-the-scenes image management. The campaign to soften Gadhafi’s image and to improve Libya’s international reputation occurred after the Bush administration worked to strengthen United States-Libyan relations. In 2004, the United States terminated sanctions and opened a Liaison Office in Tripoli, which was upgraded to a U.S. Embassy in 2006.⁴ Between 2006-2008, the Monitor Group, founded by professors from Harvard University, agreed to give Gadhafi an image makeover under a \$250,000 a month contract plus an open expense account of up to \$3 million (“Attention” 12). Their plan, paid for by the Libyan government, included an hour-long television program representing Gadhafi not as a dictator, but as an “individual thinker” (“Executive” 8).

The program included interviews by renowned British journalist David Frost and was to be followed by full-length biography, which never materialized (“Executive” 8; Corn and Mahanta). In the “Executive Summary,” the in-house document obtained and leaked by the National Conference of the Libyan Opposition, the Monitor Group listed as a “key outcome” increased media coverage that was “broadly positive and increasingly sensitive to the Libyan point of view” (2).⁵

The “Executive Summary” makes clear that the Monitor Group considered the media plan to be a “vital component” of their project. Monitor identified “high-caliber individuals” who would visit Libya, meet with Gadhafi, and follow their visits with lectures and publications about their experience. Benjamin Barber of Rutgers University and then Senior Fellow at the University of Southern California Center for Public Diplomacy visited Libya three times and wrote in the *Washington Post* of the possibility of Libya becoming “the first Arab state to transition peacefully and without Western intervention to a stable, non-autocratic government.”⁶ In response to *The Nation’s* request for clarification on payment received, Barber replied, “I did not take money from Qaddafi. The money to Monitor was coming from the Qaddafi Foundation,” an organization funded by Gadhafi’s son, “who was providing the impetus for reform” (Wiener). Barber continued, “Everyone gets paid. Consultants get paid, and I was paid by Monitor” (Wiener). Governments, corporations, for- and non-profit agencies, and individuals can and do employ the services of public relations consultants legally and ethically. However, without transparency in the



process of rehabilitating Gadhafi's image, the public has little opportunity to understand, let alone evaluate, world events. Monitor Group's campaign can be identified as Bernaysian in its laundering of rhetorical agency.⁷

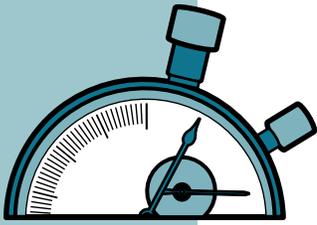
PR: Foreign Agents and Disclosure

In early March 2011, a week before news of the Monitor Group's multimillion-dollar lobbying campaign broke, Harvard professor Robert Putnam described his 2007 trip to Libya to meet Gadhafi in *The Wall Street Journal*. Putnam recalls the initial invitation from Monitor Group—through a former student—requesting him to visit Libya to discuss his research on civil society and democracy with Gadhafi. Putnam notes that “an international consulting firm that was advising the Libyan government on economic and policy reform” would pay his standard consulting fee. He agreed to go, the first time. When asked to return for a second visit, Putnam declined, concluding “that the whole exercise was a public-relations stunt.” Putnam's narration of events suggests that he was ostensibly invited to discuss his research and economic and political reform, not to participate in enhancing the profile of Libya and Gadhafi. Monitor Group's “Executive Summary” tells a different story: it claims success by “leverag[ing] the reputation of key influencers engaged in conversation with the Leader in highly public forums” (“Executive” 14). These forums included articles by or interviews with Monitor's “global thought leaders” in *Newsweek*, the *Financial Times*, *National Public Radio*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*.

Monitor Group's strategy of “establishing a dialogue with the international community through the media” by “showcasing and leveraging Libya's links to some of the world's influential thinkers” is not necessarily problematic in and of itself (“Executive” 13-14). But a discrepancy exists between the Monitor's stated strategy and the “high caliber intellectuals” understanding of their role. The Monitor Group's “Executive Summary” makes clear that the international consulting firm fully understood their lobbying and public relations role. Monitor identifies the function of “the world's foremost scholars and influencers” as “designed to elevate Libya's agenda to a more prominent global position” with the media strategy intended to “elevate and clearly communicate Libya's goals and agenda for the future” (“Executive” 3; emphasis added). The United States' Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA), originally intended to combat Nazi propaganda, provides a disclosure statute requiring U.S. firms who perform “acts in a public relations capacity for a foreign principal” to register their activities. FARA is intended to facilitate “evaluation by the government and the American people of the statements and activities of such persons in light of their function as foreign agents.” Evaluation is not possible without a clear understanding of what is at stake in the conversation; otherwise, we are left only with what Bernays calls the “intelligent manipulation [...] of the masses” (38).

PR: Propaganda or Lobbying?

The techniques used by the Monitor Group in their attempts to revise Gadhafi's image as a dictator share stark



PR Guns for Hire

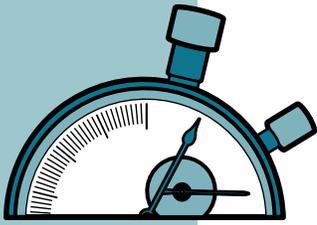
similarities with Edward Bernays's 1954 campaign to topple the Guatemalan government at the request of one of America's wealthiest corporations, the United Fruit Company. For an annual fee of likely more than \$100,000, Bernays orchestrated an image makeover for democratically elected Jacobo Arbenz Guzman by turning his leadership into a threat to American democracy.⁸ To disparage the popularly elected leader, Bernays played on increasing Cold War fears and brought journalists to Guatemala to report on its "instability." Arbenz was soon branded a communist and his government was overthrown by, in Bernays's words, an "army of liberation," consisting of 200 men trained by the CIA. Documents were made public following Bernays's death, which, according to biographer Larry Tye, provide "vivid detail [about] his behind the scenes maneuvering and show how, in 1954, he helped to topple" the Guatemalan government (156).

Likewise, not until Monitor Group's confidential documents were leaked did the public, including the readership of the media outlets that covered the story, gain a clear understanding of the PR campaign behind Libya's makeover. Responding to growing pressure from international media and continued unrest in Libya, the Monitor Group issued a statement asserting that "much of the recent commentary on our work in Libya does not capture accurately who we are, what we do, and what drives us" ("Statement"). In an effort to recurate their own image, Monitor reiterates that their work on behalf of Libya occurred during "a period of promise" when Gadhafi "had renounced terror, forfeited nuclear and chemical weapons and programs, and declared himself ready to rejoin

the community of nations," claiming to regret the short duration of that moment ("Statement"). Indicating that they will take accusations of lobbying "very seriously," Monitor launched an internal investigation and hired outside counsel who found that Monitor employees saw themselves as "economic analysts and management consultants," not as public relations counselors (Stockman). But a closer look led even the Monitor Group to concur that "some elements" of their work in Libya could be considered lobbying and "should have been registered under FARA" ("Regarding"). Monitor followed textbook crisis communication strategies of ethos-based self-management by acknowledging errors, taking responsibility, and taking action including "enhanced management training" (Stockman).

Conclusion: PR, Democracy, and Disclosure

From Bernays's Guatemalan intervention to Monitor Group's rehabilitation of Ghaddafi's image during his anti-democratic rule, a good word for dictators periodically issues forth from US public relations firms. Monitor Group's campaign failed to "protect and advance the free flow of accurate and truthful information"; likewise, it did not "foster informed decision making through open communication"—two of the Public Relations Society of America's principles for ethical practice.⁹ With multibillion dollar international "consulting" firms orchestrating the content of so much of our public discourse—the news; articles and stories across media outlets; lectures and publications by leading intellectuals, our politicians,

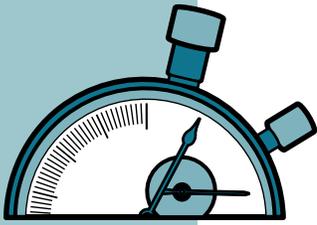


and our government—the state of civic discourse suffers. Without transparency in the process of rehabilitating Gadhafi’s image, or the private production of any “public” image, with the means themselves undisclosed, the free flow of accurate and truthful information is deeply hampered.

Nothing is inherently wrong with using public relations to relate with the public or to tell a story in the best possible light and in the most effective way. However, when corporations, businesses, or individuals present their stories as “news” or rely on “experts” or “spokespeople” who are being paid to speak or write about an idea, person or product in a way that may shape beliefs, policy or global standing, the audience has a right to know, and public relations firms and their clients have a duty to disclose. With a multibillion dollar global industry hard at work spinning our realities, realizing Bernays’s claim that “[v]irtually no important undertaking is now carried on without [public relations]...,” scholars of rhetoric across disciplines have much work to do to pull back the curtain on the special pleader and better understand how the rise of public relations in the United States has altered communication in contemporary democracy.

Endnotes

1. Gadhafi’s Arabic name can be and is transliterated in many different ways. I have opted to follow the Associated Press with Muammar Gadhafi.
2. The first chapter of Steven Mailloux’s *Disciplinary Identities: Rhetorical Paths of English, Speech, and Composition* offers a detailed account of how “by the middle of the twentieth century, rhetoric as the study of language arts found itself radically fragmented into separate disciplinary domains with faculty that did not, and, for the most part, still do not talk to each other” (32).
3. See Berlin’s *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges* and *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*; Crowley’s *The Methodical Memory: Invention in Current-Traditional Rhetoric*; and Johnson’s *Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric in North America*.
4. In early March 2011, the United States government cut ties with the Libyan government and imposed sanctions on the Gadhafi regime in response to its violent crackdown on protestors.
5. The “Executive Summary,” titled “Project to Enhance the Profile of Libya and Muammar Qadhafi,” is a typical document produced by the PR team for the client and is not intended for public distribution. This 32-page document contains a detailed overview of the work completed by the Monitor Group including “Goals of the Project,”



PR Guns for Hire

"Summary of Outcomes," "Action Plan" (cataloging the "visitors" who met with Gadhafi), and a section detailing Monitor's Ongoing Dialogue with Leading Individuals. The National Conference of the Libyan Organization released several other documents including the initial proposal for the project, a letter from Monitor's CEO to Gadhafi's head of military intelligence, Abd Allah al-Sanusi, who oversaw the Monitor campaign. The letter details the visits of leading intellectuals and discusses the financial arrangements including the \$250,000 monthly retainer. For a complete list of documents, see www.libya-nclo.com/DocinEnglish.aspx.

6. In addition to Joseph Nye and Benjamin Barber, other "high-caliber individuals" included the leading British intellectual Anthony Giddens, Harvard professor Robert Putnam, and philosopher and Professor of Political Economy Francis Fukuyama, among others. For a complete list, see "[Project to Enhance the Profile of Libya and Muammar Qadhafi](#)."

7. I follow Marilyn M. Cooper's sense of rhetorical agency as emergent, enacted, embodied, and distinct from postmodernism's decentered subject. See Cooper's recent "Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted."

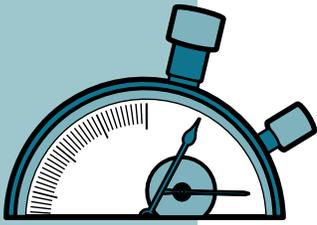
8. As Guatemala's primary landowner, employer, and exporter, United Fruit controlled the country for decades through pliable dictators until the election of Arbenz, who confiscated and returned 200,000 acres of United Fruit's land to the people of Guatemala. See Tye 165, 178.

9. In 2000, the Public Relations Society of America, the world's largest organization

for public relations professionals, revised the Code of Ethics from an "enforcement" model to an "inspiration" model, because their expensive and time-consuming investigations and lawsuits yielded little success. See Fitzpatrick, "PRSA Code of Ethics Moves from Enforcement to Inspiration."

Works Cited

- Barber, Benjamin. "[Gadhafi's Libya: An Ally for America?](#)" *Washington Post*. 15 Aug. 2007. Web. 5 May 2011.
- Berlin, James. *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987. Print.
- . *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984. Print.
- Bernays, Edward. *Propaganda*. 1928. Ig Publishing, 2004. Print.
- Cooper, Marilyn M. "Rhetorical Agency as Emergent and Enacted." *College Composition and Communication* 62:3 (Feb. 2011): 420-449. Print.
- Corn, David, and Siddhartha Mahanta. "[From Libya with Love](#)." *Mother Jones*. 3 Mar. 2011. Web. 5 May 2011.
- Crowley, Sharon. *The Methodical Memory: Invention in Current-Traditional Rhetoric*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990. Print.
- Dowie, Mark. Introduction. *Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*. Common Courage Press, 2002. Print.



Fitzpatrick, Kathy. "PRSA Code of Ethics Moves from Enforcement to Inspiration." *PRSA*. Public Relations Society of America, 2009-2011. Web. 21 Aug. 2011.

"[Foreign Agent Registration Act](#)." *The United States Department of Justice*. n.d. Web. 6 May 2011.

Heath, Robert L., Elizabeth Toth, and Damion Waymer, eds. *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations II*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.

Johnson, Nan. *Nineteenth-Century Rhetoric in North America*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1991. Print.

Mailloux, Steven. *Disciplinary Identities: Rhetorical Paths of English, Speech, and Composition*. New York: Modern Language Association, 2006. Print.

Monitor Group. "[For the attention of Mr. 'Abd Allah al-Sanusi](#)." *The National Conference of the Libyan Opposition*. 3 July 2006. Web. 14 Sept. 2011.

---. "[Executive Summary: Project to Enhance the Profile of Libya and Muammar Qadhafi](#)." *The National Conference of the Libyan Opposition*. 20 Mar. 2009. Web. 24 Mar. 2011.

---. "[Regarding F.A.R.A. Registration](#)." *Monitor*. 6 May 2011. Web. 31 May 2011.

---. "[Statement by Monitor Group Concerning Libya](#)." *Monitor*. Web. 24 Mar. 2011.

Nye, Joseph S. "[Tripoli Diarist](#)." *The New Republic*. 10 Dec. 2007. Web. 5 May 2011.

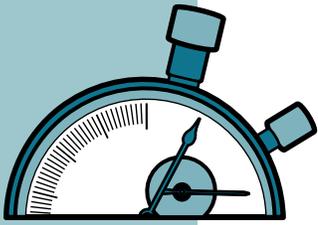
[PRSA](#). [Public Relations Society of America](#). 2009-2011. Web. 21 Aug. 2011.

Putnam, Robert D. "[With Libya's Megalomania 'Philosopher King'](#)." *The Wall Street Journal*. 26 Feb. 2011. Web. 5 May 2011.

Stockman, Farrah. "Firm Says it Erred on Libyan Consulting." *Boston Globe*. 6 May 2011. Web. 6 May 2011.

Tye, Larry. *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays and the Birth of Public Relations*. New York: Crown, 1998. Print.

Wiener, Jon. "[Professors Paid by Qaddafi: Providing 'Positive Public Relations'](#)." *The Notion: The Nation's Group Blog*, 5 Mar. 2011. Web. 5 May 2011.



PR Guns for Hire

Sharon J. Kirsch is an Assistant Professor of English and Rhetorical Studies at Arizona State University, where she also serves as a Co-Facilitator for the Philosophy, Rhetoric and Literature Faculty Research Cluster. She has published in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *The Feminist Wire*, and *Women and Language*. Her current book project, *Gertrude Stein and the Canons of Rhetoric*, reinterprets an iconic literary figure as a major twentieth-century rhetorician.

