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PR! - A Social History Of Spin



Synopsis

The early years of the twentieth century were a difficult period for Big Business. Corporate monopolies, the brutal exploitation of labor, and unscrupulous business practices were the target of blistering attacks from a muckraking press and an increasingly resentful public. Corporate giants were no longer able to operate free from the scrutiny of the masses. "The crowd is now in the saddle," warned Ivy Lee, one of America's first corporate public relations men. "The people now rule. We have substituted for the divine right of kings, the divine right of the multitude." Unless corporations developed means for counteracting public disapproval, he cautioned, their future would be in peril. Lee's words heralded the dawn of an era in which corporate image management was to become a paramount feature of American society. Some corporations, such as AT&T, responded inventively to the emergency. Others, like Standard Oil of New Jersey (known today as Exxon), continued to fumble the PR ball for decades. The Age of Public Relations had begun. In this long-awaited, pathbreaking book, Stuart Ewen tells the story of the Age unfolding: the social conditions that brought it about; the ideas that inspired the strategies of public relations specialists; the growing use of images as tools of persuasion; and, finally, the ways that the rise of public relations interacted with the changing dynamics of public life itself. He takes us on a vivid journey into the thinking of PR practitioners—from Edward Bernays to George Gallup—exploring some of the most significant campaigns to mold the public mind, and revealing disturbing trends that have persisted to the present day. Using previously confidential sources, and with the aid of dozens of illustrations from the past hundred years, Ewen sheds unsparing light on the contours and contradictions of American democracy on the threshold of a new millennium.

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Customer Reviews

It took to me nearly one month to sit down and write about this book. It has valuable strenghts and some weaknesses.As a whole, "PR!" makes no easy reading.It is sold as a "Social History of Spin" and consists of five parts.Part one tells us about the interest of the author - his attempt to discover the social and historical roots that would explain the boundless role of public relations in our world.This is the best part of the book, it's fresh, it's written full of enthusiasm, and it feels; Stuart Ewen tells us of his visit with Edward Bernays, one of the most influential pioneers of American public relations.Ewen describes how he started teaching his course, the "CULT(ure) of Publicity"; how he and his students made the class "look good", "look interesting" in the presence of an unaware journalist, so to meet the reporter's standard of "intriguing".If you are interested in how spin works, this first part is a must!Parts two and three really are a social history of spin.Page after page, Ewen writes a "grim meditation on the human price of industrialization".Mmmh.I think this book is very smart. Why? The author brings us examples from the past, and extensively quotes other's sources. Here's an excerpt (as Upton Sinclair summarized it in 1908):"See, we are just like Rome. Our legislatures are corrupt; our politicians are unprincipled; our rich men are ambitious and unscrupulous. Our newspapers have been purchased and gagged; our colleges have been bribed; our churches have been cowed. Our masses are sinking into degradation and misery; our ruling classes are becoming wanton and cynical".

Public relations (PR) has become so pervasive that its very existence almost goes undetected. Some of it remains on such a level of subtlety that many observers would never notice. Seeing PR requires knowing what to look for. It lurks in obvious places such as advertising and political dialogue. But it can also appear in less obvious places such as photography, movies, television shows and news stories. Once it makes itself known the realization that the modern world is literally covered with PR hits home like a flail to the torso. This realization can dig so deep that one's own identity can even come into question. How much of who we are, what we believe in, and our framework of the world has come from public relations offices? Probably a fair amount. Decoding this miasma of stratified information would encumber a lifetime. Stuart Ewen, the author of this very ambitious history of public relations, struggles with this same question in chapter two. After all,

Where is the objective frame of reference for studying something as *Äber alles* as PR? Perhaps such a perspective exemplifies philosopher Thomas Nagel's "view from nowhere." "PR! A Social History of Spin" covers a lot of infrequently covered ground. How many have heard of the now defunct United States Committee of Public Relations (CPI)? Or the philosophy of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM)? It's all here. Roughly, the book covers attitudes towards and potential controlling of "the crowd" or "the public" from 1907 to the 1980s. The definition of "public relations" remains elusive throughout, but it takes on various meanings through the delineation of its history over some 400 pages. In the end, "public relations" involves a mosaic of multifarious concepts, attitudes and methodologies.

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