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**Robert L. Heath**  
*University of Houston*

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## CHAPTER 37

# Being Public

## *Publicity as Public Relations*

Kirk Hallahan

**P**ublicity involves the use of communication to make an entity publicly known. One dictionary defines publicity as “the state or quality of being public”—and suggests that publicity is an “act or device to attract public interest” and support (*Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, 2009). *Being public* thus implies visibility, attention, prominence, identification, understanding, and openness—and is the opposite of being private or secretive.

Modern public relations (PR) originated with publicity, although the term has generally fallen out of favor except in segments of the public relations practice devoted to promotion of creative works such as movies, plays, and books. Yet publicity—in the broad sense of an entity acting in public view—is a necessary condition for effective public relations. Indeed, “PR = performance + recognition.”

For the past half century, publicity has been narrowly defined within public relations to mean obtaining media coverage in the news and entertainment portions of newspapers, magazines, television, and radio. However, publicity can be

defined more generically as the “dissemination of information and materials.” In this sense, advertising and publicity are equivalent, and the paid use of the former can even be viewed as a tool for obtaining the latter.

The distinction between the broad and narrow senses of *publicity* is important in today's rapidly changing communication environment where practitioners use a combination of public media and direct communication vehicles to reach publics. Moreover, when critics refer to questionable public relations practices, they are usually referring to the *publicity* aspects of public relations—not its assessment, planning, or counseling functions.

As this chapter suggests, publicity is a metaconstruct that can be examined from professional, historical, managerial, economic, interpersonal, behavioral, cultural, critical, philosophical, ethical, legal, and technological perspectives. Moreover, publicity provides an alternative and potentially valuable paradigm for understanding how entities of all types promote themselves—including individuals and institutions.

## Professional Perspectives

Reaching the public is a primary reason why clients retain public relations consultants, recruit public relations volunteers, and establish public relations departments. Publicity skills also represent the principal focus of tactical training in public relations programs offered by educational institutions in the United States. Publicity can be deployed for various purposes in all four of the basic kinds of public relations programs.

1. Promotional programs
  - Create awareness; promote trial; and encourage repeat use of products and services.
2. Relational programs
  - Maintain mutually beneficial patterns of interaction and exchanges by key stakeholders.
3. Issues management programs
  - Create awareness and understanding, marshal support, and prompt action related to a social problem, public policy matter, or dispute.
4. Crisis communication programs
  - Provide information, give directions, explain organizational actions, or assume (or deny) responsibility during periods of uncertainty following an extraordinary event.

Publicity about an entity can be initiated either internally or externally and can be either favorable or unfavorable. This suggests the four-part typology illustrated in Figure 37.1.

*Controlled* publicity involves favorable messages generated by an entity that helps advance its mission or cause and appears before audiences essentially as desired. *Compromised* publicity entails messages modified substantially by a third party when being distributed (such as by the news media) and might harm achievement of the entity's goal. Problems include errors, favorable information about competitors, alternative solutions to a problem or situation, or negative comments. *Corroborative* publicity is generated by a third party that supports an entity's purpose or position on an issue. Examples include, but are not limited to, reports issued by outside organizations, endorsements by prominent people, and favorable media news reports, editorials, or reviews. *Countervailing* publicity is generated by critics or competitors and can work against the interests of the entity by mentioning contradictory information, criticisms, or attacks.

Importantly, controlled or corroborative publicity does not always need to be positively valenced. Indeed, a neutral tone, the avoidance of hype, and inclusion of some negative information can lend credence to the arguments presented and accrue credibility to the source. This phenomenon has been observed in terms of *language expectancy theory* (Burgoon, Denning, & Roberts, 2002; Hallahan, 1999a), the *paradox of the positive* (Heath & Waymer, 2009), *inoculation theory* (Szabo & Pfau, 2002), and *stealing thunder*

**Figure 37.1** A Typology of Publicity

Valence	Source	
	Internal	External
Favorable	Controlled	Corroborative
Unfavorable	Compromised	Countervailing

or the purposeful release of negative information in a crisis (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Similarly, compromised and countervailing publicity can help advance a cause by encouraging public consideration or discussion of the arguments.

## Historical Perspectives

The antecedents to modern publicity date to the use of drums among tribal peoples and the dissemination of papyrus leaflets promoting farming practices in ancient Iraq. For-profit and not-for-profit organizations have used publicity to promote their activities since the 16th century (Cutlip, 1995).

The emergence of modern publicity in the early 20th century reflected the increased complexity of society, the emergence of large and complex institutions, the heightened pluralism and diversity in society, and people's dependence on organizations. The trend also reflected Progressive Era ideals about the rational nature of people, the emerging power of large newspapers and magazines, and the attacks on corporations and government by muckraking journalists (Cutlip, 1994; Ewen, 1996; Thompson, 2003).

*Publicity* was the term most often used to describe public relations activities in the early 20th century. Although he occasionally described his role as being an "advisor on public relations" as early as 1916 (Raucher, 1968, p. 122), public relations pioneer Ivy L. Lee (1925) almost always called his craft *publicity*. Definitions of publicity at the time were strikingly similar to modern descriptions of public relations (I. L. Lee, 1925, p. 8; Wilder & Buell, 1923, p. 6). Publicity eventually subsumed *press-agentry*—the practice of obtaining notices in newspapers about plays, books, lectures, and movies—and was used interchangeably with press-agentry and public relations in the 1930s (Washburn, 1937).

Publicity's impact raised considerable public concern by the early 1900s (Hallahan, 2002; Lucarelli, 1993; Russell & Bishop, 2009). Despite the success of wartime government information programs (Creel, 1972a, 1972b; Lasswell, 1927),

*propaganda* was considered a scourge by the end of World War I. Not surprisingly, savvy practitioners like Edward L. Bernays started using "counsel on public relations" as an innocuous and more dignified term to describe publicity work (Bernays, 1923, 1965; Curtis, 2005). At the same time, a spate of books appeared on the topic (Cutlip, 1994; Raucher, 1968; Wilder & Buell, 1923). In 1922, journalist Walter Lippmann (1922) observed, "The development of the publicity man is a clear sign that the facts of modern life do not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known. They must be given shape by somebody" (p. 218).

## Managerial Perspectives

Publicity is a form of *management communication* used to lead organizations.

## Organization of the Function

The first publicity department for a corporation was established by Westinghouse in 1889. Traditionally, the publicity function focused on external media relations. Managers of the early 20th century, who often focused on efficiency and control, centralized publicity in public relations departments where the function could be controlled (L. A. Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). But postmodern management approaches suggest that publicity can and ought to be decentralized (Hallahan, 2007). Today, publicity is an important function both *outside* and *within* organizations and can be pursued by units such as marketing communications, investor relations, employee communications, and even corporate journalism (Kounalakis, Banks, & Daus, 1999).

The focus on publicity as a management tool—not merely a promotional vehicle—began in the early 20th century when practitioners like I. L. Lee convinced corporate executives to look at situations from the public's perspective and to provide factual and accurate news to the press. Meanwhile, public relations pioneers like Arthur W. Page stressed the importance of supplying

information directly to employees and other stakeholders. Publicity played an important tactical role as businesses embraced public relations during the early half of the 20th century (Ewen, 1996; Olasky, 1987; Raucher, 1968; Safire, 1963; Tedlow, 1979). Yet, today, most large complex organizations pay little strategic attention to publicity at the executive level. Publicity suffers from any kind of strategic or long-term planning (Doorley & Garcia, 2007; Holstein, 2008).

### Publicity Seeking and Avoidance

Most entities seek controlled publicity that helps advance their mission and strive to avoid compromised or countervailing publicity. Organizations not only release information routinely in the form of news and feature stories but also stage *pseudo events* (Boorstin, 1960), *spectacles* (Debord, 1995; Spencer, 2000), and *stunts* (Fuhrman, 1989) that have no other purpose than to generate attention. Entities obsessed with gaining exposure are referred to as *publicity hounds*.

Some organizations purposely shun publicity. The 11th Tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous (2009), for example, emphasizes attraction rather than promotion and stresses maintaining the anonymity of members in the media. Legitimate reasons for publicity avoidance include (a) the unintended or premature disclosure of business plans, (b) the disclosure of proprietary information (such as a trade secret), and (c) security concerns about crimes against senior and other personnel. Other reasons include (d) executive shyness or fear, (e) distrust or disdain for the media, (f) concerns about misrepresentation, (g) lack of personnel with publicity skills, and (h) worries about repercussions resulting from publicity gone awry (see Doorley & Garcia, 2007; Grant, 1995).

### Strategic Uses

Publicity serves as a strategic management tool in at least five ways:

First, publicity can be used to *signal an entity's planned activities* to the marketplace. Preannouncements about future activities provide

implicit clues (and often explicit instructions) for how vendors, business partners, distributors, suppliers, customers, competitors, investors, public officials, or employees should anticipate an entity's forthcoming actions (e.g., gear up production or defer purchases).

Second, publicity allows entities to articulate their values and goals publicly. Thus, publicity serves an educational function for employees and other stakeholders and can explain the entity's aims and activities. Publicity thus also sets a standard against which performance can be later judged. Importantly, stakeholders assess the verisimilitude of publicity by comparing an entity's words with their personal experience.

Third, publicity helps an entity fulfill its mission by stimulating stakeholder behaviors that contribute to revenue or other performance goals. Stakeholder actions can include buying, investing, donating, working, voting, adopting spiritual beliefs, engaging in prosocial activities, and avoiding risk. In marketing, publicity often *supplements* or serves an *alternative* (in the absence of adequate budget) for advertising, direct selling, or sales promotion (Hallahan, 1996). While initially resisted by advertising professionals (Tedlow, 1979), publicity today plays a critical role in *integrated marketing communication* (Hallahan, 2007).

Fourth, publicity is a tool that can be used for *impression management* or to enhance an entity's *reputation*. People prefer to identify with and be affiliated with entities with good reputations (Doorley & Garcia, 2007; van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Positive reputation alternatively can be measured in terms of perceived goodwill and brand equity. Reputation operates as a heuristic that enables people to make judgments about an entity without having in-depth knowledge of or a relationship with the entity (Hallahan, 2000b).

Fifth, publicity represents a publicly accessible historical record of an entity's activities. Newspaper clippings, digital archives, employee publications, and other publicity records serve as artifacts that chronicle an entity's evolution.

## Assessment

Demonstrating publicity's effectiveness remains a managerial challenge. Although the metrics for media publicity measurement are well known, most publicists and their clients rely on subjective assessments or readily available circulation figures or readership/viewership/access data. Actual impact is often imputed because the costs of more rigorous assessments (such as surveys to measure awareness, attitudes, or behavioral intent) can easily equal or exceed the expenditures for the activity being measured. When measurement is applied to larger, multifaceted campaigns, the challenge becomes distinguishing between the effect of publicity and that of all other campaign components. In the same vein, calculating publicity's *return on investment* is conceptually straightforward (Merims, 1972; McElreath, 1997), but requires identifying fully the amount spent and agreeing on the percentage that publicity (vs. all other efforts) contributed to the results obtained. Alternatively, clients have a penchant to assess publicity's costs and benefits in terms of space or time equivalency to advertising—a dubious exercise because the two content classes are not directly comparable.

## Economic Perspectives

For economists, publicity is a tool of *social coordination* that enables entities to signal the availability of resources and to communicate incentives in order to match consumption to production (Wills, 1997). Publicity information is a *public good* that can be reproduced and reused without depleting its value.

## Publicity and Economic Behavior

Classical economics assumes that people are rational beings. Publicity facilitates decision making and exchanges in a free market economy to the extent that the information is material and complete. However, available information is rarely perfect (*symmetrical*). Thus, publicity can bias decision making, resulting in irrational choices. Examples of this phenomenon include reliance on price or quality ratings found in

magazines such as *Consumer Reports* (Archibald, Haulman, & Moody, 1983).

Publicity hype has contributed to frenzied economic activity dating back to the Dutch Tulip Bubble of 1624, and today primes confidence in the economy during periods of both recession and recovery. Brennan and Pettit (2004) argued that publicity can affect performance through what they term the *economy of esteem*: Publicity increases the size of an entity's audience and thus an entity's reputation or prestige, which in turn provides incentives for the entity to perform. Behavioral economists have demonstrated the effects of news and publicity on economic transactions and movements in a variety of contexts. Among these are trading and investments, financial planning, public procurement, real estate and construction, international trade, and demand for consumer products considered hazardous.

## Publicity and Economic Structures

Neoclassical economists challenge the premise of the rational consumer and the effectiveness of free markets. Transaction cost analysis, for example, suggests that organizations will abandon market mechanisms and enter into hierarchical relationships whenever costs are lower (Podnar, Lah, & Golob, 2009; Williamson, 1996). Resource dependency theory similarly posits that organizations will establish relationships with others to obtain needed resources and will maximize the dependence of others on them (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). In such cases, publicity facilitates relationship formation and maintenance by supplying vital information that promotes or reinforces the benefits of such arrangements. In systems theory, publicity similarly represents the outputs and inputs used by boundary-spanning units.

## Publicity and Media Economics

Publicists are a key component in a society's extended *public information system* (Cutlip, 1994). Estimates suggest that 40% or more of news content originates with or involves publicity sources (Cutlip, 1989). Extensive research has examined the media's reliance on public relations-generated

materials and the role of publicists in the production of news (for a review, see Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997; Sallot, Steinfatt, & Salwen, 1998).

As *sources* of news, publicists and their clients operate as *information sponsors* that subsidize news media operations. Gandy (1982) explained that an *information subsidy* involves a party interested in influencing government, media, or other organizations and who bears the cost of generating information favorable to the party's position (see also Curtin, 1999; McManus, 1994, 1995; Turk, 1986). Publicists and their clients reduce the cost of media news gathering by facilitating efficient *work routines* for media workers (Tuchman, 1978) and by providing *official sources* (Fishman, 1980; Gans, 2003). These institutionalized arrangements bias the news production process. This phenomenon is best illustrated by the membership press clubs (*kisha kurabu*) through which much media publicity is distributed in Japan (Schudson, 2003).

Information subsidies take three basic forms—and these represent the three core strategies used in all publicity. First, publicists supply *materials* that can be used as is or require only modest editing. Prepackaged information saves media time and money by eliminating the need to create content from scratch. Second, publicists arrange for *spokespersons* to deliver information in readily accessible forms such as speeches, testimony, or media interviews. Third, publicists organize provocative *events* that journalists and others are invited to attend. Events are easy and compelling ways for media personnel to experience an idea, individual, or institution.

## Interpersonal Perspectives

Beyond institutional exchanges, publicity depends heavily on interpersonal communication or exchanges. These include *publicist-gatekeeper negotiations*, *spokesperson exchanges*, and *audience information sharing*.

### Publicist-Gatekeeper Negotiations

To gain access to major speech platforms, governmental bodies, or media, publicists often propose

("pitch" or "sell") an idea and then negotiate arrangements with a designated organizational representative or *gatekeeper*. Examples of gatekeepers include program chairs for major speech forums, staff members for legislative bodies conducting hearings, and media editors or producers (Shoemaker & Vos, 2008). Gatekeeping involves subprocesses of screening and selection, and the accompanying negotiation is a dyadic process in which each party pursues a distinct role and goal (Belz, Talbott, & Starck, 1989; Charron, 1989). The publicist seeks exposure for a client, while the gatekeeper wants to advance the organization's mission or agenda. Such negotiations are *transactional exchanges* (McManus, 1994, 1995) and can be analyzed in terms of *game theory* (Murphy, 1989) where the parties seek a mutually beneficial ("win-win") outcome. Both negotiators can grant *rewards* or impose *punishments* by allowing or blocking access to the party they represent. Negotiators use the authority, stature, or knowledge of the party they represent as leverage. French and Raven (1959) referred to these as *legitimate*, *referent*, and *expert* power, respectively.

Much publicity work involves *relational exchanges* wherein the parties strive for an ongoing pattern of mutually beneficial exchanges, not just a single transaction. Social exchange theory suggests that people will maintain such relationships until the point when perceived costs exceed perceived benefits (Prior-Miller, 1989). Lobbyists, agents representing artists, and media relations specialists all generally recognize the potential value of future access. So all of them try to establish and maintain positive relationships with gatekeepers by using their professional training and experience to anticipate and accommodate the needs, production processes, and protocols followed by gatekeepers (Taylor, 2009).

### Spokesperson Exchanges

Interpersonal communication plays a critical role whenever a spokesperson shares information with others. A publicist who negotiates access might also serve as a spokesperson. However, clients often assume the separate

spokesperson role by giving a speech, testifying before a government body, or being interviewed. These interactions usually involve another key person who talks with or questions the spokesperson—the emcee at a speech, the chairman of a legislative panel, or a media interviewer. As with publicist-gatekeeper negotiations, the parties in spokesperson interactions have distinct roles and goals. The spokesperson is the expert source of information whose goal is to persuasively communicate key messages (*talking points*) in a compelling and persuasive way. The role of the host is to facilitate the presentation and thus advance the mission or agenda of the sponsoring organization—whether through cordial hospitality or tough interrogation. The host can also serve as an audience's representative to ask the questions that audiences would ask if they could do so.

Importantly, spokespersons engage in a *dialogue* (not monologue) when presenting information and often can pose questions and obtain valuable feedback. Serving as a spokesperson, regardless of the venue, requires careful training and preparation and knowledge of the dynamics of successful interpersonal communication (Knapp & Daly, 2002). Spokespersons must “stay on message” while following learned routines, customs, and communication rules (Berger, 2002; Len-Rios, 2008; Pearson, 1989). Complaints about spokesperson interactions or interviews usually can be explained by the fact that one of the parties either (a) impeded the other party from achieving a desired goal or (b) violated the other party's expectations based on explicit or implicit rules of conduct.

### Audience Information Sharing

Many publicity campaigns focus on *word-of-mouth* advertising or *buzz marketing*, where the aim is to prompt audiences to share information with others (Hughes, 2005; Thorne, 2008). As part of the resulting conversations, audience members thus become as *advocates* or *evangelists*. Publicity and social marketing campaigns commonly employ multitier approaches, where a portion or all of the effort is

intentionally targeted to information *intermediaries* because of their roles or stature in a community or organization and their abilities to reach the ultimate target audiences. Examples include distributors and retailers who share product information with consumers, financial analysts who make recommendations to individual investors, and health care providers who advise at-risk populations and their families or friends. Individuals with strong knowledge or involvement in a topic can play critical roles in a publicity program as sources of *interpersonal influence* and *social support*—consistent with the theories of the *two-step flow of mass communication* and *opinion leadership* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

## Behavioral Perspectives

### Publicity as Persuasion

Publicity attempts to influence people's knowledge, attitudes, or actions. These represent the *cognitive*, *affective*, and *conative* dimensions of human behavior recognized by psychologists (Christen & Hallahan, 2005). As a form of *persuasion*, publicity uses communication (vs. physical force, patronage, or purchase) to influence others (Miller & Levene, 2008), including the formation and maintenance of mutually beneficial organizational-public relationships.

Contrary to early theorizing that suggested persuasion effects were uniform and driven by human instincts, behavioral research suggests a wide variety of factors influence the persuasion process. Among these, audiences engage in *selective perceptions*, *attention*, and *retention* of publicity messages based on their interests. Publicity can also have a differential effect based on the degree to which groups are information advantaged or information disadvantaged and are in a position to use new information (Gaziano & Gaziano, 2008). Publicists and other persuaders thus must enhance the *motivation*, *ability*, and *opportunity* to process publicity (Hallahan, 2000a).

Persuasion process models suggest that people respond to persuasive messages in two ways—that



is, there are two routes to persuasion (Chaiken, Wood, & Eagly, 1996; Petty, Briñol, & Priester, 2009). Individuals with high involvement in a topic will systematically or effortfully consider the quality of arguments presented—while individuals for whom a topic has low relevance or consequence are less attentive and engaged in processing messages. Instead, low-involvement individuals are cognitive misers who rely on simple peripheral or heuristic cues to make judgments. In the context of publicity, such cues might include the association of an entity with a respected organization or cause, or involvement by prominent public figures or celebrity endorsers. Other examples include the appearance of a news story in a particularly prestigious medium, or merely whether a topic is covered in the news at all. Hallahan (1999a, 1999b) argued that the much-touted *third-party endorsement* effect attributed to media news can be explained as a form of heuristic processing.

### Publicity, Awareness, and Learning

Behavioral effects from publicity are rooted in learning the content of publicity messages. *Diffusion of innovation theory* suggests that the adoption of new ideas involves a sequence of steps or *hierarchy of effects* that involves knowledge, persuasion, trial, decision, and reinforcement (Rogers, 2003). Alternative approaches suggest that emotion can be critical: People can become aroused or involved, which then prompts them to learn (Christen & Hallahan, 2005; Hallahan, 2001). Learning can involve thoughtful consideration of arguments, the use of heuristic cues, or simple observation and emulation as posited in *social learning theory* (Bandura, 2009). Anecdotal evidence about the effectiveness of observed publicity can be evidenced in *fads* and *crazes*, the perpetuation of *myths* and *legends*, and risky *copycat behaviors* (pranks, crimes, and suicides) patterned after media portrayals.

Publicity, like all communications messages, stimulates thinking through a process of *priming*, where particular memory nodes (also referred to as schemas or associative networks) are stimulated so that new information is categorized and understood in the context of particular preexisting memory

traces or knowledge (Kosicki, 2002; Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2009). Publicity thus strives to make particular knowledge more readily available and accessible in memory. Publicity's effect on awareness is evident in media *agenda-setting* research, which demonstrates a strong correspondence between media coverage and the topics that people report as being on their minds or that they talk about with others. Similarly, people think about the *attributes* of a topic in the same way those attributes are covered in the media (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009; Valenzuela & McCombs, 2008).

### Publicity and Intent

Beyond awareness, publicity is used to help crystallize positive attitudes and prompt desired actions. In the absence of the ability to control actual future behavior, much publicity is directed at fostering *behavioral intent*, which can serve as a proxy measure of probable behavior based on the psychological theories of *reasoned action* and *planned behavior* (Christen & Hallahan, 2005; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Creating behavioral intent is the goal of information campaigns that seek commitments to support prosocial causes (Rice & Atkin, 2009) as well as promises from people to pursue healthy behaviors (Atkin & Silk, 2008). Political polls are essentially measures of behavioral intent that assess plans to vote for particular candidates or ballot measures or to support public policy initiatives based on electioneering or exposure in public forums (Kaid, 2008).

### Negative Publicity

Extensive research on decision making has demonstrated the overwhelming effects of negative information. People react more strongly to negative information suggesting the prospect of hazard or loss than to positively valenced messages that promise gains (Hallahan, 1999c). This phenomenon reflects people's autonomic responses and automatic vigilance that guards them against danger (Pratto & John, 1991). Negative psychological reactions require organizations to respond to *crises*, *risky situations*, and *controversies or disputes*

involving clients. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that people suffer discomfort when presented contradictory information and seek cognitive balance (Cooper, 2007). Importantly, audiences with direct personal experiences with a situation are more likely to dismiss negative publicity inconsistent with their experience. Or more negative publicity might prompt others to reevaluate their knowledge based on new information. For individuals with negative personal experiences, negative publicity resonates with and reinforces negative perceptions. Negative publicity can result in unfavorable purchase intent related to products and brands or the avoidance of entities accused of malfeasance or corporate irresponsibility based on a person's knowledge or values.

### Credibility and Contextual Effects

More than a half-century of research suggests that publicity is more effective when the source, spokesperson, vehicle, or channel presenting a persuasive message demonstrates a higher level of *credibility*—as measured in *trustworthiness*, *expertise*, *independence*, or *attractiveness*. However, even information from a low credibility source can be effective if people later dissociate message content and sources in memory—the so-called sleeper effect (Self, 2008).

The format or *content class* in which publicity appears also biases assessments of the publicity messages. People consistently report that they prefer to obtain information and recommendations about products, services, and public affairs from friends or family. When asked to choose, people say that they think news is more credible than advertising and prefer to obtain information about products from news reports rather than advertising (Hallahan, 1999b). Experiments analyzing the comparative effectiveness of media publicity versus media advertising have provided mixed results but draw into question the contention that media publicity is uniformly more effective than advertising. But most experiments presumably force participants to actually process the message (e.g., see Hallahan, 1999a). Because people react negatively to persuasion attempts (Burgoon, Alvaro, Grandpre, & Voulodakis, 2002), evidence

suggests that people are more likely to avoid, resist, or discount advertising compared with publicity messages. Whereas people think that *advertising sells*, publicity's advantage might be that people think *publicity tells*. Hallahan (1999a) argued that more attentiveness or openness to publicity results from people deploying different format-related schemas or cognitive rules for processing persuasive messages. This phenomenon is particularly relevant to the new emerging content classes found on the Internet (Wang, 2009) where the promotional intent of message formats (such as blogs or social networking profiles) are not always clear to users. Similarly, audiences can become confused about *hybrid messages* (advertorials, video news releases, product placements, edutainment, etc.) where the message's persuasive purpose is often obfuscated (Balasubramanian, 1994; Goodman, 2006).

### Publicity Uses and Knowledge

People *depend* on the information provided to them through publicity in living their daily lives (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) and are motivated to use publicity to various purposes. Cognitive needs include surveillance of the environment, solving problems, and the desire for intellectual stimulation known as *need for cognition* (Hallahan, 2008). Other uses of publicity can be examined from a *uses-and-gratifications perspective* and include the formation of *personal identities*, *social utility* (the usefulness of the information for social vs. problem-solving purposes), and *diversion/entertainment* (Papacharissi, 2008; Rubin, 2009).

Interestingly, people's responses to publicity and other persuasion attempts vary based on their knowledge of persuasion processes (Friestad & Wright, 1994). In general, people are ignorant about publicity processes—such as how news makes its way into the media. They are also generally unaware of how publicity might affect them: People tend to underestimate the effect of mediated publicity on them but overstate its effects on others—a phenomenon known as *third-person effect* (Perloff, 2009). They are also unaware of *cultivation effects* or how consumption of heavy

concentrations of unbalanced publicity fare might distort their views of social reality (Shrum, 2009; Signorelli & Morgan, 2008). Finally, people generally don't recognize how their group memberships (*social identification*) can bias their media choices and their interpretation of information that contradicts their worldviews. This effect is commonly evidenced in complaints about *media bias* and observed as the *hostile media phenomenon* (Eveland, 2002).

## Cultural Perspectives

### Publicity and the Social Construction of Culture and Social Reality

As a major source of ideas in people's lives, publicity is integrally involved in the creation of culture—the systems of beliefs, values, ideals, traditions, customs, and mores that characterize a society and the subcultures or communities within it. Publicity serves essentially the same functions in society as the mass media: surveillance, correlation, transmission, entertainment, and mobilization (Lasswell, 1948; Wright, 1975).

Publicists help construct the social reality or worldviews shared among individuals and groups through recommendations about actions that clients should undertake and through *rhetoric*, or the use of culturally significant mediating symbols: words, images, and sounds. As with all rhetoric, publicity involves a process of signification whereby message producers ascribe and recipients derive meaning (Heath, Toth, & Waymer, 2009). Publicity can contribute to introspective processes such as *sense making* (Dervin, 1992; Weick, 1995) and can be examined using *symbolic interactionism*, which argues that people derive meaning through interactions with others (Blumer, 1969). *Structuration theory* suggests that publicity serves as a structural property that can be drawn on by social actors as they create or transform an institutional relationship or other social relationships and structures in their own discourse.

### Publicity as Narrative

As rhetors, publicists help create a *persona* (personality) for an entity by creating an image and giving the entity a "voice." Group, organizational, and corporate *narratives* (Gilpin, 2008) can be delivered in the form of *lectures*, where a source speaks directly to the audience, or *dramas*, where players in a scene act out a situation and audiences draw their own conclusions (Wells, 1989). Both lectures and dramas can be analyzed using rhetorical tools such as Aristotle's *persuasion triad* (logos, pathos, ethos), Burke's (1969) *dramatic pentad* (act, scene, agent, agency, purpose), Toulmin's (1958) *argument analysis* (grounds, warrants, backing, rebuttal, qualifiers, claims), *frame analysis* (Goffman, 1974), or *sociodrama* (Mickey, 2003).

Publicity employs argumentation, evidence, emotion, and figurative language (see reviews in Dillard & Pfau, 2002; Walton, 2007). Much of how publicity works also can be explained through *framing theory*—how message producers prime audiences by focusing attention on only particular aspects of a situation while excluding others (Hallahan, 1999c; Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). Framing devices include *catchphrases*, *depictions*, *metaphors*, *exemplars*, and *visual imagery* (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992). Publicity involving issues or disputes can also entail *claims making*, where social problems are identified through a process of *typification*, where situations are characterized as of a particular category familiar to the audience. Claims makers not only use argumentation and framing techniques but also employ *celebrities*, *large and official numbers*, and *symbols* (Best, 1987; Salmon, 1990). Many of the rhetorical devices used in publicity are variations on propaganda devices identified in the 1930s—*name-calling*, *glittering generalities*, *transfer*, *testimonial*, *plain folks*, *card stacking*, and *bandwagon* (A. M. Lee & Lee, 1972). Importantly, effective publicity and rhetoric draw on the core values in a society, the enduring values of gatekeepers (Gans, 2003), and the inherent *news values* of information (Brighton & Foy, 2007).

## Publicity, Identification, and Community

As an alternative model to persuasion, Burke (1969) argued that the fundamental process that people use to connect to others in a culture is *identification*—an intrapersonal process wherein people look for associations and seek affinities and affiliations based on common interests (stakes), attitudes, values, experiences, perceptions, or material properties. Recognizing such *consubstantiality* involves a semiconscious or subconscious process of *self-persuasion*. Heath et al. (2009) observed that public relations practitioners use publicity to create identification and to inform, evaluate, and recommend actions.

Although publicity is commonly dismissed as a self-serving, one-way form of rhetoric, publicity plays a vital role in the *free marketplace of ideas* (Milton, 1927) and adds value to a society by prompting people to engage in dialogue, to identify or align with common interests, and to seek cooperation (Heath et al., 2009). Philosopher John Dewey (1927) argued that the role of media and publicity was to facilitate the “great conversation” vital to a democracy, not merely to transmit objective information to the public (cf. Lippmann, 1922, 1925). In a similar vein, Burke (1969) described rhetoric as a way in which people with competing interests participate in the “wrangle in the marketplace” (Heath, 1992; Heath et al., 2009). Publicity thus helps build social capital by encouraging *civic engagement* (Shah, Rojas, & Cho, 2009), by fostering a *civil society*, and by promoting a sense of *community* (Hallahan, 2004).

## Publicity and Cultural Expression

Publicity is integrally involved in preserving and encouraging public interest in the fine arts and other forms of serious creative expression—painting, sculpture, dance, symphonic and chamber music, theater, serious fiction, and so on. Publicity is also crucial to the commercial viability of popular culture by creating popular demand for books, plays, movies, music recordings, TV shows, electronic

games, and other entertainment fare. Publicity exposure serves as an *extension* or an *alternative* to actually experiencing cultural works themselves. Exposure occurs through previews and reviews by critics and consumers; news, feature stories, and documentaries; and discussions about culture trends. Publicity also has contributed to the rise of today’s *celebrity culture* where personalities seek and audiences grant *fame* to people for their accomplishments in the arts, entertainment, professions, commerce, sports, and politics (Herwitz, 2008; James, 2007; Rein, Kotler, & Stoller, 1997). Publicity also serves as an arbiter of public tastes related to products and services such as food, fashion, travel and tourism, and sports. In much the same way, publicity itself has become a fixture in popular culture—celebrated through fictional portrayals of publicists in movies and books and the memoirs of famous (and infamous) publicists.

## Critical Perspectives

Manipulating symbols and driving topics onto the public, government, and media agendas of discussion (Mannheim, 1987) are sources of considerable power to those who possess the financial and creative resources to generate publicity. Public exposure in media and other public forums provides *legitimization* and confers *status* on particular ideas (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948).

## Publicity and Social Change

Publicity is a primary tool used by social activists and social advocates to effect social change. Social change typically begins on the periphery (not at the center) of society and involves a sometimes long and arduous process of *agenda building* to create public awareness of a social problem and then mobilize support (Cobb & Elder, 1983; Hallahan, 2001; Perloff, 1998). Resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 2001) and power resource management theory (Heath, 2008) suggest that publicity is one of the advantages that can be exploited by activists and otherwise disadvantaged

social movements. Various tactics are available to capture public attention and jolt mainstream society out of complacency. Among these are *hate speech* (Cortese, 2006), *counterpublicity* (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Ryan, 1991), *outlaw discourse* (Boyd & VanSlette, 2009), and publicity-driven terrorism (Clark & Newman, 2006; Nacos, 2007; Wilkinson, 1990).

### Publicity and Social Control

Critics argue that media and other institutions too often ridicule, marginalize, and trivialize dissent. By reflecting the values of mainstream society, publicity produced by mainstream organizations often enforces social norms and the status quo (Carey, 1989/2009). Marxist theorists argue that publicity is one of the principal tools by which the dominant ideologies in society are preserved and extended. Karl Marx (1845/1998) defined *ideology* as a false consciousness that upper classes impose on the working class to perpetuate their power. Neo-Marxists further suggest that social control operates through a process of *hegemony*, whereby citizens unquestioningly accept and tacitly consent to the actions of the dominant class—and their own actions reinforce dominance over them (Gramsci, 1971). Thus, by reinforcing predominant social values, publicity can be seen as an unobtrusive form of capitalistic control.

Social control involving publicity can also be examined from political economy perspectives that center on *conspiratorial* and *constraint* explanations for how communications systems operate (e.g., see Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Examples of collusion include the unchecked ability of media organizations to self-promote their own activities and those of other powerful interests while often ignoring negative news involving themselves or their business partners. Media are also subject to direct influence attempts by government, special interest groups, and advertisers. Even governments in democratic societies occasionally pressure publishers to squelch controversial stories and employ threats ranging from prosecution to curtailing access to future information. Media advocacy groups pressure media to portray society in ways consistent with

their worldviews and values—and threaten reprisals ranging from boycotts to legislative reform (Fortunato, 2005; Gallagher, 2001; Suman & Rossman, 2000; Toplin, 2006). Advertisers similarly complain about adverse coverage and threaten to withdraw business (An & Bergen, 2007; Koc, 2006; Price, 2003). Fears of reprisals and other negative consequences hold media in check, discourage controversial or countervailing publicity, and encourage *puff pieces* and other publicity coverage favorable to powerful interests.

### Philosophical Perspectives

Publicity is integrally involved in questions related to privacy versus secrecy—or what Hannah Arendt (1998) differentiated as our *public lives* versus our *private lives*. Indeed, communicating publicly alters the constitutive forms and functions of communication and has been shown to affect the behaviors of people and entities in arenas ranging from literature, politics, and commerce to interpersonal communication and human relationships (e.g., see Goffman, 1959).

In most democratic societies, people are guaranteed the right to publicize ideas as part of the protection of free expression and free press (Splichal, 2002) but are protected from disclosing private matters against their will. That same protection does not apply to government and other institutions, and philosophers have debated for more than two centuries about the importance of transparency.

### Publicity and Governance

In libertarian societies, access to information about government activities is a vital right of citizens. Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1791/1994) observed, “Without publicity, no good is permanent; under the auspices of publicity, no evil can continue” (p. 589). In a similar vein, the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1795/1991) argued that laws to which people were required to adhere are invalid unless publicly known. He argued, “All actions related to the right of other human beings are wrong if their maxim is incompatible with publicity” (translated in Luban,

1996, p. 155). Publicity is similarly an essential ingredient in Kant's concept of the public use of reason (Gosseries, 2005).

Much of the credit for the dissolution of the former USSR in 1991 was attributed to *glasnost*, which is often defined as "openness" but also can be translated as "publicity." Openness is the foundation of laws found in democracies that require citizen access to government processes—open meetings, open records, media access to crime scenes, and so on. Yet even staunch advocates of public disclosures recognize the value of confidentiality in certain matters. For example, in providing for the national defense, a government must balance the needs for publicity and secrecy (Cunningham, 2003; Shils, 1956).

### Publicity and Deliberation

Kant argued for publicity as an abstract principle, but others contend that the dissemination of information (*actual publicity*) is essential for the public discussion of issues. Kant defended the importance of the secret ballot for citizens, but called for the public disclosure of legislators' voting records. Drawing on the example of Ancient Greece, John Stuart Mill argued that the psychological constraint of being in the eye of the public promotes honesty and has an important place in republican theory. But Mill (1861/1962) observed, "Publicity . . . is no impediment to evil, nor stimulus to good, if the public will not look at what is done; but without publicity, how could they either check or encourage what they were not permitted to see?" (chap. 2). Numerous writers from Karl Marx to publisher Joseph Pulitzer have expressed similar sentiments. Lippmann (1915, p. 199) observed, "A special interest openly avowed is no terror to democracy; it is neutralized by publicity." Importantly, this notion of openly competing perspectives and the ready identification of sources differentiates publicity from one-sided or surreptitious *propaganda*.

Contemporary theorists argue that publicity does not always facilitate discussion. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1994) contended that media coverage and polls reporting that a majority in

society hold a particular view actually creates a *spiral of silence* wherein those in the minority will become reticent to speak (Salmon & Glynn, 2008). Jürgen Habermas (1962/1989) similarly chided one-sided media publicity (and advertising) for the demise of the robust *public sphere* of public discussion that he argued characterized 18th-century Europe (see Mayhew, 1997).

### Publicity and Fairness

Kant argued that people are important because they are human beings and deserve to be treated with respect and dignity—and not merely exploited as the means toward an end (Kant, 1785/2002). According to Kant, enabling people to exercise their free will and their capability to reason promotes their freedom. Thus, being forthright and transparent, and avoiding deception, are essential for entities to behave ethically (Plaisance, 2009).

In a similar vein, the 20th-century philosopher John Rawls (1971) contended that an ethical society is one that is grounded in fairness and justice. According to Rawls, publicity enables people to know the bases of their social and political relationships and the underlying principles and enforceable rules that govern them and society. Publicity thus operates as one of the five formal constraints on rights (Rawls, 1993, 2001). Publicity also permits an entity's actions to stand up to public scrutiny. Thus, entities have an obligation to be transparent in and accountable for their actions. According to Rawls, those with power should not monopolize public communications. Instead, they must balance self-interest with the public interest—especially to ensure that the concerns of the most vulnerable members of society are addressed.

### Publicity and Justice

Publicity plays a critical role in the formal and informal systems of justice in society. Throughout the centuries, governments have routinely made examples of criminals and political dissidents by publicly exposing them and their misdeeds through actions ranging from

humiliation to public executions (Foucault, 1995). Today, publicized court trials ostensibly serve as deterrents to crime in a similar way. However, *fear of publicity* often discourages victims from coming forward, thus impeding justice by preventing prosecutions. Publicity similarly can play a negative role in justice through *prejudicial pretrial publicity* and *prejudicial media coverage*. Both can jeopardize the right of a defendant to a fair trial (Kovera & Greathouse, 2008). Meanwhile, attorneys increasingly push the limits on professional guidelines related to *litigation of trial publicity* to seek public sympathy for their clients or causes (American Bar Association, 2007; Roschwalb & Stack, 1995). In the contemporary restorative justice movement that seeks out-of-court resolution of crimes, publicity can serve as *reparation* and play a crucial role in involving and reassuring a community affected by a crime (Schiff, 2007). Publicity has been used as a tool to discourage corporate offenses (Fisse & Braithwaite, 1983), while *corrective publicity* and corrective advertising have been ordered as remedies in administrative law actions (Bernhardt, Kinnear, Mazis, & Reece, 1981; Liu, 1998; Tyebjee, 1998).

## Ethical Perspectives

As an activity that attempts to influence the behavior of others, publicity has been a topic of suspicion and scrutiny since its inception. Ethics represent guidelines for decision making or socially agreed-on standards of conduct based on actions deemed right or wrong, fair or unfair. Ethical standards stem from previous transgressions and can be established at the societal, professional, organizational, employer, and personal levels. Ethics involve *expectations* for performance that generally exceed the *minimum* standards required by law.

Media publicists have been criticized for manufacturing news, for cluttering media channels with trivia, for blocking access to newsmakers by journalists, and for holding their duty to clients

above their responsibility to the public. Publicists confront a variety of ethical dilemmas related to the release of information. A partial inventory of publicity practices deemed unethical include *lying, stonewalling, sandbagging, selective (vs. full) disclosure of available information, failure to seek out information that a publicist should know, puffery, leaking, rumormongering, gossiping, false fronting, unfair dealing/favoritism, failure to correct errors, blackmailing, and spin-doctoring*.

Outright *bribery* (paying gatekeepers to obtain exposure) is prohibited in most Western nations. But bribing government officials or paying journalists for coverage is a customary practice in nations around the world such as Mexico and Russia and in Asia and Africa. In many nations, journalists *moonlight* (also work for corporations or government) or receive payments whether or not they perform legitimate work. More subtle forms of bribery include free meals, event tickets, product samples (*freebies*), gifts, and paid trips (*junkets*).

The struggle to establish ethical standards for publicity, including proper levels and forms of disclosure by organizations, has led about a dozen professional associations to establish codes of conduct. The Public Relations Society of America's (2000) Code of Ethics, for example, stresses six professional values: (1) responsible advocacy, (2) honesty, (3) professional expertise, (4) independence, (5) loyalty, and (6) fairness. These self-regulation attempts are informal, voluntary, and aspirational (prescriptive rather than restrictive). Most codes lack effective enforcement powers and provide for only weak penalties, such as expulsion from the sponsoring organization. Ironically, fears of libel suits and adverse publicity precludes organizations from using publicity to name offenders.

## Legal and Regulatory Perspectives

Although publicity involves the free expression of ideas, publicity activities can be highly regulated.



In totalitarian states, publicity activities by entities other than the government are simply prohibited. In partially free nations, publicity materials can be scrutinized prior to dissemination. In most Western nations, publicity content is free from such prior restraint but the *manner* in which publicity activities are undertaken is subject to oversight.

Publicists generally must comply with tort laws, including prohibitions against defamation or misuse of others' intellectual property (copyrights, trademarks, etc.). In the United States, celebrities and others enjoy a specific property right known as the *right of publicity*, which requires obtaining permission and providing compensation whenever using another person's words or images for financial gain (Bunker, 2008; McEvoy & Windom, 2003).

In the United States, political speech and publicity are protected by the First Amendment's guarantees of "free speech, and of the press." Promotional publicity for profit-making entities is considered *commercial speech*, which has enjoyed increased protection but can be regulated as part of the oversight of activities in which the government has a "compelling state interest." Commercial speech regulation (a) cannot interfere with political speech and (b) cannot be used to preclude entities from engaging in otherwise legal activities. Under the regulations of the Federal Trade Commission, a news release is considered *advertising*. Meanwhile, the Food and Drug Administration considers publicity a form of *labeling*. Publicly traded companies must conform to the prompt and full disclosure requirements of the Securities and Exchange Commission's Regulation FD (Fair Disclosure) and to publicity restrictions governing public offerings of securities. Publicists for foreign organizations or governments must register with the Department of Justice under the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938. Specific rules apply to publicity during bargaining governed by the National Labor Relations Act. Various government agencies are responsible for enforcing antidiscrimination rules that call for organizations to

affirmatively promote equal opportunity in promotional communications related to employment, education, real estate, banking, and lending.

## Technological Perspectives

The forms, story genres, conventions, and channels used in publicity have changed over time and are inevitably shaped by technology. Whereas publicity in the 20th century was predominated by reliance on public media, major changes took place at the dawn of the 21st century—most notably, the rise of interactive media employing the Internet and mobile devices (Hallahan, 2010).

Publicists have always relied on direct communications to reach audiences. Examples range from drums and carrier pigeons to lectures and speeches. Printed ephemera have included trade cards, bulletins, and brochures. During the 19th and 20th centuries, publicists seized the opportunity to distribute information quickly, broadly, and at low cost using third-party newspapers and magazines as well as radio and television. (The resulting saving in distribution costs almost always offset the labor costs represented in providing information subsidies to the media.) But today many of the cost, speed, and distribution advantages of mass media have been negated by electronic networks that allow the publicists to circumvent the press (Hallahan, 1994).

Digitization of text, images, and sounds has altered how publicity is produced and packaged. More important, however, the ways in which publicity is distributed, archived, and used have been transformed. In addition to "pushing" out information, modern publicity involves "pulling" in audiences seeking information using Web sites. Search engines such as Google and Yahoo! have become master publicity aggregators and directories for organizational information. Optimizing the lowly news release has become a prerequisite to enable search engine users to find information. Online communication has transformed the structure and language used in



publicity stories and, in particular, has elevated the importance of *keywords*. In the past, publicity was a fleeting commodity and often lost to audiences, except for clipping an occasional article or recording a TV air check.

Today, Web and mobile phone users can reread and retain publicity messages. Moreover, users can look up publicity information or seek additional facts using these same devices. Audiences have become content producers who can forward publicity to friends or family, create new e-mail or text messages, or post information or opinions on personal blogs, microblogs, or social networking pages.

## Academic Perspectives

The *Gannett Center Journal* observed, "We live in an age of publicity" and described publicity as "the oxygen of recognition." The editors added, "As such it's bound to be on the mind of anyone who wants to gain the notice of the public" (Publicity, 1990, p. vi).

This review suggests that publicity is an important, multifaceted construct that can be examined from multiple perspectives. Publicity—as both the general concept of *being public* and the narrower concept of gaining media visibility—has made an impact on world events and plays a critical role in economics and the management of organizations. Understanding publicity processes requires knowledge of basic psychological and communication processes and how people then use publicity in a social context. Because of publicity's power, the proper use of publicity has been debated, and publicity practices continue to be scrutinized and regulated. Publicity is also evolving with the advent of new media.

Within public relations research, publicity has languished as a concept. Theorizing about publicity over the past 25 years was biased, in part, by J. E. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) advocacy of symmetrical two-way communication as a normative standard for practicing public relations. In their four-part model of public relations, the authors

lumped press-agentry and publicity together with propaganda in a single form of public relations practice where "practitioners spread the faith of the organization involved, often through incomplete, distorted or half-truth information" (p. 21). Yet if publicity is conceptualized as an entity *being public*, or more narrowly as gaining exposure through media, it should be readily evident that characteristics of messages are not defining characteristics of publicity as a process. Indeed, the full spectrum of message accuracy, completeness, and candor can be represented in publicity messages. Moreover, publicity plays a vital role in all four models of public relations practice.

Heath (2001, pp. 1–2) observed that all the introductory chapters of the 2001 version of this *Handbook* defined public relations in terms of reducing conflict. He noted that while most academics focused on advancing harmony, most practitioners spent the bulk of their time on "other dynamics of the marketplace" such as attracting buyers, protecting or promoting an image, promoting donations, or attracting taxpayer support of government initiatives. These inevitably involve publicity. Ferguson (1984) had suggested that the *relationships* might serve as the construct to provide coherence to the field—an idea that blossomed a decade later. However, as a generic concept, publicity stands on equal footing with relationships as a potential framework for examining the field. Publicity subsumes a variety of constructs and approaches for examining an entity's public activities; the promotion and measurement of organizational-public relationships might be only one (albeit desirable) outcome of *being public*.

Some evidence suggests a glimmer of recognition for publicity's importance today. Heath and Coombs's (2006, p. 7) textbook, for example, includes "publicity" and "promotion" in their definition of public relations. Zoch and Molleda (2006, p. 295) proposed an integrated model of media relations that combines framing, information subsidies, and agenda building. Most recently, Heath et al. (2009, p. 40) acknowledged the role of publicity in adding value to public discourse.

Importantly, publicity is a pursuit not limited to public relations. Various social actors seek or shun public attention—with no pretext of engaging in public relations. Instead of relegating publicity to a tool used in public relations, public relations can be seen as only one of the varied contexts or reasons why entities pursue public attention and understanding. Future research needs to examine in more depth and breadth the many dimensions of publicity, its alternative relationships to public relations, and its importance in public communication.

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