

Public Relations and the Public Sphere

Senior Media Seminar, MCC-UE1200.001

Fall 2012

Tuesdays, 9:30 a.m. – 12 noon

Waverly 669

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(Please schedule appointments with Gina Young-Looby at gy6@nyu.edu).

Course Description

PR is often portrayed as a powerful, even ominous force in the world. Yet PR's influence is more often presumed than actually established. What kind of power does PR, as practice and as industry, actually wield in the public sphere? Do PR practices tend to reinforce corporate power or help social movements challenge the status quo? How do news media practices shape PR, and vice versa? What conceptions of the audience guide the work of public relations practitioners, and how accurate are these? What kinds of ethics can/should PR practitioners aspire toward? What are the broader social and cultural effects of PR promotional culture? We will explore these and other questions by drawing on a variety of theoretical approaches and historical, ethnographic, and comparative studies. Our goal will be to achieve a comprehensive, critical understanding of PR as a social force -- and what better place to critically examine public relations than at NYU, where PR "father" Edward Bernays taught the world's first university course on public relations!

Course Objectives and Requirements

Through this course, you will come to understand better public relations' role in the public sphere. Weekly readings and class discussions will help you improve your critical reading and speaking skills. A research paper will provide you with the opportunity to apply theories and concepts learned in class and to improve your research and writing skills. Through participating in a team debate and writing a debate "judging" essay, you will develop and hone your own informed positions about fundamental questions concerning public relations and the public sphere.

Readings

Stuart Ewen. 1996. *PR! A Social History of Spin*. New York: Basic Books.

Sarah Sobieraj. 2011. *Soundbitten: The Perils of Media-Centered Political Activism*. New York: NYU Press.

Additional Course Readings: Available online on Blackboard (indicated with * in course schedule)

Course Assignments and Policies

Evaluation of your performance in this course is based on five elements:

(1) Attendance and Participation (10% of grade)

Please inform me in advance if you will be missing class for religious observances, family emergencies, or medical problems.

You are expected to arrive on time, fully prepared to discuss the readings and participate in class discussions. The course is a collaborative, interactive seminar: please bring your experience, insight, and intelligence to our discussions.

Please bring a paper copy of the assigned reading (article or book) to the class, so that we will all be, literally, on the same page. I strongly encourage active, annotated reading practices.

Cell phone use (including texting) is not permitted in class. Laptops should only be used for note-taking. Use of laptops for email or internet surfing, unless linked to a class assignment, is not permitted: violation of this policy will negatively affect your participation grade.

One week you will help synthesize and critique student blackboard short responses. There will be a sign-up for these informal presentations the first day of class.

(2) Weekly Blackboard Reading Critiques/Questions (10%)

For most weeks you will be asked to post a short response to the readings (2-3 paragraphs or about 200-250 words with critical commentary and at least one question) on our class Blackboard "Discussion Board." Your submission will be due by 10 p.m. the Sunday before our next class meeting. This deadline is not negotiable. If you post your response after the deadline, you will receive reduced credit. Your short response must address all of the week's assigned readings for the posting to count toward fulfilling this requirement. All short responses will be graded on a pass/fail basis.

(3) Research Paper (40%): In this original research paper of 15-20 pages (4000-5000 words), you will apply theories and concepts learned in the course to analyze a PR campaign of your choosing (subject to my approval). More information on this assignment will be provided.

(4) Debate Presentation (25%): You will be part of a 4-5 person team that will debate one of two "big" questions about public relations. Early in the semester, we will choose teams and each team will flip a coin to determine which side of the debate it will take. Debate arguments must draw upon all relevant course readings, PLUS additional secondary and

primary source materials obtained through outside research. Prior to the debate, each team will provide me with a bibliography of sources used in preparing for the debate. All members of a team will receive the same grade.

Only the direst medical emergency should lead you to miss your designated Debate presentation. This is a team oral presentation, so it is essential that you show up ready to fully participate on the designated day. Failure to do so may penalize your team as well as your own grade. Any makeup written assignment, if permitted based on the circumstances, will only be accorded partial credit.

(5) Debate Judging Essay (15%): Students who do not participate in a given debate will write a 1,000 – 1,250 word essay (about five pages double-spaced) evaluating the merits of arguments made by the opposing teams AND suggesting additional arguments and evidence that could have been used in the debate. In addition to a detailed critique of the debate, this essay must cite at least three relevant readings from the course. While considering the pros and cons of various arguments, the essay should ultimately adopt and justify a position.

A paper copy is due on 5 p.m. – stamped by the office receptionist and placed in my mailbox -- on the Monday immediately following the class debate. On a blank cover page, write your name and the total word length of the essay. Do not write your name anywhere else in the paper. Start the essay on page two. You are responsible for keeping your own copy.

LATE POLICY: Any assignment received after the designated day and time will be downgraded. A 15-minute grace period will be allowed. E.g.: If the assignment is due at 5 p.m., at 5:16 p.m. on the due date and at 5:16 each twenty four hours thereafter, the essay will be graded down one full grade (B+ to C+, etc.).

It should go without saying that plagiarism is strictly prohibited. This policy will be strictly enforced.

“Plagiarism, one of the gravest forms of academic dishonesty in university life, whether intended or not, is academic fraud. In a community of scholars, whose members are teaching, learning and discovering knowledge, plagiarism cannot be tolerated. Plagiarism is failure to properly assign authorship to a paper, a document, an oral presentation, a musical score and/or other materials which are not your original work. You plagiarize when, without proper attribution, you do any of the following: Copy verbatim from a book, an article or other media; Download documents from the Internet; Purchase documents; Report from other’s oral work; Paraphrase or restate someone else’s facts, analysis and/or conclusions; Copy directly from a classmate or allow a classmate to copy from you.” (NYU Steinhardt School Statement on Academic Integrity)

Some basic reminders:

(1) If the assignment includes more than one page, STAPLE them.

(2) NUMBER your pages.

Evaluation Summary:

Attendance / Class Participation	10%
Including one week in-class synthesis of BB comments	
Weekly BB Short Responses	10%
Research Paper	40%
Debate Presentation	25%
Debate Judging Essay	15%

Grades are calculated according to the following scale:

93-100 A; 90-92 A-;
 87-89 B+; 83-86 B; 80-82 B-;
 77-79 C+; 73-76 C; 70-72 C-;
 67-69 D+; 63-66 D; 60-62 D-; 0-59 F

A = excellent. Outstanding work in all respects. Your exams, papers, and presentations are thoroughly researched, appropriately documented, logically organized and rhetorically convincing. Your analysis is not only comprehensive and sound, but creative and original. In short, you not only get it, but begin to see through it!

B = good. Your understanding of course materials is complete and thorough, and there is at least some evidence of your own critical intelligence at work. You demonstrate basic competence in research, writing and oral presentation.

C = barely adequate. Your writing is vague and incoherent or riddled with grammatical or spelling errors. You do not make proper use of source materials, and there is little depth or concreteness to your research or analysis. Your understanding of concepts and ideas is incomplete and often misguided, but there is at least some evidence that you “got” something from this course.

D = unsatisfactory. Work exhibits virtually no understanding or even awareness of basic concepts and themes of course. Your participation has been inadequate or superficial. Either you have not been paying attention or you have not been making any effort. There is no reason anyone should get this grade.

F= failed. Work was not submitted or completed according to the basic parameters outlined in the course syllabus (basic requirements for page length, topical focus, types and number of sources).

Schedule (subject to modification)**WEEK 1: SEPT. 4 Overview: PR and the Public Sphere**

*Myra Marx Ferree, William Anthony Gamson, Jürgen Gerhards, and Dieter Rucht. 2002. "Normative Criteria for the Public Sphere." In *Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States*, pp. 205-231. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

WEEK 2: SEPT. 11 Public Spheres: old and newPart I:

*Jürgen Habermas. [1964] 1991. "The Public Sphere." In C. Mukerji and M. Schudson, eds., *Rethinking Popular Culture*, pp. 398-404. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Ewen, *PR!*, pp. 39-73, 102-127, 131-145

WEEK 3: SEPT. 18 A Rational Public?

*Walter Lippmann. 1997 [1922]. *Public Opinion*. New York: Free Press, chs. 1, 3-8, 24, 26-28.

*John Dewey. 1922. Review of *Public Opinion*, *The New Republic*, 30(3), 338-344.

*John R. Zaller. 1998. "Monica Lewinsky's contribution to political science." *PS, Political Science & Politics*, 31(2), 182-189.

Recommended:

*Brett Gary. 1993. "Modernity's Challenge to Democracy: The Lippmann-Dewey Debate." In R. Kroes, R.W. Rydell, and D.F.J. Bosscher, eds., *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe*, pp. 35-46. Amsterdam: VU University Press.

WEEK 4, SEPT. 25 The Rise of PR: The Engineering of Consent

Ewen, *PR!*, pp. 3-36, 73-101, 146-173, 215-232

Edward Bernays. 1952. "The Engineering of Consent." In *Public Relations*, pp. 156-168. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

PAPER PROPOSAL DUE: 2-page double-spaced prospectus detailing research questions, theoretical approaches (from course), and primary data sources

WEEK 5, OCT. 2 Media and Lifestyle Logic(s)

*Charlotte Ryan. 1991. *Prime Time Activism: Media Strategies for Grassroots Organizing*. Boston, MA: South End Press. Chs. 1-3, pp. 3-74.

*Michael Schudson. 1989. "How Culture Works: Perspectives from Media Studies on the Efficacy of Symbols." *Theory and Society* 18(2), 153-180.

*Oyvind Ihlen. 2007. "Building on Bourdieu: A sociological grasp of public relations." *Public Relations Review* 33, 269-274.

*Pierre Bourdieu. 1984. *Distinction*, pp. 169-200, 260-283, 288-290, 298-301, 324-325, 334-336, 339-357, 440-453. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

WEEK 6, OCT. 9 Celebrity and Promotional Culture

*Joshua Gamson. 1994. *Claims to Fame*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Excerpts.

* Robert Jackall and Janice M. Hirota. 2000. *Image Makers: Advertising, Public Relations, and the Ethos of Democracy*, pp. 110-171, 207-228. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Recommended:

*Charles Baxter. 2011. "Hatching Monsters." *Lapham's Quarterly* (winter).

*P.T. Barnum. 2011. "P.T. Barnum Sets His Stage." *Lapham's Quarterly*. Excerpt from P.T. Barnum, *The Life of P.T. Barnum* (1855).

OCT. 16 NO CLASS

WEEK 7, OCT. 23 GUEST SPEAKER**WEEK 8, OCT. 30****Government and Business PR**

Ewen, PR!, chapters 12-14, 16 and coda (pp. 233-336, 373-414).

*Aaron Davis. 2002. *Public Relations Democracy*, chs. 3-4. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

*Jacquie L'Etang. 2006. "Corporate Responsibility and Public Relations Ethics." In J. L'Etang and M. Pieczka, eds., *Public Relations: Critical Debates and Contemporary Practice*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum.

[Choose Debate Teams]**WEEK 9, NOV. 6 Civil Society Activism**

Sobieraj, *Soundbitten*, excerpts

*Manuel Castells. 2007. "Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society." *International Journal of Communication* 1, 238-266.

*Aaron Davis. 2002. *Public Relations Democracy*, chs. 6, 8, & 9.

WEEK 10, NOV. 13 Research and Debating Techniques / Team Preparations

*Jon M. Ericson, James J. Murphy, and Raymond B. Zeuschner. *The Debater's Guide*, third edition. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, excerpts.

PAPER DUE FRI., NOV. 16

WEEK 11, NOV. 20: In-Class Team Debate Preparation

WEEK 12, NOV. 27: DEBATE I

Draft Proposition: PR helps the weak more than the powerful.

Debate I Judging Essays due Monday, Dec. 3, 5 p.m.

WEEK 13, DEC. 4 GUEST SPEAKER TBA AND/OR DEBATE PREPARATION

WEEK 14, DEC. 11 DEBATE II

Draft Proposition: PR is good for democracy.

Debate II Judging Essays due Monday, Dec. 17, 5 p.m.