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It is as unrealistic to expect student journalists to function as public relations professionals as it is to expect Future Teachers of America members to assume professional classroom teaching duties.

Student publications versus the public relations concept

by Robert P. Knight

Those of us who have dealt with student publications in secondary schools know that among some school administrators, some faculty, some parents and even some students there exists some unclear connection between publications and "public relations." That vague connection can be fraught with misperceptions about public relations (See Item I). Some inappropriate assumptions are made about the purpose of publications and/or about the level of journalistic sophistication and the skills of student journalists and their advisers.

It can be argued correctly that student publications have public relations **implications,** whether staffs know it or not. (Bad grammar in the yearbook, for example, can create a bad image.) Student publications, however, do not and should not have public relations **goals,** in the view of public relations professionals (See Item II). The **student** newspaper and the **student** yearbook should be student-oriented publications with news and materials of interest and significance to students. They are not, nor should they be, "house organs" or "cheerleaders" for the school, even though they may be read by publics other than students; those publics must be considered secondary and sometimes must be reminded—gently or with good humor—that the publications are not intended for them, any more than are **Seventeen** or **Boys' Life.**

Public relations, in the professional sense, is defined as follows in the nation's most widely used public relations textbook (Cutlip and Center, 1978):

Item 1

Here is a brief catalog of some of the common misinterpretations of "public relations" by school people, especially administrators, with some comments about each:

Public relations means presenting only the "good news." Said a public relations teacher, "The news media and the public are too sophisticated for that. We live and work in a fishbowl today." (Morgan, 1977) Furthermore, a too-rosy picture is not credible.

If there is "bad news," keep still; let the news media dig it out if they choose. The "father of public relations," Ivy Lee (Lewis, 1970), dispelled that notion more than 70 years ago when he taught the railroads that it was in their best interests, in train accidents, to take the initiative in contacting newsmen; and to cooperate quickly and fully; and that they should expect newsmen to dig into unexplored—or hidden—areas (That is their job) (Hiebert, 1956, p. 55). School PR people have come to those same conclusions about bad news or crisis coverage (Bruton, 1973, p. 15; Lesley, 1971, p. 255; Wilkens, 1977; New York State School Boards Association, 1973; Bagin and Others, 1976).

"Bad news" causes loss of public support. Quick, honest coverage of such news may in fact win support for the institution, as it did for Cornell University, when donors increased their contributions, after campus uprisings, because "they felt their support was significant in maintaining the university in a time of crisis" (Smith, 1973, p. 24).

"Public relations" is a one-man job. Impossible. It requires teamwork; building-level efforts (Wherry, 1977); and a comprehensive, well thought-out program (National School Public Relations Association, 1972).

"Public relations" is synonymous with "publicity." The view that the number of news releases sent out or the number of stories printed or broadcast determines the success of a school PR effort is far too one-dimensional. Professional public relations is an integral part of the management function. Fenton, an accredited member of the Public Relations Society of America, makes an important distinction about public relations (1977).

Basically two concepts exist: that of (Edward L.) Bernays (and that of the professional counselor)—the interpretive, analytical, policy-making communications role; and that of the publicist-promoter—the non-professional who accepts a segment of the field as the whole and measures his performance by inches and audience. Results: the non-professional benefits from hanging on to the coattails of the professional, and professionalism dragged down.

The executive director of the National School Public Relations Association (Wherry, 1977) said that school public relations is "not publicity, not 'flackery.' It is being aware of what the public ex-

pects, making adjustments, and making sure the public knows their expectations are being met."

> Public relations is the **planned effort** to **influence opinion** through good character and responsible performance based upon mutually satisfactory **two-way communication.**

Public Relations is a legitimate professional field, whose best practitioners have an accreditation system, through the Public Relations Society of America, to help guarantee professional competence and ethics. One of its branches, the school public relations field, has its own organization and its own code of high standards and ethics (See Item III).

Item II

What position do professionals in school communications take about school publications?

Until recently, in works on school public relations, only fleeting references were made to school newspapers and yearbooks. Grinnell (1937, pp. 168) noted that a "good school newspaper is as effective a means as can be found to interpret the school to the pupils" when it is done by students themselves, whereas he said it was "doubtful" if the yearbook or annual **of that time** "had much value as an interpreter of the school" (p. 184). Twenty years later, Kindred echoed those sentiments. (Yearbooks have improved greatly since then.)

Moehlman and van Zwoll (1957) placed their comments about student publications into a perspective which other communications professionals over the years seem to have shared:

> It should be noted . . . that the primary function of these publications is instructional rather than interpretive.
>
> Valuable though the **incidental interpretive value** publications is, there is no excuse for their abuse and exploitation as propaganda instruments for adult institutional interpretation or for the personal advancement of superintendent, principal or teacher.

In 1977, the man responsible for a strong NSPRA stand in support of students' First Amendment press rights and for a school board policy to back up those rights (Staver, 1976) had this to say: day:

> I do not feel student publications should serve the public relations end of the school . . . I treat student journalists as I would journalists on the Chicago Tribune, the Bloomington Herald-Telephone, the Indianapolis Star, or the Louisville Courier-Journal: I provide accurate, timely news, as quickly, as possible; I expect honest, fair reporting from them.
>
> If student journalists make mistakes—and they will because they are still in the learning process—he offers them help, from a teaching standpoint.

It is as unrealistic to expect student journalists to function as public relations professionals as it is to expect Future Teachers of America members to assume professional classroom teaching duties. It also is unrealistic to expect that journalism teachers, as a group, would have the journalistic sophistication or know-how to help mount professional-type public relations campaigns for their schools. The sad fact is that journalism teachers are decidedly short on professional journalism training and that relatively few states have strong journalism teacher certification requirements that are really enforced (Windhauser and Click, 1971). This is not to say there are no good journalism **teachers.** There are thousands, a small group of whom have thoroughly adequate formal training or experience in journalism and a large, amazing group of whom have become excellent journalism teachers "the hard way," i.e. by trial and error, by attending "crash courses," and by personal study.

The point is that student journalists are not publicists but **journalists,** concerned with learning good journalism in a democratic context. Advisers are **teachers,** striving to teach good journalistic principles. They know well how to deal with news and with disseminating information and material of interest to their primary audience. They are not, however, schooled in public relations techniques, nor should they be.

Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that at a recent Kansas State University high school journalism conference, those of us in an adviser session entitled "Using Student Publications as a Public Relations Tool" began by rejecting the title. On the panel were a public relations professor, a school superintendent, a state high school press association director (also a long-time newswriting teacher in college), and the director of the state high school activities association (a former principal).

The panel was not saying, however, that student publications never **affect** a school's public image or its "public relations." In fact, student publications can have quite strong impact—either positively or negatively.

In trying to document the assumption that principals view "public relations" and scholastic journalism as synonymous, the evidence in the literature is not altogether convincing because of the lack of depth and because of the imprecision of the research. Sometimes circumstances of the times may cloud the issue, as Jackie Raymond Engel feels it did in her extensive survey of Kansas principals (Engel, 1977).

In 1931 Roop asked principals and teachers in Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma to rank eight suggested purposes for the journalism class. "Give valuable publicity to the school" ranked third with principals and fourth with teachers; "production of a creditable school paper" ranked second and first, respectively. In 1959 Kleine sought the same rankings from Missouri principals: "Give valuable publicity to the school" had slipped to fifth place among principals in the same size schools as in the 1931 study but "production of a creditable school paper" remained in second place. (First, in the principals' opinion, in both 1931 and 1959, was "Vitalize the teaching of English composition".)

Horine (1966) found that only one adviser among 277 principals/advisers/editors in a Los Angeles County survey said that to "support and reflect the proper image of the school" is **not** a function of a student newspaper. He concluded, "This put the remaining 276 in the position of saying a student newspaper should be a public relations instrument of the school."

The man who has researched more aspects of scholastic journalism than anyone else, Dr. Laurence R. Campbell, director of Quill and Scroll Studies, surveyed

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612 high school principals in Maine, Ohio, Virginia, Missouri, Texas and California in 1968 (**The High School Newspaper as a Medium of Good Will**). Based on how they rated coverage of curricular, co-curricular, and community-related news areas, Campbell concluded, "School newspapers are a significant factor in internal public relations and an important force in external public relations." In 1971 he analyzed the 1968 data again and viewed them against a 1970 study in which advisers reported principals' criticisms of the high school press, in what was then a time of student unrest. His conclusion: "The newspaper is an effective public relations medium in some high schools . . . But it is also ineffective in some schools." However, Campbell never really defined what he meant by "effective public relations," except that he implied it meant doing an excellent job of covering various news areas. He said principals' "greatest failure in improving the school newspaper as an effective public relations medium" came in their failure to hire newspaper advisers who have studied journalism.

Item III

Has school district public relations, in a formal sense, come of age? One study in the state of Texas in 1964 showed that it was, although desired by both superintendents and news media, still in its infancy (Knight, 1964). A review of the research literature a few years later indicated the same was rather true for state-level educational PR (Chaffee and Ward, 1968) and that the field lacked theoretical underpinnings.

Dr. John Wherry, executive director of the 1100-member National School Public Relations Association, said (1977) an awareness of the need for professional-level public relations has emerged in the last 10 years and schools are increasingly seeking help in combatting the current problem of low public confidence in education.

"Public perceptions are out of phase with reality. This is a public relations job in a true sense," he said, explaining the job is not one of "publicity, 'flackery' . . . It's being aware of what the public expects, making adjustments (in the educational program), and then making sure the public knows that expectations are being met."

More than 500 full-time or part-time school public relations people belong to NSPRA and Wherry estimated that there are as many as 1,500 formal school public relations positions in the U.S.

The job calls for social responsibility, Wherry said. NSPRA adopted a code of educational PR standards in 1968 and standards for educational public relations professionals in 1969 (NSPRA, 1969).

The National School Boards Association recommends establishment of such a position, with a well-trained professional (Bagin, 1975).

In 1973, in the wake of several years of underground papers in Kansas high schools, when Jackie Raymond Engel asked Kansas principals the purpose or objective of their school newspaper, 6.3 percent viewed it as an "educational facility" to create a greater awareness of the media and/or to lead to a possible career in journalism; 24.9 percent viewed it as a "voice box" for the school community; and 68.8 percent viewed it as a "public relations tool" (Raymond, 1973).

In the last decade, at least three questions or issues have put student publications into the limelight, creating situations which concerned administrators and caused many of them to re-think their attitudes toward high school newspapers and yearbooks. Quite apart from the fact that these matters involved publications, each of them clearly had public relations implications for schools, in the same way that any major change in the school has PR implications of a broad nature, e.g. when Title IX, guaranteeing quality for the sexes in sports, was introduced, it wrought major changes in high schools throughout the land.

The "Underground Papers" Question

In the 1950s, high school publications were encouraged, by the national judging services, to stay close to home, that is, to focus on classroom and extracurricular activities. Within a decade, Glessing (1970) was able to write: ". . . youthful unrest has nurtured a network of some 3,000 regularly and irregularly published underground high school papers, many of which are simple one-page mimeographed sheets."

Journalism Chairman Richard G. Gray of Indiana University explained, in Glessing's introduction:

> . . . youth have turned to the Underground Press because they found treatment by the professional and regular scholastic press inadequate. The underground movement has responded by editorializing on civil rights, social welfare, colonialism, flower children, international peace movements and the inhumanity of war.

In a Missouri study, Secora (1969) documented the fact that principals, advisers and even student editors were out of touch with what the "common" students wanted in their school papers. (The latter were far more interested in editorials on Vietnam—in whose conflict they might soon have to serve—than were the so-called "top" students, who were more interested in close-to-home editorials.)

At the high school level, underground papers found audiences because they dealt with the serious non-school issues of the times and because they also dealt with school issues which were not permitted in regular school newspapers, such as direct criticism of school or its policies. In retrospect, the high school topics and their handling in underground papers seem generally mild, especially compared to the topics and language of their college or adult counterparts.

Principals **did** notice underground papers, despite some persons' advice to ignore them. It has been said that principals "ran scared" (The National Association of Secondary School Principals even considered starting a countrywide high school press service to counteract the work of the then flourishing but, short-lived, underground high school press services). One positive effect of the underground press movement was that principals had to become more open, in dealing with the regular high school press, or face the threat of an underground paper, which for them usually represented a "bad scene" in terms of public relations.

Not all principals quickly saw this alternative of a freer scholastic press as their main defense against the unwelcome underground papers. One California high

school editor said, "There wouldn't be any underground papers if we were allowed to print the truth" (Glessing, p. 134). A Kansas adviser (Lowther, 1971) said, "Perhaps the main reason students go underground to publish a newspaper is to avoid the often unreasonable, rigid censoring the above ground high school publication must submit to." Rigid principals, who responded by trying to keep underground publications out of their schools, ironically helped pave the way for a freer student press because they forced students to take their cases to court.

The "Student Press Rights" Question

In a decade of ferment (racial upheavals in the cities, Vietnam, student unrest, drug problems and the like), students began to want to print materials about the troubles they were witnessing. The black armbands Supreme Court decision of 1969 (Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District) and subsequent lower court decisions—many involving distribution rights of underground papers—affirmed that students do not leave their rights at "the schoolhouse door" (Trager, 1974; Student Press Law Center, 1976). The theory that developed is this: Because public schools are seen as an arm of the state, which is constitutionally prohibited from abridging press freedom, student journalists, therefore, are said to have unique First Amendment rights. Principals found that once-prevalent systems of censorship of student-written materials could no longer be tolerated (The Commission of Inquiry Into High School Journalism—in the most extensive study to date of the field charged in **Captive Voices,** 1974, that despite any legal advances, a pervasive atmosphere of censorship continued to exist in the nation's high schools).

An interesting extension of the legal points won by student journalists in the early 1970s is Fager's "forum theory" (1976). He argues that student First Amendment rights are defined by the nature of the publication and not by who pays the bills. If, in practice, a school newspaper has been a forum of ideas (as with letters to the editor, through coverage of a wide range of ideas, through freedom from censorship), then it is defined as a forum and, as a matter of equity, must so remain. On the other hand, if a school district were to establish a new publication, as in a new school, and to make it clear from the start that it was to be a "house organ" for the school, without editorial freedom for its writers, then that would define the nature of the publication as one in which authorities consciously, and from the beginning, made the choice of non-freedom.

The "Sensitive Issues" Question

From a public relations point of view, it soon became apparent that the unique First Amendment privileges accorded to student journalists in public schools provided little protection against community uproar in dealing with whatever the community might define as a "sensitive issue" (whether it be a criticism of deer hunting in a community which depended on that sport, a story of discipline problems in a particular class or the usual drug/sex stories that so often have caused problems in the hands of inexperienced journalists). Advisers learned, and their staffs with them, that applying the highest standards of journalistic excellence—procedure certainly not mandated by the First Amendment—would permit them to deal with any topic without stirring up unwanted trouble; that reporting, on sensitive issues, must be flawless and well balanced; and that writing must be precise, polling scientifically accurate and packaging well done (layout, headlines, etc., in good order) (Fotheringham and McGee, 1976). They also learned that establishing editorial boards can help support a strong journalism program.

Further, they learned not only that adviser, staff and administrator must be ready (i.e. journalistically equipped) for handling sensitive issues before doing so, but also that the administrator and the community must be prepared to expect such reporting (One Missouri yearbook, which, in trying to be honest in reporting, turned brutally frank about the poor record of its football team, soon found that the student body was not ready for such candor and that they began rejecting what on the surface was a well-done book).

The three questions discussed—underground papers, student press rights and sensitive issues—have, in the view of some, had bad public relations implications. At the same time, they have advanced the cause of an interesting, journalistically excellent high school press, which, when it deserves those adjectives, has some quite positive public relations implications for the school. Such a press helps make the point that schools are concerned with open inquiry in a democratic society.

What lies ahead in the late 1970s for scholastic publications?

With a changing mood among youth, the publications will be more concerned, than they have been in 20 years, with school-related issues (Brasler, 1977). They're more interested already in school news, social events, features on individuals. Brasler, one of the nation's most sought-after scholastic newspaper analysts, describes the trend as being like "a time warp to the 1950s."

One of the country's leading yearbook judges has noted that yearbooks, too, are looking inward to the school and becoming concerned again with human beings (Savedge, 1977), in what one adviser of a prize-winning book has called a "very humane, gentle" approach (Patterson, 1977).

What advice, then, can be given to a school interested in getting what it considers the best "public relations value" from its publications in the perhaps more calm times ahead?

1. Encourage students to do the best journalistic job possible on whatever they undertake. This includes being aware of their audience; seeking a balance of material (not all positive, not all negative); covering the full community, including minorities; and striving for journalistic excellence.

2. Most important, hire the best journalism teacher available.

3. Create a healthy rapport between publications staffs and administration, letting each know the others' goals or agenda for the year. Sometimes an editorial board structure serves this purpose well (so long as it is clearly understood it will not become a harassment or censorship instrument).

4. Recognize student publications for what they are, no more, or less. Be tolerant of learner's mistakes. Encourage improvement.

5. Enjoy the publications and the vibrancy of which they are capable: What better public relations than to have outstanding, interesting publications.

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