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**When Government Used Publicity Against Itself:
Toledo's Commission of Publicity and Efficiency,
1916-75**

by

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Abstract

In early 20th century America, the Progressive Movement sought to fight corruption and graft in city governments through publicity. The usual approach was to establish a nonprofit bureau of research or efficiency that would investigate city government and publicize the results. However, in Toledo (OH), that bureau was a government agency and was also publisher of the official city gazette. Was the public sector affiliation of the Toledo

Commission of Publicity and Efficiency a fatal flaw? This inquiry concluded that the Toledo bureau was as effective as its nonprofit counterparts. A government agency dedicated to reform was successful using publicity against its own government.

1. Publicity in Government Public Relations

Grunig's review of public relations in the public sector concluded that most government agencies used the public information approach, one of the four categories in his theoretical model. Generally, government disseminated information to "try to change the behavior of publics" (Grunig, 1997, p. 261). That comment confirmed Hiebert's earlier observation that persuasion was one of the core motivations for government communication efforts (Hiebert, 1981, pp. 12-13). Similarly, Cutlip noted that "the basis of power in a democracy is persuasion" (Cutlip, 1976, p. 10). For example, Lee's classification of eight distinct purposes of public sector external communications identified four based on persuasion: public education and public service campaigns, obtaining voluntary compliance with laws and regulations, increasing public support for the agency and the increasing utilization of goods and services (Lee, 2000, pp. 192-5).

With persuasion as a goal, one of the primary tools of public relations in government is publicity. The close correlation of publicity and government public relations was indicated by early academic writings on the subject. The first academic article about government public relations was entitled "Official *Publicity* Under the New Deal" (Herring, 1935, emphasis added) and *Government Publicity* was the title of the first book (McCamy, 1939).

Generally, publicity can carry a positive or negative content. Positive publicity is information disseminated to public audiences that puts the subject being discussed in a

favorable light, with negative publicity doing the converse. In that context, the mere *threat* of negative publicity can be a powerful force. In the mid-20th century, the federal government sometimes used the threat of negative publicity as extra-legal public relations tool to influence behavior. For example, the federal Civil Rights Commission, created by the 1957 Civil Rights Act, had neither enforcement nor regulatory powers. Nonetheless, it used its access to publicity to draw a spotlight on injustices and discriminatory actions. Similarly, during its early years, the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission had few formal coercive powers. Therefore, it often used the threat of negative publicity to obtain compliance from private sector employers since "A good public image is precious to almost every industry. ... The possibility of disapproval by peers or public becomes a powerful motivator of action at the industry or company level" (H. Doc. 91-107, 1969, p. 2).

When the Nixon Administration imposed a wage-price freeze in 1971 with no real field enforcement staff, Treasury Secretary John Connally wasn't concerned. Negative publicity would do the trick, saying: "it's inconceivable to me that a major American corporation would attempt to violate the wage and price freeze. The public reaction would be so immediate and so intense that no reasonable American business enterprise would want to incur the wrath of the American people to that extent" (Connally, 1971).

2. The Publicity Doctrine of Progressive Era Reformers

Sometimes, the impact of publicity – including the threat of negative publicity – has been applied in the other direction, *to* government. The potency that publicity has in relation to government is tied to democratic theory. The sine qua non of modern mass democracy is an informed citizenry. Through direct and indirect democratic processes, opinions held by

the public greatly affect governmental outcomes. Astronaut Jim Lovell (of Apollo 13 fame) stated the connection bluntly, saying NASA realized that publicity from "the press determined public opinion and public opinion helped determine funding" from Congress (Lovell & Kluger, 1994, p. 155).

This powerful cause-effect relationship between publicity and its effect *on* government was the lynchpin of the good government movement during the Progressive Era in the US in the early 20th century. These good government reformers (derisively called googooos by their opponents) relied heavily on accomplishing their goals by disseminating information to the public. In their view, widespread publicity in local newspapers and in their own publications about government corruption would inevitably bring pressure to bear on government, creating an inevitable momentum for reform (Truman, 1936, p. 58). In 1911, a leader of the National Municipal League said his movement's slogan "is 'Turn on the light and keep it turned on!' – in other words, 'publicity' – and the foundation of publicity is information based on the facts" (Woodruff, 1911, p. 183). Freeman's overview of the movement concluded that these bureaus "have no means of accomplishing their ends other than by the force of public opinion" (Freeman, 1927, p. 12). A contemporary historian distilled the essence of the Progressives' approach: "Publicity was the key to accountability" (Kahn, 1997, p. 93).

To pursue their goals, reformers usually established in major cities local organizations to advocate for good government. They were typically called bureaus of municipal research or efficiency bureaus. In most cases, these bureaus were nonprofit agencies. They conducted research about local government operations and then advocated for the resulting reform recommendations through publicity.

While most bureaus were in the nonprofit sector, a small number were government agencies. (The federal government also had a Bureau of Efficiency from 1916 to 1933 [Lee, 2003]). The public sector versions of these bureaus were generally discouraged by reformers because such agencies "do not in fact operate with the same freedom" as nonprofit ones (Crane, 1923, p. 296). In their view, a government agency could never be independent enough to publicly criticize other departments. After all, these reformers reasoned, a bureau of research or efficiency overseen by a mayor and city council could not realistically go out-of-house with negative publicity about a sister agency. Elected officials would never permit that, since such public criticism would reflect badly on them and, most importantly, their chances for reelection. Therefore, the reformers said, citizens needed to "get at the truth about them [i.e. government] through a non-partisan staff, *independent of the government*" (National Program, 1916, p. 23, emphasis added).

This meant that the nonprofit sector affiliation of research and efficiency bureaus was a corollary to the uses of publicity, including threats of negative publicity. That also had important implications for the bureau's own publications. Since publications were a key publicity vehicle for reform efforts, it was a basic premise that the publications – like the bureaus themselves – needed to be outside of government so that they would be free to criticize government. "The very publication of an official journal would invite criticism of a publicity organ likely to become a propaganda medium" (National Committee, 1931, p. 12). Also, given the tradition (and constitutionally protected status) of a free press in the US, there was general antipathy to official gazettes, even though such publications were de rigueur outside the US. For example, the *Federal Register* did not begin publishing until the New Deal and even then it faced substantial early criticism. Daily newspapers were often at

the vanguard of opposition to official governmental newspapers (Dunlop, 1913) for a mix of reasons including pecuniary interests (desire for the revenue from official government notices), fear of competition and abstract constitutional doctrine. Given the antipathy of both reformers and newspapers, there were few official municipal gazettes (Woodruff, 1911; Harris, 1913).

In summary, the doctrine of the reform movement in the Progressive era had two key pillars. First, bureaus of municipal research or efficiency should be nonprofit organizations rather than public-sector agencies so that they could be free to criticize government. Second, since publicity was a key vehicle to push for reform, the media should also be independent of government. Given that conventional wisdom, it is surprising to find that in Toledo (OH), the reform bureau was part of city government and that it was also the publisher of an official city newspaper, giving it unlimited opportunity to publicize its reform recommendations. Toledo was the only city that united these two pillars of the reform movement, but on the 'wrong' side of the sectorial divide. This meant that city government would be using the power of publicity – or threat of it – to reform *itself*. This is an intriguing anomaly to the public relations doctrine of the good government reformers and deserves a more detailed review.

3. Creation and Philosophy

In some respects, Toledo was a hotbed of good government reforms, including utility regulation and ownership, proportional representation in city council elections and a city manager (Barber, 2000, p. 112-6; Finegold, 1995, p. 21). Between 1897 and 1913, it had two mayors who were reformers and progressives. As part of reform efforts in Toledo, in 1914

the voters adopted a new city charter that had an emphasis on home rule. One of its provisions (Chapter IX, sections 181-186 [Gill, 1944, p. 157n]) established a new department called the Commission of Publicity and Efficiency (CP&E). Its legal responsibilities included:

- To publish weekly the *Toledo City Journal*;
- "To investigate any and all departments in order to determine the degree of efficiency with which public service is being rendered;"
- "To recommend to members of council and other officers, methods, devices and systems by which in the judgment of the commission, the business of the city could be transacted with greater economy and efficiency" (Crosser, 1923, p. 239).

Here was an unprecedented experiment of the Progressive movement, a merger of the usually separate powers of advocating reforms and the medium of publicity into the same bureau, all in the public sector no less. The newly created Toledo Commission of Publicity and Efficiency could initiate an investigation of another city department, print its report and recommendations in the official city newspaper it published and, if the department hesitated to implement the Commission's recommendations, could subject the department to continuing negative publicity in its journal. This was one-stop government reform. While violating the dogma of the Progressives by being inside government, the Commission nonetheless possessed a highly unusual combination of the two pillars that reformers said were necessary for reform to work.

The five mayoral appointees to the Commission gradually evolved a philosophy of how to exercise the "unique" powers they possessed (CP&E, 1921a, p. 76). In large part,

even though they were inside government, their modus operandi was nearly identical to that of the more common nonprofit bureaus of research or efficiency. They committed themselves to:

- Acting in a nonpartisan fashion
- Functioning independently
- Focusing on presenting facts
- Using only constructive criticism
- Seeking to maximize improvements through cooperative relationships
- Using confrontation only as a last resort (CP&E, 1930a; 1931a; 1934a)

Nonetheless, the Commissioners recognized that they had a 'club in the closet.' Negative publicity about a city agency opposing their reform recommendations would be "an effective weapon" to exercise if necessary. In particular:

The ability to make public facts concerning poor management in a department was the best assurance that the conditions found would be remedied. *Efficiency through publicity was the slogan.* (CP&E, 1921a, p. 76, emphasis added)

This bluntly stated that the combination of its efficiency and publicity missions would be used, if needed, to promote and enact reform. But, based on the Commission's philosophy, this "militant strategy [was] used only as a last resort" (CP&E, 1931a, p. 225).

4. In Operation

The Commission published the *Toledo City Journal* on a weekly schedule, charging 50¢ a year for subscriptions, later increased to \$1. Circulation never attained the levels expected by the reformers. Early predictions had been that 10-20,000 households would subscribe to

the paper. However, the paid circulation never reached 2,000, usually hovering at about 1,500 (CP&E, 1930a, p. 17).

This lower-than-expected circulation understandably diminished the publicity-based clout of the Commission. However, to compensate, CP&E developed credibility and cooperative relations with the two major daily newspapers – unlike the hostility that some metropolitan dailies had to official city gazettes (discussed above). The papers usually ran stories about Commission reports and recommendations (CP&E, 1930b, p. 155). This amplified CP&E's own power of direct publicity.

Most issues of the *Journal* contained features that would be expected of official gazettes, such as council proceedings, ordinances enacted, official legal notices and annual reports of city departments. Other aspects of the paper were similar to publications of nonprofit bureaus of research and efficiency, such as reports summarizing investigations of government agencies, descriptions of reforms adopted in other cities that might be applicable to the local metropolitan area and notification of upcoming elections and referenda.

The Commission's use of the *Journal* sometimes showed a public relations sophistication that was ahead of its times. It was common for most governmental directories to be based on agency names. While that makes sense to public administrators, it showed little understanding of how the world looked to the public-at-large. Generally, citizens don't think about problem solving in relation to the titles of government agencies. Rather, they focus on what the problem they are facing or the service they are seeking is called. Therefore, when CP&E included a directory in the *Journal* entitled "This is Where You

Should go if You Want Certain Things Done," it was in alphabetical order by activities and services rather than titles of bureaucratic units. Some examples included:

Alley Cleaning—Street Department.

Disturbance—Police Department—[phone number].

Drainage—Engineering Department.

Licenses, Dogs—Courthouse—[phone number].

Street Lighting—Electric Light Clerk (CP&E, 1918a).

This was a pioneering effort to make government more intelligible and accessible to the public. In the mid-1970s, one of the projects of Federal Information Centers was the development of 'Blue Pages' in the phone books distributed by local telephone companies that focused on the names of services citizens might be seeking (Lee, 2004a, p. 66).

The budget for the Commission was about \$11,000 a year (Fairlie, 1930, p. 111) and its staffing was equally modest. For many years it had only one full-time professional staffer, usually holding the title of secretary to the Commission. Given ongoing responsibilities to edit the paper and staff Commission meetings, the secretary had little time to investigate departmental operations. Generally, every year the Commission conducted one or two substantial investigations (usually on its own initiative), as well as submitting several minor reports, usually informational, to the city council. Some of its major investigations included the city's accounting system (CP&E, 1917), municipal court (Coker, 1922, p. 99), Fire Department (CP&E, 1925a), Police Department (CP&E, 1926), criminal branch of the courts (Forbes, 1929a) and the civil service system (CP&E, 1931b).

In 1928, the anti-reform 'regulars' proposed an amendment to the city charter that would have, amongst other things, reduced the independence and powers of the Commission (Shenefield, 1929, p. 736). The voters defeated it.

During the New Deal, the Commission's staff was temporarily increased with personnel funded by the federal Civil Works Administration (CWA) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) (Paige, 1934, p. 277; Curry, 1936, p. 47). After World War II and through the 1960s, permanent Commission staffing expanded to include a librarian, government analyst and editorial research assistant (CP&E, 1949; 1963a). One of the Commission's staffers in 1948, Thomas 'Lud' Ashley, was elected to Congress from Toledo in 1954 and served until defeated for reelection in 1980 (Ashley, 2004). Another employee from the early 1960s, Edna Brown, was the first African-American woman elected to the Toledo City Council, in 1994 (Brown, 2004).

5. Publicizing Reform Initiatives from the Inside

The Commission was generally consistent about applying its philosophy of seeking to avoid controversy. However, it gradually evolved several tactics for using the power of publicity to push for reforms and didn't hesitate to use them when other less confrontational approaches failed. Commissioners realized that government officials would not treat a topic seriously unless an issue was "brought to the public attention through *publication*," especially when "the newspapers were not interested in the situation" (Forbes, 1929b, emphasis added). CP&E developed three tactics for using publicity as a form of pressure: criticism, advocacy and follow-up.

5.1. Criticism

The first time the Commission used the *Toledo City Journal* to give negative publicity to government occurred quickly, the seventh issue of the paper. It was directed at elected officials. While the Commission derived its powers from the city charter (akin to a constitution at the state or federal level), the city council nonetheless had the discretion to determine the level of funding it would allocate to run the Commission. Maneuvering subtly to cripple the Commission with inadequate staffing, the Council sought to limit the duties and lower the salary level of the Commission's secretary, its main professional staffer. The Commission responded with a front page story in the *Journal* headlined "A Plain Statement." Arguing for adequate funding, the article concluded with a subtle but clear threat to the Council: "The issue, then, is clear and definite: Shall the will of the people be carried out in the spirit of the charter?" (CP&E, 1916, p. 2). Eventually, the Council yielded. While the Commission did not get the overall staffing it was hoping for, it received what it considered the minimally necessary level to function.

In a more typical use of negative publicity, directed at operations of city agencies, CP&E had released a study in 1918 of the city's Workhouse Farm (a cross between a correctional institution and a welfare residence that was a working farm). The Commission didn't soft-pedal its criticisms. For example, on the front page of the *Journal* it noted, "Of the 14 employes [sic] at the Workhouse, not one has taken an examination for the position he holds" (CP&E, 1918b, p. 429). In other words, the city hall regulars had found a way to ignore the nascent merit-based civil service system and instead continue to hire based on patronage. The Commission exposed this scheme through publicity, assuring that it could not continue indefinitely. Similarly, the Commission conducted a study of the city motor

vehicle fleet and concluded "Toledo's city-owned cars cost more to operate and maintain than should be the case. ... The present garage system is very unsatisfactory" (CP&E, 1921b, p. 512).

CP&E also learned to nuance the rhetoric it used in its publicity, so that differently toned criticisms could be communicated based on the particulars of the situation. For example, when in-fighting between factions was paralyzing the city council, the Commission published a front-page statement to urge a settlement. Using low-decibel rhetoric, it commented that "it would be derelict in its function of promoting efficiency in the city government unless it took cognizance of the present situation in Council" and called on all sides to settle their differences as quickly as possible (CP&E, 1922). On another occasion, a front-page story gently chided some agency and department heads for not submitting the required annual reports that were to be published in the *Journal* (CP&E, 1920, p. 315). Conversely, the Commission could employ attention-getting hyperbole when needed. In 1939 it described actions of the city council as "little more than token approaches to the whole problem" (CP&E, 1939). In the parlance of the 21st century, that was a perfect sound bite.

5.2. *Advocacy*

Sometimes the Commission would use its publicity power to advocate for policies and positions in a pro-active fashion. This tactic was "less negative in character" than criticism since it usually focused on "attempting to prevent an action which the members of the Commission feel is wrong in principle, or illegal, or both" (CP&E, 1931a, p. 227). For example, in 1925 the mayor submitted a proposed annual city budget to the council that the

Commission felt was out of balance and was, in effect, deficit spending. Rather than criticizing the mayor for what he had already done, CP&E published a front-page article that urged the Council to exercise its prerogatives to amend the mayor's proposal. Using soft but clear language, the article reminded Council members that "it is the duty of Council which provides the revenues, to cut the cloth to fit the pattern" (CP&E, 1925b, p. 10).

On another occasion, the Commission advocated for the enactment of centralized purchasing as having many advantages for the city (CP&E, 1934b). This type of publicity focused on the positive, the benefits of administrative change rather than the overt criticism of the status quo. Similarly, later that year, it noted its "advocacy of the principle of salary reductions on the basis of the principle of the sliding scale used in income taxation" (CP&E, 1934c, p. 127).

5.3. Follow-up

The Commission was persistent about pursuing the adoption of its recommendations and used to the full extent the publicity powers it had to accomplish that. For example, when its recommendations about the Workhouse weren't enacted, it followed up with a section in its annual report in the *City Journal* pointedly noting, "conditions remain unchanged" (CP&E, 1919, p. 106). On another occasion, an article in the *Journal* noted that "the Commission reiterated its former stand on two previous occasions" and yet this particular recommendation had still not been enacted (CP&E, 1934c, p. 127).

Finally, the Commission developed a graphic scorecard technique in its publicity to focus readers' attention on which of its recommendations had been adopted and which hadn't. For example, in its annual report for 1926, CP&E listed all of the recommendations it

had made during the year and then, immediately following each recommendation, provided text in bold face on its fate. In some cases, recommendations were listed as having been enacted. In other cases, "**nothing yet has been accomplished**" or that certain reports were "**not [submitted] to the city council**" notwithstanding Commission's recommendation (CP&E, 1927, pp. 174-5, bolding in original). This was an effective technique of using publicity to create pressure for adoption of recommendations that had not initially been accepted.

6. Denouement

After reaching a zenith of both investigative and publicity activism in the 1920s and 30s, the Commission of Publicity and Efficiency gradually atrophied. It evolved to become a tamer version of its earlier self. Its investigative functions gradually shifted to preparing reports requested by the mayor, city council or municipal departments. Those kinds of subjects were unlikely to be the kind of exposés that resulted from studies initiated by the Commission. Also, a request to explore the feasibility of a future project could not be critical of current operations since the topic was about a prospective activity. For example, in 1963 CP&E submitted a report on the feasibility of constructing a civic auditorium (CP&E, 1963b). Later that year, the city council asked it to study incorporation and annexation laws (CP&E, 1963c). These kinds of projects subtly shifted the mission of the Commission from that of a bureau of research or efficiency that initiated investigations to a legislative reference bureau and library that responded to requests for research reports.

The other major responsibility of the Commission, publisher of the *Toledo City Journal*, also changed over time. Its role became more and more that of a passive printer

rather than the author of the contents of the paper. The Commission of Publicity and Efficiency had been tamed.

In such an emasculated form, there was less and less logic for the Commission's existence. By the early 1970s, it looked like a relic from bygone days rather than a vigorous body that was continuing to implement its unusual dual mandate from the 1914 charter. Finally, without controversy, in the fall of 1975 the voters approved a charter amendment that abolished CP&E and shifted its publication responsibilities to the clerk of the city council. The Commissioners convened for their last meeting on November 20, 1975 and then adjourned sine die (CP&E, 1975). The December 27 issue of the *Toledo City Journal* was the last one it published.

7. Conclusions

What to make of this unusual government agency, mandated to investigate its own government and use its publicity power to push for implementation of its recommendations? The central question prompting this inquiry had been whether CP&E's public sector affiliation diminished its potential effectiveness. Therefore, the key to assessing CP&E's performance would not be whether it was effective. Rather, the central issue is sectorial affiliation. Relative to its nonprofit counterparts, was CP&E less effective because it was inside government? Using more contemporary nomenclature, the working hypothesis of the good government reformers was that (a) research and efficiency bureaus should be in the nonprofit sector and (b) for the power of publicity to have impact it needed to come from independent media that were beyond the reach of government. Based on those premises, CP&E's location in government would be expected to be a fatal flaw crippling its ability to

use the power of publicity to promote public sector reform. Was that hypothesis confirmed by CP&E's record?

The answer can best be sought in third parties' assessments of the Commission, both contemporaneously those of modern day researchers. In 1920, a review of recent municipal developments in the *American Political Science Review* judged the *Toledo City Journal* as "one of the most useful" of city newspapers, clearly an endorsement of the uses that CP&E put the paper to (Coker, 1920, p. 702). Reviewing various municipal approaches to report to the public, an academic researcher in 1928 praised the Commission's work, especially its use of the *Journal* for "interpretive articles presenting the analyses of [its] research into the city's administration" (Kilpatrick, 1928, p. 52). In 1931, a committee of four national nonprofit associations promoting government reform praised the *Journal* compared most official gazettes, noting that despite its public sector affiliation it was "tenable" as a medium for reporting to the public (National Committee, 1931, p. 12). Seidman judged the Toledo Commission as one of "the two outstanding" central staff agencies in all American cities (Seidman, 1941, 178). (The other was the City of Los Angeles' Bureau of Budget and Efficiency.) He also opined that public sector bureaus like Toledo were generally more effective than nonprofit ones. More recently, Williams referred to the *Journal* as one of two prime examples of the good government movement's efforts to communicate vigorously with the public (2004, p. 153). For Williams, the public sector affiliation of the *Journal* was an unimportant detail, not worth highlighting. The newspaper was a leading publicity organ of reformers regardless of sector.

Perhaps the most significant indication of CP&E's performance vis a vis the nonprofit-dominated reform movement was embodied in a 1928 brochure. The

Governmental Research Association, the nonprofit association of bureaus of research or efficiency, solicited letters from all such entities about their work and record. The intent was to compile and publish the letters in order to present a national overview of the scope and accomplishments of the municipal reform movement. The booklet had about 40 letters, including one from the Toledo Commission of Publicity and Efficiency (Cutting, 1928, p. 38). That CP&E was included in the pamphlet was an initial signal that it was just like the (overwhelmingly) nonprofit bureaus. Furthermore, a comparison of the contents of CP&E's letter with those from the nonprofit bureaus showed no significant difference in the kinds of activities or accomplishments each boasted about. In short, the public sector Commission of Publicity and Efficiency was *similar* to its nonprofit counterparts. The unintended message of this published compilation was that in the case of CP&E, the sectorial affiliation of publicity-oriented bureaus of research or efficiency was not particularly important. Yes, indeed, government *was* able to use publicity against itself to accomplish reform.

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