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The Short Life of the Government Public Relations Association in the US, 1949-1958

by

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Abstract

The historical literature on US public relations has paid modest attention to the professionalization of the practice in the public sector. This is an historical summary of the Government Public Relations Association, which existed between 1949 and 1958. It attempted to organize a professional association of, largely, public relations officers at the municipal level of government. Its failure to become institutionalized likely reflects the tenuous status of the overt practice of public relations in the US public sector.

Keywords

Public relations in government; public relations professional associations; professionalization; Government Public Relations Association; American Municipal Public Relations Officers; Institute for Government Public Information Research

1. Introduction

The Institute for Government Public Information Research (IGPIR) was co-founded in 1978 by the National Association of Government Communicators and American University in Washington, DC. Its goal was to conduct research about the practice and profession of government public relations. Given its location in the national capital, it was primarily focused on public relations in the federal government. While not a membership-based organization, IGPIR's work was intended to strengthen the professional status of federal public information officers (PIOs). In a mailing to federal PIOs, IGPIR described itself as seeking "ways of strengthening the professional environment of government communicators" (Lee, 2006a, p. 121). However, the agency was short-lived, dissolving in 1981. IGPIR's brief existence was an historical case study that served as a synecdoche for the larger picture. The tenuous status and defensiveness of public relations professionals in federal agencies was reflected in IGPIR's own difficulties at survival. The US Congress had for nearly a century been adopting laws and appropriations controls to limit the practice of public relations in the federal executive branch (Kosar, 2005). The Institute's demise was "emblematic of the practice of public relations in government itself" (Lee, 2006a, p. 123).

IGPIR largely focused on the federal government. Is the same true of public relations in local government in the US? This historical inquiry is a case study of an organization that two decades earlier was a close parallel to IGPIR. The Association of Municipal Public Relations Officers (AMPRO), later renamed Government Public Relations Association (GPRA), was an effort to create a professional association for practitioners of public

relations in the public sector in the US, especially city government. The life and fate of that professional association can similarly be examined as a mirror of the status of the practice and profession itself, in this case study, the municipal level of government in the US.

During its early years, it looked like AMPRO/GPRA was a significant development in the evolution of the profession in the US. The first edition of the highly successful public relations textbook by Cutlip and Center viewed GPRA's creation as one of several signal events in the industry that were "spurs for solidarity and professional growth" (Cutlip & Center, 1952, p. 476). The previous year a textbook on city government suggested that the new association would "testify to a growing recognition" of the importance of public relations in municipal government (Hallenbeck, 1951, p. 302). However, it was not to be. In 1958, GPRA disbanded. It quickly disappeared from the literature and was largely forgotten. Therefore, the purposes of this article are to restore GPRA to its place in the history of public relations in the US public sector and to evaluate the significance of its failure to become institutionalized.

The research methodologies for this historical case study were mainstream methods for historical research. Primary sources were archives, libraries, journals and magazines, contemporaneous newspaper coverage, and an interview. Sources included the National Municipal League's archives at the Auraria Library in Denver (CO), *The American City*, and the digital databases OCLC/WorldCat, JSTOR, NewspaperARCHIVE.com and ProQuest Historical newspapers.

2. Creation

From 1941 to 1945, the monthly journal for municipal managers, *The American City*, published a regular column called “The Human Side of City Hall.” Written by Professor Phillips Bradley, it promoted improved public reporting by cities and an overall attention to public relations (Lee, 2006b, p. 258). The column was revived in 1947 with the title of “The City Tells Its Story.” That title more explicitly identified its public relations orientation. Henry Davis Nadig, director of public relations for the New York Regional Plan Association, was author and editor of the column. As part of his research for the monthly feature, Nadig frequently initiated correspondence with municipal officials in the US and Europe who were involved in public relations. In turn, once published, his columns triggered responses and follow-ups from readers with reactions, suggestions and examples. Gradually, Nadig and Eric Carlson, the magazine’s associate editor, realized the existence of the growing number of US cities with public relations officers. The two became interested in promoting, advancing and professionalizing municipal public relations (Carlson, 1956, p. 276n11, 277n14). Along with “a handful of New York City public relations officials,” they decided to try to create such an organization (Wheeler, 1956a, p. 315).

In the November 1948 column, Nadig announced the effort to create an Association of Municipal Public Relations Officers (AMPRO). He invited readers who were interested to contact him and used his correspondence files as an initial mailing list to solicit expressions of interest. He listed his office at the Regional Plan Association as the mailing address for the nascent organization (Nadig, 1948). That month, at the annual conference of the National Municipal League (NML) in Boston, Nadig and Carlson organized a meeting to

make the case for such an organization. NML (later the National Civic League) was an organization of individual good government reformers and activists. (This is in contradistinction to the American Municipal Association [later the National League of Cities], a membership organization for cities.) Nadig and Carlson called for formalizing and institutionalizing public relations offices in every city, or for smaller cities to share a full time professional (Nadig & Carlson, 1949).

By May 1949, AMPRO had a letterhead and a governing board of ten. Seven of the members of the board had titles such as Public Relations Officer or Public Relations Director and were from New Orleans, Norfolk (VA), Rochester (NY), Teaneck (NJ) and St. Paul (MN). The other three were with national or regional associations of city-level officials, such as the National Fire Protection Association (Nadig, 1949). AMPRO was formally launched by twenty public relations men who attended a luncheon meeting on June 17, 1949 in New York City. They adopted a constitution and by-laws, elected officers and an executive committee, and decided to loosely affiliate with NML.

3. Infancy

The nascent organization gradually developed all the standard accoutrements of a professional association, including membership certificates, a newsletter (called *Basics...For the Government Public Relations Professional*), a membership directory, a code of ethics, a model ordinance for governing municipal public relations offices, publications, an annual conference and annual awards.

The organization's official goals revolved around normalizing and professionalizing the status of municipal public relations. AMPRO sought "To stimulate the growth of official municipal public relations through organized leadership and action; To promote public and official understanding of the functions and principles of municipal public relations; [and] To encourage recognition of the municipal public relations profession as a non-political activity of government" (Municipal public relations officers, 1949). These goals faintly hinted at the precarious nature of the open practice of public relations in city governments and defensiveness about the profession.

The difficulties of forming such an association were apparent from the start. In some cities public relations was viewed as an unnecessary or wasteful expenditure of tax funds.

Alternately, or simultaneously, municipal public relations was viewed as highly political, as the propaganda outlet for the city's elected officials, especially the mayor. As with public information officers in the federal government in Washington, DC, municipal public relations officers struggled for legitimation, recognition and professionalization. There was a detectable tone in AMPRO's materials suggesting the ongoing struggle for legitimacy and professionalization of government public relations. Summarizing the difficult context of openly practicing public relations in the public sector, co-founder Nadig said that the new organization "cannot afford to truckle to the timid, to pander for the politician, nor to cater to the queasy" (Nadig, 1951, p. 123).

Given this unsupportive environment that municipal PR functioned in, it was evident from the start that AMPRO might be different from other professional associations of municipal

public servants. Fire chiefs, public librarians, school administrators, city attorneys, city planners and purchasing agents all had national organizations with full-time staff and bustling headquarters, while AMPRO had an unpaid volunteer executive director (Nadig) and no office besides that of Nadig's salaried job (Professional organizations, 1950). Whether it could achieve the same size and permanence as those other organizations would be a test of the scope, standing and legitimacy of municipal public relations.

AMPRO had its "First Annual Meeting" in May 1950 in New York City, in conjunction with the annual convention of the US Conference of Mayors. New officers and board members were elected. Of the six officers and eight board members, all were men except regional vice president Lee K. Jaffe, who was Public Relations Director for the New York Port Authority. Their titles included assistant to the mayor, deputy commissioner of commerce, and director of research and information. These titles were an indication of the partially subterranean status of municipal public relations. Outgoing President Harold Rand of Rochester (NY) said that the profession needed to guard against the negative stereotype of press agency, one reason for some of the members having non-PR titles (AMPRO's first, 1950; Publicity group, 1950).

AMPRO released its first publication that year, *Public Relations for Public Officials*. It was a 14-page bibliography of relevant literature compiled by Carlson.¹ At the association's second annual meeting in June 1951, the group decided to change its name to Government Public Relations Association (GPRA) so that its membership base would "include public-relations personnel of all levels of government" (AMPRO changes, 1951). At the meeting,

Jaffe was elected president, the first woman in that position (Heads publicity group, 1951). In general, the leadership had a rising sense of confidence in the nascent organization and the profession it sought to promote. Summarizing a session the association sponsored during the annual conference of the National Municipal League, past-President Harold Rand declared, “The general tone of the meeting was a confident expression that the techniques of municipal public relations are making headway and that this newest of administrative techniques is now on a solid footing in many of our communities” (Rand, 1951, p. 178).

4. Struggling for Survival

In 1952, upon acceptance of a new job, Nadig resigned as GPRA’s volunteer executive director and as the monthly columnist for *American City* (Carlson, 1952). Eventually, a major organizational reform was announced in 1953 (AMA and GPRA, 1953). First, Nadig’s replacement would be Pan Dodd Wheeler, the public information expert on the staff of the Municipal Technical Advisory Service of the University of Tennessee’s Extension. She would also take over Nadig’s monthly column. Wheeler had already established her credentials through numerous publications on municipal PR (Wheeler, 1950, 1951).²

Second, GPRA’s very loose affiliation with NML – such as holding meetings concurrent with NML’s annual conference – would be replaced by a more formal relationship with AMA. GPRA’s central office (such as it was, mostly records and mailing lists) would move from New York to Chicago, to AMA’s national offices at the ‘1313’ building in Chicago, which housed a score of national public administration organizations. AMA would provide secretariat and other services to GPRA. In turn, GPRA would hold its annual meetings

concurrent with AMA's annual conference (Eimon, 2007). However, given her unsalaried status, Wheeler would stay in Knoxville and dedicate only part of her time to her GPRA responsibilities. In some respects, the new relationship with AMA had the effect of partly negating the organization's recent name change. Despite its new name, GPRA, as an affiliate of AMA would be gravitate to a municipal public relations focus, rather than all levels of government. This would have the effect of discouraging membership growth with government PR staff from counties, states and the federal government.

Notwithstanding the benefits of the affiliation with AMA, there were still inherent organizational problems, mostly relating to the small size of its active membership. After the AMA and GPRA 1953 annual conference, co-founder Carlson was concerned about "lack of leadership" and the lack of "a properly constituted nominating committee" (Carlson, 1953). Membership and participation continued to be lackluster, ranging from a low of 60 to a high of about 120 (Eimon, 2007). In 1956, it had 103 formal paid members (*Encyclopedia*, 1956, p. 91). This small size raised doubts about the organization's sustainability. President Jaffe, describing GPRA's membership as "small," wondered if perhaps it should fold into a national association of public relations practitioners (mostly from business) rather than remain a freestanding organization for those in the public sector (Jaffe, 1955, 141). According to Carlson, GPRA was "strictly a bootstrap-lifting operation, unaided by foundation grants or other subsidies" (Carlson, 1956, p. 277n14).

Wheeler was energetic in representing the Association, prolific in her writings and active in external fora, including speaking at the 1956 annual convention of the New York State

Conference of Mayors (the only woman to do so that year), delivering a paper at an international conference in Brussels in 1958 (coinciding with the World's Fair) and speaking at a training program of the American Society for Public Administration (Wheeler, 1956b, 1958; Eimon, 1958a, 1958b, 1961). (In 1958, Wheeler remarried and took her husband's name, and changed her byline to Pan Dodd Eimon.)

GPRA sought to generate publications and annual awards that would help professionalize the practice of government public relations and, incidentally, attract more members. It published another bibliography that Carlson compiled, a 25-page booklet on municipal PR for small and medium sized cities (Wheeler, 1955),³ and reprinted a Beverley Hills (CA) municipal training manual in public relations (Huntley, 1957). However, GPRA's plan to publish a comprehensive manual on government public relations in 1956 fell through. It was to have a chapter on the practice of public relations in each of the major subdivisions of municipal government, such as personnel, public works and sanitation. Only the chapter relating to housing and redevelopment ever reached print (Gorman, 1956). GPRA also issued a model ordinance for a municipal public relations office and an ethics code, both common products of professional associations (Eimon, 1960, pp. 731-734). At each of its annual conferences it issued awards to outstanding public relations practices by American cities.

5. Quietus

The continuing inability to generate the critical mass of active members – itself a reflection of the tenuous status of public relations professionals in government – made the

organization's demise practically inevitable. For the AMA's annual convention in late 1957, GPRA was still announcing that it would hold its annual meeting during the conference (Wheeler, 1957) and, as usual, released the list of its annual award winners at the meeting (Eimon, 1958c). But it had trouble filling a slate of officers at the annual meeting. It wasn't able to announce the new officers until mid-1958 (New GPRA officers, 1958).

During AMA's annual conference in December 1958, only a "handful" of GPRA's active members convened for what was supposed to be GPRA's annual conference. Facing reality, they voted to disband and reconstitute as AMA's Committee on Municipal Public Relations (GPRA, 1958, p. 1). The move was significant, much more than merely organization trivia. Not only would GPRA lose its existence as a free-standing national organization, but the new committee would largely focus only on the annual PR awards and would gradually shift to a membership of mayors instead of municipal public relations officers (P. R. award, 1959; Mayors Brown, Arnold, 1968). So ended the effort to create an independent national professional organization of municipal public relations officials in the US.

The Committee's first chair was GPRA's last chair, Abe Rosen of Philadelphia (AMA program, 1959). The public transition occurred more slowly. The last time that the monthly column on municipal public relations in *American City* was identified with GPRA was the May 1959 issue, when Eimon, as the column's editor, was listed as GPRA's Executive Director (Eimon, 1959a, p. 167). In the next monthly issue, she was identified with her University of Tennessee title, "Consultant, Municipal Public Relations" (Eimon, 1959b, p. 149).

The AMA Committee continued the annual awards program, but subtly shifted the attention to “excellent Public *Information* programs,” using a euphemism for government public relations that was less controversial (P. R. award, 1959, emphasis added). By 1962, the awards were expanded to include “community relations” and were amalgamated into AMA’s pre-existing annual awards to the magazines of state municipal leagues (12 cities, 1962). The Committee continued to be active into the late 1960s (Mayors Brown, Arnold, 1968), after AMA had changed its name to National League of Cities (NLC). Later, NLC reorganized the awards program and the 17th annual cycle of the new awards were announced in 1997. One category was “excellence in communicating with the general public” (21 capture, 1997). However, the annual public information award had been discontinued by 2007, with NLC no longer listing it as part of its annual awards (NLC, 2007). GPRA’s last vestige had disappeared.

6. Summary and Conclusions

After GPRA’s demise, there have been other efforts in the US to create professional organizations for government public relations professionals. One vestige of GPRA was the New York State Government Public Relations Association, which was active in the 1960s (Chapter notes, 1965, p. 55; Press agent, 1968). US organizations that existed at the time of writing (2007) included the National Association of Government Communicators (with a membership largely dominated by federal employees) and the California Association of Public Information Officials. Based on the fate of GPRA and IGPIR, the longevity of these organizations could be interpreted as indicating an improvement in the professional

environment of the practice of government public relations. Future research could assess the organizational vitality of those two extant professional associations and interpret the results in juxtaposition with GPRA and IGPIR.

Outside the US, the London Government Public Relations Association existed in the 1970s (Steel & Stanyer, 1977, p. 420) and an Association of Municipal Public Relations Officers was established in South Africa in 1974 (Public Relations Institute, 2007). A GPRA for Latin America existed briefly in the 1960s, when Eimon lived in Central America (Eimon, 2007). The most prominent contemporary example of an active government public relations organization outside the US is the Local Government Public Relations Association of Australia (Public Relations Association, 2007). Such non-US examples suggest future comparative research, assessing the vitality of these non-US professional associations for government PR practitioners and comparing the results to their counterpart (defunct and extant) organizations in the US.

GPRA's short life foreshadowed the brief existence of the subsequent Institute for Government Public Information Research at American University in Washington, DC (1978-81). Both sought to professionalize the practice of public relations in government, at the municipal and federal levels, respectively. Both failed. As with the IGPIR, GPRA's brief life can be viewed as a reflection of the professional status of the practice of public relations at the municipal level of government. As an overt and publicly acknowledged activity, it had difficulty gaining legitimacy in American political culture. This negative context of the

practice of public relations in the public sector is a key factor differentiating it from counterpart activities in the private sector (Liu and Horsley, 2007).

Eimon deserves the last word. She viewed municipal public relations grandly, as a major factor in assuring the proper functioning of democratic government in American cities. Its role, she wrote, was “to hold the minds of men to the principles of democracy” (Wheeler, 1956a, p. 320).

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Notes

1. The author was not able to locate this publication. It was referenced in “Sources of Information” in C. E. Ridley & O. F. Nolting (Eds.), *Municipal year book, 1952* (Chicago: International City Managers’ Association, 1952), p. 265.
2. Reflecting the times, a newspaper column about her work promoting annual municipal reports in Tennessee mentioned in the lede that she was “a vivacious young blonde” (Bill Freehoff, “Over the Coffee Cup” [column], *Kingsport [TN] News*, April 12, 1956, p. 1).
3. The original version was published in 1954 by the University of Tennessee with P. Cliff Greenwood listed as co-author. The 1971 fourth edition of Cutlip and Center’s widely used

textbook *Effective Public Relations* referenced it (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971, p. 559). The version GPRA published in 1955 contained a three page appendix entitled “Notes From Officials Who Reviewed This Manuscript.”

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