



Speech to the New York Telephone Company
December 1936

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Summary

Page provides a historical perspective on the company’s business ventures and reviews how the company has successfully faced challenges created by the depression, the war, and other company ventures. He encourages the company to begin thinking about meeting social needs and causing social change. Page talks about the opportunities associated with conducting public relations for the Bell System, which was at the time the “biggest company in the United States.”

Key topics

Page Principles

Federal Communications Commission (FCC)	Listen to the customer
History - history of the Bell System	
Public Opinion - operating in the public’s interest	
Social Change	

Public Relations Today and the Outlook for the Future

Public Relations Course
New York Telephone Company
December 10, 1936

PUBLIC RELATIONS TODAY AND THE
OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

During the last 25 years we have lived under the “square deal,” the “new era,” “normalcy,” and the “new deal.” We have had a couple of panics, one first-class depression, a war, and some minor excitements. During that period the Bell System has grown and become consolidated in position and I think has improved its reputation and standing.

Not only has the environment changed but the whole inside of the Bell System has changed. If history repeats itself, therefore, there’s one thing that we can be sure of and that is that there will be a constant change both inside and out. The only kind of people who can get along well in these circumstances are those whose minds are subject to change. I don’t mean subject to change without notice like the railroad timetable. But by foresight and thought one ought to be prepared for the changes so that they can be made at the proper time and in due order.

If this business is to prosper we have to be sure that it is flexible so that it fits the times and needs of the people it serves. Now that necessity brings up a more or less embarrassing fact. People in this world from the earliest times have been seeking with pathetic eagerness for a formula for their tough problems—a formula for religion, for government, and for morals. Why do they do that? It is to escape the painful necessity of constantly thinking about those things, and this is a serious thing for us.

We are the biggest company in the United States and to keep the biggest company so flexible that it meets the changing fancies of the public is bound to take eternal and unremitting thought; and more especially since our company is not only the biggest but is also a monopoly. To keep it close to the public is going to take more and more unremitting thought. And now for the more serious part of the news, — you are going to do the thinking.

You may have had the notion that Mr. Cooley and I, and others in the Information Department, were hired to do the thinking, — in other words that a simple formula had been found for public relations by hiring the public relations department. This is far from the truth. Those of you who know may think of many reasons why this could not be so. I will mention only one of the least important ones but still a completely conclusive one, — that is, there are not enough of us.

We were not hired to do the thinking, we were hired to be sure that you do. That is our job. We are a constant reminder, — what the doctors call a “counter-irritant.” The men who in different tasks and on different levels in this business see its currents flow by day by day before their eyes are the men in positions to see and know whether it slides smoothly over the highway of public approval, or to see and feel the bumps when they occur. They have the opportunity to diagnose the troubles and find the cure for them.

You are then in the position to see the signs of a public habit or desire. You are likely to see it if you are looking for it, and likely to see it in time to do something about it, that is, if you are looking for it hard enough. The job simply is this: every man in his own area must see that our service fits the needs and pleasures of the American people at all times; to see that it fits like a glove fits a hand, — not a still hand but a moving hand. It is not a static problem. Our service has got to fit every motion that comes, and that goes for everyone in the Bell System, — from the president to the office boy.

Incidentally, I have tried to catch the President neglecting this part of his job so that I could remind him of it and fulfill my job, but I have not had much success. His is constantly on his job.

I should like to reiterate that the long pull and the main current of our activities are keeping our eye on the public and seeing what they want and seeing what they want and seeing what we can do to give it to them in the way they want it. I emphasize that particularly because from the questions people ask me I think sometimes we are a little diverted by details which are part of, but not the main part of, the task.

For instance, I am asked a great many questions about what effect the Securities and Exchange Commission has on us and the Federal Communications Commission and the Social Security Act and many other new attending circumstances of our life. They

are all-important, but remember they are just as much subject to the changing scenery of public pleasure as we are. They are signs of it exactly as our changing activities are signs of it. They are important symbols, but after all they are symbols.

The fundamental thing is the public desire, and whatever these institutions are now you may be sure they will be different two years hence, just as we will be. Our job is to adapt ourselves to this part of the changing scene now and in the future and to all the other parts of the changing scene. Our job is to run the communication business for the American people in whatever state of mind and money they happen to be at the time, and be on hand at the next stop ready with whatever they want when they get there.

I do not mean to imply that the conduct of our relations with commissions is not a highly important operating function. It is, and we should be foolish indeed if we did not conduct those relations with the utmost skill with which we are capable. All I mean to say is that for those who are not concerned with this particular job, the main long haul effort is to please the public, which is the final authority. That is our job and it is also the job of the commissions. We have a charter from the public just as they have. We have a mandate just as they have and to the same end. If we do our thinking better than they do, they will follow us. If they do their thinking better than we do, we will follow them. And the thinking is in relationship to the public as it is, not as we might expect our desire it to be.

If we think at times the public jury does not give us a fair chance to tell our story, that doesn't make any difference. In the long run I am not afraid of that, but if in the long run it were true that the public wouldn't give us a fair hearing, it would merely mean we would have to find a way to please the public without a fair hearing. We have got to please this public for it's the only public we've got - we can't change it.

Now, one word more on commissions. They are not always sensible and always wise, any more than anyone else is. But there is one thing certain. We have been through a depression and we have in general maintained our rates. I am fearful to think that might have happened without the commissions being there, because in the general state of public thought about such things it is practically necessary for us to have some institution to which we can point and say "we haven't conducted this thing arbitrarily; We have had to refer, and have gladly referred, this thing both to the commissions and to the courts."

I used to know an old man down in North Carolina who ended many arguments with the remark: "I knew a man who made a great success in life by minding his own business." That always seemed very complete and satisfying to me until it finally dawned on me that there might be some little difficulty in figuring out just what one's business was. If you ask most people in the Bell System what business they are in they will tell you the telephone business. That is right, we are, but that isn't all there is to it.

Our business is to enable people to communicate at a distance any way they want to, to the degree that the public desires to perform this service. I put this last in because you will remember that we once owned the Western Union Telegraph Company and were in a fair way to do the telegraph as well as the telephone business. The public at that time decided against that. The public's veto is the upper limit on our efforts. However, we don't want to have any other upper limit. We don't want to be like the buggy makers who

stuck to buggies when automobiles came along, nor the transportation companies which limited themselves to rail haulage because they called their business railroading.

We are not therefore just a wire company or a telephone company. We are not limited by the use of any material, device, or name. We are engaged in the social purpose of eliminating distance from human intercourse, — to make it possible for people to congregate in cities if they want to, or live in the suburbs if they want to, or live in the country, on a farm or anywhere else, and go where and when they please and still be able if they want to, to talk or write or sing or send a picture with anyone else with as little inconvenience as possible.

We often put in the word “instantaneous” as a description of our objective. That is a description of what we can do, but we are not limited to that. If the public wants the messages delayed, that is our job just as well as anything else.

In thinking about this business and the social service it performs, don't limit yourselves to any devices. Think in terms of social needs and social changes. The idea is not what are the uses of the telephone instruments or the things that are now associated with them, but what uses does the public want or could the public use, then let's find the means of giving it to them.

We are engaged in a social enterprise of vast usefulness and almost infinite possibilities. If we have the vision to see a wider and better public service, I am sure that there is ingenuity enough in the System to provide ways and means of rendering it.

In other words, even if we mind our own business, there is ample room for imagination and expansion. Opportunity runs off into the infinite. However, we can't be quite like the White Knight in President Wilson's story. According to that tale, the White Knight donned his armor, called for his sword and spear, clanked down the castle steps, mounted his great charger, and rode off in every direction at once.

We can't quite accomplish that. We have discovered that whether logically or not, the public does not expect us to attend to everything which touches on electric transmission. We do not do the message telegraph business now. That is in other hands. We do do the teletypewriter business — that is a switch message business.

We also do a leased wire business telephone and telegraph. We do the teletypewriter and the leased wire business for the very good reason that we are the most competent people and have the best equipment to do it. That gives us our public license. We did ask the telegraph companies to join us in the teletypewriter business, but they saw fit not to, so we did it alone.

Radio you know, we were in, being among the first to broadcast. But we got out of that. I think there would have been public complications had we stayed in it longer, but foresight got us out in time. We do, of course, still very largely furnish the networks, which connect the chains.

We used to be in the foreign manufacturing business. We got out of that. We were in the electrical distributing business, — Graybar. We got out of that. We got into the talking motion picture business, as some of our friends in the FCC pointed out in recent

times, because of the inventions in the Laboratories. We did try to get out of that. We tried to put that into the hands of the Warner Brothers. It didn't work. And then during the depression we got further into it than we normally would, in an effort to save our accounts. We have various other small things outside of the telephone business, such as hearing devices, medical devices, etc., and there is the much-discussed subject of television. Television is a thing which has had a vast amount of publicity. While it may be just around the corner, I am afraid that it is likely to be a pretty big corner.

The only part that we are preparing to do ourselves in television if and when it arrives is the same kind of job that we do for the chain broadcasting, that is, supply the network services between different stations. That might possibly be done by the coaxial cable, although as the coaxial cable is now it is a telephone experiment.

I mention all these things as examples of the kind of decisions which the management of the Bell System has had to make in the process of constant thinking about our public relations, whether we got in or out of these things, developed them or gave them to someone else, or what. All of these are just like the problems that come daily before us. If we see them early enough we make our decisions wisely, and if we have good fortune we pass through that difficulty not only without public disapproval but many times with high public approval. When we do not see them early enough, or where we have a bad break, then we get a less satisfactory result.

To me it has been most interesting that it is almost impossible in judging the public feeling to do it on a logical basis.

I don't think you can work out your problems by what you think is reasonable, but you have to work them out with constant thought and attention, watching the signs to see, not what they ought to think but, what they really do think. Now besides those questions of what is our business—they are as close as that—there are a great many others, which are brought up to us which are not so close. I am not going into many of them, but I will give you a few examples.

When the late unpleasantness was at its most acute stage, I used to have a very frequent visitor who in one way or another wished us to save the country. He came in on one excuse or another. He would let us participate in its salvation by contributing about \$100,000 to combat Red propaganda. I had those offers twice a month. Now, our charter does not include saving the Nation from the Reds as one of our duties. I don't believe our stockholders put their money in the enterprise for that purpose. Some of them may be Reds for all I know.

We were also asked to lecture our employees on the value of peace, to help start a building boom, and to meddle in one-way or another with all manner of problems. As individuals, of course, we have all the rights and duties of any other citizen, but as a company it seems to me a wise thing for us to mind our own business, always with the thoughtful picture of what that business is.

Now we have come out of the valley of the shadow and are on the sunny slopes of the upward climb again. We have come through the valley of adversity exceedingly well. We have been very fortunate. The test now is whether we have the wisdom and character to stand the strain of returning prosperity, for there are many people who

drag anchor worse with the swells of prosperity than they do with the winds of adversity. The best balance wheel and governor that I know is a critical and constant thought on how we mold our flexible institution to a continuing fit with the constant change of the public's needs and desires.

Success, accomplishment, security, and satisfaction are all bound up with keeping clear the fact that our best job is the public service when, where, and as the public desires it, and the first requisite of giving the public what it wants is to keep our minds on every possible bit of evidence we can get which will give us a clear and early picture of what those wants are. I commend this exciting and entertaining game to you. As far as I know, there aren't many rules that anyone knows of. The only equipment necessary is brains. There are, however, no intermissions and the penalties for too much time out are quite heavy.