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Karen S. Miller. *The Voice of Business: Hill & Knowlton and Postwar Public Relations.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. xiii + 261 pp. $ 39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2439-9.

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Listening to a Voice of Business

Public relations, like advertising, is alternatively blamed and credited for both the good and the wicked conditions of modern times. How can a scholar tread the perilous course of responsibly assessing the impacts of a public relations firm, while avoiding both platitudes and alarms? Karen S. Miller provides us with a solidly researched and insightful model in her masterful case study of Hill & Knowlton (H&K), one of the most important public relations firms in the United States. Instead of a false drama of blame or credit, Miller weaves together a lively and finely tuned narrative of H&K activities after World War II with a balanced evaluation of their impacts. She sticks closely to her evidence, resulting in a solid and most useful study. Moreover she knows that looking at her subjects' output does not necessarily tell the historian whether or not "the general public saw, read, agreed with, or discussed the material" (p. 112). Like advertisements, public relations messages tell us more about their creators than their audiences. This approach is not the stuff of which *New York Times* best sellers are made, but *The Voice of Business* should make the best seller list of all those interested in how ideas combine with business activities and interests when business people try to influence public policy, consumption, and mainstream attitudes.

Public relations advisors and textbooks alike insist that practitioners' most important tasks focus on clients. After all, without commitment and participation by managerial authorities, no PR program can function. Even more than an advertising campaign, which certainly requires some managerial cooperation, a public relations policy or program must engage decision makers. For instance, in an all-time classic case, public relations pioneer Ivy Lee guided the Rockefellers' recovery from the public opinion disaster of the 1914 Ludlow Massacre by convincing John D. Rockefeller Jr to come to the site of the anti-labor violence and express his sorrow and regret. Had Lee simply issued a press statement on the Rockefellers' behalf, it would not have sufficed to calm public outrage at a time when Progressive Era opinion already mistrusted Robber Barons, and firms were more generally identified with their owners than now. In a more recent classic, Johnson & Johnson executives decided in 1982, at huge cost, to remove and destroy all Tylenol packages from store shelves across the United States after seven poisonings in the Chicago area. Even though the cyanide had been inserted by a murderer in a single locale, with public confidence their highest priority, Johnson & Johnson managers sought to assure consumers that they would thereafter see only safe products on the shelves. They did not hesitate or argue about their firm's lack of culpability.

Miller demonstrates the merits of such focus on clients by public relations practitioners. Through a series of case studies she shows how H&K's prestige and influence grew because founder John W. Hill early on recognized the client as the public relations practitioner's first audience. Selecting cases for their importance to successive stages of H&K's development, Miller covers the agency's postwar work for and relations with the

steel, aircraft, butter, and tobacco industries. The public opinion campaigns H&K generated and waged on behalf of these business interests yield fascinating narratives and provide Miller the means of analyzing complex relationships between large-scale businesses, the state, and the public. On behalf of steel interests, for instance, H&K argued against labor militancy and state authority, taking on the task of "popular education" about "basic economics," that is, pro-business economics. Through the usual armementarium of news releases, publications, film, radio broadcasts, speeches, and congressional testimony, plus a comic book for school distribution, H&K attacked what Hill called the "national problem of winning more friends for the steel industry" (pp. 55-9).

In the early stages of the professionalization of advertising agencies, F. Wayland Ayer raised the stature of the field by operating as a businessman among businessmen, helping the latter to make decisions rather than just taking their orders. John W. Hill likewise raised his profession by always conducting himself as a peer to his clients, counseling them and speaking–not shouting–for them. Hill expected to participate in policy making, and believed that clients who sought only publicity risked "poor policy and bad public relations" (p. 142). When even major clients, like the National Retail Dry Goods Association and the tobacco industry, closed their decision-making processes, H&K resigned those accounts.

Miller concludes that "Hill's legacy must be viewed as mixed." H&K's "manipulation of information" did influence "both the content and the quantity of public discussion," but its "biggest impact was not on the general public but on its own clients" and others who already agreed with them (p. 3). For instance, the agency helped settle the 1948-1950 controversy over oleomargarine by "urging the butter lobby [its client] to alter its policy to a compromise position that in turn changed legislators' goals" (p. 72). Miller also suggests that in other cases H&K's influence followed in part from reinforcing the pre-existing opinions of clients and like-minded citizens. By fulfilling its mission "to amplify the voice of industry," H&K "fortified executives in the face of battle" and strengthened their resolve (pp. 189, 193).

Perhaps Miller's strongest methodological contribution is her use of the social science concept of issue framing. In each of her cases, she finds H&K's greatest impact in its "adding to the frames of interpretation used in public debates" (p. 190). This analytical insight alone is well worth historians' attention, for others besides skilled, professional communicators deliberately attempt to frame public debates. H&K's work for the tobacco industry during the 1950s and 1960s provides Miller's strongest example of purposeful framing. To combat growing evidence and fears that cigarette smoking was hazardous, H&K "emphasized several themes within the 'case is not proved' frame." At that early stage in the gathering of antismoking evidence, H&K helped the tobacco industry to define the public opinion problem not as a direct confrontation with scientists and their evidence, but rather as a matter of raising doubts about the validity of their concerns. "Medical science" had not proven a health hazard, and H&K recommended that the industry set up a research program to "demonstrate that a controversy existed" (pp. 129-30, 133-4). This campaign succeeded in rebuilding consumers' confidence in tobacco by raising comforting doubts about the challengers' arguments. After a decline in smoking among adults during 1953 and 1954, consumption rose again until the Surgeon General's 1964 report, which made it increasingly difficult to maintain the decade-old framing of the controversy. In this case, as in others, H&K sometimes increased the flow of information, and at other times decreased it. More importantly, it learned to direct that flow by framing issues for the press and the public.

Miller's opening critiques of those who have "overestimated the power of public relations" initially raised my concerns that *The Voice of Business* might parallel the apologists for cigarette advertising–whose modesty about its marketing impacts before courts and legislators clashes repeatedly with the immodesty implied by massive campaign spending. Miller, however, is no apologist; nor is she a critic. Instead her scholarship conveys little of her own opinions about the ethical consequences of H&K activities, although I think I detected a sigh of relief when H&K resigned the tobacco account in 1969. Clearly, Miller admires John W. Hill for his skills, dignity, and his steadfast adherence to personal and professional standards, yet she also points to his political contradictions. She frequently refers to Hill's political conservatism and party affiliation without positive or negative comment.

Linking labor's goals and state authority with the thin edge of socialism's wedge, especially when arguing against President Truman's seizure of steel mills in April, 1951, during the Korean War, H&K fought the free enterprise battle in each of its big postwar campaigns. Intriguing contradictions popped up, however, such as promoting the butter lobby's desires that the federal government intervene in the market by forbidding oleo manufacturers to color their product yellow. Similarly, H&K's exten-

sive campaigns on behalf of the air transport industries lobbied both Congress and the public to increase government contracts. In both these cases, anti-government partisans unabashedly saw government action as the solution to their problems.

Exercising the reviewer's prerogative, what would I have asked Miller to do differently? A broadened perspective that included slightly fuller treatments of the public relations story before and during the postwar period could have deepened Miller's analysis of Hill's principles and practices. Similarly, although Hill's pro-business, politically conservative ideas are key to her story, contextualization and explanation run thin: "Whatever the reason, Hill held many of the characteristics and beliefs of his clients" (p. 22). The ideological environment in which Hill and his clients operated during the early Cold War fostered their mutual successes, and more recognition of this could have better situated H&K and its impacts. On another track, did H&K agents take into account issues of population diversity with which advertising agents were learning to wrestle, or did they dismiss those outside the mainstream middle classes as either irrelevant to decision-making processes, or, as with labor, opponents? A clearer sense of how H&K saw "the public's" identity would have enriched our picture of why they operated as they did. Surely they knew that their field, like advertising, was moving toward stronger feedback loops with audiences. Was it paternalism, elitism, or just inertia that kept H&K's vision narrow? None of these areas is essential for Miller's story, but I do think that brief forays would have made the book, and her otherwise sterling analyses, more accessible to a larger audience and more meaningful to all. Nonetheless, *The Voice of Business* is a must read for all those interested in how and why business organizations project ideas into the public arena when they seek to influence public policy, consumption, and popular attitudes.

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