Lawson, Victor Fremont

Lawson, the circulation of the Daily News reached two hundred thousand, second largest in the nation. Lawson had launched a morning newspaper, The News, in 1881. When he sold it in 1914, it was worth $2.3 million. Soon after Lawson died in 1925, the Daily News sold for an unprecedented $13.5 million. By this time, nearly half a million of the city's three million residents were regular readers of the Daily News. Lawson's reputation was now international. He was a champion of cooperative news-gathering, who had established the City News Bureau in 1890 to assure professional police reporting, and he had become president of the Associated Press in 1894, eventually creating a network of twelve hundred newspapers that voluntarily shared the news on a non-profit basis. Other newspapers followed Lawson's lead in establishing foreign news bureaus after 1898, but few could match his lead in developing reporters and columnists. Eugene Field, George Ade, Ben Hecht, Finley Peter Dunne, and Carl Sandburg were among those who learned their craft at the Daily News. The paper would receive its first Pulitzer Prize for Reporting in the year of Lawson's death.

Few men foresaw the future of journalism as clearly as Victor Lawson. His emergence as a young publisher with communitarian concerns in America's late Gilded Age helped transform twentieth century news-gathering into a cooperative enterprise evoking municipal pride while enhancing international awareness.

Further Reading


Chicago Tribune, August 20, 1925, 1, 2.


Bruce J. Evensen

LEE, IVY LEDBETTER

Ivy Ledbetter Lee (July 16, 1877–November 9, 1934) is considered to be one of the fathers of modern public relations. The son of a minister, Lee was born in Georgia in 1877 and attended Princeton University where he studied under Woodrow Wilson and was fully indoctrinated in the ideals of America's Progressive Era that emphasized the importance of facts and the ability of people to rationally draw their own conclusions.

Lee began his career as a reporter covering general assignments and Wall Street for the New York Journal, World and Times. Lee left newspapering in 1904 and worked two years as a freelance writer and publicist before opening a publicity firm in 1906 with fellow reporter George Parker. The firm was the fourth publicity agency founded in the United States.

Lee and Parker envisioned an approach to serving clients that radically differed from the flamboyant press agenty that characterized public relations work at the time. The former reporter understood that news workers needed information and timely service in order to adequately cover his clients. In 1906, Lee issued a now-famous Declaration of Principles outlining how his firm would operate. In part, it read: "This is not a secret press bureau. All our work is done in the open. We aim to supply news. This is not an advertising agency; if you think any of our matter ought properly to go to your business office, do not use it. Our matter is accurate. Further details on any subject treated will be supplied promptly, and any editor will be assisted most cheerfully in verifying directly any statement of fact" (Hiebert 1966, 48).

Two years later, Editor & Publisher observed Parker & Lee had established its credibility among editors and was "never sensational, never libelous, always trustworthy, and always readable."

Lee’s early clients included the mine owners during the 1906 anthracite coal strike and the Pennsylvania Railroad. Among other innovations, Lee convinced the railroad's publicity-shy officials to reverse their long-standing policy to avoid publicity about train accidents. Instead, Lee gave reporters complete access to all the facts about an incident—and even took reporters to accident sites at the railroad's expense.

During 1914, while serving as the assistant to the railroad's president, Lee served as part-time consultant to his most famous client, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Lee had been recommended by Arthur Brisbane to help the Rockefellers respond to attacks stemming from the suffocation deaths of thirteen women and children during a bitter coal strike in Colorado.

Hired a full six weeks after the so-called "Ludlow Massacre," Lee recommended that the coal operators launch a program to communicate factually their side of the strike to opinion leaders. News interest in the controversy had already waned, so Lee produced a series of nineteen bulletins during the year that were mailed to as many as forty
thousand prominent individuals nationwide, including newspaper editors. The intensive effort helped stem the tide of negative public opinion as the strike collapsed at the end of the year.

After working during 1915 on the staff of the Rockefellers, Lee opened his own publicity firm in 1916 and immediately attracted a stable of prominent clients—public utilities, banks, investment companies, shipping interests, mining firms, and foreign cartels. Among his first assignments was promoting ridership on New York’s subway system. His “Elevated Express” and “Subway Sun” posters were popular artifacts in New York City’s culture from 1918 to 1932.

Lee continued his work for the Rockefellers until his death in 1934, and encouraged the family to be more open about its activities. Contrary to popular accounts, Lee never recommended that John D. Rockefeller Sr. give away dimes to children. However, he helped recraft the image of the once-despised oil baron into one of a kindly philanthropist. Lee also was instrumental in promoting some of John D. Rockefeller Jr.’s most important initiatives: the Rockefeller Foundation’s new medical school in China, the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg, and the building of Riverside Memorial Church and Rockefeller Center in New York.

Lee’s initial work for the Rockefellers, which he conducted secretly in order to avoid publicity for his railroad employer, thrust Lee into the public spotlight when he and the Rockefellers became the target of a pro-labor investigation by the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations. Lee’s two appearances before the federal investigators—in January and May 1915—resulted in widespread visibility for both him and the power of publicity agents. Upton Sinclair later vilified Lee as “Poison Ivy” in his attack on American journalism, *The Brass Check* (1920).

Controversy followed Lee throughout his career. In the 1920s, Lee was attacked for his belief that United States should recognize the Communist regime in Russia. Later, as a result of his work for a Belgian chemical company and the German Dye Trust just prior to his death in 1934, Lee was investigated for being a Nazi propagandist. In both cases, he was absolved of any wrongdoing.

Lee never used the term “public relations.” Instead, he practiced what he called *publicity*, which he defined as “everything involved in the expression of an idea or of an institution—including the policy or the idea expressed” (Lee 1925, 8). Nonetheless, Lee was among the first to articulate the importance of two-way communication between organizations and the public as well as a counseling role in modern public relations. According to Lee, the modern publicist: “... is going to become much more than a mere press agent. As he develops, he will see that his job cannot be done if he is merely to have policies determined and then be told that he must “put them over.” ... If he has personality, brains and judgment, he is going to be able very soon to show the heads of the corporation that the policy of the corporation is the vital thing, rather than the mere information that is put out to the public” (Lee 1925, 26–27).

Lee staunchly denied claims that he could get newspapers to publish anything he wanted—claims made during the early 1920s, when *Editor & Publisher* and *Printer’s Ink* waged vigorous campaigns to discourage editors from using “free publicity” materials. He argued that information had to be newsworthy in order for information to gain coverage. Whereas “improper” propaganda failed to disclose the source of information, “proper” publicity was honest, acknowledged and responsible (Lee 1925, 33, 37).

**Further Reading**

*Goldman, E.F.* *Two-Way Street: The Emergence of the Public Relations Counsel.* Boston: Belman, 1948.


KIRK HALLAHAN

**LEGISLATIVE BRANCH REPORTING: THE CONGRESS**

Congress has traditionally gone to great lengths to accommodate reporters, only to see its share of news coverage diminish over time. For over a century, Congress stood at the center of Washington news as the most open branch of the federal government. Steadily since the 1930s the focus of the Washington press corps has shifted towards the presidency. The one hundred senators and four hundred and thirty-five representatives engaged in significant legislative activities can rarely command the media attention a president receives at routine events. Reporting about Congress has decreased on the national level, producing fewer front-page and evening news reports, but the proliferation of cable news channels and online newsletters have offered senators and representatives a myriad of other opportunities for public visibility.

As elected officials, members of Congress have usually been eager for press attention to inform and impress their constituencies, promote their legislative initiatives, and build their national reputations. Members issue press releases, hire press secretaries, hold press conferences, stage photo opportunities, conduct public hearings, and give interviews to reporters—on and off the record. The legislative branch has been a particularly fertile field for uncovering otherwise suppressed information about the government. Legislative bodies are rarely able to hold secrets, since those