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Arien Rozelle

St. John Fisher College, arozelle@sjfc.edu

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Abstract

The Suffrage movement stands out as an early progressive cause that utilized an integrated approach to public relations in support of a clear objective. The arrest of Susan B. Anthony provided the movement with a huge opportunity to influence public opinion in order to win the right to vote.

Keywords

public relations, public opinion, susan b. anthony, suffrage, suffrage movement, progressive, activism, communication

INFLUENCING PUBLIC OPINION: PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE ARREST OF SUSAN B. ANTHONY

ARIEN ROZELLE
ST. JOHN FISHER COLLEGE



The Suffrage movement stands out as an early progressive cause that utilized an integrated approach to public relations in support of a clear objective. In 1872, the so-called “New Departure” political and legal strategy provided Susan B. Anthony with a prime opportunity to influence public opinion during the early dawn of “modern” public relations itself. This essay examines Anthony’s use of public relations strategies and tactics surrounding a seminal moment in Suffrage history: her arrest for voting illegally and attempts to situate herself as an early pioneer of activist public relations.

Although often taken for granted, public relations is no
doubt vital to facilitating social change.

Martinelli 206

In anticipation of the centennial of the passage of the 19th Amendment guaranteeing women’s right to vote, I began researching the use of public relations strategies and tactics among women of the suffrage movement. At the time, it was hard to imagine that 2020 itself would become a year rife with social and political activism—and all in the midst of a global pandemic. Our era of heightened activism has underscored the role of public relations in the push for social change not only now, but throughout history. From the Suffrage Movement to #MeToo, from the Civil Rights Movement to Black Lives Matter, the role of public relations has been vital to activist work and social movements for centuries. In *Effective Public Relations*, the authors note “efforts to communicate with others and to deal with the force of public opinion go back to antiquity;

only the tools, degree of specialization, breadth of knowledge, and intensity of effort are relatively new” (Broom and Sha 74).

The term “public relations,” which today is defined as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics,” wasn’t coined until about 1897 when it began appearing in railroad literature (“About Public Relations” 1). The more recent history of public relations is often told through stories in textbooks of historical figures—primarily white men like P.T. Barnum (of the famed circus), Ivy Lee (known for his work as a journalist) and Edward Bernays (the nephew of Sigmund Freud), working in a business context. George Westinghouse gets credited for establishing the first corporate public relations department for his new electric corporation in 1889.

Today, much of the textbook history of modern public relations still places an emphasis on the rise of business as a driver for the development of public relations and ignores a “bottom up” approach to grassroots or activist public relations. Yet as Miller notes, “political and social histories show that public relations was emerging and apparently would have emerged even if big business has not” (381). Beyond business, “the public relations function emerged when a person or organization sought to secure profit, recruitment, legitimacy, or to participate in the marketplace of ideas through agitation and advocacy” (Lamme and Russell 356).

In *Public Relations History*, Myers details the various forces that helped to shape public relations history. From corporate perspectives to individual practitioners, to examinations of different time periods, Myers “struggled to figure out where historical ‘truth’ was” (xi). He admits that “... PR history is, and probably will remain, something that is difficult to get our heads around” (xi). Lamme and Russell have stated that “no area of public relations history has been adequately researched,” and urged scholars to investigate four sectors: religion, education, nonprofit and reform, politics and government; and business (356). They noted that “scholars should continue investigating the ways in which public relations was used by people and organizations before the 20th century, locally, nationally, and internationally,” and “into the backgrounds of those who emerged as effective practitioners” (356).

While public relations history continues to be written, so too does the role of public relations in social movement scholarship. As Martinelli notes,

Perhaps it is because public relations has historically been viewed as representative of those involved in maintaining the status quo – those in decision-making positions within (or on behalf of) organizations, corporations, and government – that it has been largely left out of the social movement literature, which inherently centers on efforts that work against established norms (219).

Indeed, despite many nonprofit and reform organizations' efforts to spur social change over time, historians have only recently begun to document these activities as part of public relations history. Martinelli cites recent work by Straughan (2007) and Lamme and Russell (2009). In 2008, L'Etang noted that "PR history needs to encompass individual, organizational and societal levels" (321). And other scholars like Dozier and Lauzen (2000) and Berger (2005) have called for more scholarship related to social activism.

This call for research, coupled with my proximity to the home of Susan Brownell Anthony (Rochester, NY), the location of the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention (Seneca Falls, NY), and the site of Anthony's trial for voting illegally (Canandaigua, NY), led me to investigate the role of public relations in the push for women's right to vote. Because, as Myers notes, "it is evident that the emergence of public relations coincided with the changes going on in society – politically, economically, and socially" (xi). And "Although often taken for granted, public relations is no doubt vital to facilitating social change" (Martinelli 206). In an effort to add to the body of knowledge of public relations history and public relations in an activist context, this essay will examine a seminal moment in Suffrage history: Anthony's arrest for voting illegally. By exploring the events leading up to and following her arrest through the lens of public relations scholarship, I will attempt to situate Susan B. Anthony as an early public relations pioneer. While suffrage movements nationally and internationally have been heavily researched, as Martinelli notes: "few, if any, have been examined collectively through the lens of public relations and activist scholarship" (206).

NEW DEPARTURE AS PR OPPORTUNITY

Political forces have long used the strategies and tactics of public relations to influence public opinion. In fact, the power struggles that emerged from political reform movements helped usher in early developments in the field of public relations itself, as groups vying for dominance worked to earn public support (Broom and Sha 78). While more of a political and ideological movement than a social movement, the American Revolution is often cited as an early and noteworthy campaign to influence public opinion. Led by Samuel Adams, a public relations pioneer, revolutionaries understood the importance of earning public support and used a variety of methods to achieve it. From articles to speaking engagements, and staged events to symbols, Adams worked to influence public opinion, “proceeding always on the assumption that “the bulk of mankind are [sic] more led by their senses than by their reason” (Broom and Sha 75).

Adams was very aware that “public opinion results from the march of events and the way these events are seen by those active in public affairs” (Broom and Sha 75). He also had a keen understanding of the ways that symbolism could sway public opinion. These factors led him to create events in order to meet a need. Most notably, Adams is credited with organizing the Boston Tea Party, which Shortman and Bloom call “the greatest and best-known publicity stunt of all time.”

Perhaps taking a cue from their revolutionary predecessors, women of the suffrage movement spent decades using a variety of public relations strategies and tactics to help raise awareness, recruit, mobilize and legitimize their cause. From speeches to parades and everything in between, as the movement went on, they adapted their strategies, “relying on state and national conventions, parlor meetings, petitions, promotional stunts, and print culture” (Goodier).

Following unsuccessful attempts to convince Congress to remove gender-specific language from the 14th Amendment and to prevent passage of the 15th Amendment, a noteworthy shift in strategy for the movement occurred when The National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) adopted the so called “New Departure” political and legal strategy. The New Departure interpreted the 14th Amendment to grant all naturalized

and native-born Americans citizenship and posited that voting was one of the “privileges or immunities” of citizenship. Based on this interpretation, suffrage organizations encouraged women to attempt to vote and if they were denied, file federal lawsuits. This presented not only a political opportunity but a public relations opportunity as well. Just as Adams created events made for the purpose of publicity, the New Departure Strategy created an opportunity for Anthony to create events that would create news, which could serve to influence public opinion.

According to *On Deadline: Managing Media Relations*, there are eight common ways public relations practitioners create news, or “add value” to news in order to obtain the attention of the news media. They include: timeliness, impact, proximity, conflict, human interest, prominence/celebrity, novelty and currency/trend. (Howard et al. 23-25), Potential news stories do not need to include all news values in order to be newsworthy, but should include at least one – or, even better, a combination of a few – in order to be effective. The New Departure Strategy created an opportunity to utilize nearly every news value available. The strategy itself and the upcoming Presidential election gave Anthony a timely news hook on a national scale. And while the Suffrage Movement presented inherent and ongoing conflict in its attempt to change the status quo, The New Departure strategy brought a fresh element of conflict to the issue.

Despite hundreds of Black and white women suffragists registering and voting from 1868 to 1872 in an attempt to bring the issue before the courts, Anthony’s celebrity allowed her to make news even though she wasn’t the first to vote illegally. In addition, the New Departure strategy created the potential for a variety human interest stories related to the women and men involved in the movement or impacted by it. While Anthony’s act of voting could have remained a local or regional story in the Rochester, NY market, the combination of many other news values – and subsequent events like her arrest and trial -- helped to propel the story to national news.

RESHAPING PUBLIC OPINION, GAINING POWER

By 1871, a variety of factors had led to a power struggle within the women's movement. From a public relations perspective, the emergence of Victoria Woodhull, a controversial figure and free love advocate, is notable. Woodhull made a spectacular rise to power in the movement and quickly "became an overnight star, identified by the press as "the leader of the party"" (Tetrault 60).

As the media spotlight began to shift toward Woodhull, Anthony felt that her stature and influence within the movement was threatened. And while Anthony and others initially welcomed Woodhull into the organization, as the momentum "swung behind Woodhull and the New Departure, Anthony also began to feel eclipsed and rudderless: "I tell you I feel utterly disheartened – not that our cause is going to die or be defeated, but as to my place and work" (Tetrault 60).

Following Woodhull's advocacy of a new national political party – the "People's Party," and later the creation of the short lived "Equal Rights Party," which nominated Woodhull as their 1872 candidate for President of the United States, Anthony had had enough. Fearing that Woodhull had damaged the reputation of the National Woman Suffrage Association, Anthony worked overtime to salvage the struggling organization, which she perceived as nearly destroyed:

"There was never such a *foolish muddle*," she confided to her diary, "*all come of Mrs. S. [Stanton] consulting with & conceding to Woodhull -- & calling Peoples [sic] Con – instead of W.S. [woman suffrage] Con[vention] --*" (Tetrault 64).

Anthony continued,

Our movement as such is so demoralized by the letting go of the helm of ship to Woodhull. I am thrown half off my own feet – really not knowing whether it is *I* who am gone *stark mad* or some other people (Tetrault 64).

Then, just months later, Woodhull was involved in accusing a prominent minister, Henry Ward Beecher of having an affair with his best friend's wife, Elizabeth Tilton. It became a salacious, headline grabbing sex scandal, and one that threatened to veer the movement off course

entirely. Woodhull's involvement in breaking the news of the affair cast a shadow on the suffrage movement and drastically changed the attention of the media. "Anthony's fears that chaos within the movement left it open to misdirection, and it prompted her to seek tighter control" (Tetrault 56). Fearing that Woodhull posed a great threat – and that her actions could indelibly harm the success of the movement – Anthony seized upon the opportunity that the New Departure strategy presented her to earn media coverage and reclaim the headlines that Woodhull had been dominating.

When the National Association urged women everywhere to vote in the upcoming 1872 presidential election, and "as the accusations of Beecher's infidelity became public, Anthony went to the polls to cast her vote in the November 1872 election, and this act helped her chart a course through the public-relations disasters that followed Woodhull's revelations" (Tetrault 66).

SETTING THE STAGE: PRE-ARREST PUBLICITY

In *The Strategy of Social Protest*, Gamson notes that "virtually every aspect of a challenger's experience – recruitment efforts, organization, strategy, and tactics – is affected by a potential or actual media presence" (147). In Anthony's attempts to repair the reputation of the movement and reframe the news coverage, she used every opportunity she could to earn media attention, beginning with voter registration. On November 1, 1872, when she entered a Rochester, New York, barbershop that was set up as a voter registration location and requested that her name be added to the list of voters, she set her publicity effort into motion. She was strategic and well prepared with what read almost as "talking points" – "time-sensitive messages that apply to special events, sudden developments or crises" (Howard et al. 53). According to accounts, "Three young registrars were on duty. When the workers politely declined her request to register, Anthony read them the 14th Amendment. She threatened to sue each poll worker individually. "I know I can win," she said. "I have Judge Selden as a lawyer" (Zahniser 29). Taken aback by Anthony's vehemence, the registrars accepted Anthony's registration, but avoided any blame by administering the required oath affirming that she was a qualified voter.

The election workers also registered Anthony's companions. When the afternoon papers reported that morning's events, three dozen more Rochester women registered to vote (Zahniser 29).

According to accounts, she then acted as her own publicist and went directly to a newspaper office to give reporters an interview (Gordon 33). In doing so, Anthony gave the press not only the story, but she provided them with her account first, which may have helped frame her version of events as the accepted one, and position her, and the movement, in a favorable and sympathetic light.

VOTING AS PUBLICITY STUNT

On Election Day, November 5, 1872, Anthony and fourteen other women cast their ballots in the presidential race between Ulysses S. Grant and Horace Greeley. Anthony was by no means the first woman to attempt to vote. In fact, hundreds of women had attempted to vote. But, by this time, she was a nationally known figure with well-established relationships with key stakeholders – and she knew how to “make news.” “With the press, Anthony had the advantage. Reporters and editors liked her, and the spunk she displayed caught the public’s imagination” (Gordon 39).

Anthony’s act of voting, while an act of civil disobedience in support of her cause, was also nothing short of a publicity stunt. The press, including the notoriously anti-suffrage *New York Times*, gave it space. And a Rochester paper printed letters to the editor on both sides of the issue, among other publications. ““Let nobody deny the influence of Susan B. Anthony,” another paper editorialized” (Zahniser 29).

Just a few weeks after voting, Anthony was arrested by a U.S. marshal and charged with voting unlawfully. She then sought out ways to capitalize on the attention she had earned and “used her talents to achieve the maximum educational value from her own arrest” (Gordon 39).

Anthony’s fame, combined with the public’s interest in suffrage, helped make her impending trial newsworthy from Election Day until its conclusion in June 1873. This served to place Suffrage more prominently and frequently in the press and counter bad publicity surrounding the Beecher-Tilton scandal. Newspapers across the country published daily

reports provided by the Associated Press, reporters from Rochester newspapers, and the editor of Canandaigua's weekly paper, who attended the trial. "By June 1873, readers of newspapers everywhere understood that this was the test of the claims of woman suffragists. The lawyers' arguments and the judge's ruling filled several columns of the daily papers" (Gordon 36).

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO PUBLIC RELATIONS

Anthony's public relations strategies and tactics didn't rely on publicity alone. Leading up to her trial, she embarked upon a speaking tour to twenty-nine towns and villages in Monroe County, New York, where her trial was originally set to take place, giving a lecture called "Is It a Crime for a U.S. Citizen to Vote?" Her speaking tour proved persuasive. In May 1873, her trial was transferred from Monroe to Ontario County, because the U.S. Attorney sought out a new pool of jurors. Undeterred, Anthony set out again on a speaking tour, this time of Ontario County. Again, her relentless attempts at influencing public opinion stirred up controversy.

Anthony was ultimately found guilty and sentenced to a fine of \$100 and court costs, which she refused to pay. Her conviction earned ample attention in the press due to the circumstances: Justice Ward Hunt directed the jury to find her guilty. Hunt's unexpected directive shifted the framing of the story in the media as editors took sides on the legality of his action, rather than the decision itself.

Denied the possibility of appeal, Anthony's publicity efforts related directly to her act of voting were effectively over. But, one of the most fascinating and prolific public relations strategies employed by Anthony was in documenting the history, and crafting the narrative, of the Suffrage movement. Following her conviction, Anthony assembled a 200-page book that included indictments, trial transcripts, the judge's ruling, the attorney's arguments and motions and her own speech to the potential jurors. In April of 1874 she published *An Account of the Proceedings on the Trial of Susan B. Anthony, on the Charge of Illegal Voting, at the Presidential Election in Nov., 1872, and on the Trial of Beverly W. Jones, Edwin T. Marsh and William B. Hall, the Inspectors of Election by Whom*

Her Vote Was Received. A local newspaper called it “the most important contribution yet made to the discussion of the woman suffrage issue, from a legal standpoint” (Gordon 34-5). Members of Congress, who were then discussing her petition for remission of her fine, received copies, and Anthony continued to sell it and give it away for decades (Gordon 34-5).

In addition, the six-volume account of the suffrage movement, *History of Woman Suffrage*, a work of more than 5,700 pages written over a period of 41 years, was published by Anthony, who then donated copies to libraries and gave to people of influence. This was no doubt a PR move meant to frame the narrative of the movement, as well as to cement Anthony’s legacy. By writing down the events as she saw them—including details of her arrest—she was able to put her version of history on paper, in the hopes that it would be the version told long after her death. Below is an excerpt from *The History of Woman Suffrage, Volume II* that addresses Anthony’s arrest, trial, and conviction, and specifically mentions the role of the media:

The effect of Miss Anthony's prosecution, conviction, and sentence, was in many ways advantageous to the cause of freedom. Her trial served to awaken thought, promote discussion, and compel an investigation of the principles of government. The argument of Judge Selden, clearly proving woman's constitutional right to vote, published in all the leading papers, arrested the attention of legal minds as no popular discussions had done.

Thus the question of the abstract rights of each individual, their civil and political rights under State and National Constitutions, were widely discussed. And when the verdict, contrary to law, was rendered by the Judge, and the jury dismissed without having been permitted to utter a word, the whole question of woman's rights and wrongs was brought into new prominence through this infringement of the sacred right of jury trial. (Anthony et al. 691)

CONCLUSION

This essay makes a contribution to our understanding of the suffrage movement and the importance of public relations strategies and tactics in support of a clear objective. Today, activist groups and organizations could take note of Anthony's sharp focus on an objective, keen ability to make news, and her ability to craft a narrative and to do so relatively quickly. In today's rapidly moving media landscape, speed and agility are of particular importance.

As Anthony sought out ever more creative and strategic ways to communicate on behalf of her organization and its publics, her arrest for voting illegally is merely one moment in time. Further analysis of Anthony's use of public relations strategies and tactics through her involvement with the suffrage movement would broaden our understanding of the use of public relations in an early activist context. Additional analysis would also help to further justify and carve out a place for Anthony as an early public relations pioneer.

The Suffrage movement utilized a variety of public relations strategies and tactics over the course of decades in support of a clear objective: winning women's right to vote. "As a political process, the long struggle for woman suffrage was of necessity also a communication process, as both the proponents and opponents of suffrage sought to persuade others to embrace their cause" (Soukup 1). Anthony's act of civil disobedience was a strategic move which functioned as a catalyst for public relations strategies and tactics including publicity, speaking tours and the crafting of the historical narrative. Her work was part of an activist approach to public relations during the advent of modern public relations in the United States.

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