

# The Engineering of Consent

*By Edward L. Bernays*

FREEDOM of speech and its democratic corollary, a free press, have tacitly expanded our Bill of Rights to include the right of persuasion. This development was an inevitable result of the expansion of the media of free speech and persuasion, denned in other articles in this volume. All these media provide open doors to the public mind. Any one of us through these media may influence the attitudes and actions of our fellow citizens.

The tremendous expansion of communications in the United States has given this Nation the world's most penetrating and effective apparatus for the transmission of ideas. Every resident is constantly exposed to the impact of our vast network of communications which reach every corner of the country, no matter how remote or isolated.

Words hammer continually at the eyes and ears of America. The United States has become a small room in which a single whisper is magnified thousands of times. Knowledge of how to use this enormous amplifying system becomes a matter of primary concern to those who are interested in socially constructive action.

There are two main divisions of this communications system which maintain social cohesion. On the first level there are the commercial media. Almost 1,800 daily newspapers in the United States have a combined circulation of around 44,000,000. There are approximately 10,000 weekly newspapers and almost 6,000 magazines. Approximately 2,000 radio stations of various types broadcast to the Nation's 60,000,000 receiving sets. Approximately 16,500 motion picture houses have a capacity of almost 10,500,000. A deluge of books and pamphlets is published annually. The country is blanketed with billboards, handbills, throwaways, and direct mail advertising. Round tables, panels and forums, classrooms and legislative assemblies, and public platforms—any and all media, day after day, spread the word, someone's word.

On the second level there are the specialized media owned and operated by the many organized groups in this country. Almost all such groups (and many of their subdivisions) have their own communications systems. They disseminate ideas not only by means of the formal written word in labor papers, house organs, special bulletins, and the like, but also through lectures, meetings, discussions, and rank-and-file conversations.

## Leadership Through Communication

This web of communications, sometimes duplicating, crisscrossing, and overlapping, is a condition of fact, not theory. We must recognize the significance of modern communications not only as a highly organized mechanical web but as a potent force for social good or possible evil. We can determine whether this network shall be employed to its greatest extent for sound social ends.

For only by mastering the techniques of communication can leadership be exercised fruitfully in the vast complex that is modern democracy in the United States. In an earlier age, in a society that was small geographically and with a more homogeneous population, a leader was usually known to his followers personally; there was a visual relationship between them. Communication was accomplished principally by personal announcement to an audience or through a relatively primitive printing press. Books, pamphlets, and newspapers reached a very small literate segment of the public.

We are tired of hearing repeated the threadbare cliché "The world has grown smaller"; but this so-called truism is not actually true, by any means. The world has grown both smaller and very much larger. Its physical frontiers have been expanded. Today's leaders have become more remote physically from the public; yet, at the same time, the public has much greater familiarity with these leaders through the system of modern communications. Leaders are just as potent today as ever.

In turn, by use of this system, which has constantly expanded as a result of technological improvement, leaders have been able to overcome the problems of geographical distance and social stratification to reach their publics. Underlying much of this expansion, and largely the reason for its existence in its present form, has been widespread and enormously rapid diffusion of literacy.

Leaders may be the spokesmen for many different points of view. They may direct the activities of major organized groups such as industry, labor, or units of government. They may compete with one another in battles for public good will; or they may, representing divisions within the larger units, compete among themselves. Such leaders, with the aid of technicians in the field who have specialized in utilizing the channels of communication, have been able to accomplish purposefully and scientifically what we have termed "the engineering of consent."

## The Engineering Approach

This phrase quite simply means the use of an engineering approach—that is, action based only on thorough knowledge of the situation and on the application of scientific principles and tried practices to the task of getting people to support ideas and programs. Any person or organization depends ultimately on public approval, and is

therefore faced with the problem of engineering the public's consent to a program or goal. We expect our elected government officials to try to engineer our consent—through the network of communications open to them—for the measures they propose. We reject government authoritarianism or regimentation, but we are willing to take action suggested to us by the written or spoken word. The engineering of consent is the very essence of the democratic process, the freedom to persuade and suggest. The freedoms of speech, press, petition, and assembly, the freedoms which make the engineering of consent possible, are among the most cherished guarantees of the Constitution of the United States.

The engineering of consent should be based theoretically and practically on the complete understanding of those whom it attempts to win over. But it is sometimes impossible to reach joint decisions based on an understanding of facts by all the people. The average American adult has only six years of schooling behind him. With pressing crises and decisions to be faced, a leader frequently cannot wait for the people to arrive at even general understanding.

In certain cases, democratic leaders must play their part in leading the public through the engineering of consent to socially constructive goals and values. This role naturally imposes upon them the obligation to use the educational processes, as well as other available techniques, to bring about as complete an understanding as possible.

Under no circumstances should the engineering of consent supersede or displace the functions of the educational system, either formal or informal, in bringing about understanding by the

people as a basis for their action. The engineering of consent often does supplement the educational process. If higher general educational standards were to prevail in this country and the general level of public knowledge and understanding were raised as a result, this approach would still retain its value.

Even in a society of a perfectionist educational standard, equal progress would not be achieved in every field. There would always be time lags, blind spots, and points of weakness; and the engineering of consent would still be essential. The engineering of consent will always be needed as an adjunct to, or a partner of, the educational process.

### Importance of Engineering Consent

Today it is impossible to overestimate the importance of engineering consent; it affects almost every aspect of our daily lives. When used for social purposes, it is among our most valuable contributions to the efficient functioning of modern society.

The techniques can be subverted; demagogues can utilize the techniques for antidemocratic purposes with as much success as can those who employ them for socially desirable ends. The responsible leader, to accomplish social objectives, must therefore be constantly aware of the possibilities of subversion. He must apply his energies to mastering the operational know-how of consent engineering, and to out-maneuvering his opponents in the public interest.

It is clear that a leader in a democracy need not always possess the personal qualities of a Daniel Webster or a Henry Clay. He need not be visible or even audible to his audiences. He may lead indirectly, simply by effectively using today's means of making contact with the eyes and ears of those audiences. Even the direct, or what might be called the old-fashioned, method of speaking to an audience is for the most part once removed; for usually public speech is transmitted, mechanically, through the mass media of radio, motion pictures, and television.

During World War I, the famous Committee on Public Information, organized by George Creel, dramatized in the public's consciousness the effectiveness of the war of words. The Committee helped to build the morale of our own people, to win over the neutrals, and to disrupt the enemy. It helped to win that war. But by comparison with the enormous scope of word warfare in World War I, the Committee on Public Information used primitive tools to do an important job.

The Office of War Information alone probably broadcast more words over its short-wave facilities during the war than were written by all of George Creel's staff. As this approach came to be recognized as the key factor in influencing public thought, thousands of experts in many related fields came to the fore— such specialists as editors, publishers, advertising men, heads of pressure groups and political parties, educators, and publicists. During World War I and the immediate postwar years a new profession developed in response to the demand for trained, skilled specialists to advise others on the technique of engineering public consent, a profession providing counsel on public relations.

### The Professional Viewpoint

In 1923 I defined this profession in my book, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, and in the same year, at New York University, gave the first course on the subject. In the almost quarter-century that has elapsed since then, the profession has become a recognized one in this country and has spread to other democratic countries where free communication and competition of ideas in the market place are permitted. The profession has its literature, its training courses, an increasing number of practitioners, and a growing recognition of social responsibility.

In the United States, the profession deals specifically with the problems of relationship between a group and its public. Its chief function is to analyze objectively and realistically the position of its client vis-a-vis a public and to advise as to the necessary corrections in its client's attitudes toward and approaches to that public. It is thus an instrument for achieving adjustment if any maladjustment in relationships exists. It must be remembered of course that good will, the basis of lasting adjustment, can be preserved in the long run only by those whose actions warrant it. But this does not prevent those who do not deserve good will from winning it and holding onto it long enough to do a lot of damage.

The public relations counsel has a professional responsibility to push only those ideas he can respect, and not to promote causes or accept assignments for clients he considers antisocial.

### Planning a Campaign

Just as the civil engineer must analyze every element of the situation before he builds a bridge, so the engineer of consent, in order to achieve a worthwhile social objective, must operate from a foundation of soundly planned action. Let us assume that he is engaged in a specific task. His plans must be based on four prerequisites:

1. Calculation of resources, both human and physical; i.e., the manpower, the money, and the time available for the purpose;
2. As thorough knowledge of the subject as possible;
3. Determination of objectives, subject to possible change after research; specifically, what is to be accomplished, with whom and through whom;
4. Research of the public to learn why and how it acts, both individually and as a group.

Only after this preliminary groundwork has been firmly laid is it possible to know whether the objectives are realistically attainable. Only then can the engineer of consent utilize his resources of manpower, money, and time, and the media available. Strategy, organization, and activities will be geared to the realities of the situation. The task must first be related to the budget available for manpower and mechanics. In terms of human assets, the consent engineer has certain talents—creative, administrative, executive—and he must know what these are. He should also have a clear knowledge of his limitations. The human assets need to be implemented by work space and office equipment. All material needs must be provided by budget.

Above all else, once the budget has been established, and before a first step is taken, the field of knowledge dealing with the subject should be thoroughly explored. This is

primarily a matter of collecting and codifying a store of information so that it will be available for practical, efficient use. This preliminary work may be tedious and exacting, but it cannot be by-passed; for the engineer of consent should be powerfully equipped with facts, with truths, with evidence, before he begins to show himself before a public.

The consent engineer should provide himself with the standard reference books on public relations, publicity, public opinion: N. W. Ayer & Son's Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals, the Editor and Publisher Year Book, the Radio Daily Annual, the Congressional Directory, the Chicago Daily News Almanac, the World Almanac—and, of course, the telephone book. (The World Almanac, for example, contains lists of many of the thousands of associations in the United States—a cross section of the country.) These and other volumes provide a basic library necessary to effective planning.

At this point in the preparatory work, the engineer of consent should consider the objectives of his activity. He should have clearly in mind at all times precisely where he is going and what he wishes to accomplish. He may intensify already existing favorable attitudes; he may induce those holding favorable attitudes to take constructive action; he may convert disbelievers; he may disrupt certain antagonistic points of view.

Goals should be defined exactly. In a Red Cross drive, for example, a time limit and the amount of money to be raised are set from the start. Much better results are obtained in a relief drive when the appeal is made for aid to the people of a specific country or locality rather than of a general area such as Europe or Asia.

### Studying the Public

The objective must at all times be related to the public whose consent is to be obtained. That public is people, but what do they know? What are their present attitudes toward the situation with which the consent engineer is concerned? What are the impulses which govern these attitudes? What ideas are the people ready to absorb? What are they ready to do, given an effective stimulant? Do they get their ideas from bartenders, letter carriers, waitresses, Little Orphan Annie, or the editorial page of the New York Times?

What group leaders or opinion molders effectively influence the thought process of what followers? What is the flow of ideas—from whom to whom? To what extent do authority, factual evidence, precision, reason, tradition, and emotion play a part in the acceptance of these ideas?

The public's attitudes, assumptions, ideas, or prejudices result from definite influences. One must try to find out what they are in any situation in which one is working. If the engineer of consent is to plan effectively, he must also know the group formations with which he is to deal, for democratic society is actually only a loose aggregate of constituent groups.

Certain individuals with common social and/or professional interests form voluntary groups. These include such great professional organizations as those of doctors, lawyers, nurses, and the like; the trade associations; the farm associations and labor unions; the women's clubs; the religious groups; and the thousands of clubs and fraternal associations. Formal groups, such as political units, may range from organized minorities to the large amorphous political bodies that are our two major parties. There is today even another category of the public group which must be kept in mind by the engineer of consent. The readers of the New Republic or the listeners to Raymond Swing's program are as much voluntary groups, although unorganized, as are the members of a trade union or a Rotary Club.

To function well, almost all organized groups elect or select leaders who usually remain in a controlling position for stated intervals of time. These leaders reflect their followers' wishes and work to promote their interests. In a democratic society, they can only lead them as far as, and in the direction in which, they want to go. To influence the public, the engineer of consent works with and through group leaders and opinion molders on every level.

### Value and Technique of Research

To achieve accurate working knowledge of the receptivity of the public mind to an idea or ideas, it is necessary to engage in painstaking research. Such research should aim to establish a common denominator between the researcher and the public. It should disclose the realities of the objective situation in which the engineer of consent has to work. Completed, it provides a blueprint of action and clarifies the question of who does what, where, when, and why. It will indicate the over-all strategy to be employed, the themes to be stressed, the organization needed, the use of media, and the day-to-day tactics. It should further indicate how long it will take to win the public and what are the short- and long-term trends of public thinking. It will disclose subconscious and conscious motivations in public thought, and the actions, words, and pictures that effect these motivations. It will reveal public awareness, the low or high visibility of ideas in the public mind.

Research may indicate the necessity to modify original objectives, to enlarge or contract the planned goal, or to change actions and methods. In short, it furnishes the equivalent of the mariner's chart, the architect's blueprint, the traveler's road

map. Public opinion research may be conducted by questionnaires, by personal interviews, or by polls. Contact can be made with business leaders, heads of trade associations, trade union officials, and educational leaders, all of whom may be willing to aid the engineer of consent. The heads of professional groups in the communities—the medical association, the architects, the engineers—all should be queried. So should social service executives, officials of women's clubs, and religious leaders. Editors, publishers, and radio station and motion picture people can be persuaded to discuss with the consent engineer his objectives and the appeals and angles that affect these leaders and their audiences. The local unions or associations of barbers, railwaymen, clothing workers, and taxicab drivers may be willing to cooperate in the undertaking. Grass-roots leaders are important.

Such a survey has a double-barreled effect. The engineer of consent learns what group leaders know and do not know, the extent to which they will cooperate with him, the media that reach them, appeals that may be valid, and the prejudices, the legends, or the facts by which they live. He is able simultaneously to determine whether or not they will conduct informational campaigns in their own right, and thus supplement his activities.

### Themes, Strategy and Approach

Now that the preliminary work has been done, it will be possible to proceed to actual planning. From the survey of opinion will emerge the major themes of strategy. These themes contain the ideas to be conveyed; they channel the lines of approach to the public; and they must be expressed through whatever media are used. The themes are ever present but intangible—comparable to what in fiction is called the "story line."

To be successful, the themes must appeal to the motives of the public. Motives are the activation of both conscious and subconscious pressures created by the force of desires. Psychologists have isolated a number of compelling appeals, the validity of which has been repeatedly proved in practical application.

Once the themes are established, in what kind of a campaign are they to be used? The situation may call for a blitzkrieg or a continuing battle, a combination of both, or some other strategy. It may be necessary to develop a plan of action for an election that will be over in a few weeks or months, or for a campaign that may take years, such as the effort to cut down the tuberculosis death rate. Planning for mass persuasion is governed by many factors that call upon all one's powers of training, experience, skill, and judgment.

Planning should be flexible and provide for changed conditions. When the plans have been perfected, organization of resources follows, and it must be undertaken in advance to provide the necessary manpower, money, and physical equipment.

Organization also correlates the activities of any specialists who may be called upon from time to time, such as opinion researchers, fund raisers, publicity men, radio and motion picture experts, specialists for women's clubs and foreign language groups, and the like.

### The Tactics

At this point it will be possible to plan the tactics of the program, i.e., to decide how the themes are to be disseminated over the idea carriers, the networks of communication.

Do not think of tactics in terms of segmental approaches. The problem is not to get articles into a newspaper or obtain radio time or arrange a motion picture newsreel; it is rather to set in motion a broad activity, the success of which depends on interlocking all phases and elements of the proposed strategy, implemented by tactics that are timed to the moment of maximum effectiveness.

An action held over but one day may fall completely flat. Skilled and imaginative timing has determined the success of many mass movements and campaigns, the familiar phenomena so typical of the American people's behavior pattern.

Emphasis of the consent engineer's activities will be on the written and spoken word, geared to the media and designed for the audiences he is addressing. He must be sure that his material fits his public. He must prepare copy written in simple language and sixteen-word sentences for the average school-age public. Some copy will be aimed at the understanding of people who have had seventeen years of schooling. He must familiarize himself with all media and know how to supply them with material suitable in quantity and quality.

Primarily, however, the engineer of consent must create news. News is not an inanimate thing. It is the overt act that makes news, and news in turn shapes the attitudes and actions of people. A good criterion as to whether something is or is not news is whether the event juts out of the pattern of routine. The developing of events and circumstances that are not routine is one of the basic functions of the engineer of consent. Events so planned can be projected over the communication systems to infinitely more people than those actually participating, and such events vividly dramatize ideas for those who do not witness the events.

The imaginatively managed event can compete successfully with other events for attention. Newsworthy events, involving people, usually do not happen by accident. They are planned deliberately to accomplish a purpose, to influence our ideas and actions. Events may also be set up in chain reaction. By harnessing the energies of group leaders, the engineer of consent can stimulate them to set in motion activities

of their own. They will organize additional, specialized, subsidiary events, all of which will further dramatize the basic theme.

## Conclusion

Communication is the key to engineering consent for social action. But it is not enough to get out leaflets and bulletins on the mimeograph machines, to place releases in the newspapers, or to fill the air waves with radio talks.

Words, sounds, and pictures accomplish little unless they are the tools of a soundly thought-out plan and carefully organized methods. If the plans are well formulated and the proper use is made of them, the ideas conveyed by the words will become part and parcel of the people themselves.

When the public is convinced of the soundness of an idea, it will proceed to action. People translate an idea into action suggested by the idea itself, whether it is ideological, political, or social. They may adopt a philosophy that stresses racial and religious tolerance; they may vote a New Deal into office; or they may organize a consumers' buying strike. But such results do not just happen. In a democracy they can be accomplished principally by the engineering of consent.