

# **Amplifying the Voice of Business: Hill and Knowlton's Influence on Political, Public, and Media Discourse in Postwar America**

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“Every morning, John W. Hill, a lean and wiry man with soft, blue eyes can be observed walking from his home at 74th Street and Park Avenue to his office at 42nd Street and Third Avenue,” a biography produced by his public relations agency declared in 1961. “He walks at least five miles a day and spends eight hours daily at his job, and often is required to put in more time. At 72 years of age, when many men are content to spend their time idling in the sun or beside a fireplace, he is actively overseeing one of the busiest and most successful enterprises in the nation.”

The agency exaggerated. But John Hill could justifiably have claimed to head the most important public relations agency ever: Hill and Knowlton, Inc. of New York. Its clients included the steel, tobacco, and aviation industries' trade associations, Procter & Gamble, Texaco, and Gillette. Agency executives liked to boast that the combined sales of its clients in 1959, exceeding \$50 billion, amounted to ten percent of the gross national product [3, p. 67]. Its annual billings topped \$3,000,000, not including out-of-pocket expenses, making it either first or second among agencies [5]; and, in surveys of public relations practitioners and journalists alike, H&K ranked first and best [4, p. 6]. It had a payroll of 250 employees in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Nassau, Geneva, The Hague, Dusseldorf, and Sydney.

Given the size and significance of Hill and Knowlton's clients and its stature in the field of public relations, it is worthwhile to ask what the agency did and to evaluate the consequences of those actions. Surprisingly, no major scholarly works have examined the history of this agency, or any other public relations agency in the United States, concentrating instead on individuals or on the rise of public relations generally. This dissertation focuses on Hill and Knowlton's work for its large trade association accounts during the decade following World War II, based largely on

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the John W. Hill papers at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, although its international expansion and recent history are also discussed.

Hill and Knowlton believed its mission was twofold: to disseminate messages about the clients that it represented, and, at the same time, to educate Americans about the role of big business generally. As the agency's principal founder, John Hill's philosophy of public relations had great influence. "The end product of effective public relations," he wrote in 1958, "is not the 'publicity' that its implements create" but "the public attitudes resulting from communication of information, facts, and management's point of view" [1, p. 7]. Given that reasoning, it makes sense that, for example, in its steel industry programs the agency did not seek resolution of fundamental disagreements between labor and management but rather public support for management's perspective. It was as though clients sought to defeat unions, federal regulation, or a disapproving public by yelling louder than anyone else. I call this "amplifying the voice of business," by which I mean simply taking the thoughts and words of business executives and making them heard throughout the three arenas—media, public, and political—where discourse (broadly defined as public discussion of any kind) about issues took place. Using news releases, radio programs, films, newsletters, paid advertising, small group meetings, and nearly every other medium imaginable, H&K was undeniably successful in making industry's views heard. Its contribution to the "selling of America" is less obvious, but H&K's work did have a significant impact because of its influence on its own clients.

When it came to amplifying the voice of business in the media arena, H&K did its job well. The agency was able to affect discourse in the media on innumerable occasions, demonstrated most clearly in the case of tobacco. Its program for the Tobacco Industry Research Committee changed the basic frame used in the media arena to interpret the cigarette scare of 1953 to 1954, when tobacco stock prices and cigarette consumption dropped after medical reports suggested smoking caused cancer. The agency took advantage of the journalistic convention of objectivity by arguing that a medical controversy, as opposed to a clear-cut health hazard, existed. Because reporters believed that in a controversy, all sides must be represented, industry denials always appeared alongside medical accusations that smoking caused cancer. As one critic later said, "like the tail of a kite, no story about the risk of smoking goes anywhere without a tobacco industry rebuttal trailing along behind" [2, p. 26]. H&K even affected the quantity of news by convincing at least some journalists not to pursue the story; it also influenced media discourse simply by providing reporters with data on or the opinions of the industries it represented.

In the political arena Hill and Knowlton was only somewhat less successful at influencing the content of discourse. From 1948 to 1950 it represented three dairy organizations that sought to protect federal taxes and a ban against artificial coloring of margarine. The agency did not lobby individual members of Congress, although it did provide information to legislators from dairy states. It concentrated instead on a grass roots campaign to mobilize public support for butter, in the hopes that constituents would in turn pressure their representatives to side with the butter lobby. H&K did affect what was said by political actors by focusing on one aspect of the issue, the possibility of fraud (committed by retailers who might sell cheap margarine at expensive butter prices if both were colored yellow). But it affected discourse only by narrowing the debate to the single issue of fraud, a charge that

margarine advocates were able to minimize. In general Hill and Knowlton did not set the political agenda; rather, it responded to problems created when margarine manufacturers, physicians, reporters, or other advocates made statements that caused political actors to become interested in an issue that affected its clients.

Influencing public discourse proved the most difficult. H&K executives most often changed discussion of an issue by adding to it. They could not stop—and never tried to prevent—other groups from contributing to public discussion as well. During the 1952 steel strike, for example, individuals had access to opinions and interpretations offered by the steel manufacturers, the union, and the Truman administration, as well as those of journalists and members of the judiciary and Congress. An examination of the mail sent to the three major protagonists—Truman, the Steel Institute, and the union—indicates that citizens did pay attention to the various arguments presented from all sides. For instance, one woman who wrote to Truman referred to a speech made by a steel executive and asked the President to "please ignore his inane 'remarks.'" On the other hand, Hill and Knowlton received forty-two letters from union members who favored the industry's view that the government was moving toward socialism. Clearly, people did hear what Hill and Knowlton had to say, whether or not they agreed with its views.

The agency sought to amplify the voice of business, and it did. Did that make any difference for social and political action? That seemed to depend on the issue and the support for the client's side that pre-existed H&K's campaigns. The agency's mobilization of noisy support for the aircraft industry, for instance, in its "Air Power Is Peace Power" campaign may have given some members of Congress a pretext for voting for higher appropriations for the Air Force in 1949 than Truman had requested, something they actually wanted to do for budgetary and other reasons. In the case of tobacco the changes in discourse in the media arena did seem to affect personal decisions about smoking, because cigarette consumption did return and then surpass its pre-health scare levels. Once the health scare calmed down, calls for social and political action had little appeal. But in neither of these cases did the agency's programs change opinions; instead, they offered information people already wanted to hear. With butter, on the other hand, influencing political discourse had negligible effect on the outcome for consumers. Although members of Congress did use Hill and Knowlton's arguments and evidence about fraud during political debate, both consumers and most of their colleagues agreed the law must be revised, and H&K could not alter their opinions.

The agency's mixed success in affecting social and political action was less important than the unintended and indirect effects its campaigns had on its clients and therefore on the American people. Contribution to the creation of a climate of intolerance in the postwar era is one example. Nearly every statement emanating from the Steel Institute warned of the threat of creeping socialism, while the aircraft manufacturers subtly invoked the threat of communism as a reason to support their industry. The PR agents seemed obsessed with the threat of communism, and events seemed to prove them right. Truman's attempt to redirect public attention to steel prices by seizing the mills inadvertently gave the industry an illustration of the danger of socialism that it had for twenty years claimed was imminent. If the President could order the takeover of an industry by executive fiat, perhaps the federal government really was dictatorial and untrustworthy. The industry's warnings, Truman's actions, and events in Korea, coupled with the tension many

Americans already felt about the Soviet Union, may have made some more apt to believe the accusations made by Joe McCarthy and other red-baiters, especially regarding communists in the government. John Hill and his executives never intended to support such stridency, but they were honestly worried about the role of the federal government and therefore talked about it ceaselessly.

The campaigns also provided business leaders with a justification for their own behavior. Historian Richard Tedlow contends that "whether or not trade association public relations was able to create the reality of broad public support," it did help to create "the appearance that such support existed" [6, p. 204]. This appears to hold true in public relations, as well, at least in Hill and Knowlton's case. This apparent support gave business executives license to take certain actions under the rationale that they had the support of public opinion—even though opposition groups simultaneously made the same claim. For example, the industry, the union, and the Truman administration all claimed that their mail—which often came in as a result of public relations activities—showed that the American people supported whatever position they each held in the 1952 steel seizure. This alone was a meaningful effect.

But perhaps the most important effect was brought about through the reinforcement of the opinions of H&K's clients and people who were similar to them. During the 1952 steel strike, few opinions were transformed. Yet steel executives believed that they had a strong case against federal intervention in business decision-making and that, second, their winning it was a moral and legal imperative. They pressed on, therefore, until they had achieved their goals. What they said to one another reinforced their own determination to defy the Truman administration—making H&K's job of amplification all the more important. For the general public this reinforcement culminated in a months-long crisis and a steel strike when the nation was waging battle against a dreaded enemy.

During the early 1950s *Fortune* magazine's William H. Whyte, Jr., published a series of articles and then a book on what he saw as the dismal failure of corporations to communicate with the people, despite the millions of dollars they had spent "selling America to Americans." *Is Anybody Listening?*, he asked [7]. The question is pertinent. Although neither Whyte nor John Hill and his executives realized it, the answer was yes: business executives heard the agency's messages loud and clear, and Hill and Knowlton's campaigns most affected not the general public but own their clients and people who thought like they did.

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