



When government used publicity against itself: Toledo's Commission of Publicity and Efficiency, 1916–1975[☆]

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Abstract

In early 20th century America, the Progressive Movement sought to fight corruption and graft in city governments through publicity. The usual approach was to establish a nonprofit bureau of research or efficiency that would investigate city government and publicize the results. However, in Toledo (OH), that bureau was a government agency and was also publisher of the official city gazette. Was the public sector affiliation of the Toledo Commission of Publicity and Efficiency a fatal flaw? This inquiry concludes that the Toledo bureau was as effective as its nonprofit counterparts. Contrary to the dogma of Progressive Era reformers, a public agency dedicated to reform could successfully use publicity against its own government to accomplish reform.

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1. The publicity doctrine of Progressive Era reformers

Since the essence of democracy is approval by public opinion, publicity is a potent public relations tool to influence government. This powerful cause–effect relationship was the lynchpin of the good government movement during the Progressive Era in the US in the early 20th century. These good government

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reformers (derisively called goo-goos by their opponents) relied heavily on publicity. Publicity in local newspapers and in their own publications about government corruption or inefficiencies would inevitably bring public pressure to bear on government for reform (Freeman, 1927, p. 12; Kahn, 1997, p. 93; Truman, 1936, p. 58; Woodruff, 1911, p. 183).

In most major American cities, reformers established organizations to advocate for good government that were typically called bureaus of municipal research or efficiency bureaus. They researched local government operations and then advocated for reform through publicity. While most bureaus were in the nonprofit sector, a small number were government agencies. The latter were generally discouraged by reformers because government agencies “do not in fact operate with the same freedom” as nonprofit ones (Crane, 1923, p. 296). Therefore, the reformers said, citizens needed to “get at the truth about them [i.e. government] through a non-partisan staff, *independent of the government*” (National Program, 1916, p. 23, emphasis added).

This meant that the nonprofit sector affiliation of research and efficiency bureaus was a corollary to the uses of publicity, including threats of negative publicity. That also had important implications for the bureau’s own publications. It was a basic premise that publications—like the bureaus themselves—needed to be outside of government so that they would be free to criticize government. “The very publication of an official journal would invite criticism of a publicity organ likely to become a propaganda medium” (National Committee, 1931, p. 12). Daily newspapers often opposed official governmental newspapers (Dunlop, 1913) for a mix of reasons including pecuniary interests (desire for the revenue from official government notices), fear of competition and abstract constitutional doctrine. Given the antipathy of both reformers and newspapers, there were few official municipal gazettes (Harris, 1913; Woodruff, 1911).

In summary, the doctrine of the reform movement in the Progressive Era had two key pillars. First, bureaus of municipal research or efficiency should be nonprofit organizations rather than public sector agencies so that they could be free to criticize government. Second, since publicity was a key vehicle to push for reform, the media should also be independent of government. Given this conventional wisdom, it is surprising to find that in Toledo (OH), the reform bureau was part of city government and that it was also the publisher of an official city newspaper. Toledo was the only city that united these two pillars of the reform movement, but on the ‘wrong’ side of the sectorial divide. This meant that city government would be using the power of publicity—or threat of it—to reform *itself*. This is an intriguing anomaly to the public relations dogma of good government reformers.

2. Creation and operations

Toledo was something of a hotbed of reform (Barber, 2000, pp. 112–116; Finegold, 1995, p. 21). In 1914, the voters adopted a new city charter that included a provision establishing a Commission of Publicity and Efficiency (CP&E) (Gill, 1944, p. 157n). The Commission’s responsibilities included publishing a new weekly called the *Toledo City Journal*, investigating municipal operations and recommending reforms to improve the efficiency of city government (Crosser, 1923, p. 239). Here was an unprecedented experiment, a merger of the usually separate powers of advocating reforms and the medium of publicity—in the public sector no less. The newly created CP&E could initiate an investigation of another city department, print its report and recommendations in the official city newspaper it published and, if the department hesitated to implement the Commission’s recommendations, could subject the department to continuing negative publicity in its journal. This was one-stop government reform.

The five mayoral appointees to the Commission gradually evolved a philosophy that was akin to the modus operandi of nonprofit bureaus of research or efficiency (CP&E, 1921a, p. 76). They committed themselves, first, to being nonpartisan and fact-based and, second, to using constructive criticism to maximize improvements through cooperation (CP&E, 1930a, 1931, 1934a). As a last resort, the Commissioners knew that negative publicity, or even just the potential threat of it, could be an effective weapon aimed at a city agency opposing Commission recommendations. In the Commission's view, "the ability to make public facts concerning poor management in a department was the best assurance that the conditions found would be remedied. *Efficiency through publicity was the slogan* (CP&E, 1921a, p. 76, emphasis added). But, based on the Commission's overall philosophy, this "militant strategy [was] used only as a last resort" (CP&E, 1931, p. 225).

The Commission published the weekly *Toledo City Journal*, charging 50¢ a year for subscriptions, later increased to \$1. Most issues of the *Journal* contained features that would be expected of official gazettes, such as council proceedings, ordinances enacted, official legal notices and annual reports of city departments. Circulation never attained the levels expected by the reformers. Early predictions had been that 10,000–20,000 households would subscribe to the paper. However, the paid circulation never reached 2000, usually hovering at about 1500 (CP&E, 1930a, p. 17). This lower-than-expected circulation understandably diminished the publicity-based clout of the Commission. To compensate, CP&E developed good relations with the two major daily newspapers—unlike the hostility that some metropolitan dailies had to official city gazettes. The papers usually ran stories about Commission reports and recommendations (CP&E, 1930b, p. 155). This amplified CP&E's own power of direct publicity.

The budget for the Commission was about \$11,000 a year (Fairlie, 1930, p. 111) and its staffing equally modest. For many years it had only one full-time professional staffer, usually holding the title of secretary to the Commission. Given ongoing responsibilities to edit the paper and staff Commission meetings, the secretary had limited time to investigate departmental operations. Generally, every year the Commission conducted one or two substantial investigations (usually on its own initiative), as well as submit several minor reports, usually informational, to the city council. In 1928, the anti-reform 'regulars' proposed an amendment to the city charter that would have, amongst other things, reduced the independence and powers of the Commission (Shenefield, 1929, p. 736). The voters defeated it. During the New Deal, the Commission's staff was temporarily increased with personnel funded by the federal Civil Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration (Curry, 1936, p. 47; Paige, 1934, p. 277). After World War II and through the 1960s, permanent Commission staffing expanded to include a librarian, government analyst and editorial research assistant (CP&E, 1949, 1963).

3. Publicity tactics for promoting reform from the inside

The Commission gradually evolved three tactics for using the power of publicity to push for reforms: criticism, advocacy and follow-up. The first time the Commission used the *Toledo City Journal* to criticize government occurred quickly, the seventh issue of the paper. It was directed at elected officials. While the Commission derived its powers from the city charter, the city council nonetheless had the discretion to determine the level of funding it would allocate to run the Commission. Maneuvering subtly to cripple the Commission with inadequate staffing, the Council sought to limit the duties and lower the salary level of the Commission's secretary, its main professional staffer. The Commission responded with a front page story in the *Journal* headlined "A Plain Statement." Arguing for adequate funding, the article concluded

with a subtle but clear threat to the Council: “The issue, then, is clear and definite: Shall the will of the people be carried out in the spirit of the charter?” (CP&E, 1916, p. 2). Eventually, the Council yielded. The Commission did not get the overall staffing it was hoping for, but it received the minimum necessary to function adequately.

In a more typical use of criticism, directed at operations of city agencies, CP&E had released a study in 1918 of the city’s Workhouse. The Commission did not soft-pedal its criticisms, noting on the front page of the *Journal* that “of the 14 employees [sic] at the Workhouse, not one has taken an examination for the position he holds” (CP&E, 1918, p. 429). In other words, the city hall regulars had found a way to ignore the nascent merit-based civil service system and instead continue to hire based on patronage. The Commission exposed this scheme through publicity, assuring that it could not continue indefinitely. Similarly, the Commission conducted a study of the city motor vehicle fleet and concluded that “the present garage system is very unsatisfactory” (CP&E, 1921b, p. 512).

CP&E also learned to nuance the rhetoric of its criticisms, so that different tones could convey different levels of criticism. For example, when in-fighting between factions was paralyzing the city council, the Commission published a front-page statement to urge a settlement. Using low-decibel rhetoric, it commented that “it would be derelict in its function of promoting efficiency in the city government unless it took cognizance of the present situation in Council” and called on all sides to settle their differences as quickly as possible (CP&E, 1922). On another occasion, a front-page story gently chided some agency and department heads for not submitting the required annual reports that were to be published in the *Journal* (CP&E, 1920, p. 315). Conversely, the Commission could employ attention-getting hyperbole when needed. In 1939, it described actions of the city council as “little more than token approaches to the whole problem” (CP&E, 1939).

Sometimes the Commission would use a second publicity tactic, advocacy, to push for policies and positions pro-actively. This tactic was “less negative in character” than criticism since it usually focused on “attempting to prevent an action which the members of the Commission feel is wrong in principle, or illegal, or both” (CP&E, 1931, p. 227). For example, in 1925 the mayor submitted a proposed annual city budget to the council that the Commission felt was out of balance and was, in effect, deficit spending. Rather than criticizing the mayor for what he had already done, CP&E published a front-page article urging the Council to modify the mayor’s proposal. Using soft but clear language, the article reminded Council members that “it is the duty of Council which provides the revenues, to cut the cloth to fit the pattern” (CP&E, 1925, p. 10).

On another occasion, the Commission advocated for enactment of centralized purchasing (CP&E, 1934b). This type of publicity focused on the positive, such as the benefits of administrative change rather than overt criticism of the status quo. Similarly, later that year, CP&E publicized its “advocacy of the principle of salary reductions on the basis of the principle of the sliding scale used in income taxation” (CP&E, 1934c, p. 127).

The Commission was persistent about following up on the adoption of its recommendations. For example, when its recommendations about the Workhouse were not enacted, it followed up with a section in its annual report in the *City Journal* pointedly noting that “conditions remain unchanged” (CP&E, 1919, p. 106). On another occasion, an article in the *Journal* stated that “the Commission reiterated its former stand on two previous occasions” and still its recommendation had not yet been enacted (CP&E, 1934c, p. 127). CP&E developed a graphic scorecard technique to follow up on its recommendations. For example, its annual report for 1926 listed all recommendations it had made during the year and then, in bold face text, the fate of each. In some cases, recommendations were listed as having been enacted.

In other cases, “*nothing yet has been accomplished*” or that certain reports were “*not [submitted] to the city council*” despite Commission proposals (CP&E, 1927, pp. 174–175, bolding in original). This was a powerful visual technique to press for adoption of recommendations.

4. Denouement and conclusions

After reaching a zenith of both investigative and publicity activism in the 1920s and 1930s, the Commission gradually atrophied. Its investigative functions evolved to reports requested by city government, subjects unlikely to be exposés. The other major responsibility of the Commission, publisher of the *Toledo City Journal*, became that of a passive printer rather than author of content. The Commission had been tamed. In such an emasculated form, there was less logic for its existence. By the early 1970s, it looked like a relic from bygone days. Without controversy, in 1975 the voters approved a charter amendment abolishing CP&E and shifting publication responsibilities to the city council’s clerk. The Commission convened for its last meeting on 20 November 1975 and then adjourned sine die (CP&E, 1975). The 27 December issue was the last one it published.

What to make of this unusual government agency, mandated to investigate its own government and use its publicity power to push for implementation of its recommendations? The central question is whether CP&E’s public sector affiliation diminished its potential effectiveness. Therefore, the key to assessing its performance is if this sectorial affiliation made it less effective than its nonprofit counterparts. Based on the premises of Progressive reformers, CP&E’s placement within government would be expected to be a fatal flaw crippling its ability to use the power of publicity to promote public sector reform.

Third party assessments of the Commission have not judged its peculiar sectorial affiliation as fatal. In 1920, a review of recent municipal developments praised the *Toledo City Journal* as “one of the most useful” of city newspapers, clearly an endorsement of the uses that CP&E put the paper to (Coker, 1920, p. 702). A 1928 review of various municipal approaches to public reporting praised the Commission’s use of the *Journal* for “interpretive articles presenting the analyses of [its] research into the city’s administration” (Kilpatrick, 1928, p. 52). A few years later, a committee of four national good-government associations complimented the *Journal* compared to most other official gazettes (National Committee, 1931, p. 12). Seidman judged CP&E as one of “the two outstanding” central staff agencies in all American cities (Seidman, 1941, p. 178). More recently, Williams identified the *Journal* as one of two prime examples of the reform movement’s efforts to communicate vigorously with the public, passing over without comment its unorthodox sectorial affiliation (Williams, 2004, p. 153).

Perhaps the most significant indication of CP&E’s effectiveness in the nonprofit-dominated reform movement was a 1928 compilation published by the Governmental Research Association, the association of bureaus of research and efficiency. The compilation consisted of letters from these bureaus summarizing their work. The booklet had about 40 letters, including one from CP&E (Cutting, 1928, p. 38). That it was included in the pamphlet was an initial signal that CP&E was just like the overwhelmingly nonprofit bureaus. Furthermore, CP&E’s letter showed no significant difference in the kinds of activities and accomplishments that nonprofit bureaus boasted about. In short, the public sector Commission of Publicity and Efficiency was *similar* to its nonprofit counterparts in most respects. The unintended message of this booklet was that in the case of CP&E, the sectorial affiliation of this particular publicity-oriented bureau of research and efficiency was not especially notable. Yes, indeed, in this case government *was* able to use publicity against itself to accomplish reform in the Progressive Era.

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