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ABSTRACT

Electrifying Public Relations: How a Canadian Company Created Brazil's First Corporate Public Relations Department

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With great celebration, the public relations industry in Brazil celebrated its 100th anniversary, recognizing the establishment of the first corporate public relations department at the Brazilian Traction, Light and Power Company (BTLP) in 1914. However little is understood on how this historic development came to being established by a company that was considered to be Canada's largest overseas corporation at the time.

In fact most of the historical references to the creation of this first public relations department are incorrect: Freitag and Stokes (2009) and Molleda, Athaydes and Hirsch (2009) both quote noted Brazilian public relations scholar Margarida Kunsch who stated that it was the Sao Paulo Tramway, Light and Power Company while Ferrari (2013) states that it was at the Canadian Light Company in Sao Paulo.

According to Morrison (1989), the Sao Paulo Tramway, Light and Power Company was incorporated in Toronto on 7 April 1899 and five years later, the Rio de Janeiro Tramway, Light & Power Company was established on 9 July 1904 (para 22). After experiencing tremendous growth, both systems were merged in 1912 into the BTLP (para 31).

While the practice of public relations had taken root in some Canadian private corporations in the 1880s (Cardin & McMullan, 2015), it wasn't until the early 20th century that "Institutions such as Canadian-owned railroads, banks and telephone companies had hired publicity specialists and were conducting publicity, promotion and public affairs campaigns" (Likely, 2009, p. 656). Canadian companies such as Massey Manufacturing, Bell Canada, and the Canadian Pacific Railway were early adopters of internal communications, promotionalism, publicity and public relations activities (Johansen, 2013)

While the Canadian founders of BTLP may have had some experience with public relations from their previous railroad endeavours or knowledge of some of the new practices being established at the headquarters of other Toronto-based companies, a conflict between BTLP and a wealthy Brazilian family "was widely publicized and had a profound effect on

the development of tramways in Brazil and on the attitudes of Brazilians towards the foreigners who ran them” (Morrison, 1989, para 25).

The need for public relations may have been due to the ongoing conflict with the Guinles family which led a national campaign against foreign ownership of public utilities causing service disruptions across the country. “Tram service temporarily improved, but public relations ultimately deteriorated. The conflict between the Guinles and the Canadians spread throughout Brazil and Yankee imperialism became the favorite target of the Brazilian left. Students in Piracicaba burned a tram to its wheels. Rio Light took its English name off its cars” (Morrison, 1989, para 53).

This paper will examine the history of the development of BTLP and the creation of its first public relations department, while examining the conditions in both Canada and Brazil that may have led to the need for this new and historic initiative. This paper will contribute new knowledge to the history of Canadian public relations as well as provide a more detailed and new understanding of this important development in the history of Brazilian public relations.

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