

The American Influence in Telefónica's Public Relations Strategy during the 20's and 30's.

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Abstract — The *Compañía Telefónica Nacional de España* (CTNE, 'Telefónica' in colloquial speech then) was incorporated in 1924. It was a strategic move of New York-based holding ITT. In contrast with a landscape of State-owned networks across Europe, Telefónica was the subsidiary of an American corporation, with internal organization, procedures and ideas that revealed that origin.

We study the influence in Telefónica's early development of public relations policies created by *American Telephone & Telegraph*. Although the environment was quite different, the new organization faced the same challenge that gave birth to the brilliant AT&T's communication strategy, from 1907 onwards, to create the image of a "beloved monopoly", in expression of the classical work of Roland Marchand.

Index Terms — Public Relations, Telefónica, ITT, AT&T.

I. INTRODUCTION

On August 25th, 1924, King Alfonso XIII signed a Decree issued by the military Directory headed by General Miguel Primo de Rivera, granting the monopoly concession of Spain's telephone network to *Compañía Telefónica Nacional de España* (CTNE) [1]-[2].

Although formally a Spanish privately held company in that moment, as the concession procedure required, CTNE was a major strategic move of New York-based holding *International Telephone and Telegraph* (ITT), led by Sosthenes and Hernand Behn [3]. Right after the Decree was published, CTNE approved a capital increase from 1 million to 115 million pesetas. ITT became the main stock holder and the biggest American investor in Spain [4].

Before 1924, telephone business in Spain was underdeveloped [5]-[6]. The country had only about 80.000 lines. In contrast with the rest of Europe, instead of a public monopoly integrated in the Post and Telegraph Administration (PTT), there was a mix of tiny urban networks granted to different companies and local corporations. Half a century of political mismanagement had produced one of the most inefficient telephone systems of the continent. Spain had been a case of study of the European failure in this field [7]-[8], and the need of a deep transformation was felt since the beginning of the century.

The contract between CTNE and the Government of Spain, contained a series of hard deadlines to build a new network, with automatic exchanges in the main cities, a modern transmission backbone based on electronic multiplex systems, and a submarine telephone cable across Gibraltar Strait.

ITT provided CTNE technology, executives and engineers to organize the company.

The granting of monopoly to a foreign holding and the presence of Americans in daily operation created controversy, although Parliament had been closed and press was under censorship. The management of this kind of 'low intensity' hostility was not unknown to Sosthenes Behn, an expert in public relations. From the first day on, CTNE made a sustained effort to create a positive public image, following the successful path of the giant AT&T. This paper describes the influence of this model in the Spanish Company.

II. PUBLIC RELATIONS IN TELEPHONE BUSINESS

Roland Marchand, studied in his classical work [9], the use of storytelling and iconography by large American corporations, as powerful tools for public relations. Industrial and commercial organizations were seen as 'soulless'. They struggled to earn public appreciation or, at least, to be non-threatening. Banks, insurance companies or large manufacturers aspired to establish emotional ties with customers in the same way than Churches, the ideal of socially respected institutions.

Marchand devoted a whole chapter of his book to AT&T, under the title 'The Vision of a Loved Monopoly', with the following introduction:

"In 1908 the leaders of the N. W. Ayer & Son advertising agency took a deep and worried breath as they embarked on a significant new task for one of the nation's largest corporations, the American Telephone and Telegraph Company. To launch an advertising campaign touting the virtues of a private monopoly seemed a bold and possibly foolhardy venture. But the Ayer agency was eager to prove its mettle, and AT&T's new president, Theodore Vail, was distressed by his company's unfavorable public image. The formidable obstacles only reinforced Vail's resolve to fund the forging of a corporate image at a level unprecedented among American corporations. Thus began the first, most persistent, and most celebrated of the large-scale institutional advertising campaigns of the early twentieth century. Its primary purpose was political—to protect a corporation with an odious public reputation against

threats of public ownership or hostile regulation. Among the methods deployed to publicize Vail's new emphasis on quality and service were measured argument, emotional appeal, and transformed corporate behavior. Certainly AT&T was not the first major American business corporation to recognize, for good or for ill, that it had an image, and that its image could affect its long-term welfare. But never had a major corporation so systematically and decisively set out to create a new corporate image for itself as did AT&T in 1908. And never did a corporation so triumphantly accomplish that task."

There is general agreement among scholars on the success of *AT&T*, despite different critical approaches [10]-[11].

Marchand's description of the question calls our attention to the 'political' nature of *AT&T* goals. The company was facing the danger of public seizure, and had a nasty reputation. Theodore Vail responded to the challenge with a long term public relations strategy that underpinned the corporation's growth for the next seventy years.

AT&T devised a set of resources and liturgies to convey its messages. Many of them were copied by other telephone companies all over the world, including *ITT*. These are the most relevant ones:

- 1) **Advertising.** *N. W. Ayer & Sons* publicists produced a large amount of advertisements with a consistent structure that remained almost unchanged for decades. They were like a little press reports with an artistic illustration, a slogan, and a short description in two column layout. Slogans became very familiar.
- 2) **Press.** *AT&T* published paid news in local and national journals. It had also an excellent collection of newsletters for different targets (technical, general public, investors or employees).
- 3) **Books.** The company hired writers and journalists to write books about its history and organization. 'The History of the Telephone' of Herbert N. Casson [12], has been one of the most influential, and even today it's cited as reference, although it is a propagandistic work, not a historical one. Arthur W. Page, the vice president for Public Relations, wrote 'The Bell Telephone System' edited by an external publishing house [13].
- 4) **Pictures.** There are rich collections of pictures taken for publishing or advertising. Daily works, images of buildings and equipment, special events and ceremonies were carefully documented. Later, *AT&T* produced some of the first corporate films in history.
- 5) **Iconography.** To embody Company values a pair of imaginary heroes were invented. The anonymous lineman (painted by Frank T. Merritt, 1913), and the sweet and delicate telephone operator (T. D. Skidmore, 1915) represented the commitment and sacrifice of *AT&T* employees.

6) **Hagiography.** Besides those imagined prototypes, two figures were a kind of corporate patriarchs, depicted and described with expressions and images of the Old Testament. Alexander Graham Bell was the first one, although his involvement in the company was almost inexistent after the very first years. After Theodore Vail passed away, the charismatic builder of the Bell System received a lot of attention [14].

7) **Ceremonies.** Public events were very important for *AT&T* since the early days, when Bell made demonstrations of his invention in theaters. The most beloved were 'first call ceremonies'. Some new achievement was put into service and politicians were invited to inaugurate. The most dramatic one was the first transcontinental call in 1915, when Bell called from New York and was answered by Watson in San Francisco [15]. Vail was hearing the conversation from Georgia and President Woodrow Wilson from Washington DC.

8) **Architecture.** Buildings played an important role in Public Relations. Although telephone exchanges are industrial premises, they were externally designed to fit local styles in order to avoid rejection. Main offices were intentionally built with rich decoration and expensive materials like marble and bronze were use for lobbies. Everything was a representation of *AT&T*'s financial power [15]. The superb telephone palaces of 20's (New York, San Francisco, St. Louis, Denver, Minneapolis) are a product of this policy. Public in general and small investors, were invited to know them through scheduled guided visits.

9) **Social benefits.** *AT&T* was an innovator also in this field. Employees enjoyed programs of medical care and retirement pensions. An important number of them were also shareholders. These advantages were a common topic in advertisement.

Sosthenes Behn was aware of the importance of public relations for telephone business. He had been always in good terms with *AT&T*. In 1916, his *Cuban Telephone Co.* and the giant signed a joint venture to build an underwater cable from Havana to Key West. This technical challenge was suspended by the Great War, but finally completed in 1921, one year after the creation of *ITT*. A first call ceremony was organized to celebrate the achievement, with Presidents Harding and Mario García Menocal as the main guests [17].

'The Colonel', as he liked to be called, had strong social skills that allowed him to easily establish contacts at the highest level with the political and financial *élites* of the countries where *ITT* settled, many of them under dictatorships during that period of turmoil. He fed the legend about his person and the origin of his fortune. Multilingual (he was fluent in Spanish and French), well-mannered, elegant and *gourmet*, he behaved like a diplomat and was supported by the Department of State when necessary.

III. CTNE ADVERTISING DEPARTMENT

In the original organization of *Telefónica*, Public Relations were assigned to “Departamento de Publicidad” (Advertising Department). An American, Kenneth McKim, was the first director, and stayed in Spain from 1924 to late 1928 [18]. According to the description of people that worked with him, he was an excellent writer and an empathic leader. Later he became Assistant Vice Chairman of *ITT*.

Telefónica had a very well edited newsletter *Revista Telefónica Española*, following the model of *Revista Telefónica Cubana*. *ITT* also edited in Spanish *Revista Telefónica Internacional*. They were inspired in *AT&T*'s *Telephone Review*. After the purchase of the European branch of *Western Electric* in 1926, *ITT* kept publishing *Electrical Communication*, an excellent technical journal. McKim and other *ITT* and *CTNE* employees prepared for it some reports on the activity in Spain [19]-[20].

McKim was the mastermind of *CTNE* public relations, and he put in practice some ideas common in America but unknown in Spain. This American connection did not end when he leaved. In 1929, a group of employees of the Department traveled to the USA, where they met colleagues of *AT&T* and *ITT*. One of them wrote a long report with interesting remarks on the American telephone business that appeared in *Revista Telefónica Española* [21].

CTNE hired the best Spanish photographers of the moment (Alfonso, Cámara, Marín, Gaspar...) to document every aspect of the development of the Company. The purpose of this action was to provide graphic material to internal and external publications. The collection has extraordinary historical and artistic value, recently put in value [22], because is a detailed portrait of society with more than 5.000 negatives.



Fig. 1: Local journalists and *CTNE* staff after the inauguration of Santander Exchange, 26th August 1926. McKim is the fourth man counting from left to right in the first row. Archivo Histórico Fotográfico de *Telefónica*.

IV. CREATING A PUBLIC IMAGE

From the first days of existence, *CTNE* was present in press with advertisements that informed about intentions and plans of the Company. In 1925, journals inserted short news of construction works, provided by the Departamento de Publicidad. In graphic magazines we can find reports, usually occupying two pages, with photographs and texts. The same picture can be reproduced by *Mundo Gráfico* and *Blanco y Negro*, but none of them specify that the news probably had been paid by *CTNE* [23]-[24]. In November of that year, the ‘first call ceremony’ was rehearsed, when a new and tiny long distance switch was inaugurated in Madrid. From the technical point of view it was a minor accomplishment, but General Primo de Rivera, the Major and the Bishop of Madrid, and Chairman of *CTNE* Marquis of Urquijo were present. They appear in a group portrait. The title in *Mundo Gráfico*, ‘New evidences of *CTNE* activity’, provides a hint on the purpose of these press releases.

Workers digging trenches, trucks carrying poles, engineers adjusting machinery... all these topics had been reproduced hundreds of times by *AT&T*. The same themes blossomed in Spanish newspapers in 1926, a very important year when first automatic exchanges were completed. Automatic telephone was nearly unknown in Spain, so *CTNE* prepared advertisements and leaflets to inform customers how to dial. They had a design close to American counterparts.

In August, King Alfonso XIII solemnly opened Santander Central Office, the first automatic urban area in Spain. Everything was new: building, equipment, outer plant and the liturgy scripted by *CTNE* publicists. A detailed program of activities included a guided visit for local journalists on previous days. They received a text describing the Exchange and the building, and we have found that many of them reproduced paragraphs verbatim in their chronicle, including cumbersome details of electromechanical machinery that Chief Engineer Manuel Marín provided. On inauguration day, authorities and *CTNE* officers made some rhetoric speeches, the Bishop blessed the equipment and the principal guest pushed a lever to symbolically put it into work. Afterwards, guests and journalists were invited to a fine restaurant. *Telefónica*'s collection has hundred of pictures of these special days. Journalists received special attention, since they were the creators of public opinion. Spanish reporters of local newspapers were not used to deal with a professional public relations department and were delighted with helpful *CTNE* employees. Inauguration chronicles were very positive, even flattering, and sometimes included useless information for the reader like the ‘splendid lunch’ menu. Portraits of smiling young journalists smoking cigars and joking with *Telefónica* officers are an evidence of how efficient the script was.

Sosthenes Behn could not be present in Santander because of the death of a relative [25]. In December he was the host of a dramatic *mise-en-scène*, when all the telephones of Madrid

were changed to three automatic exchanges with King Alfonso XIII as the main guest.

In January 1927, the first commercial radio telephone service was launched between London and New York. *ITT* had a special interest in transoceanic communications, but that link was operated by the British *GPO* and *AT&T*. In October 1928, King Alfonso XIII and President Calvin Coolidge talked by telephone:

The ceremonies at Washington took place in the directors' room of the United States Chamber of Commerce. President Walter S. Gifford of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company acted as master of ceremonies at Washington, while Colonel Sosthenes Behn, President of the International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation, acted in a similar capacity in Madrid [26].

This occasion was very special. It was a 'first call ceremony' not just for *CTNE*, but also for *ITT* and for *AT&T*, with Marquis of Urquijo, Behn and Walter Gifford together for the first and unique time. There is a striking detail, *ITT* and *CTNE* only owned 500 km. of the circuit, the distance between Madrid and the French border. The rest of the conversation ran over equipment of the French *PTT*, the British *GPO* and *AT&T*. It was actually a pure operation of public relations. It deserved the same coverage than the inauguration on October 1929 of the radio link between Madrid and Buenos Aires, three times longer and a technical success for *ITT* engineers.



Fig. 2: King Alfonso XIII and special guests during the first call ceremony Madrid-Washington DC, October 1928. Sosthenes Behn seats in the chair out of the table. On his right side is Marquis of Urquijo. Photo of Marin, Archivo Histórico Fotográfico de Telefónica.

Graphic reports kept on working for years. Smiling sweet operators and acrobatic linemen worked as well in Spain as in the USA. Pictures of internal premises, crews working in the

wilderness or clean and spacious administration offices could have been taken in any of the regional companies affiliated to the *Bell System*. There are amazing coincidences in the presentation of certain topics. Photographs of telephone poles in the deserted landscape of Los Monegros, near Zaragoza, taken by Gaspar in 1926, would fit in the series of the construction of the American transcontinental line in Nevada in 1915, conserved by the New York Public Library.

Although composition and messages may closely resemble those of *AT&T*, *CTNE's* designs were original. There are Spanish adaptations of very common topics like "The annihilator of distance", "Sentinel of night" or "Weavers of speech". We have found the shocking exception of one American advertisement disguised as Spaniard. There is no doubt, the Barclay-Vesey Building, headquarters of the *New York Telephone Company* can be seen by the Woolworth Building; the workers, the truck and everything is American. The Spanish text sounds a bit weird, a literal translation from English.

Para que el servicio sea útil al público

Nuestros ideales de servicio y nuestros esfuerzos por servir bien al público están fundados en sanas consideraciones mercantiles, porque cuanto más útil hagamos el teléfono, mayor será el uso que de él se haga. Continuamente estudiamos la manera de mejorar el servicio. Nunca cesa la instrucción de nuestros empleados, ni la aplicación de métodos perfeccionados y nuevos inventos.

Las relaciones entre el público y nosotros son las que determinan el verdadero carácter del servicio telefónico.

Y como no hay un servicio público más personal que el teléfono, constantemente buscamos el acuerdo y cooperación de todos en la gran tarea de facilitar en todo momento un servicio cuyo alcance y cuyo valor sean cada día mayores.

Compañía Telefónica Nacional de España

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Fig. 3: Advertisement in magazine *Mundo Gráfico*, 28th November, 1928. "Service Useful for Public". Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid, Spain.

Architecture was very important in the *AT&T* model and *ITT* companies followed the same approach. It's not by chance

that there are only two 'Telephone Palaces' in Europe: Madrid and Bucharest. Both, *CTNE* and the Romanian *SART* were subsidiaries of *ITT*. The expression 'Telephone Palace' faded soon in Spain, but is still conserved in Romania.

Telefónica buildings follow the principles of utility and design of American exchanges, and are quite different of European central offices. The headquarters of Gran Vía in Madrid was the first American skyscraper in the Old World. It was projected by *ITT* and *CTNE* Chief Architects, Louis S. Weeks and Ignacio de Cárdenas. This last wrote [28]:

It's is difficult to compare a telephone exchange building with other for similar purposes, because if it is essentially an industrial building, is also an embassy of the Company in the Spanish cities, and like her, has to be popular, sumptuous, useful and rich. It is also an advertisement. Today, without publicity companies face failure, and a good advertisement must be located in the best place in town.

This statement is one of the best formulations of *AT&T* policies on architecture. Cárdenas didn't speak English, though he stayed in New York several months in 1926 to work with Weeks. So, these ideas that guided not only him, but all the group of young architects under his command, were transmitted by *ITT* executives and professionals. Behn himself held some conversations with Cárdenas on the style he wanted for Gran Vía, because he liked very much the Plateresque, a Spanish variant of Gothic in Renaissance.

Social benefits for *Telefónica* workers were also inspired in *AT&T*, and were quite progressive for that time in Spain, but couldn't be exploited easily by the public relations staff. Primo de Rivera regime had forbidden trade unions but the Company was blamed for paternalistic behavior.

V. FIGHTING PUBLIC SEIZURE AND POLITICAL UNREST

On April 14th, 1931, King Alfonso XIII resigned and the Second Spanish Republic was proclaimed after Republican parties won local elections. This change was a big drawback for *ITT*, since the new Government wanted to declare null the concession of monopoly of 1924. In addition, anarchist trade union *CNT* became very powerful among *Telefónica* workers and declared a series of strikes, with some violence episodes.

A hostile political environment is a challenge for public relations, and the period 1931-1932 was the most difficult for *CTNE* in this sense before the Civil War.

Prime Minister Manuel Azaña and the Minister in charge of Communications, Diego Martínez Barrio, were against the *statu quo*. *Telefónica* took defensive actions. To prevent the accusations of colonialism, American executives withdraw from the public view. Messages changed to insist in the importance of *CTNE*'s investments, and on quality of service.

Manuel Azaña was present in the ceremony inauguration of the radiotelephone link with Majorca, in October 1931, but the danger of public seizure had not finished for *ITT*. The tension grew to a climax in November 1932, when an Act was passed to review the concession [29]. Under these circumstances Behn activated his contacts in the Department of State. The commercial conflict became a diplomatic incident. American Government pressed strongly the Spanish cabinet that finally put aside the question, showing that foreign policy may be a continuation of public relations by other means.

ITT began to find refuge behind the Department of State, after losing confidence in its own ability to deal with Spanish Governments. Behn's tactics to conquest markets were vulnerable to political changes, and the thirties are the epitome of instability.

Despite a reasonable development of business in the aftermath of 1929 financial crisis, *CTNE* couldn't escape the increasing troubles. In October 1934, Asturian miner's strike erupted in a revolutionary way with violence between workers and police. The capital, Oviedo, was scenario of fierce fights; some of them by the telephone building. After workers were defeated by the Army with a high cost of human lives, *CTNE* published a paid report in magazine *Blanco y Negro*, praising employees for bravery to keep the exchange working. The text repeats twice that the reason of this behavior was 'the spirit of service', the expression that *AT&T* had been using since 1914 to describe the heroic virtues of linemen and operators.

Ten days before the Civil War begun, *CTNE* celebrated a 'first call ceremony', when the Exchange of Toledo, the historical Spanish capital, was opened [31]. The American Ambassador was the star of the ceremony, and talked with the Major of Toledo (Ohio). That day ended a brilliant decade of public relations.



Fig. 4: First call ceremony from Toledo, Spain to Toledo, Ohio, 7th July, 1936. Ambassador Claude G. Bowers is the man on the lower right corner of this picture. Photo of Rodríguez, Archivo Histórico Fotográfico de Telefónica.

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