



Public Relations as Redevelopment Tool: Accentuating the Positive in Deindustrializing New England

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Attempts to revitalize local economies hit by industrial downsizing have been explored by a number of historians, but scholars have paid little attention to the public relations aspect of these efforts. I argue that publicity campaigns can be a central component of redevelopment drives. The subject is explored through an examination of New England in the 1920s, when the region experienced widespread factory shutdowns. Pervasive negative impressions of the deindustrializing area economy set the stage for New England's public relations campaign. Plant closures demoralized regional residents. Their pessimism was amplified and widely disseminated by press coverage that highlighted the dire circumstances in the area and posited deep-seated economic flaws that would hinder a turnaround. The leaders spearheading the push for New England recovery feared that these negative images might further worsen conditions. In response, they mounted a vigorous publicity campaign highlighting the region's economic strengths. Their effort made use of the techniques of modern advertising and public relations and featured the distortions that typify those fields. The drive to promote positive images of New England seems to have improved perceptions of the area economy and may have encouraged investment there.

The downsizing of long-established industries has been a central feature in the economic life of the United States and other developed countries in the last few decades. The phenomenon is not only a recent one. Numerous historical accounts demonstrate that deindustrialization appeared in certain parts of the United States as early as the 1920s and took hold in multiple locations in the years after World War II. Most historians have focused on the impact of downsizing on the workers, communities, unions, and companies directly affected.¹ Recent scholarship examines the

¹ Among the numerous works in this vein are many of the essays in *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*, ed. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (Ithaca, N.Y., 2003); Jefferson R. Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999); William F. Hartford, *Where Is Our Responsibility? Unions and Economic Change in the New*

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broader effects of industrial decline on politics and policymaking.² The latter works particularly focus on the attempts of public officials, activists, and business leaders to bring about recovery in locales hit by plant closures. Typically, those activities entail initiatives to strengthen remaining employers and to identify new sources of jobs and growth.³

The public relations aspect of redevelopment efforts has received little attention.⁴ I argue that publicity campaigns can be a central component in attempts to revitalize local economies affected by industrial downsizing. The subject is explored through an examination of New England in the 1920s, when the region experienced widespread factory closures at that time.

Pervasive negative impressions of the deindustrializing economy set the stage for New England's public relations campaign. Residents of the region were demoralized by plant closures. These pessimistic sentiments were amplified and widely disseminated by press coverage that highlighted the dire local circumstances and posited deep-seated economic flaws that would hinder recovery. The negative media images alarmed the business leaders who spearheaded New England redevelopment efforts in the 1920s. They feared in particular that perceptions of the area as economically stagnant would dissuade capitalists elsewhere from making badly needed new investments in the region.

England Textile Industry, 1870-1960 (Amherst, Mass., 1996); Lawrence F. Gross, *The Course of Industrial Decline: The Boott Cotton Mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, 1835-1955* (Baltimore, Md., 1993); Alice Galenson, *The Migration of the Cotton Textile Industry from New England to the South, 1880-1930* (New York, 1985).

² Guian McKee, "Urban Deindustrialization and Local Public Policy: Industrial Renewal in Philadelphia, 1953-1976," *Journal of Policy History* 16 (2004): 66-98; Gregory S. Wilson, "Deindustrialization, Poverty, and Federal Area Redevelopment in the United States, 1945-1965," in *Beyond the Ruins*, ed. Cowie and Heathcott, 181-98; Stephen High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969-1984* (Toronto, 2003), chaps. 5 and 6; David Koistinen, "Dealing with Deindustrialization: Economics, Politics, and Policy During the Decline of the New England Textile Industry, 1920-1960" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1999).

³ McKee, "Urban Deindustrialization"; Wilson, "Deindustrialization, Poverty"; Koistinen, "Dealing with Deindustrialization," chapters 5 and 6.

⁴ Attempts to create a more favorable image of a German region hit by deindustrialization are described in Wilfred Dege, "Regional Public Relations for the Ruhr Area: Strategies and Concepts," in *De-industrialisation and New Industrialisation in Britain and Germany*, ed. Trevor Wild and Philip Jones (London, 1991), 303-11. The ways in which locales experiencing industrial downsizing have been portrayed by mass media and other observers is explored in John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon, "Collateral Damage: Deindustrialization and the Uses of Youngstown," in *Beyond the Ruins*, ed. Cowie and Heathcott, 201-18, and High, *Industrial Sunset*, chap. 1.

To counteract these dynamics, local leaders mounted a vigorous public relations campaign highlighting the strengths of New England. Their effort deployed the techniques of modern advertising and public relations and featured the kind of distortions that typify those fields. The drive to promote positive images of economic life in New England seems to have been at least somewhat effective. The torrent of upbeat publicity laid the basis for a different genre of media coverage about the region. Stories in the new vein held that local conditions were better than believed and depicted in admiring terms New England's redevelopment push. The improvement in the region's image may even have encouraged investment in the area.

New England was one of the first parts of the country to experience deindustrialization. The region saw sharp downsizing in manufacturing after World War I as a result of declines in long-established sectors such as textiles and shoes. Between 1923 and 1929, employment in New England factories sank by 12 percent. In Massachusetts, the largest New England state and one of those hardest hit by deindustrialization, the number of industrial jobs fell by 17 percent over the same period.⁵ The cotton textile industry was by far the biggest sector in Massachusetts at the time and the one downsizing most rapidly. Nearly two-fifths of factory jobs in cotton disappeared during the 1920s, as plant closures spread through the commonwealth's mill cities. Massachusetts also saw substantial employment losses during this era in woolen and worsted textiles, textile machinery, and boots and shoes.⁶

⁵ Between 1923 and 1929, factory employment dropped from 1.25 million to 1.10 million in New England and from 667,000 to 557,000 in Massachusetts. By contrast, total U.S. manufacturing employment grew from 8.19 million in 1923 to 8.38 million in 1929, a gain of 2.2 percent. Industrial downsizing continued in New England in the ensuing decade, although the economic troubles of the region seemed unexceptional with the entire country mired in a deep depression. Between 1929 and 1939, manufacturing employment in New England sank from 1.10 million to 954,000, a drop of 13 percent. Over that period, Massachusetts factory payrolls fell from 557,000 to 461,000, a drop of 17 percent. Total U.S. manufacturing employment stood at 7.80 million in 1939, a 6.9 percent decline from 1929. Statistics for Massachusetts and the other New England states (from which regional totals were calculated) are from Commonwealth of Massachusetts, "Report of the Special Commission Relative to Establishment of a State Department of Commerce," Dec. 1945, Massachusetts *Legislative Documents* 1946 (House, No. 300), 75-76. Nationwide statistics from U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, Part 2 (Washington D.C., 1975), 666.

⁶ Bay State employment in cotton goods plummeted from 114,000 at 191 establishments in 1923, to 71,000 at 135 establishments in 1929. See Massachusetts Department of Labor and Industries, *Statistics of Manufactures in Massachusetts, 1920-1938* (n.p. [Boston], n.d. [1929?]), cotton goods statistics on p. 9. Competition from lower-cost producers in the American South led to

A key actor in 1920s efforts to revive the ailing New England economy was the New England Council (NEC or “the Council”). The organization had a central role in public relations efforts. The NEC was a regional business association established in 1925 to address the economic problems confronting the area. Local chambers of commerce played a key role in setting up the group. Strong support for Council efforts came from corporate executives in service industries such as utilities, railroads, banking, media, and retail that operated solely in the region and would benefit from vigorous local growth. Managers of area metalworking firms with a reputation for quality products also participated actively in the NEC’s work.

In the years after its founding, the Council mounted a multifaceted redevelopment campaign. Among other activities, the organization: a) encouraged local manufacturers to adapt the latest management techniques and use laboratory research to aid in product development; b) sought to increase financing for small regional companies, especially those producing technically innovative goods; c) promoted the area’s recreational attractions; and d) encouraged recovery efforts in localities hit by plant closures.

Council leaders subscribed to the “associational” philosophy highly popular in corporate circles at the time. Business organizations, according to this view, could resolve with minimal federal guidance most of the economic and social challenges posed by modern industrial capitalism. U.S. Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover, the leading advocate of associationalism, repeatedly lauded the activities of the NEC.⁷

Perceptions of Economic Conditions in New England

As factory closures swept through New England in the 1920s, feelings of gloom descended on area residents. A journalist investigating the regional economic outlook in 1924 found the mood of certain New England businesspeople to be “tinged . . . in some cases steeped with pessimism.” Among those he interviewed were a textile industry leader who believed

plant closures in New England cotton textiles. On the decline of this and other regional industries, see Joshua L. Rosenbloom, “The Challenges of Economic Maturity: New England, 1880-1940,” in *Engines of Enterprise: An Economic History of New England*, ed. Peter Temin (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 153-99, and David Koistinen, “The Causes of Deindustrialization: The Migration of the Cotton Textile Industry from New England to the South,” *Enterprise & Society* 3 (Sept. 2002): 482-520.

⁷ For a full account of the Council’s membership and work, see Koistinen, “Dealing with Deindustrialization,” chap. 5. On Hoover’s “associationalism,” see Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover, Forgotten Progressive* (1975; Prospect Heights, Ill., 1992), chap. 4, and Ellis Hawley, “Herbert Hoover, the Commerce Secretariat, and the Vision on an ‘Associative State,’ 1921-28,” *Journal of American History* 61 (June 1974): 116-40.

that cotton manufacturing in the region was “through” and a banker who asserted that New Englanders were unwilling to invest in locally based new enterprise.⁸ Boston businesspeople were fixated on the problems of the cotton and shoe industries, according to another writer touring the area a year later. He described the spectrum of opinion on the region’s economic prospects as including “hopes for the best, fears of the worst, or just resigned and accepted gloom.”⁹ An editorial page writer at one of the Boston newspapers wondered during this period whether “North Carolina really hope[s] to coax all New England’s industries into her water-power valleys and leave us only the mild enterprises of a vacation-land?”¹⁰ Visiting Lowell in 1930, a journalist found the city’s displaced textile workers in a highly dispirited condition: “I saw shabby men leaning against walls and lamp-posts . . . slumped in postures of hopeless discontent.”¹¹ Looking back on the era years later, a Rhode Island manufacturer remembered that “New England industry was languishing. A sense of defeat was upon us.”¹²

Media coverage of economic conditions in New England reflected this pessimism. Speaking in 1928, Massachusetts business leader John Tinsley asserted that in preceding years the press, and particularly publications based outside New England, had been “derogatory to this section. Critics have dealt . . . with what they termed our dying struggles, and the utter hopelessness of our future.”¹³ An NEC pamphlet similarly observed that until steps were taken to reverse the situation, “the alleged ‘decadence’ of New England was the frequent subject of speakers, writers, and newspapers.”¹⁴ Although these claims were exaggerated, a look at coverage of what one writer of the period called the “much-discussed ‘Trouble with New England’ ” does reveal a pronounced negative tone in numerous stories.¹⁵

Leland M. Aldrich, author of one contemporary article, observed that “[m]any acute observers see New England slipping, slowly but surely.” Aldrich seconded this analysis. He commented that “today New England

⁸ “New England, Its Curse and Cure,” *Forbes* (10 May 1924), 148, 185, and 187, quotations at p. 148.

⁹ Henry Schott, “Anything Wrong With New England?” *Nation’s Business* (Dec. 1925), 29-31, quotation at p. 29.

¹⁰ *Boston Herald*, 14 Jan. 1924, p. 24.

¹¹ Louis Adamic, “Tragic Towns of New England,” *Harper’s Monthly* (May 1931), 748-60, quotation at p. 752.

¹² Frederick Steele Blackall, Jr., address, 16 Nov. 1944 (13 Feb. 1936-4 Dec. 1945), Frederick Steele Blackall, Jr., Papers, vol. 2, in the possession of Frederick Steele Blackall III, Providence, R.I.

¹³ *Industry* (Associated Industries of Massachusetts) (25 Feb. 1928), 3.

¹⁴ New England Council, *A United New England: Four Years of Progress: 1926, 1927, 1928, 1929* (Boston, n.d. [1930?]), 3, in the stacks of Widener Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

¹⁵ “New England, Its Curse and Cure,” quotation at p. 148.

is facing many problems where conditions are not as favorable as they once were,” and went on to describe decline in numerous regional industries. The authors of another piece, Percival White and Walter S. Hayward, noted downsizing and migration in a lengthy list of once-flourishing sectors. The writers concluded that the contemporary economic picture was one of stagnation, a strong contrast to the area’s dynamic past: “The New England which led the country, first in agriculture, later in shipping and commerce, and lastly in manufacturing, now counts its pennies and clips its coupons.”¹⁶

That media coverage highlighted the weak condition of New England industry was bad enough. Worse was the fact that writers often attempted to explain area developments. In the process, they posited the existence of deep economic flaws that seemingly ensured a continuation of the present difficulties.

A leading theme in 1920s articles about the regional economy was that the area’s capitalists had lost their competitive drive. One writer penned a remarkable passage that wove frequently heard critiques of management practices at family-owned New England manufacturing firms into a sweeping, moralistic condemnation of the region’s business leadership:

Prosperity brings affluence, and affluence too often leads to pride, self-satisfaction, ultra-conservatism, laziness. The possession of wealth tends to dull the edge of incentive, blunt the spur of necessity, deaden ambition. . . . New England is cursed by too much wealth controlled by dead hands, by the continuance in places of power and influence of second and third generation men whose hands are tied or whose blood and brains do not match those of their ancestors, by the palsy of nepotism, by smug contentment with things as they have been.¹⁷

According to a separate set of authors, many ascribed the region’s problems to “age, conservatism, provincialism, . . . self-satisfaction [and] . . . mere inertia.” The writers endorsed this position, stating that “two great weaknesses in New England industry are . . . moss-backed management and failure to understand the first principles of merchandizing.”¹⁸

Other accounts identified additional factors hampering industrial productivity in New England. One author opined that workers in the region were rebellious and hard to manage. Waves of immigration had created a factory labor force “composed of almost every race” that, because

¹⁶ Leland M. Aldrich, “Industrial New England Needs New Vitality,” *Magazine of Wall Street* (17 July 1926), 520-21, quotations at p. 520. Percival White and Walter S. Hayward, “Can New England Come Back?” *North American Review* (Nov. 1928), 611-15, quotation at p. 612. Their pessimism notwithstanding, authors Aldrich and White were residents of the region and might have been expected to see a more favorable picture than those living elsewhere.

¹⁷ “New England, Its Curse and Cure,” 148.

¹⁸ White and Hayward, “Can New England,” 612.

of a considerable union presence, was “highly organized in many lines.” By contrast, in the southern locales then taking over the textile industry, workers included native whites who “offer no labor problem” and “do as they are told” and blacks who present “no problem whatsoever” due to “customs which have always prevailed.” The writer identified high taxes as another competitive burden for New England companies. This was particularly true of Massachusetts, which had a “state income tax which makes citizens of other states gasp in amazement.”¹⁹

Unfavorable press coverage of New England in the 1920s alarmed local leaders already concerned about the area’s material prospects. They feared that negative perceptions of the regional economy would scare off capitalists who might otherwise consider putting money into the area. Potential investors based elsewhere in the country who lacked first-hand knowledge of the region would be particularly susceptible to media influence. A drop-off in investment originating outside New England would of course further weaken the local economy. In this way, perceptions of distress could deepen and perpetuate the region’s already serious economic problems.

A 1927 letter from Massachusetts businesspeople affiliated with the NEC to the commonwealth’s governor demonstrated these beliefs. The writers asserted that although closures of textile and shoe factories had inflicted great hardship on particular workers and communities, the damage to the overall state economy was overblown: “in relation to Massachusetts industry as a whole . . . [t]he importance of the suspensions, liquidations, and removals [in textiles and shoes] . . . has been exaggerated.” However, the letter writers argued, the longer-term ramifications of plant shutdowns could be more serious because of their impact on the state’s business reputation: “since these cases are being used as a means to create the impression in other sections that our conditions are becoming less favorable to industry, they affect the interests of the entire state, and of all New England.”²⁰

Colonel Frank Knox, New Hampshire newspaper publisher and chair of the NEC’s committee on public relations, put the matter more bluntly in an address to the association’s 1926 annual meeting. Knox stated that negative media reports had led other regions to criticize and pity New

¹⁹ Aldrich, “Industrial New England,” 520. This author also identified insufficient promotional efforts, especially in comparison to the energetic boosterism in developing parts of the country, as contributing to the relative stagnation of the New England economy.

²⁰ John F. Tinsley, et al. to Gov. Alvan T. Fuller, 2 Feb. 1927, in Boston Chamber of Commerce collection, Case 79, File 710-1, Baker Library Historical Collections, Harvard Business School, Boston, Mass.

England and to “discount her present and future standing in the business world.” The result, he continued, was “enormous sums in lost business.”²¹

Evidence from the era after World War II suggests that there was considerable basis for these fears. The New England economy underwent another phase of downsizing and anemic growth in the early Cold War years as textile plants continued to close. Area development organizations at that time commissioned a survey of impressions of New England among corporate executives responsible for plant location decisions at large, multi-unit manufacturers based elsewhere in the country. Negative perceptions of the regional economy among such individuals could of course be particularly damaging to New England. The study found that many of the managers had unfavorable impressions of the region that closely paralleled the negative images in media accounts of the 1920s.²² Numerous executives in the post–World War II survey believed that the New England economy was in decline; that its business managers were wedded to out-of-date practices; that its workers were intractable and overpaid; and that many public officials in the region harbored anti-business attitudes.²³

We should note that many of the perceptions of the New England economy that appeared in the press coverage of the 1920s, and among corporate executives after World War II, were false. To begin with, some observers exaggerated the extent of the region’s material weakness. Local manufacturing was in poor overall condition because of declines in key sectors, and factory work remained the area’s central economic activity at this time. Yet even in manufacturing there were bright spots. Industrial

²¹ “New England Must ‘Talk Back’ to Critics,” summary of a speech by Frank Knox, in proceedings of Second New England Conference, Hartford, Conn., 18-19 Nov. 1926, *American Wool and Cotton Reporter* (25 Nov. 1926), 63-66, quotations at p. 63.

²² Although I did not systematically investigate media coverage of the New England economy during the post–World War II era, it seems likely that articles from that period had many of the same attributes as the stories appearing in the 1920s. For example, *Forbes*, a mass-circulation business periodical ran a 1953 cover story on the problems of the New England economy. In introductory comments, the magazine’s editor observed that “almost daily since 1949, business and financial columns have carried gasp by gasp reports on the area’s death throes.” See “Side Lines,” *Forbes* (15 July 1953), table of contents page. Offering more of the same in the main story, the periodical’s reporters wrote that “[t]he [nationwide] 1949 slump . . . was a near-tragedy to New England,” and summarized the economic situation of the region as follows: “Depressive conditions, chronic for a half-century, are still present.” See “The Deflowering of New England: It Is a Natural Result of ‘Savings-Bank’ Capitalism,” *Forbes* (15 July 1953), 14-19, quotations at p. 14.

²³ See “Industrial Development Techniques: Part I: Executive Attitudes Toward Locating Plants in Massachusetts and New England,” *Monthly Review* (Federal Reserve Bank of Boston) (Nov. 1955), 1-4.

gains for Massachusetts in the mid-1920s included a new Ford plant and an innovative pig iron works near Boston, as well as consolidation by Du Pont of its national production of an important early plastic in the inland city of Leominster. The emergence in the 1920s of the Boston-based investment trust (mutual fund) industry demonstrated the area's potential in services. Successful large corporations with headquarters in the Bay State included multinational United Fruit, the large United Drug chain of stores, and John Hancock Mutual Life, a leading insurer.²⁴ As these examples suggest, New England capitalists of the early twentieth century remained entrepreneurially vital, despite claims to the contrary. Even in textiles, where lax oversight had existed at numerous companies, pressures stemming from the industry's 1920s slump led to dramatic improvements in managerial practice at many firms.²⁵

Nor was the region's labor force particularly querulous. Unions had greater strength there than in the largely open-shop states of the Southeast then taking over textiles. However, workers were about as organized in other heavily industrial regions as they were in New England. Moreover, operatives in the area's struggling sectors appreciated the precariousness of their position. Few strikes took place at New England textile firms in the 1920s, despite repeated pay cuts.²⁶ Statistics on days lost to labor stoppages, first available in the mid-1930s, show markedly less workplace disruption in New England than in other areas of union strength such as the mid-Atlantic, the industrial Midwest, and the Pacific coast. Indeed, New England's level of workdays lost to strikes in the 1930s was little above that of the Southeast.²⁷

Finally, it was not necessarily the case that public officials in New England harbored anti-business attitudes. The region's states, especially Massachusetts, had stricter labor laws and higher taxes than were found in the Southeast. Again, however, workplace regulations and business levies in New England were roughly on a par with those in other industrialized areas of the country. Moreover, the region's political leaders actively supported efforts to revitalize the area economy during the 1920s and worked closely with corporate interests to advance that end. The New England governors enthusiastically backed the activities of the NEC. Elected officials in cities hit by plant closures cooperated with local businesspeople in seeking to attract new employers. Massachusetts in

²⁴ French Strother, "New England Dies—But Prospers," *World's Work* (Sept. 1926), 512-18; Natalie Grow, "The 'Boston-Type Open-End Fund'—Development of a National Financial Institution" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1977).

²⁵ See Koistinen, "The Causes of Deindustrialization," 499-500, on managerial practices in the 1920s and before at New England cotton textile manufacturers.

²⁶ Koistinen, "The Causes of Deindustrialization," 497, 503.

²⁷ See Koistinen, "Dealing with Deindustrialization," 81-82, including table in the footnote. Continued plant shutdowns in New England during the 1930s presumably contributed to worker quiescence there.

1929 even established an innovative public Industrial Commission to encourage the growth of commonwealth industries.²⁸

Of course, in the arena of perceptions, it is not the truth that counts, but what people believe to be the truth. However much the image diverged from reality, deindustrialization in New England resulted in widespread negative impressions of the regional economy that deeply disturbed area businesspeople.

The New England Public Relations Campaign

New England business leaders wanted to stave off pessimism about future prospects among local residents. They were concerned that negative perceptions of the area economy would frighten capitalists in other parts of the country who might otherwise invest in the region. Seeking to create a more favorable image of New England, they mounted a major public relations drive.

This effort commenced even before factory closures spread through the region. As early as the turn of the century, various observers warned about apparent erosion in the competitiveness of area industries. These concerns heightened in the years after World War I.²⁹ In response, the Boston Chamber of Commerce in 1921 issued a booklet on *The Industrial Supremacy of New England*, which endeavored to provide “complete and effective rebuttals” to allegations of economic trouble. Pointing to gains at or above the national average in population, manufacturing work force, and power consumption in the period 1909-1919, the Chamber argued that “Massachusetts has actually kept pace for a century industrially and in population, despite the handicap of a position off in one corner of the map, and Boston, its metropolis, has outdistanced safely some of its old-time rivals such as Baltimore.”³⁰

At about the same time, an organization of Bay State manufacturers, the Associated Industries of Massachusetts (AIM), launched a years-long drive insisting that the area’s purported economic problems were a myth. In 1922, AIM inaugurated an annual canvass of additions to industrial capacity in the commonwealth. The goal of this exercise was clearly to generate favorable publicity rather than to provide an accurate picture of manufacturing conditions. Data were collected on investment in plant and

²⁸ On labor laws and taxes in New England and the South, see Koistinen, “The Causes of Deindustrialization,” 496-97; Koistinen, “Dealing with Deindustrialization,” 98-99. On support by public officials for redevelopment efforts and the founding of the Massachusetts Industrial Commission, see Koistinen, “Dealing with Deindustrialization,” chap. 5.

²⁹ Koistinen, “Dealing with Deindustrialization,” 67.

³⁰ Boston Chamber of Commerce, *The Industrial Supremacy of New England: A Glimpse of the Present Situation of New England’s Industries* (Boston, 1921), in the stacks of Baker Library, Harvard Business School, Boston, Mass., quotations at pp. 3, 6.

equipment and changes in factory floor space—measures for which each year’s statistics were likely to be hearteningly positive—and the results of the surveys were released with fanfare to the press.³¹

AIM boosted New England industry relentlessly throughout the 1920s. In a wide-ranging 1924 study of conditions in manufacturing, the organization’s general manager Orra Stone found grounds for “a freshly awakened faith in a prosperous future for New England.”³² It was in precisely this year that a deep slump made fully apparent the competitive weakness of the region’s cotton manufacturers. Stone’s appraisals of the situation in textiles in the later years of the decade were ludicrously optimistic. In 1927, despite part-time work and mill liquidations throughout the region, he detected “more hopeful figures [in textiles] . . . than have been visioned during the past ten years.”³³

The NEC was the organization most active in generating positive publicity about New England. From its inception, the group put a high priority on counteracting negative perceptions of the local economy. Indeed, the NEC came into being as a result of a public relations effort. Troubled by the plant closings spreading through the area and the pessimistic public sentiments they engendered, regional business leaders organized “New England Week” in the summer of 1924. Through industrial exhibitions, factory tours, public meetings, and radio and motion picture features, this event spotlighted the quality goods turned out by area industries and sought to demonstrate that the region remained economically vital. Planners of the “Week” were so pleased with the results and so disturbed by the area’s ongoing economic troubles that they

³¹ Because net industrial investment almost always occurs in non-depression years, and manufacturing at this time was moving away from crowded urban centers to more spacious suburban locations, one would expect to see the encouraging positive figures for net expenditures on plant and equipment and changes in factory floor space that AIM reported. Moreover, the organization’s surveys in the initial years counted only additions to plant, with no allowance for losses in capacity due to downsizing, liquidation, removal, or fire. Reporting similar figures for other states would have provided a context for interpreting the Massachusetts numbers, but the AIM surveys did not do so. By conventional measures of economic performance, such as employment, Massachusetts manufacturing fared poorly in the 1920s. The results of the AIM surveys and the response of the media are described in the publication that appeared yearly in the 1920s under the title *Annual Report of Orra L. Stone, General Manager, Associated Industries of Massachusetts* (Boston, various years), in the stacks of Baker Library, Harvard Business School, Boston, Mass. See the reports for 1923 (50-54), 1924 (24-30), 1925 (79-80), 1926 (111-12) and 1930 (38-39).

³² Orra L. Stone, *New England’s Industrial Future* (Boston, Mass., 1924), 2.

³³ Quotation from *Annual Report of Orra L. Stone* for 1927, p. 93. For other examples of Stone’s unflappably positive assessment of conditions in textiles, see *Annual Report of Orra L. Stone* for 1926 (79-87) and 1928 (77-88).

set about establishing a permanent organization to work for regional recovery. The Council emerged from this endeavor the following year.³⁴

The NEC mounted a wide-ranging and sophisticated public relations drive—in distinct contrast with the often crude efforts of AIM.³⁵ The professionalism of the group's publicity was consistent with its strategy for regional economic development. The Council constantly advocated use of the most up-to-date management and marketing practices as key instruments for improving the competitiveness of area manufacturers.

NEC publicity made use of the key advertising strategy of repetition. Through the “ceaseless iteration and reiteration of the facts about New England,” the Council worked to create the impression that, despite problems in some industries, the region as a whole was prosperous, forward-looking, and a “good place in which to live, work, and play.” Publicity materials highlighted the important contribution New England made to American industry despite its small physical size and emphasized the strengths of the area in quality manufactures, abundant skilled labor, proximity to major East Coast markets, good transportation, and exceptional educational and financial resources.³⁶

Applying a technique from the nascent public relations industry, the Council's publicity department issued press releases and publications that were well-suited for reuse. The materials were produced in enormous quantities and targeted at the same media outlets that had been reporting in a negative manner about the New England economy. Positive developments were of course highlighted, laying the basis for upbeat coverage. The Council closely monitored the reproduction of its content in the regional and national press. Thus, the organization proudly announced that in 1929 it had issued 851 separate items on the economic progress of New England. This information was reprinted in three hundred newspapers and periodicals in thirty-seven states (verbatim, in many cases, it appears). The Council also encouraged New England banks, utilities, and railroads to launch their own campaigns advertising the area's economic strengths. These efforts often drew on information,

³⁴ This paragraph is based on Koistinen, “Dealing with Deindustrialization,” 208-10 and the author's unpublished research.

³⁵ The NEC was of course simply harnessing for its own ends the advertising and public relations techniques that were developed and perfected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to sell corporate products and services and put to use in the 1920s by associationalists seeking to achieve public policy goals. See William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York, 1994), chap. 2; Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley, Calif., 1985); Pamela Walker Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore, Md., 1998); and Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover*, chap. 4.

³⁶ New England Council, *A United New England*, 3-9, quotations at pp. 3 and 5.

themes, and graphics that first appeared in Council materials, further propagating the organization's message.³⁷

As was the case with AIM, the NEC advanced publicity goals through the use of misleading statistics that the organization itself amassed. Starting with the year 1926, the Council gathered data on plant openings and closings in municipalities throughout New England. The statistics were collected for the entirely legitimate goal of quantifying the extent of industrial migration in the region. This contrasted with the AIM figures, which were seemingly generated entirely for public relations purposes. The Council widely disseminated its statistics, however, and that was clearly done for publicity reasons. The NEC numbers called into question the popular perception that industry was migrating out of New England. For example, figures for 1928 showed that totaling new factory startups and migrations of existing firms into the region, then subtracting plant shutdowns and out-migrations by companies leaving the area, produced a positive New England balance for the year of 251 new plants employing 9,300 workers.³⁸ Although seemingly accurate concerning the narrow issue of factory openings and closings, these statistics were not particularly meaningful in a broader sense. Crucially, they took no account of changes in employment at *existing* manufacturers.³⁹ Many regional firms at this time cut back their work force while remaining in operation; such steps were particularly common in the troubled textile industry.

That the NEC sought to advance public relations goals through widespread reporting of these statistics became even clearer at the end of the decade, when the figures shifted in a downward direction. Changes in the number of plants and workers had been positive in 1926, 1927, and 1928, and Council publications each year reported the latest statistics with

³⁷ New England Council, *A United New England*, 3-9. A run of Council press releases from 1939-40 issued under the title *News About New England from the New England Council* can be found in Widener Library/Harvard Depository, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

³⁸ The NEC statistics cited in this and the following paragraph appear in New England Council, *A Year of Progress*, publication prepared for the organization's Nov. 1928 annual meeting, (n.p. [Boston], n.d. [1928]), 17, 19, in New England Council Steel Committee Papers, box 2, folder 17a, Sterling Library Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.; New England Council, *A United New England*, 13; *New England News Letter* (second Nov. 1930 issue), 17, (seventh conference issue: Nov. 1931), 19.

³⁹ According to NEC statistics, over the three calendar years 1927, 1928, and 1929, New England gained 658 plants employing 12,600 additional workers. Figures from the U.S. Census Bureau showed an increase of 527 manufacturing establishments in New England between 1927 and 1929, but indicated that total *employment* in regional factories remained essentially unchanged over that period. The Census Bureau figures reflect annual averages for 1927 and 1929 and are roughly comparable to the NEC numbers. U.S. Department of Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1932* (Washington, D.C., 1932), 761.

enthusiasm. The figures for 1929, however, showed a small rise in the number of factories but a net drop in employment. To hide this disconcerting reality, the Council did not divulge the 1929 statistics and instead reported cumulative figures for 1926-1929 that demonstrated increases in plants and employees. When the numbers for 1930 again indicated decline, the NEC issued 1926-30 statistics that once more showed positive changes, although of lesser magnitude than the year before.⁴⁰

Council publicity materials reported in depth on the organization's own growth-promoting activities. The NEC's periodical, the *New England News Letter*, gave a full account of the group's work. From the content of media coverage about the Council, it is obvious that the organization's press releases did so as well. This was less self-serving than it might appear. NEC leaders held that a prime reason for believing that economic conditions in the region would improve was that so many people were hard at work, under their auspices, to ensure such an outcome. Showing how energetically the group's agenda was being pursued helped make the case that its aims would likely be achieved.

Perhaps Council leaders' most ambitious effort was another public relations gambit launched during the 1920s: renaming the problem from which the region suffered. Language is the medium through which humans perceive what happens around them. The way in which a particular situation is framed and labeled can have enormous influence on how events are understood. Downsizing in traditional sectors created the impression that in the economic sphere New England was "slipping" due to "self-satisfaction" or even "decadence." These descriptions were judgmental. They suggested that the failings of local individuals accounted for the dire economic state of the region.

NEC officials came up with an alternative descriptor of local conditions. They argued that the area was experiencing "industrial maturity" that followed naturally on a long record of growth. In this view, unavoidable realities of history and geography were responsible for New England's current problems. As the first American region to industrialize, the area had grown "under the economics of a previous period," but was now compelled to "meet competition based on modern invention [and] new methods of production." Difficulties such as those occurring presently were to be expected in these circumstances. The region and its business leaders were therefore not at fault. Indeed, other industrial areas would likely confront the same kinds of problems in the future.⁴¹ The

⁴⁰ The figures for 1929 and 1930 were calculated by subtracting previously reported statistics for 1926, 1927, and 1928 from the totals for 1926-29 and 1926-30.

⁴¹ New England Council president John S. Lawrence set out these ideas in the articles "As It Looks to New England," *Nation's Business* (20 May 1927), 22-23,

effort to re-label the regional ailment was conscious and explicit. One local business leader wrote, “good friends of New England have sometimes diagnosed her complaint as ‘middle-aged complacency,’ but we prefer the term ‘industrial maturity’.”⁴²

As the promotional campaign of New England business associations gathered steam in the 1920s, factory shutdowns ground on. Plant closures continued during the following decade, displacing tens of thousands of workers. In this context, the cheery, boosterish rhetoric about the regional economy emanating from the NEC and other groups can seem misconceived and callous, even delusional. Critics at times chastised area business leaders for their relentlessly upbeat approach. The authors of a 1935 study on the status of New England industry prepared for the NEC concluded that local manufacturing had endured a “severe decrease.” In an apparent challenge to the public relations strategy of their sponsors, the analysts commented: “Nothing is to be gained by ignoring the facts as they are, or seeking to minimize by explanation or otherwise the fact that certain industries show discouraging declines.”⁴³

Given such criticisms, it is important to recognize that the business leaders spearheading the regional publicity effort almost certainly did not believe everything they were saying. After all, if conditions were as favorable as their rhetoric indicated, there would be no need for so much public talk about the subject—indeed, there would be no reason for an organization such as the New England Council to exist. Contradictory though it may appear, many of those making positive pronouncements about the regional economy did so precisely because they knew that their statements were exaggerated or untrue.⁴⁴

quotations at p. 22, and “New England—A Case of Industrial Maturity,” *Independent* (17 April 1926), 440-41, 468.

⁴² Lawrence, “New England,” 440.

⁴³ Ralph G. Wells and John S. Perkins, *Trends in New England Industries: A Statistical Study Based on the U.S. Census of Manufactures, 1919-1929-1931* (Boston, 1935), 7.

⁴⁴ We should note that, for reasons of their own, two other groups issued materials that put a positive spin on economic conditions in New England during the era of industrial decline. First, firms in or linked to the declining sectors distributed publications claiming that circumstances in these industries were better than they appeared. Investors were the principal targets here, as executives tried to “talk up” the price of stocks that had fallen to grievously low levels. An example is the circular issued in 1928 by a Rhode Island securities house that obviously did a significant business in the equities of local textile makers. The pamphlet argued that inevitable wage increases at the low-cost southern firms then taking over the textile industry would result in improved conditions for New England producers. The conclusion: “security holders of the best [New England] mills may be showing questionable judgment in sacrificing their shares at present depressed levels as they should be able ultimately to realize higher prices.” See Harold H. Young, *Cotton Manufacturing in New*

Effects of the Publicity Drive

New England business associations generated a blizzard of public relations materials on the positive aspects of the regional economy in the 1920s as industrial downsizing continued. Did the surge of publicity have any effect? Did it contribute substantively to regional recovery? A positive response is probably merited in both cases, although a conclusion is much easier to demonstrate in the first instance than in the second.

As the NEC public relations campaign moved into high gear, numerous items appeared in the press asserting that the situation of New England was more promising than generally believed. Some writers held that present conditions were better than they seemed. Others conceded widespread current difficulties, but expressed confidence that prosperity would eventually return. Many authors cited the activities of the NEC as grounds for expecting a positive outcome in the region.

Council publicists must have been delighted with the piece run by one national business publication in 1929. The author asserted that the textile and shoe industries were less important to the New England economy than was commonly thought. Based on the NEC's misleading statistics on industrial expansions and contractions, he made the blatantly incorrect claim that manufacturing in the area was not actually in decline: "the real complaint was not . . . a decrease, but . . . a possible slowing-up in the rate of increase of New England industries. . . . New England has never ceased to increase industrially in any year."⁴⁵ The writer continued with a lengthy

England (Providence, R.I., 1928), esp. 27-31, quotation at p. 31, in the stacks of Baker Library, Harvard Business School. The second set of positive materials about the area economy was political in inspiration. Observers might interpret economic weakness and high unemployment in deindustrializing locales as demonstrating shortcomings in the American system of free enterprise. The experiences of these places certainly contradicted the commonplace contention of laissez-faire advocates that untrammelled markets ensured prosperity for all. To preempt such claims, authors writing for business-oriented and conservative periodicals claimed that economic conditions in New England were sounder than was commonly believed. The writer for *Nation's Business*, the magazine of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, seemed determined to find positive circumstances on a 1925 tour of the region. He duly reported that the New England economy was "going ahead soundly, with well rounded development." The pessimism he repeatedly encountered among local residents was ascribed to the dourness of the Yankee character. Belying the author's unambiguously upbeat overall assessment was the distress he noted in certain localities, including an "unsatisfactory" situation among textile firms in Lowell, Massachusetts and "mills employing 55 percent of normal" in another major fabric-producing city. See Schott, "Anything Wrong with New England?" quotations at pp. 29, 30.

⁴⁵ Peter F. O'Shea, "New England Faces the Facts," *Magazine of Business* (June 1929), 660-62, quotation at p. 661. U.S. government figures, at least some of which would have been available at the time of writing, showed that regional manufacturing employment dropped steadily between 1923 and 1927 and was

description of the Council's many activities. Thanks to the organization's efforts, he concluded, "[a]ll New England has become more alive to its own unity, its advantages, its markets, its needs and its very great potentialities."⁴⁶

A review of regional economic conditions appearing several years earlier in another periodical also expressed confidence that area residents would deal successfully with the economic challenges they faced. The work of the NEC was offered as an important reason for expecting this outcome: "New Englanders are awake to [their] situation and realize its seriousness. A conference held . . . last fall [establishing the NEC] discussed New England problems with the utmost frankness, and there is not much doubt that New Englanders will solve their problems."⁴⁷

The Council's hopeful message about the local economy even made its way into one of the pessimistic articles about the area that appeared at the time. Following a detailed survey of the many business difficulties facing the region, the authors of the piece noted

. . . a large and ever larger body of opinion which would make over New England and have it hum as industriously as Detroit or Chicago. This opinion is becoming organized in the hands of capable leaders who are putting themselves at the head of a move for the Renaissance of New England.

The writers identified an unsurprising source for the surge in optimism: "[b]ehind all of this movement is the organizing and stimulating influence of the New England Council." The authors averred that the new "spirit of cooperation and coordination" should be "noted with wonderment and, indeed . . . admiration." Although skeptical that the regional economy could in fact be revived, they conceded that the "effort . . . will be watched on all sides with the keenest interest."⁴⁸

As the preceding examples demonstrate, the energetic efforts of New England publicists, especially those affiliated with the NEC, laid the basis for a new genre of media stories about the local economy. Rather than the sad tale of a region in (perhaps deserved) material decline, these articles put forward a counter-narrative of an area that retained many strengths.

unchanged between 1927 and 1929 (see *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1932*, p. 761). The dubious economic statistics AIM collected and publicized, described above, similarly generated the favorable media coverage that was desired. Discussing the results of the AIM figures for one year beneath the headline "Our Industrial Progress," a Boston paper editorialized: "New Englanders enjoy pessimism [and] . . . fairly revel in forebodings of calamities impending. Why not for once get all the advertising values we can out of the encouraging results of this survey?" See *Annual Report of Orra L. Stone* for 1926, 112.

⁴⁶ O'Shea, "New England Faces the Facts," 662.

⁴⁷ Thomas Nixon Carver, "What New England Is Doing," *American Review of Reviews* (June 1926), 593-602, quotation at pp. 601-2.

⁴⁸ White and Hayward, "Can New England Come Back?" 614, 615.

Prime among these was a citizenry working valiantly to overcome the challenges posed by structural economic change. An NEC publication from the end of the decade described the shift:

Whereas, when the Council came into being, the alleged “decadence” of New England was the frequent subject of speakers, writers, and newspapers, today through the Council’s efforts such expressions have been greatly reduced. On the other hand, the press of the country has commented most favorably upon New England’s plan of promoting its economic development through organized activity.⁴⁹

From the mid-1920s forward, press coverage of New England thus featured optimistic accounts as well as the types of negative stories that had so alarmed regional leaders. A media debate of sorts arose between the opposing perspectives. Dialogue between the two views could even appear within the same article, as in the story cited just above. Through public relations, New England advocates at least partially reframed how events in their region were understood.

The public’s perceptions of economic conditions in New England were formed largely from press coverage. This was particularly true for residents of other areas, who had little or no direct experience on which to make their own assessment of regional realities. It therefore seems likely that the more positive accounts that appeared from the mid-1920s onward produced improved impressions of New England.

The question remains as to whether this revamping of the area’s image produced any concrete benefit. It appears that unfavorable perceptions of the region among people with money to invest led to some decline in the amount of capital going into New England. If this is so, it stands to reason that the more positive impressions engendered by favorable media coverage made potential investors somewhat likelier to put money into area ventures. One press account directly linked widespread publicity of the NEC’s statistics on industrial expansions and contractions with a concrete change in the behavior of company managers in the region. According to the author, “publication of these figures immediately checked emigration by a few [companies] which had been panicked into a discussion of moving. Now they perceived that outside concerns were willing to pay the expense of moving into New England.”⁵⁰

My conclusions about media coverage and public perceptions of New England in a time of downsizing are broadly consistent with the findings of the few other scholars who have examined the issue. These authors also document negative media portrayals of deindustrializing locales in which conditions were sometimes depicted as worse than the realities merited. This kind of coverage doubtlessly contributes to the frequently unfavorable

⁴⁹ New England Council, *A United New England*, 3.

⁵⁰ O’Shea, “New England Faces the Facts,” 660. Note, however, that no specifics were provided to substantiate this claim.

public impressions of such areas, which in turn appear to render even more difficult the already challenging task of revitalizing downsized local economies.⁵¹

Since unfavorable impressions of deindustrialized areas seem commonplace, we can expect that organized attempts to bring about recovery will typically include a public relations component. Such efforts generally involve boosterish rhetoric and outright factual distortions that can be hard to stomach. In light of the negative images that (at times unfairly) burden these locales, however, the zealous publicity they deploy in their own defense seems easy to excuse.

⁵¹ Russo and Linkon, "Collateral Damage"; High, *Industrial Sunset*, chap. 1; Dege, "Regional Public Relations."