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# Globalisation and public relations: An overview looking into the future

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## **Abstract**

*Public relations scholarship is young and evolving. Rapid globalization has created new opportunities and challenges as well to public relations practice. In turn, public relations education and scholarship has had to adapt and grow quickly from its ethnocentric roots to become more diverse – a process still underway. This essay chronicles the development of the body of knowledge of global public relations broadly defining “culture” with a view to the future.*

## **Introduction**

For decades, it was widely believed that public relations practice was largely a 20th century phenomenon. Until about 15 years ago, the origins of ‘modern’ (20th century) public relations had also been traced to early 20th century practices predominantly in the US and UK. Especially in the past decade, a growing number of scholars have contended that public relations-like practices had been in existence even in pre-biblical times (see Sriramesh, 2004, and Sriramesh and Verčič, 2009 for a review of the history of the practice in various countries of the world). Al-Badr (2004) contended that public relations in the Middle East can be traced back at least 4,000 years “as evidenced in a cuneiform tablet found in Iraq resembling a bulletin telling farmers how to grow better crops” (pp. 192–193). German scholars Bentele and Wehmeyer (2009) have traced the roots of ‘modern’ public relations in Germany to the mid-nineteenth century. Others have done the same for several other countries of the world (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009).

Public relations scholarship is even younger than the ‘modern’ incarnation of the public relations practice. Although Edward Bernays is credited by scholars such as J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) with authoring the first book of public relations (in 1923) titled *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, concerted theorising in public relations only began in the mid 1970s. The early days of such theorising focused principally around two major streams of scholarship: public relations at the organisational level – popularly referred to as the models of public relations (see Grunig & Grunig, 1992, and Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002 for an overview) and individual practitioner roles (e.g. Broom & Dozier, 1986; Dozier, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). The body of knowledge of public relations had remained largely ethnocentric until the mid 1990s when greater emphasis began to be placed on diversifying scholarship by studying the practice in other parts of the world as well. The pace of this process has increased in the 21st century even though we are far from calling the body of knowledge or practice holistic. Globalisation is to be credited for moving the public relations body of knowledge toward greater cultural relativism in order to make it more relevant to practitioners who are faced with the challenge of communicating effectively with the diverse publics of the emerging markets of Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa.

This essay seeks to provide an overview of the body of knowledge of *global public relations* (synonymous with *public relations in the global sphere*), looking at its current status as well as potential for future growth. At the outset, though, it is important to provide a definition for public relations that would be relevant to the topic at hand and provide the context for this paper.

## **Defining public relations and linking it with globalisation**

Scores of definitions of the term public relations have been offered over the past decades. However, almost every one of those had consciously or unconsciously either subsumed the cultural diversity inherent in the 'relevant publics' referred to in the definitions or had been quite oblivious to the impact of culture. Globalisation has helped magnify this lacuna and helped bring focus to the need to align public relations practice and scholarship to the cultural diversity that abounds this world. It behoves us, then, to define the term public relations in a manner that reflects the practice as a global activity involving diverse publics. Recognising this need to be more holistic, *The global public relations handbook: Theory, research, and practice* (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009) offered a definition that should be useful for viewing public relations practice and scholarship in a global context:

Public relations is the strategic communication that different types of organisations use for establishing and maintaining symbiotic relationships with relevant publics many of whom are increasingly becoming culturally diverse. (p. xxxiv).

The key terms used in the definition have been explained in the original but what is most relevant for this paper is the fact that the relevant publics are culturally diverse (multicultural) and/or global (located in multiple regions of the world) largely due to globalisation.

It is pertinent to recognise that globalisation is not a 21st century phenomenon. At various points over human history, globalisation has taken place and civilisations have exchanged their values and artifacts. But focusing on recent history, one could say that globalisation occurred when much of Europe had to be rebuilt after World War II. The formation of the United Nations in 1946 can also be described as a move that pushed the world toward greater globalisation. The Bandung conference of 1955 when 29 African and Asian nations

came together in the face of the 'cold war' between the US and the USSR to form the seeds of what was to become the non-aligned movement (NAM) can also be showcased as an example of globalisation.

The final decade of the 20th century heralded significant changes that put globalisation on a different scale altogether because of three principal factors. The first is the elimination of trade barriers among nations of the world, causing countries to trade within, and among, trading blocs (such as the North American Free Trade Agreement - NAFTA, European Commission - EC, Association of South-East Asian Nations - ASEAN) rather than as individual nation-states. A confluence of political and economic ideology contributed to this and the formation of trading blocs that began in 1992 picked up pace, not without critics and opposition, after the World Trade Organization (WTO) regime came into existence and well into the new millennium. One of the primary effects of such galvanisation of economic and trade forces has been the exponential increase in the cultural diversity of organisational relevant publics such as consumers, employees, activists, members of the media, etc.

The second factor that has contributed to globalisation is oriented toward the media and communication – the onset and development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) – a trend that also began in the early 1990s but has developed by leaps and bounds in the first decade of the new millennium (such as the emergence of social media, for instance). Communication technology has not only created demands for goods and services globally but has also made delivery of these goods and services easier and cheaper. All of this activity has brought upon the need for communication and the need for global public relations.

Finally, the recognition among the overwhelming majority of countries of the world that the human race needs to come together and address common problems such as environmental pollution, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and overpopulation resulting in poverty and hunger, have also lead to increased

international and thereby intercultural communication. Therein lies the nexus between public relations (as communication activity) and globalisation.

### **Theorising about global public relations**

In order to understand public relations in a global context, a brief review of the history of public relations scholarship is in order. Although Bernays' book on public relations was written in the 1920s, concerted efforts to build a body of knowledge at least in the English language began in the mid-1970s. Arguably the first to begin a long programme of research was J. Grunig (1976) who made some early propositions of what he later termed the "models of public relations" that typified public relations strategies and techniques at the organisational or macro level. Around the same time, first Broom and Smith (1978) and then Broom and Dozier (1986) conceptualised and empirically studied the roles that individual public relations practitioners execute within organisations. Early discussions about how corporations manage issues that result in public policy (Jones & Chase, 1979) also began around the same time. Research about the models of public relations as well as practitioner roles dominated the majority of public relations scholarship in the 1980s and into the early 1990s with much of this research being conducted in the US or a few developed democracies of the West.

Two principal developments in the 1990s began the process of slowly moving public relations scholarship to the 'international' arena: the Excellence Project and the steady growth of non-US graduate students studying public relations in US universities. The Excellence Project was a 400,000 US dollar research study funded by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) that sought to assess the contributions that public relations makes to the bottom line of an organization. By the end of the 1980s, work began on the conceptual part of this project resulting in an edited volume by J. Grunig (1992). In that book, we had proposed culture (societal and organisational)

as a variable that affects public relations practice. After a thorough literature review, in the early 1990s data were collected in the US, UK, and Canada for this project and have been reported in numerous reports including Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002). In the early 1990s, studies on the models and roles were also conducted in India and Taiwan and Greece (Sriramesh, 1992, Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, & Lyra, 1995). Throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium, empirical studies have been conducted in other Asian countries such as South Korea, China, the Philippines, and Japan, as well as some Eastern European and former Soviet-Bloc countries. These developments have helped begin the process of 'internationalising' the body of knowledge of public relations. But, as we shall see later in this paper, much work lies ahead and there is a dire need to build on the strong foundation that the first four decades of theorising have provided in developing a body of knowledge of public relations.

Although the data for the Excellence Project came from three Anglo-Saxon cultures, they contributed to the evolution of a conceptual framework that has immensely helped move theorising about global public relations forward – and begin the process of developing a holistic body of knowledge based on empirical evidence from other parts and cultures of the world. The first element of the conceptual framework that resulted from the Excellence Project was the proposition that there are 10 generic principles of public relations, some or all of which can be adopted by public relations practitioners practicing in most cultures of the world. The second element was the proposition that the 'environment' for public relations varies from region to region based on five key variables – culture (societal and organisational), media environment, the political system, the economic system and level of development, and activism. These variables affect how the generic principles get adopted in a culture. These five environmental variables were collapsed into three variables – the infrastructure (political, economic, activism), culture, and media system that were used to describe public relations processes in about 40

countries and regions of the world (Sriramesh and Verčič, 2009) and 10 countries in Asia (Sriramesh, 2004). Effective public relations will link these two elements by drafting communication strategies that will adopt some or all of the 'generic principles' and 'localising' ('harmonising') them to the environment where the communication is taking place. The word 'glocalisation' where one judiciously combines elements of the 'global' with the 'local' aptly describes this approach where some universally applicable principles of public relations are harmonised to develop communication strategies that suit local cultures.

### **The generic principles of public relations**

Many publications have discussed the generic principles over the past decade and a half and therefore only a brief overview highlighting some of the key concepts is offered here (see Verčič, Grunig & Grunig, 1996 for a longer description of each principle). One of the significant outcomes of the Excellence Project was the conclusion that organisations that do not value the communication/public relations function do not rise up to their full potential in being efficacious. Organisations that integrated public relations inputs into organisational strategic decisions were found to perform much better than those that did not. In order for public relations to be able to contribute at the strategic level, it has to be empowered either by being part of the decision-making body of the organisation (the term 'Dominant Coalition' was used to refer to these decision makers) or have direct access to those who are in the dominant coalition. The first two generic principles address this issue. One would have to agree that no matter which part of the world they are located in, organisations will only be successful in maintaining synergistic relationships with their relevant publics if they take inputs from those relevant publics and integrate those into strategic decisions because organisational decisions have a direct and indirect impact on these relevant publics. In their boundary spanning role where they have one foot inside the organisation and the

other in its environment, public relations professionals are in the best position to be the conduits between senior managers and external publics and stakeholders.

The generic principles also posit that in order to fully benefit from public relations activities, organisations would do well to have an 'integrated public relations function' where all the communication activities of the organisation are driven by a unified organisational strategy. In other words, management programmes such as human resources, community relations, investor relations, media relations, trade relations, public affairs, etc. should not operate as independent functions. In cases where they are established as separate departments for administrative or other reasons, they should operate with a 'unified' communication strategy. Further, the generic principles also prescribe that as a management function public relations should be separate from other functions such as marketing primarily because most of the available empirical evidence shows that whenever these functions are combined, public relations becomes a supporting technical function limited principally to publicity activities and media relations.

The generic principles also advocate a healthy mix of 'managerial' and 'technician' roles for public relations departments. So, the public relations function should have a strategic role and not merely a technical one as happens most often in organisations around the world. This also means that public relations practitioners should possess the education, professionalism, and knowledge level to be able to contribute effectively to organisational policy making. Until as recently as a couple of decades ago, most public relations practitioners around the world were 'imports' from other disciplines such as journalism, English literature, etc. and in some parts of the world this trend continues as public relations education has not permeated tertiary education. With the development of public relations as a domain for study in institutions of higher education in many parts of the world, there is an increasing pool of graduates trained in public relations who can be relied upon to

operate as communication specialists. As these trainees rise up to middle and upper managerial positions, they are more likely to value, and use, the public relations education they have received, including the ability to conduct research that will help them in various aspects of the practice.

Although an important foundation, education alone will not result in a well-rounded public relations practitioner who can add value to the organisation. Despite the best education, professional development occurs on the job and through informal and formal exchanges with peer networks (such as professional associations). A combination of theoretical (obtained through formal education) and practical (obtained through professional peer networks) elements helps mould the young communication enthusiast into a well-rounded public relations practitioner who can add value to organisational processes. Such practitioners also will be ethical in their approach to the practice, and have a tendency to be socially responsible, often prodding reticent organisations to be more receptive to the values and needs of their audiences while not neglecting their obligations to the owner/investor. Since the generic principles were offered, a few studies have gathered empirical evidence about the presence of some of the principles in countries such as South Korea (Kim 2003; Rhee, 2002), Singapore (Lim, Goh, & Sriramesh, 2005), and Bosnia (Kent & Taylor, 2007). Studies are currently underway in a few other countries and more are needed from other parts of the world to empirically test the reliability and validity of the generic principles across a number of countries and cultures.

### **Environmental variables**

Much of the literature review and quantitative data collection for the Excellence Project was completed by 1992. In both the literature review and the surveys, culture – societal and corporate – was addressed as a key variable that affected public relations processes. However, work on the project continued even

after this stage as additional qualitative data were gathered in the mid-1990s and other ‘environmental variables’ were added to the conceptualisation. It is important to note that at least some of these variables (political/regulatory environment and activism, for example) had been implicitly addressed in at least some of the literature (such as issues management) before the Excellence study. However, concerted efforts to link public relations with political, economic (and developmental), media, and activist environments began only after the mid-1990s. A brief review of these environmental variables follows.

To herald the onset of the new millennium, the Freedom House conducted a study and concluded that the 20th century was clearly *Democracy’s Century* – in 1900 there was not a single country that offered universal adult franchise in the world whereas by 1999 there were 119 countries covering 58 percent of the world’s population that gave adults the option of choosing their government (Freedom House, 2000). There is near unanimous recognition that ‘modern’ public relations has developed almost exclusively in the 20th century. The parallel growth of these two phenomena is not a coincidence considering that public opinion is at the core of public relations.

Most of the body of knowledge also assumes a pluralistic democratic system as the environment where public relations is most advanced and practised in a strategic manner. For example, the literature on issues management is primarily built on the foundation of a pluralistic process where public policies are discussed thoroughly in the society among various actors such as citizens, opinion leaders such as the media, and activist groups, who can then freely influence legislators to vote on a certain policy as the law of the land. The notion of symmetry inherent in this process also is built on the world view that both the organisation and its relevant publics collaborate to arrive at a mutually agreed upon understanding. As attractive as this proposition might seem, pluralistic democracy is but one political system in the world. As noted by Freedom House (2000), other political systems

also exist such as countries with restricted democratic practices, monarchies, authoritarian regimes, totalitarian regimes, colonial and imperial dependencies, and protectorates. We know conceptually that each of these spawns a different type of public relations practice (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009). There is sparse empirical evidence identifying how each of these systems affects public relations practice. That would be a prime area of study in the following decades of building a global theory of public relations.

The economic system and level of development of a country also provide different opportunities and challenges to a public relations practitioner. Countries where the economy is centralised (managed market economies) emphasise public sector undertakings where the government often becomes the 'sole public' for public relations practitioners. Capitalistic economies favour private enterprise where public relations would be needed to communicate with multiple players. Developing countries, where the majority of the population of the world currently resides, have their own priorities such as nation building and therefore use public relations as a tool for this purpose. Development-oriented communication campaigns (mostly available in the research genre called Development Communication) are a good example of this. The level of development also provides the infrastructure for practicing public relations. Obviously, more developed economic systems make it easier for public opinion polls to be conducted, for example. Understanding publics in developing economies poses much different challenges and requires different sets of public relations strategies and practices.

Organisations do not operate in a vacuum in any society. They are dependent on external influences to varying degrees. Especially in pluralistic political systems, activists are a public who choose to become 'relevant' for an organisation even when the organisation does not choose them as a stakeholder. By virtue of their deep commitment to a cause, activists also pose more challenges and therefore need to be

addressed swiftly and adequately by organisational communication activities. The level of development and the state of the economy also play a key role not only in the nature of the activism but also the level of activism. Obviously individuals who are busy earning the day's meal for the family have little time for activism of any sort except for those that can be classified as 'class' clashes – the fight between the haves and the have-nots. So, activism is closely linked to both the political philosophy of a society and the state of economy. Because of this link between **political** and **economic** systems and the level of **activism**, these three variables were combined into one and labelled infrastructural variable (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009).

Almost three decades ago, we had stated that although culture (both societal and organisational) is innate to all human interactions including communication, it has largely been ignored in public relations literature (Sriramesh & White, 1992). We also had proposed how culture could be studied and empirically linked to public relations. Culture is hard to define (there are over 110 accepted definitions and over 400 more for the term in anthropology!) and even harder to measure even if we all think we know and understand what culture is. Much of the research that links societal culture with public relations has relied on the four dimensions of culture offered by Hofstede (1980): power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity femininity, individualism and collectivism, and long-term orientation (added after 1987). This genre of research has come mostly from Asia (eg. Sriramesh, 1992; Rhee, 1999; Kim 2003) with a few non-Asian studies (eg. Verčič, Grunig, & Grunig, 1996) also contributing to the discussion. A few studies have also gone beyond these popular dimensions and assessed how idiosyncrasies unique to a culture also affect public relations such as *amae* and *wa* in Japanese culture (Sriramesh & Takasaki, 2000) and *guanxi* in Chinese culture (Huang, 2001; Hung 2003). More than 25 years after our first assertion, after a review of literature linking societal and corporate culture with public relations, the comment had to be made that

“sadly culture has yet to be integrated into the public relations body of knowledge” (Sriramesh, 2006, p. 507). Clearly, there is great potential for much more work to be done in understanding this variable and finding empirical evidence that can help link it to public relations.

The interplay between media (mass, interpersonal, and now ICTs and social media) and public relations is so indispensable that in many parts of the world public relations tends to be equated with media relations. The print and broadcast media still take much of the focus of public relations despite the onset of new and social media (where the infrastructural variables described above permits its presence – discussions about the digital divide). In fact empirical data from most parts of the world tell us that organisations expect their public relations departments to almost exclusively focus on maintaining good relationships with journalists in order to seek their help to ‘place positive stories in the media. Public relations scholars, in particular, have strongly opposed this kind of ‘single public’ mentality, with good reason. Understanding the media environment, therefore, is very important to public relations practitioners especially now that they have been forced to operate in a global environment. How does one understand the media environment?

The normative theories of mass media were developed over four decades beginning with the work of Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956). Scholars such as Merrill and Lowenstein (1971), Hachten (1981), and McQuail (1994) further built on that work, describing how mass media function differently in liberal democratic systems, authoritarian systems, communist systems, the erstwhile Soviet system, developing economies, and finally in revolutionary environments. Public relations practitioners can certainly draw a lot of wisdom on the press system prevalent in a country from that literature. However, at least some of that literature is not relevant in the 21st century (the Soviet media theory for example) and therefore a different framework consisting of

three factors – media *control*, media *diffusion*, and media *access* has been offered (Sriramesh, 2003; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009). Media *control* refers to who owns the media in a country and more importantly what sorts of controls (political, economic, social) are placed on the media. Media *diffusion* is indicative of the media consumption in a society – whom do the mass media ‘reach’ in a given society? Illiteracy and poverty have for decades made both print and electronic media the medium of the educated, rich, and elites of the society. Finally, media *access* refers to the openness (and willingness) among the mass media of a society to provide an ‘outlet’ (voice) to all segments of the society. Viewing the mass media system in a country from this new ‘prism’, provides a more practical orientation that is very useful specifically to public relations practitioners.

### **The future**

This brief overview of the development of the body of knowledge from humble beginnings to its present state, provides us the launching pad to look ahead into the ‘globalisation phase’ of public relations – in practice and scholarship. I have contended previously (Sriramesh, 2002) that although the body of public relations has come a long way from its humble beginnings in the 1970s and many scholars deserve a lot of credit for bringing it to its present state, public relations practice, as well as the body of knowledge, have largely been ethnocentric. The ethnocentricity can be seen in various forms.

The knowledge has been based predominantly on empirical data from a few Western liberal democracies such as the US and the UK. Although there have been a few welcome changes in the past five years or so, even the textbooks used for teaching public relations around the world came from the US or the UK. Although these contain a wealth of information that has been very useful to students everywhere, the authors of these books did not intend for them to be used outside of their own societies and therefore rightly used ‘local’ examples and case studies, which obviously are not very relevant to the socio-economic environment of a far away society.

The literal translation of textbooks written in English to other languages (be it Chinese or Croatian) also hinders education and the transfer of wisdom appropriate to a socio-cultural environment as discussed in this paper. There is a need, then, for a healthy blend of both 'local' examples and 'global' ones to help students (and practitioners) be better educated to meet their 'global' challenges. In other words, there is a need for a more thoughtful representation of many of the 'generic principles' of public relations practice to suit the 'local environment' as outlined in this essay so that the body of knowledge is more holistic and relevant to global demands. One could make a reasonable argument that even textbooks in the US and the UK should contain more 'global' cases and interpretations so as to give their own students a more international and holistic education, thus broadening their horizons.

The body of knowledge also has a serious deficiency in terms of empirical evidence from different parts of the world about phenomena relevant to public relations practice. Much of the 'international' data in the literature comes only from a small set of countries of the world – principally in Asia and a few eastern European countries and also South Africa (but not the rest of the African continent). Although there has been a lot of scholarship in countries such as France, Germany and Brazil, their dissemination has been severely limited by language; English continues to be the 'universal' language of choice.

The available knowledge from 'international' sources is mostly limited to replication of studies conducted in the West. There are undeniable advantages to such replication; the primary one being the ability to make cross-cultural comparisons based on similar data. There is a dire need for such comparisons and one should encourage studies conducted in multiple countries based on the same conceptual framework and research design. For example, as already noted in this paper, there are less than a handful of studies that have addressed

whether the generic principles are applicable in a different culture. We need many more of those studies to be able to build a theory that is based on empirical evidence. Similarly, we also need empirical evidence from the hitherto 'silent' continents such as Africa or Latin America (in English). These could very well be based on replicating existing conceptual frameworks and methodologies. However, the field also urgently needs studies that make a concerted effort at expanding the horizon by designing studies that also look at new and 'unique' phenomena in a society or culture based on different conceptual frameworks. We currently have very few such studies.

When scholars think of, and discuss, public relations, the global perspective is often overlooked. A good example of this is the article in the inaugural issue of *PRism* (Mackey, 2003) which claimed to introduce the various contemporary theories of public relations. Although the author attempted to review "the changing vistas in public relations theory", there was not a single mention of any advances in global public relations theorising in that piece even though by 2003 there were several advances worth reporting. The article made references to South Africa not in terms of any cultural difference but only in the context of the discussion of the postmodern conceptualisation of Holtzhausen (2000). The final sentence of that article was most telling of the ethnocentrism that is being critiqued here: "[T]he advent of the internet and the need for a more intelligent social critique expose much 'traditional' textbook public relations theory as wanting." What about the effects of globalisation, that began with the Maastricht Treaty and NAFTA in 1992, the WTO in 1994 and all that has followed since? They have surely impacted the public relations industry, as has been discussed here.

Finally, the field also needs to move away from its almost singular focus on corporate public relations activities and also seek wisdom from the other two major sectors: government and non-profit. This orientation can be easily explained by that fact that much of the current literature has evolved from nations predominantly oriented to capitalism. However,

the focus of a globalising public relations industry and scholarship is going to be on 'new markets', most of which are in the developing world. This alone is a good enough reason for the field to be focusing its research and scholarship on government and non-profit public relations also. Save for cases about political campaigns, government public relations, for instance, is rarely discussed in existing public relations textbooks. Further, even after 64 years of existence, the United Nations agencies are rarely used as case studies in textbooks even though one could make a reasonable case that their work in nation building and social development is unsurpassed.

### Conclusion

Globalisation has not only increased the importance of 'global' public relations but has also provided the opportunity for introspection and self-critique about the practice and scholarship. Over three decades of concerted scholarship has advanced the body of knowledge of public relations greatly and this is to be recognised. In the global public relations sphere this has meant the development of the generic principles and specific applications of public relations concepts. Despite these meaningful and useful developments, however, the glass is still half empty and much work needs to be done to make the body of knowledge more holistic and globally relevant. There is a need to test these largely conceptual frameworks empirically in different parts of the world. Doing so would serve one primary goal of global public relations scholarship – making the body of knowledge more relevant to the practice by increasing its 'predictive' capabilities so badly needed by practitioners who are now venturing into new markets and cultures.

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