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An assessment of progress in research on global public relations from 2001 to 2014

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ABSTRACT

Designed to investigate the trends, patterns and rigors of research studies examining global public relations, this study conducted a content analysis of published articles in public relations journals as well as other communication journals between 2001 and 2014. During this time span, a total of 163 articles examined topics related to global public relations. Information including journal name, publication year, country examined, authorship, theoretical application, method approach, and future research direction was recorded for each article. Given the steady increase in the number of articles addressing global public relations during the timeframe examined, the field should shift from description to theorization and establish theories specific to global public relations with methodological diversification. The United States was the nation of most frequent focus in the articles, followed by China, the United Kingdom, and South Korea.

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Due to the convergence of financial markets and advancement of communication technologies, the popularity of and demand for global public relations practices are rapidly escalating across various types and sizes of organizations. For example, the value of U.S. multinational companies in 2009 was \$3.593 billion, comprising about 40% of U.S. businesses (Barefoot & Mataloni, 2011). Furthermore, approximately one-third of public relations firms in the United States have at least one office in a foreign country (Wilcox & Cameron, 2006), with this globalization trend steadily increasing every year. Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) confirmed this trend, stating that almost “all public relations is global or international” (p. 541).

With the prevalence of global public relations practices, scholars have attempted to examine this phenomenon from a scholarly perspective. Several books including *The Global Public Relations Handbook* by Sriramesh and Vercic (2003b) have extended knowledge regarding global public relations theories and practices. Some scholars have used the case study method to present public relations practice abroad (e.g., Al-Enad, 1992; Beng, 1994; Berkowitz & Lee, 2004), while others have applied theories developed in the United States to investigate the similarities and differences of public relations practices in foreign nations (e.g., Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, & Lyra, 1995; Huang, 2001; Rhee, 2002). Indeed, *global issues* is a frequent topic in current public relations research (Ki & Khang, 2005; Pasadeos, Berger, & Renfro, 2010).

While global public relations research has been on the rise, a systematic review of academic articles addressing this topic has not yet been conducted. Tomasello (2001) suggests, an assessment of published articles demonstrates various topics, approaches and methodologies used by scholars in a given field. To understand the status of global public relations and

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determine methods for future improvement, it is necessary to evaluate what has been done in the past. This study aims to observe the patterns and trends of global public relations research through content analysis of published articles in public relations and related mass communication journals. Specifically, this study intends to assess: 1) progress that has been achieved in global public relations research, 2) prominent topics presented in each journal, 3) public relations theories and cross-cultural or intercultural theories applied, and 4) methodologies applied. The results of this research may contribute to knowledge about global public relations by investigating the generality of individual study findings and establishing several empirical generalizations.

1. Literature review

1.1. Global public relations vs. international public relations

Although the terminology and constructs of international public relations and global public relations have been used interchangeably in the scholarship, each conveys a different meaning. *International* as defined by New Oxford American Dictionary as “existing, occurring, or carried on between two or more nations” while *global* is “relating to the whole world.” The meanings of the words are similarly reflected in scholarly definitions. For example, Wakefield (1997) defined international public relations as “a multinational program that has certain coordination between headquarters and various countries where offices and/or publics are located, and that carries potential consequences or results in more than one country” (p. 355). Wilcox and Cameron (2006) conceptualized it as “the planned and organized effort of a company, institution, or government to establish mutually beneficial relations with the publics of other nations” (p. 516). These definitions highlight that international public relations are strategic communication activities performed in more than one country beyond an organization’s country of origin.

The term “global public relations” has gained momentum in the literature. Sriramesh and Verčič (2009) define public relations as “the strategic communication that different types of organizations use for establishing and maintaining symbiotic relationships with relevant publics, many of whom are increasingly *becoming culturally diverse*” (emphasis added) (p. xxvii). To reflect the change of publics in the field, Szondi (2009) conceptualized global public relations as “the internationalization of the profession, including being practiced in more and more countries throughout the globe” (p. 119). In this sense, the term “global public relations” is broader, more inclusive, and holistic because the term “global” denotes the whole world. As global public relations represents strategic communications all around the world, this is a progression from international public relations.

In recognition of the terminological relationship described above, this study employs the term “global public relations” to mean communication efforts to establish and/or cultivate mutually beneficial relationships with publics on the globe.

1.2. Examining the state of the field

Using a thematic meta-analysis, scholars in the public relations domain have endeavored to evaluate what has been accomplished in academic research in order to understand the state of the field. Such studies can be divided into two primary categories: 1) analysis of the state of the field, and 2) analysis of a specific topic. The first stream tends to investigate the general state of the field by emphasizing topics and theoretical approaches (e.g., Botan & Taylor, 2004; Ferguson, 1984; Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Jones, 2003). Conducting the first of such studies in the field of public relations, Ferguson (1984) synthesized 10 years of articles published in *Public Relations Review*, categorized them according to three types (i.e., social responsibility/ethics, social issues and issues management, and public relationships), and concluded that the field was underdeveloped in terms of theory construction. Twenty years later, Sallot et al. (2003) replicated and expanded Ferguson’s study by analyzing 748 peer-reviewed articles from three public relations journals (i.e., *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Public Relations Review* and *Public Relations Research Annual*) and established research categories similar to Ferguson’s while adding others. After reviewing public relations articles, Botan and Taylor (2004) grouped public relations theories into two groups: functional¹ versus cocreational² perspective. They concluded that the most prominent change in public relations scholarship over the past two decades has been a transition from a functional to a cocreational perspective. The latter two studies concluded that the field of public relations is more theory-driven than before.

The other stream of study examines academic articles relating to a specific topic. For example, in their review of academic articles addressing organization-public relationships from 1985 to 2013, Ki and Shin (2015) found that the number of studies covering organization-public relationships has rapidly increased in recent years, but the area still lacks a consistent definition. An and Cheng (2010) analyzed a 30-year span of articles regarding crisis communication in the two leading public relations journals (i.e., *Journal of Public Relations Research* and *Public Relations Review*) and demonstrated that a majority of

¹ The functional perspective, which was popular in the formative years of the field, considers publics and communication as a tool or means to achieve organizational goals. Research with this perspective primarily focuses on the use of public relations as an instrument to attain specific organizational goals and evaluates an organization and its mission (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

² The cocreational approach views publics as partners or co-creators of meaning and communication, making it possible to agree on shared meanings, interpretation, and long-term orientation (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

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