



International public relations: A synopsis of German-speaking and Anglo-American research approaches

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 November 2012

Accepted 15 April 2013

Keywords:

International PR theory
International PR strategy
Intercultural communication
Culture and PR

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines concepts, research traditions, and the current state of art on (1) *international PR* as the internationally oriented public relations of multinational organizations and companies, (2) *international comparative PR research*, which primarily describes domestic occupational fields of PR within global settings and (3) *international public relations of states*, also known as *public diplomacy*. Since culture constitutes the central element of PR research on a global scale, we conclusively take a closer look at how concepts of culture can be applied with greater strength in international PR research. Furthermore, we address different strategic paradigms in international PR strategies along the continuum of standardization and differentiation, and thus outline their consequences for international PR.

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1. Introduction: the emergence of international PR as a field of research

One could probably not describe the developments the field of research has undergone in the last twenty years more concisely than Bardhan and Weaver (2011, p. 1) when they stated, “Public Relations has gone global.” In this paper, however, we follow a more differentiated approach to delineating the newly rising field of international public relations (PR). Our aim is to systemize and analyze the efforts, approaches and findings spawned by German-language and Anglo-American research. In doing so, we will explore what the terms “global” and “international” really mean for PR; illustrate the conditions under which the field has developed besides “traditional PR”; and discuss the major methods and models used for studies in the international arena. As international PR applies to different cultural contexts, we will take a closer look at different concepts of culture (Hofstede, 1980; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) and discuss implications associated with various ways of looking at culture in research – an aspect widely neglected thus far.

Taking the 21st century’s internationalized environment as a starting point for our analysis, we need to acknowledge that processes of globalization have brought forth the international integration of a multitude of social (sub) areas. Moreover, far-reaching technological advances in the area of communication media and

communication channels have accelerated globalization over the last two decades (Taylor, 2001, p. 73; Szondi, 2009, p. 123). Today, organizational activities are no longer limited by national borders. Organizations expand their activities from their home countries across different nation states. Accordingly, organizations increasingly become multi-national (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 56) and face new challenges posed by internationally linked stakeholders. In addition, organizations need to take into account the different conditions prevalent in different countries, such as political and technological environments or media systems.

As of today, scholars have not yet managed to develop commonly accepted definitions, models and methods adequate for extensive studies of PR taking the underlying complexities of PR in the multinational organizations into full account (Andres, 2004, p.189; Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 3; Sievert & Porter, 2009, p. 2). This gap has led to a recent state of knowledge in PR research described as “fragmentary and rudimentary” (Klare, 2010, p. 73). The same applies to the practices of organizations which have not yet developed a shared understanding of how the challenges posed by a multitude of cultures in various countries can be dealt with.¹

The internationalization of communication management and PR as a separate research area is still young and was only identified as a “hot topic” in the mid-90s (Culbertson, 1996), especially in

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¹ The recent argument between Google and the Chinese government allows for a concrete example to illustrate this point. In 2010, the Chinese government threatened the search engine operator to deprive their website operating license, if Google did not obey to Chinese censorship rules when prompting search engine results (Barboza & Stone, 2010).

German-speaking and Anglo-American countries (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 8). This has to do with the fact that the development of PR is a phenomenon of Western societies, in which market capitalism was introduced early (Miller & Dinan, 2003). Characteristic of existing research to date are efforts to fructify existing PR theories internationally. However, such efforts reach their limits in regard to new global realities, necessitating a repositioning of PR theory (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011, p. 1).

2. Defining international PR research and its perspectives

When systemizing existing conceptualization of international PR research, we can distinguish between three main approaches (see also Andres & Bentele, 2008, p. 595; Zaharna, 2000, p. 87):

- (1) internationally oriented PR practices of organizations, i.e. international PR
- (2) international comparative PR research focusing primarily on descriptions and comparisons of national occupational fields
- (3) international PR of nation states, i.e. nation PR

While *international PR* is concerned with the study of PR practices and the structures and processes of *internationally operating organizations or companies*, the aim of *comparative PR* is to reveal differences and similarities between the countries investigated, taking cultural norms as well as social, political and economic environments into account. The third area of research focuses on the *international PR efforts of nations* and governments or other national interest groups, respectively, to positively influence a country's image abroad (Kunczik, 1997, p. 12). Nation PR is also known as *public diplomacy* (Karten, 2008). However, the question remains: Which perspectives on definitions can be identified to discriminate between the three areas?

In German-language research, international PR is closely aligned to the definition of "traditional" PR, in which the central aim of PR is the management of an organization's relationships with internal and external stakeholders. This definition mainly becomes extended with an international perspective (Andres & Bentele, 2008, p. 595; Klare, 2010, p. 74). Huck (2007, p. 892) coins the term *international corporate communications*, i.e. country and cross-cultural communication management including all internal and external communication activities of any company to build up or to maintain relationships with stakeholders in different nations or cultures with the ultimate goal of building and expanding a globally coherent reputation.

We can find similar terminology in the Anglo-American world, also resembling the basic assumptions about PR. In an early definition, Wilcox, Ault, and Agee (1989, p. 395)² describe international PR as "the planned and organized effort of a company, institution, or government to establish mutually beneficial relations with publics of other nations." Similarly, Grunig defined international PR as "a broad perspective that will allow [practitioners] to work in many countries – or to work collaboratively with many nations" (Grunig, 1992, p. 23). Wakefield (2007, p. 355) sees international PR 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" (Wakefield, 1997, p. 355).

Quite early Botan (1992, p. 157) and later Zaharna (2001) noted that international PR should always be understood as cross-cultural PR, since communication processes cannot escape country-specific characteristics and contexts. Banks (2000, p. 20)

approves this premise and speaks of *multicultural PR* in the international environment. According to his definition "multicultural public relations is the management of formal communication between organizations and their publics to create and maintain communities of interest and action that favour the organization, taking full account of the normal human variation in the systems of meaning by which groups understand and enact their everyday lives." In summary, international PR is primarily defined as *country border-crossing communication activity of companies or any other type of organization*.

From the above we can delineate studies of *international comparative PR*, which dominate the research especially in Anglo-American countries. However, distinguishing comparative PR research is not always easy since such research is often addressed as "international public relations" (e.g. Sriramesh & Verčič, 2001, 2003, 2009a) or "global PR" (Freitag & Stokes, 2009). Comparative PR describes PR in different countries. Its goal, according to Culbertson and Chen (1996, p. 2), is to explore "more or less universal problems that challenge many or all nations, and to search for generic principles that apply widely." Therefore, comparative analyzes of national PR practices in different countries aim to detect commonalities and differences from which external environmental variables expected to influence PR practices can be derived.

The field of *public diplomacy*, in which governments are seen as international PR actors, has gained very little attention, yet (Kunczik, 2003, p. 399; Signitzer & Coombs, 1992; Szondi, 2009, p. 145). Public diplomacy is defined by Delaney (1968) as "the way in which both government and private individuals and groups influence directly or indirectly those public attitudes and opinions which bear directly on another government's foreign policy decision." He argues that the transitions of international PR by governments and other organizations are fluid. This is why Kunczik (1992, p. 339) puts international PR on a level with nation PR a few years later; an idea similarly expressed by Pasquier, Weiss, and Yersin (2009, p. 16). Curtin and Gaither (2007, p. 9) even differentiate further and describe the targeted PR efforts of governments (primarily from developing and emerging countries) to achieve national and international goals as "nation building" activities. An additional perspective is offered by Szondi (2005, p. 208) who describes public diplomacy as only one element in a "pantheon of international PR for nation states." According to him, what differentiates public diplomacy from the other elements in the pantheon (i.e. destination branding, cultural relations, country branding and perception management), is that the communicator of PR needs to be the government of a specific country, whereas for example cultural relations can emanate from non-profit cultural associations mostly concerned with language, art etc. (Szondi, 2005, p. 213).

3. International PR strategies

Regardless of whether we look at the PR strategies of countries or multinational corporations, or whether country-specific PR practices are at the center of our attention, one can see that PR was primarily extended to international PR to account for cultural components. Important criteria affecting international PR theorizing go back to research on intercultural communication. Within that field, we can basically distinguish between three research approaches toward the influence of culture on communication, which were later transferred to the study of organizations and international public relations: (1) *the culture-specific approach*, (2) *the culture-free approach*, and (3) *the hybrid model*.

The so-called *culture-specific* approach examines the specific characteristics of a particular culture. In organization and management research, the corresponding research questions mostly center around how a country's culture affects organizational behavior (Tayeb, 1988) and in turn, how organizations need to

² This definition also remains unchanged in the eighth edition of the miscellany in 2007.

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