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Global public relations and communication management: A European perspective

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ABSTRACT

The article reviews the status of international public relations research and reports on a pan-European study into international communication practices in the corporate sector. It is based on a quantitative survey of 579 heads of corporate communication from 21 European countries and a semi-structured qualitative survey of 42 chief communication officers (CCOs) in large multinationals from 12 European countries. Results reveal that international public relations are a part of daily business for more than 90 percent of CCOs in Europe, with nearly a quarter of them dealing with 20 countries or more. Sensitivity to multiple cultures while preserving core identity and the ability to change is the main challenges, along with the language(s) problem where introduction of English as the business lingua franca is only a partial solution. Only about a half of CCOs reported solid structures for international public relations operations.

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1. Global public relations and communication management: a European perspective

Globalization is increasing economic, social, and political interdependencies around the world. Consequently, public relations as a discipline are more often charged with managing communication and relationships between organizations and their stakeholders on an international level (Verčič, 2013b). As more actors consciously use public relations globally, its description and explanation gain on the global level in importance. Yet “in a global context, systematic empirical research in public relations is rare” (Verčič, 2013a; p. 17).

Although there is a noticeable rise in publications on international and global public relations, Wakefield (2011) noted “the scarcity of theory specific to public relations in global organizations.” Ni (2013) proposed two major perspectives for the examination of public relations in the global(ization) context: cross-cultural comparison (comparing practices in different countries) and intercultural interaction (communication in intercultural settings). Curtin and Gaither (2007) identified four clusters of studies in international public relations: (1) analyses of how national cultures influence public relations practice, (2) analyses of the relevance of US-centric public relations models in other countries, (3) comparisons of public relations practices across regions or countries through case studies, and (4) studies of international public relations practiced by governments. One can note that many authors from the United States classify studies done in other countries as international public relations. Jain, De Moya, & Molleda, 2014 reviewed articles on international public relations published from 2006 to

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2011 in 12 peer reviewed journals. They found that 77% of 200 journal articles identified were concerned with domestic public relations practice in a region/nation other than the US, only 18% with cross-country analyses and 5% with global issues or organizations. International public relations in academic journals predominantly means public relations practiced in a country other than the home country of the publication (and is often written by domestic researchers from within those countries and cultures). There is an obvious scarcity of empirical research on international and global public relations.

This article tries to close the research gap by reviewing the status of international public relations theorizing and research and reporting on a pan-European study into international public relations practices in the corporate sector. Multinational enterprises are at the very center of economic globalization (Kleinert, 2001). How do they and how should they practice international public relations?

2. Literature review

Sharpe and Pritchard (2004) noted that “the development of public relations as a profession globally correlates with historical developments in three areas: communication, democracy, and global social interdependence” (p. 35). Indeed, as Sriramesh (2008) summarized: “Globalization seems to be the hallmark of the 21st century just as democratization was the legacy of the 20th century” (p. 409).

Verčič et al., 1996 Verčič, Grunig, & Grunig, 1996 proposed a framework of *generic principles and specific applications* for international public relations. Organizations should have core competencies and policies that are valid worldwide, while at the same time their implementation in different parts of the world should appreciate local specialties. These they organized into five environmental variables: political ideology, economic system, degree of activism, culture, and media system. The theory of generic principles and specific applications resonates with the *Stockholm Accords* and the *Melbourne Mandate* (The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, 2010, 2012) in emphasizing the importance of public relations for the core character and values of an organization with respectful and responsible relations with various social environments.

The notion of generic principles and specific applications resembles the broader concept of *glocalization*. Wakefield (2007) found this too rigid for a full appreciation of local stakeholders and for relationship management. He proposed an extension of the generic principles and specific application framework and termed it “world-class public relations” (Wakefield, 2011). In the *world-class public relations model*, organizations should perpetually and simultaneously think global and local and act global and local. The model proposed six factors which are important for its effectiveness: purpose, executive support, staffing and teamwork, training, communication style, and response preparedness.

Building on the notion of generic principles and specific applications, Sriramesh and Verčič (2001, 2009) proposed a *theoretical framework for global public relations* in which they comprised the original five environmental variables into three factors: a country’s infrastructure (composed of the political system, legal system, level of economic development, and the level of social activism), media environment (media control, outreach, and access), and societal culture.

A special challenge for international public relations practice is “cross-national conflict shifting” which describes the situation when actions in one country also have consequences in another country (Molleda & Quinn, 2004). With the advent of the Internet and the growing ubiquity of social media, some even argue that all public relations are becoming global and that domestic public relations no longer exists (Falconi, 2010). News of the death of domestic public relations may be exaggerated but globalization is permeating ever greater areas of communication work, and in many ways international public relations represents the most challenging part of the profession: “It demands more work in a more complex environment” (Verčič 2009; p. 804). Not only practice, research into international and global public relations is also challenging. Gregory and Half (2013) reviewed the challenges stemming from global complexity and claimed that they “do not propose to give up empirical research [in international and global public relations] altogether” (p. 424). Taylor (2001) urged for examination of presuppositions underlying public relations theory and research into the context of international public relations. Wakefield (2001) declared that what “public relations needs are ‘paradigm shift’ to reflect its emerging globalization” (p. 641), which is: “The global should become the strategic umbrella by which all domestic programs are carried out” (p. 643).

Cornelissen et al., 2006 Cornelissen, Bekkum, & van Ruler (2006) argued toward a practice-based theoretical conceptualization of corporate communication to supplement the theoretical notion of transformation of communication from a “functionary” activity into a strategic management function (Grunig, 2006; Verčič & Grunig, 2000). Their empirical investigation covered a set of case studies in European multinational firms (Nokia, Shell, Siemens, and Philips). They found strategic positioning and cultural accommodation of the communication function as the major challenges needing further study in practice, and they highlighted the importance of organizing the communication function for organizations: “In other words, the way in which communications is organized carries important strategic and political dimensions and is also crucial for the effective support and integration of communication activities” (Cornelissen et al., 2006; p. 120). Coordination and control, centralization and decentralization of the international public relations function are among the central topics of studies in multinational corporations and organizations (Molleda, 2009), with evidence suggesting that public relations are still predominantly “practiced in a monolithic fashion with multinational agencies replicating global strategies with only minimal, if any, variations that suit local socio-political conditions” (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2007; p. 357). Wakefield (2001) and Botan (1992), on the other hand, declared that “successful public relations in the multinational is not ‘top-down’” (p. 644), but that has to be empirically investigated.

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