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Public Relations Review



Communicating Catalan culture in a global society



Melissa A. Johnson^{a,*}, Xavier Cester^b

^a Department of Communication, Campus Box 8104, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695-8104, USA

^b Catalan Institute for the Cultural Companies (ICEC), Rambla Santa Monica 8, Barcelona, Catalunya, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 20 June 2015

Keywords:

Culture
Public relations
International public relations
Global communication
Digital media
Social media

ABSTRACT

This case study describes the communication objectives of the Catalan! Arts organization based in the autonomous region of Catalonia in Spain. Best practices in public relations, particularly in digital and social media, are described. The authors highlight the use of sound and bold visuals in public relations programming, and address the importance of interactive tactics. Program evaluation includes digital analytics plus an analysis of cultural industry export data and employment statistics in the creative industries. The case is an example of identity-based communication in international public relations. It also adds to the literature on public relations in government and arts organizations.

Published by Elsevier Inc.

1. Introduction

One of the limitations of current research in international public relations is the centrality of the nation state in definitions of the field (e.g., [Sriramesh, 2009](#)). And according to [Bardhan \(2013\)](#), public relations discourse about globalization is rooted in Western and capitalist/corporate models. Thus, most international public relations research has focused on corporate public relations, usually based in English-speaking environs. However, a recent study ([Johnson & Sink, 2013](#)) argued that communication for organizations such as ethnic activist groups or cultural heritage organizations has growing influence in global society and yet has received little scholarly attention. Although ethnic media scholarship has investigated the role of such niche media, there has been no similar examination in public relations, even though practitioners now produce globally distributed “owned media” themselves ([Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, 2014](#)).

Given this organization-controlled media production, along with traditional media relations and other tactics, public relations by culture-specific organizations bears attention. One such organization is Catalan! Arts, part of the Ministry of Culture for the Government of Catalonia, an autonomous region in Spain. Catalan! Arts was created in 2005 by the International Promotion Department (now Market Development), a unit of the Catalan Institute for Cultural Companies. The organization’s aim is to create a brand that can help markets abroad visualize the Catalan cultural companies. The main purpose is to offer support to the production of professional projects and their promotion abroad. While diffusing Catalan identity and cultural knowledge worldwide and contributing to the cultural industries sector of the Catalan economy, this arts organization also improves the well-being of artists, performers and their audiences. Ultimately, this contributes to the creative economy of Catalonia.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 919 515 9756.
E-mail address: mjohnson@ncsu.edu (M.A. Johnson).

The goal of this case study is to discuss the role of identity-based public relations in global society by demonstrating how Catalan! Arts employs a combination of digital and traditional public relations strategies to reach audiences throughout Europe, the Americas and beyond. The study provides insight and practical examples for communication professionals. In addition, by concentrating on an autonomous region's strategic communication, we hope to help reduce what Sriramesh has termed the "extreme ethnocentricity" of the public relations body of knowledge (2009).

1.1. Catalonia

One of 17 Spanish autonomous regions, Catalonia and its capital, Barcelona, have historically been known for entrepreneurship and innovation (Hughes, 1992). In the 21st Century, Barcelona has become a digital and communication technologies hub, the site of gaming companies, Yahoo's research and development office for Europe and Latin America, and much more (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010). The city's decade-old 22@ district is an urban innovation center where many companies engaged in these activities are based (Clos, 2004). Thus, championing the creative arts fits with the overall vibrant Catalonia identity and commitment to an array of inventive industries.

1.2. Public relations in Spain and Catalonia

Except for a few articles related specifically to Catalan public relations in recent years (e.g., Garcia, 2013; Xifra, 2009; Xifra & McKie, 2012) or to Basque strategic communication (Garcia, 2012), most articles about public relations in Spain have focused on the practice at the level of the nation state (e.g., Arceo, 2004; Smith, 2013). However, as Smith (2013) described, the Galician, Castilian, Basque and Catalan regions of Spain have distinct cultures and languages or linguistic variations. Thus, a study focused on one cultural identity and its positioning on the national, regional, and global stage is an appropriate addition to the public relations literature.

Xifra said that the Catalan government's sports policy has been the main channel for building relations with international publics (2009). The authors argue that the arts is another important channel. One method of extending Catalan identity globally is the promotion of Catalan cultural industries, which enhances the identity and economic goals that Xifra and McKie identified as important for the region (2012) by linking the two. In other words, spreading understanding of cultural identity through the arts also benefits the financial status of Catalan artists (broadly defined) and the larger regional economy.

1.3. Cultural identity and public relations

Scholars such as Sha (2006) and Pompper (2005) have described the lack of attention paid to culture, ethnicity and/or race in public relations research. In the past decade L'Etang's work also elevated a concern for multicultural societies, saying a broadened understanding of diplomacy is needed to include "cultural identity projects" (2009, p. 611). She noted that "public relations becomes broader as technology facilitates communication across national frontiers and creates more publics" (1996, p. 20). According to L'Etang, "cultural diplomacy tends to be characterized by long-term 'hearts and minds' campaigns aimed at developing emotional bonds with overseas domestic publics to gain their identification and sympathy" (2009, p. 610). As examples, she mentions art tours and exhibits; Catalan! Arts extends her exemplars with its promotion of Catalan literature, music, dance and much more. Other work has described how culture-specific museums ("ethnic museums") communicate organizational identity via their digital communication, both locally and internationally (Johnson & Carneiro, 2014) and this case study found that to be a similar goal.

The afore-mentioned briefly described research led to the research questions for the present study:

RQ1: What are the public relations goals of Catalan! Arts?

RQ2: Who are the key international publics of Catalan! Arts?

RQ3: How does Catalan! Arts employ its branding and multiple communication channels to reach its publics and accomplish its organizational goals?

And finally, our over-arching research question is, how does the case of Catalan! Arts demonstrate the concept of culture-specific public relations?

2. Methodology

2.1. Method, data and sample

This article is a case study about Catalan! Arts public relations. As Yin (2014) noted, case study methodology is best for contemporary research questions related to "how and why." Following Yin's recommendations (2014), we used multiple sources of evidence (data triangulation) in the case study. We combined a content analysis of the Catalan! Arts Web site with an examination of one year of newsletters, e-magazines, flyers and other controlled message tools. We also examined a stratified (by country) sample of media coverage and a sample of social media mentions of Catalan! Arts. In addition, the

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