



Toward an historically informed Asian model of public relations



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ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a meta-analysis of the 51 historiographies of public relations in Asia-Pacific countries to identify common themes, threads and theoretical insights. The authors propose a set of necessary components for the study of Asia-Pacific public relations drawn from a historical perspective that differs from the paradigmatic underpinnings of the major Western models. They draw conclusions about epistemological and practice differences between public relations in the West and in the Asia-Pacific region in a globalizing world.

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1. Introduction

It has been argued that PR-research can close the gap to organization, culture and the nonintended forms of communication that are distinctly distinguishable between societies (Wehmeier & Winkler, 2013). This has yet to happen. Over the last twenty years, the public relations academy has mostly put forward principles or models which seek to simultaneously theorize on the local as well as global practice of public relations. For example, van Ruler and Vercic (2002) and van Ruler, Vercic, Buttschi, and Flodin (2004) articulated a European Model of public relations and Vercic, Grunig, and Grunig (1996) and Grunig (2009) proposed a set of generic principles and specific applications drawn largely from research focused on North America, but which, they proposed, had global utility. Few others have argued that these generalizations are Western in origin and orientation (Choi & Cameron, 2005; Gregory & Halff, 2013; Sriramesh, 2002). More fundamentally, Broadfoot and Munshi (2007) and Prichard (2006) have argued that generic principles (in public relations and elsewhere) lead to the reproduction of intellectual domination and the re-enactment of a particular form of (mostly managerial) logic at the expense of alternative voices and polyphony. Miike and Chen (2007) have collated over 230 publications by Asian communication scholars that react to the academy's universalism. Dissanayake (1988, 2009a) offers an alternative paradigmatic territory and calls for an epistemological response leading to the 'excavation' of specific Asian communication theories.

In public relations research, there have been published studies which seek to apply the generic principles to practice in Asia-Pacific countries – for example to Korea and Singapore (Lim, Goh, & Sriramesh, 2005; Rhee, 2002) – and a growing number of studies exists about public relations in countries such as India, Malaysia, Indonesia and China. However, there

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has been no attempt to undertake an analysis of these in aggregate to determine whether it is possible to theorize about the common components which characterize an indigenous Asia-Pacific model of public relations with a possibly alternative logic.

In this conceptual paper the authors will do four things: first, identify the epistemological and practice principles which underpin the major Western models of public relations; second, undertake a meta-analysis of the 51 historiographies of public relations in Asia-Pacific countries published in English to identify common themes, threads and theoretical insights. Third, propose a set of necessary components for a model of Asia-Pacific public relations drawn from an alternative historical perspective. Finally, draw conclusions about epistemological and practice differences between public relations in the West and in the Asia-Pacific region in a globalizing world.

Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) posit that conceptualizing public relations would benefit from a reversal aimed at understanding “how communication organizes [...] rather than the traditional focus on the organization of communication” (2011, p. 384). Organizations, systems and societies should not only be considered—like in most research on public relations as a managerial function – as a given, since they emerge from and are recursively implicated by communication, including public relations. In this vein we suggest to study all extant models of public relations using the concept of ‘expert systems’. As argued by Giddens (1991, p. 27) “systems of [...] professional expertise [...] organize large areas of the material and social environments”. They are the structures that frame the actions of individuals and organizations. By the same token, individual behavior re-enacts and reproduces those structures. This connection between action and structure has been described as ‘institutional logics’, or sets ‘of material practices and symbolic constructions (Friedland & Alford, 1991, p. 248; Thornton & Ocasio, 2009): an overarching rationale that justifies the actions within a structure, organization or expert system. It engenders and constrains individual action, which in turn reproduces the logic. In their seminal paper on institutional logics, Friedland and Alford (1991) identify political democracy, capitalism and state bureaucracy as the three competing institutional orders in society. We similarly suggest that the three expert systems in which public relations takes place are the civic, the corporate and the governance expert systems whose institutional logic is participation, profitability and power, respectively.

The expert systems are not static. Instead, Giddens’ concept of disembedding describes how expert systems are regenerated, restructured and adapted in unlimited spaces, particularly in the globalized age of ‘late modernity’ (Giddens, 2002). This means that the institutional logics of expert systems are extended into other, neighboring expert systems where they co-exist, compete or are reproduced alongside those expert systems’ own institutional logics, e.g. when government agencies feel the need to become more ‘customer oriented’, or when corporations are ‘nationalized’ (Buurma, 2001; Cervera, Molla, & Sanchez, 2001). In this context of disembedding, public relations has been described (Falkheimer, 2007) as constitutive: on the one hand, it requires and reproduces an expert system’s own logic, i.e. participation in the civic expert system, profitability in the corporate expert system and power in the governance expert system. On the other hand, PR enables adaptation and the shifting of relationships between the three expert systems (Hardy, 2011; Lammers, 2011; Patriotta, Gond, & Schultz, 2011). In each of the expert systems, public relations can therefore be understood as a distinguishable “institutional practice that is widely distributed and is based on a set of governing mechanisms, including taken-for-granted activities, rules, norms and ideas” (Fredriksson, Pallas, & Wehmeier, 2013, p. 194).

We propose that in Europe and the US in particular the corporate expert system has disembedded as its institutional logic with its attendant features of individualism and privatization has gained ascendancy across place and time. Consequently, Western models of public relations can also be said to be predominantly corporatist.

The meta-analysis of Asia-Pacific scholarship in public relations will show that the above expert systems are also present, but their relationships are different. It will be shown that the corporate expert system is less dominant, as it is historically held in check and framed by the governance expert system and by its disembedding into most parts of corporate and civic life in Asia-Pacific societies.

From this analysis, we will comment on the epistemological basis of studying public relations in Asia-Pacific and propose key components for the analysis of Asia-Pacific public relations which will be different from those which appear to have current currency.

2. Public relations in the United States and Europe

Western models in public relations make two epistemological implications for global public relations research. They firstly imply that public relations consists of a set of overarching principles varied only by local applications per market, country or culture. They secondly imply a teleological, unidirectional history in which over time countries aspire toward a generalization of that set of overarching principles which might be assumed to be ‘best-practice’.

2.1. United States

The existence of generic principles in public relations was first assumed for the United States (US) by this study’s authors James and Larissa Grunig in the 1990s (Grunig, 2006; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Their scholarly framework of the ‘Excellence Study’ can be argued as being etic in the implicit assumption that its principles are universal across diverse populations. It became the dominant paradigm for the field of public relations altogether (Curtin & Gaither, 2012; Gower, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2000; L’Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Motion & Weaver, 2005) with the communication academy mostly

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