



Worlds apart or a part of the world? Public relations issues and challenges in India



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ABSTRACT

This study examines modern public relations in India investigating current issues, trends and leadership in communication management. Using a survey of Indian practitioners, it compares public relations in India with global trends. Findings suggest that practice in India is interdependent and changing dynamically with global influences, though a global–local dialectic is clearly present. Country-level differences are evident with development of human capital seen as the top issue in the region. At the same time, similar to other countries, the industry in India is also dealing with issues of digitization and information flow, struggling with measurement concerns, and trying to stay on top of crisis management preparedness.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the confluence of economic, professional and global factors have contributed to substantial growth in the public relations industry in India. According to recent reports, prospects are bright with the industry slated to grow upwards of 20% in 2013. In addition, an overwhelming optimism regarding the future of public relations is evident among practitioners in India (“[Understanding the Public Relations Industry. . .](#),” 2012; “[Inside the Industry’s Mind and the 2013 Outlook. . .](#),” 2013). This optimism has often been attributed to the changing role of public relations in post liberalization India. As the private sector has exploded in a period of economic deregulation, a shift to public relations as a key management function is more evident (Bardhan & Sriramesh, 2006). On the agency side as well, the arrival of major global public relations firms looking to provide systematic consultancy has led to a gradual change from the media relations approach of Indian public relations to a more data-driven, stakeholder focused activity (Dharmakumar, 2011).

Growth and change, however, pose their own challenges, particularly in a transitioning environment. Due to the speeding up of market globalization in the 1990s, and despite enthusiastic projections for the growth of the industry, countries such as India have the additional challenge of being relative newcomers to the global industry. There is little doubt that practice and thinking in India are still a blend of the old and the new. A mix of diverse styles and activities prevails (Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2014) with a market globalization philosophy co-existing somewhat uneasily with more traditional approaches driven largely by the public sector (Bardhan & Sriramesh, 2006).

This research is one of the few scholarly industry surveys of Indian public relations practitioners in the country’s post economic liberalization period and the only one that compares the industry with global trends. It is part of a global public relations project sponsored by The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations at the University of Alabama. The cross

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cultural project involved 28 researchers, covered 23 countries, and collected data in 2011 and 2012 from 4484 practitioners in Europe, Asia, North America, and Latin America. As India project directors, we distil insights from the country dataset and compare them with global trends.

The study's value lies in adding a quantitative dimension to the more qualitative studies of public relations in the region published in past years. By incorporating views of practitioners from across the industry spectrum (public/private sectors; small/medium/and large organizations), it focuses on collective insights on challenges and changes faced by the industry in India. Many among those surveyed are leaders in the field, and their cumulative responses enhance the quality and credibility of the data collected. And, more importantly, the study represents an opportunity to expand understanding of public relations by exploring particularities at the country level and relating them to the global.

We concentrate on two broad research questions: (1) what do practitioners perceive as major issues for public relations in India? (2) What strategies and actions are being adopted by industry leaders in India to address these issues? More specific research questions are presented later. Overall, we focus on how India fares in its own context as well as in comparison with the industry globally.

2. Conceptual framework

Grasping how transitioning economies poised for major growth in this century are handling country-level challenges in tandem with global dynamics is imperative for an overall understanding of the public relations industry at the global level. The study is set within the framework of cross cultural research on international/intercultural public relations. Fueled by the forces of globalization, research in this area of public relations began mostly in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Scholars have studied how public relations in different countries is both similar and different, and developed various approaches for doing so. For instance, [Botan \(1992\)](#) was one of the earliest scholars to point out the importance of understanding public relations according to specific country context and developed a matrix of four conceptual indicators for such analyses – level of national development, primary client for public relations, legal-political context and history of practice. Additionally, [Verčič, Grunig, and Grunig \(1996\)](#) proposed the cultural general-cultural specific approach, and [Sriramesh and Verčič \(2001\)](#) proposed a country-specific approach with focus on infrastructure (political system, level of economic development, activism, legal system), culture and media system.

Public relations scholars have frequently criticized the application of concepts, models and measurement approaches developed in the West to contexts elsewhere regardless of their cross cultural validity ([Bardhan, 2003](#); [McKie & Munshi, 2007](#); [Pal & Dutta, 2008](#)). At the same time they have emphasized the need to study the relationship between country-specific practice and the global dimensions of the industry. Such an approach to international/intercultural public relations highlights the need to view the global-local dialectic as an interconnected whole. It is not sufficient to focus on just the global or just a specific country in order to gauge the relationship between the two. For instance, [Bardhan and Weaver \(2011\)](#) note that in order to develop truly global rather than just West-centric theories of public relations, it is necessary to study “the spread of the industry itself in more interdependent, interconnected, and fluid ways since these phenomena are hallmarks of globalizing processes” (p. 5). The global and local are not static either – they inform each other and keep shifting ([Featherstone, 1995](#); [Robertson, 1992](#)). This approach is very relevant to the study of public relations in India because its industry landscape is in a state of high flux. The notion of what constitutes effective public relations in the current economic and cultural climate is at a fluid intersection between traditional public sector style practice, development communication needs, and new-technology driven western-style corporate communication ([Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2004](#)).

3. Historical perspective on public relations in India

The history of public relations in India is as varied as the ancient history of the region. India gained its status as an independent country in 1947 after over 200 years of British rule. Before that, the entire south Asian region was considered a more continuous entity. It is also a region of great ethnic, linguistic, racial and religious diversity, a fact that remains true today. Some scholars have traced the roots of public relations in India back to ancient times when emperors used rock tablets to issue proclamations to subjects ([Kaul, 1988](#)). Others have focused more on the public relations activities that started taking shape during colonial rule, while some prefer to focus on the period after independence.

The British administration used public relations to manage its governing practices in India. In the domain of business, domestic companies such as the House of Tata, and multinationals such as Unilever, Philips and Dunlop developed excellent public relations programs before 1947 ([Bardhan & Patwardhan, 2004](#)). The independence struggle against British rule itself was a successful public relations effort in the realm of political activism ([Desai, 1999](#)). After the end of British rule in 1947, India adopted a semi-socialist economy and most of the strategic industries (e.g., coal, gas, steel) were largely government controlled, and a specific style of public relations called public sector public relations took shape. According to this approach, the focus was on internal/employee relations and external image management. In a newly independent country, national development was high on the agenda of the public sector and its public relations activity ([Bardhan, 2003](#)).

Up until the 1990s, print media were relatively free and vigorous, but radio and television were government controlled. This media and economic landscape made government an important player in public relations ([Bardhan & Sriramesh, 2006](#)) and public relations in the private sector constituted a much smaller section of the industry. Furthermore, during this time

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