



Editorial

Public relations and communication management in South Africa: An intangible asset in a time of radical transparency



The world watched as Nelson Mandela was laid to rest and remembered his life and long walk to freedom. In 2014 South Africa will be celebrating 20 years of democracy and the story of its peaceful transition from the apartheid regime to a young democracy remains an example to all. The country has made strides toward political, economic and social transformation, but there are still unacceptable levels of poverty, civil indiscipline, poor education, corruption, violent crime and a lack of political will to affect visible change.

Since 1994 South Africa has become a major player on the international stage. In spite of its size and location, South Africa finds itself at the center of most of the global negotiations and forums. The developed world recognizes South Africa as a major economic and political power within Africa, as well as the economic powerhouse of and a gateway into the rest of Africa. South Africa now being part of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) – an endeavor by developing economies – heightened South Africa's credentials as a global player. The 2011 BRICS Summit affirmed the emphasis of the involved countries on development in Africa. This cooperation will assist in providing vital infrastructure that the BRICS partners require to sustain economic development, making them less dependent upon developed economies. However, after a decade of rapid economic growth in the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China), the future is looking less rosy for these countries. According to *Business Insider* the currencies of these countries (except for China's), had been under pressure since 2013 and a new group of nascent developing countries is lurking – namely the Mint-countries (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey). South Africa's development as a country is closely tied to development in Africa as a continent. Africa is the source of much of the raw materials and minerals of the world. Africa is often viewed as a problematic continent because of war, poverty, corruption and weak governments and developed countries are hesitant to invest money in sustainable economic development. South Africa is acknowledged for a sophisticated Constitution and for its relative media freedom, which remains an example and advantage on the African continent. Furthermore, Africa is the most connected continent in the world (Rensburg, 2013, pp. 859–862) and South Africa also enjoys rapid technological development and a growing social media environment.

Public relations and communication management are very developed academic fields in certain parts of Africa, particularly in South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana. Universities across the continent are offering degrees and courses for continuous education and development. The Public Relations and Communication Management Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) – established in 1957 – has had significant influence on the growth of the practice over the past 50 years. PRISA has been a founding member of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication (GA), where it still enjoys representation on the board. Other public relations and communication professional and academic associations followed suit across Africa, inter alia the African Public Relations Association (APRA); the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR); the Public Relations Association of Uganda (PRAU); the Zambian Public Relations Association (ZAPRA); the South African Communication Association (SACOMM), and Public Relations for Africa (PRFA).

As public relations and communication management (in particular as it pertains to communication as a thrust for change, development and sustainability) is a developing and growing academic discipline and practice in the world, more cross-cultural research, cases and collaboration will be needed in future to improve practices. There are pressing issues that impact on transitional economies and developing countries, and specifically still in Africa, that would need to be addressed by future communication management research.

The Excellence Theory (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995) provided the impetus for a global search for excellence in communication management that started in the 1990s and still continues and South Africa contributed to this movement by further

exploring the value-added contribution that communication management could make to organizations. The worldview that resulted has come to be known as the *Pretoria School of Thought* (De Beer, 2010) – a paradigm that focuses on the conceptualization of communication management in the strategic context of the organization. The most significant contribution to date has been the differentiation between ‘strategic communication management’ and ‘communication management’ taking place on different organizational levels (Steyn, in Toth, 2007, pp. 139–141). The institutionalization of strategic communication management within the triple context environment – people, planet and profit – is a further seminal perspective that is shaping the theoretical and pragmatic thinking in the field of communication management (De Beer & Rensburg, 2011a, 2011b; Melbourne Mandate, 2012; Muzi Falconi, 2010; Rensburg & De Beer, 2003; Steyn & Niemann, 2008, 2010; Steyn, 2009; Stockholm Accords, 2010). Stakeholder engagement, strategic communication and reputation management, and the roles of these in good corporate governance toward sustainability and business continuity, had made a profound imprint on the communication management discipline and practice in South Africa with the introduction of the three King Reports of Corporate Governance. These reports and the principles of corporate governance are now being implemented as best practices around the globe. The practice of including stakeholders in the organization’s decision making processes has highlighted the role of strategic communication management in identifying the legitimate expectations of organizational stakeholders through research; providing this information to the strategic management team and the board; and giving feedback to stakeholders in the integrated report (IoD, 2009).

South African communication management scholars and practitioners alike had been at the forefront of the business leap toward efforts into importing communication management into *integrated reporting* during the course of 2013. The release of the International Integrated Reporting (<IR>) Framework on 9 December 2013 marks a milestone in the marketplace evolution of corporate reporting. <IR> incorporates principles and concepts that are focused on bringing stronger cohesion and efficiency to the corporate reporting process, and adopting “integrated thinking” as a way of breaking down internal silos and reducing duplication. It strives to improve the quality of information available to providers of financial capital to enable a more efficient and productive allocation of capital. The focus is on value creation, and the “capitals” used by business to create value over time, might contribute toward a more financially stable global economy and promotes sustainability. The challenge to communication management scholars and practitioners will now be to find novel ways of adding communication value to the “capitals” of business. The *Pretoria School of Thought* has been regarded as a thought leader in this area for the past number of years (comments by Frasier Likely in 2011 and IIRC Chairman Mervyn King in 2012/2013). Other South African scholars are following the example by continuing current research pertaining to the issues surrounding corporate governance, integrated reporting, strategic communication and reputation management.

The above-mentioned developments and research foci warranted a special issue on public relations and communication management in South Africa. The call for papers for the special issue had been posted as follows:

“Public relations and communication management in South Africa has significantly altered its state as discipline and as practice over the last 50 years. As the professional association for public relations and communication management in South Africa – the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) prepares to celebrate 57 years of existence, scholars and practitioners alike are posing the question: *Quo vadis?*”

Contributions across Africa and the world were invited, addressing the following issues:

1. The current body of knowledge

Past developments in the field of public relations and communication management in South Africa can be viewed as eclectic. It can be expected that disciplines that have strongly influenced the field, inter alia communication, management, politics, philosophy, linguistics, economics, law and of late the financial sciences with the rise of corporate governance and integrated reporting will also steer its direction in the future. There had recently been significant movements toward strengthening this developing field as a discipline on its own. Contributions on new ways of viewing and of thinking about public relations and communication management in South Africa were encouraged in this part of the call for papers.

2. The stakeholders

Through the early years of public relations the “publics” as key roleplayers in public relations have always been emphasized. Recently the term “stakeholders” began echoing in the corridors of business, government and NGO’s. It is often argued that publics and stakeholders can either be “ambassadors” or “demolishers” of corporate reputations. Who are these constituents and what are their significance in the development of public relations and communication management in South Africa? What are the roles and identities of the initiators and recipients of modern public relations content? Can communicators complement the current genre of stakeholder theory?

3. The message content

The message content has always been interpreted as the “core” of public relations and communication management. Contributions on the evolution of communication message content since 2000 onwards and the onset of “messaging” in

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