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To be, or not to be: Paradoxes in strategic public relations in Italy

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ABSTRACT

There is a paucity of empirical studies of public relations in Italy. This study sought to assess whether public relations departments are managed strategically in Italy and whether public relations contributes to the strategic management of organizations. Using the four generic principles that deal with strategic management, this study gathered data from public relations professionals working in the three major types of organizations: corporations, government agencies, and non-profits. The study found that regardless of the type of organization, few public relations practitioners are represented in the senior management of their organizations. Senior managers of non-profits tended to value public relations more than the other two sectors. Symmetrical communication again proved to be normative. By using a conceptual framework and research instruments that have been employed in studies conducted in other parts of the world, this study has generated data that can be used to compare strategic public relations in different socio-cultural environments – thus contributing to building a global theory of public relations.

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1. Introduction

The number of studies that have tried to explain the development and practices of public relations, especially in non-Anglo-Saxon contexts, is limited, albeit growing (Arceo, 2004; Lim, Goh, & Sriramesh, 2005; Oksitutz & Enombo, 2011; Rhee, 2002). In most regions of the world, public relations practice is gradually advancing from merely being a technical function in support of other functions such as marketing or advertising to a strategic management function (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009). However, we have little empirical evidence, even from the developed nations of the world beyond a few countries such as the US, UK, and Germany on the extent to which public relations is practiced strategically and whether it contributes to the strategic management of organizations. Despite its status of being a G-8 industrialized economy, Italy has provided the public relations body of knowledge with few empirical studies on this subject.

We conceptualized this study in order to bridge this knowledge gap by empirically assessing strategic public relations activities among a sample of organizations in Italy. In designing this study, we sought to bridge another knowledge gap. We believe public relations scholarship has focused almost exclusively on the corporate sector thereby often being accused of being 'hired guns' of corporate greed. We believe public relations is used no less by governments and their agencies as well as the non-profit and civil society sectors. Therefore, we decided to study public relations across the three major sectors: private, public and non-profit in Italy. The private sector was operationalized in two groups, in-house practitioners

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and practitioners from agencies and consultancies. Public relations practices and functions differ across sectors and are also influenced by different socio-economic environments (Liu & Horsley, 2007; Valentini, 2013; Valentini & Muzi Falconi, 2008).

Because we intended to assess how strategically public relations is being practiced by organizations of these three sectors in Italy, we relied on the four generic principles that address the strategic function of public relations in organizations (to be described in Section 3). It is pertinent to add here that few empirical studies have been conducted on public relations in Italy. Those that have been conducted have focused almost exclusively on the in-house departments of corporations (e.g. Invernizzi & Romenti, 2009a,b; Valentini, 2009b) or public sectors (Valentini, 2013). To our knowledge no study has so far has been conducted on strategic public relations of organizations across the private (in-house and agencies), public, and non-profit sectors in Italy.

2. Public relations in Italy

As with many countries around the world, public relations activities in Italy may be considered to be as old as the country's first organized societies. Over the millennia, the Romans had used different public relations tactics to persuade, convince, and negotiate within their borders and also with the regions they set out to conquer, or conquered. Ceremonies and events were among the most common strategies adopted to convey their dominant position and divine mission while also serving to exercise their authority (Valentini, 2009a). Particularly, the quest for controlling publics through public relations strategies and techniques were central concerns of fifteenth-century Italian political thinkers and rulers. The most famous example of this is Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532/1961) that resonates even in the 21st century in its description of the use of power and influence. Machiavelli was among the first to comprehensively discuss politics and propaganda and unveil how the powerful Italian princes had gained power and exercised it to maintain stability in their kingdoms. Many of those activities were a combination of persuasive public communications with strategies for maintaining and nourishing personal relations with influential individuals. Harris and Locke (1996) and Harry, Moss, and Vetter (1999) are among the many scholars who have argued that Machiavelli's techniques are being practiced by modern UK lobbyists and corporations.

Another interesting aspect is the key role of the Roman Catholic Church in the development of public relations in Italy. During Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church deftly used the newly invented printing press to produce religious pamphlets to persuade the public into adopting, or continuing, Catholic religious practices as a counter to the Reformists' own propaganda (Taylor, 2002). Yet, it was only about a century later that the Roman Catholic Church established a formal department of information. In 1622, Pope Gregory XV created *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* (the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith) in Rome. It was the first church-based organization comprising cardinals and high rank ecclesiastics whose primary goal was to spread and promote the Roman Catholic doctrine and regulate church affairs. When it was first coined, the word *propaganda*, from the verb "propagare" (meaning 'to spread') denoted a noble activity with none of the negative connotations that is associated with the term today. Besides educating people, the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* had the important function of collecting data on populations, communities, cultures, etc. from all corners of the world. Monitoring and obtaining information on key publics and their environments, which today is central to strategic public relations, were important activities undertaken by the Church for preparing and developing plans for religious purposes. The Congregation still exists and plays a key role in the Vatican's efforts for evangelization (Vatican, 2010).

Despite this rich history, 'modern' public relations in Italy has its origins in the administration of Mussolini and then World War II. Muzi Falconi (2009) identifies the mid-1930s as the origin of modern public relations and the Pirelli Group of companies as the first organizations to practice it. American influence is inescapable even from those early days when Italian journalists who were trained by the United States Information Services (USIS) became public relations practitioners (Introvigne, 2007; Muzi Falconi, 2005). The first public relations professional associations were established in Rome, *Sindacato Nazionale Professionisti Relazioni Pubbliche* (trans. National Union for Public Relations Professionals), and in Milan, *Associazione Italiana Relazioni Pubbliche* (trans. Italian Public Relations Association), in the 1950s with practitioners from the largest companies and multinational enterprises as members (Muzi Falconi, 2009). Between the 1960s and 1970s a number of public relations agencies and consultancies emerged offering services to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) around the country. Over 96% of Italian enterprises are SMEs prompting many to refer to it as the country of SMEs. Most of these SMEs are family-based firms. According to *Confcommercio*, the Italian General Confederation of Enterprises, over 95% of SMEs employ fewer than 10 employees. Only 4.5% of SMEs have 10–49 employees with only a half percent employing between 50 and 249 employees (Confcommercio, 2009).

Until the early 1980s, public relations in Italy mostly consisted of activities that supported marketing or helped bolster a company's image and reputation (Valentini, 2009a). The latter function gave public relations the attribute of the "master of ceremony" (Muzi Falconi, 2009, p. 485), which, persists even today in the mind of a notable segment of Italians (Valentini, 2009b). Public relations courses began to be offered only in the 1990s with IULM (*Istituto Universitario di Lingue Moderne*) University in Milan being the first university to offer a public relations degree (Valentini, 2009a). The majority of public relations practitioners over the past 50 years thus hailed from different backgrounds such as journalism, economics and political science. For them public relations education and preparation occurred 'on-the-job', a phenomenon not unlike many other countries of the world (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, public relations has also started to play a more important role in public sector organizations in Italy due to legislative changes aimed at modernizing public administration and giving greater attention to informing and communicating with citizens and other relevant stakeholders (Valentini, 2013). Government communications prior to

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