

Centre and periphery: Two speeds for the implementation of public relations in Spain

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Abstract

In this qualitative study conducted at the Rovira i Virgili University we show that there are clearly two speeds for the implementation of public relations in Spain: one in the big cities (basically Madrid and Barcelona) and one in the smaller cities or regions of secondary economic importance, such as Tarragona, where the degree of professionalisation is noticeably lower.

The medium-sized universities located outside the metropolises have an important role to play for three reasons. First, to homogenise professional practices and achieve a standard level of quality across the board. Second, to ensure that the profession achieves universal recognition. And third, to promote territorial equilibrium by improving the activities carried out by companies and institutions located outside the great urban centres.

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1. Background

To understand the scope and meaning of this study, the following contextual aspects should be taken into consideration. Firstly, the professionalisation of public relations in Spain is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Noguero (2004, p. 337) highlights 1955 as the year in which the first public relations activities were carried out in Spain. The same source states that the first publications to discuss the discipline were an article by Juan Beneyto in 1957 and a book by Marqués and Marqués (father and son) in 1958. The first professional association appeared in Madrid in 1961 but it was not until 1967 that Public Relations became an official discipline of study, first in the curriculum of the Official School of Journalism and then, in 1974, as part of the university curriculum for the Degree in Advertising and Public Relations.

In 1991 the curriculum for this discipline underwent a thorough change. And today, due to the convergence requirements of the new Common European Framework and the Bologna Process, it is again undergoing a process of revision. Thus, with only 50 years behind it, Public Relations is still a relative new activity in Spain and this conditions its recognition in society and its development as a profession.

Interestingly, as Tilson and Saura (2003, p. 131) point out, most Spanish public relations companies have their main offices in the two biggest Spanish cities, Madrid and Barcelona. In fact, of the 35 public relations companies that in 2003 were members of the national association (ADECEC), 25 had their main offices in Madrid, five had their main

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offices in Barcelona, two in Seville, one in Valencia and one in Vitoria. Public relations companies and activities are therefore clearly concentrated in the big cities, firstly in Madrid and secondly in Barcelona (ADECEC, 2003).

Another important factor, because it affects how those who work in the sector are recruited, is that in Spain (with the exception of the autonomous region of Valencia) having an official academic certificate is not an absolute requirement for working in public relations, although it is for a wide range of other professional activities such as law, medicine, engineering, architecture, physiotherapy, the selling of insurance, the administration of estate agents and even the refereeing of football matches.

In addition, in the opinion of most experts, and this is supported by numerous studies, the daily practice of Spanish public relations professionals is usually guided more by personal experience and intuition than by scientific, empirical and theoretical arguments (Alfredo Arceo, 2004, p. 295).

This delay in the professionalisation of the activity due to historical reasons means that the term “public relations” now has several negative connotations in Spain, as several authors (Tilson and Saura, 2003, p. 133; Toro, 2002, p. 25; Xifra, 2003, p. 7) have pointed out. Spaniards still see Public Relations as a poorly structured activity, somewhere between personal relations and events organisation.

We believe that this biased and simplistic view is gradually changing thanks to the incorporation of Advertising and Public Relations graduates, who are helping to dignify the profession and afford it a recognised professional status. However, the term’s erroneous associations (among other reasons) have encouraged public relations departments and companies to systematically avoid using it in their names and to use concepts such as “communication” or “media relations”, which, though more vague and less defined, have more prestige in society.

The highest level of training in public relations is the official degree in Advertising and Public Relations. Degree courses in Public Relations are offered by 32 Spanish universities. This wide range of academic courses is intended to meet the constant increase in demand over the last few years (Magallón, 2004, p. 376).

We should bear in mind, however, that due to government regulations students receive specialised training in both areas of business communication (advertising and public relations) simultaneously. In practice, therefore, for most curricula the direct public relations content throughout the degree course does not usually exceed two, three or four specific subjects.

Finally, we need to briefly describe the territorial scope of our study. Spain is divided into 17 autonomous communities and these communities are made up of 50 provinces. Our study was conducted in the province of Tarragona, which, together with the provinces of Barcelona, Girona and Lleida, comprises the autonomous region of Catalonia.

The province of Tarragona has an area of 6300 km² and a population of 631,000 inhabitants (1.5% of the total population of Spain). In the provincial capital, which is also called Tarragona, live 121,000 people. The city of Tarragona is built on top of the ancient Roman *urbs*. Situated on the Mediterranean coast in the northeast of the Iberian peninsula, it is the most southern of the four Catalan provincial capitals.

The population of the province of Tarragona is considered to be at a phase of marked growth (CEPTA, 2004). In 2002 and 2003, growth rates were over 3%, which is way above the rate for the Spanish population as a whole. The population in the province of Tarragona increased by 13.83% between 1998 and 2003. The corresponding figures for Catalonia and Spain were 10.08 and 7.68%, respectively.

In 2001 the GNP (Gross National Product) for Spain was 651,000 million euros. For Tarragona the GNP was 12,000 million euros, or 1.86% of Spanish GNP and just over 10% of the GNP of the autonomous region of Catalonia. In 2003 the number of people in work in the province of Tarragona was 308,000 (an increase of almost 50% over the previous 7 years) compared to 2,892,900 in Catalonia and 16,817,800 in Spain as a whole.

There were university studies in Tarragona as far back as the 16th century, but these later disappeared. It was not until 1971 that the University of Barcelona set up local branches of the University in Tarragona. In 1991 these branches, and others that had also been set up in the intervening years, became independent and formed the initial nucleus of what is today the Rovira i Virgili University. This is a medium-sized public university with 12,000 students and 950 teachers offering 51 official courses in 11 Schools or Faculties in the municipalities of Tarragona, Reus and Vila-seca.

Tarragona has been considered a suitable city for the study due to the fact that it is a medium-sized one. Therefore, the PR action does not develop as easily as in big cities such as Barcelona or Madrid. On the other hand, Tarragona has two important economic sectors, like the petrochemical sector and the tourist sector with big companies and institutions. Moreover, owing to the situation of the city, less than 100 km from Barcelona, some companies in Tarragona contract local PR services, while others do it in big agencies in Barcelona. For this reason, a comparison of local communications tasks can be made.

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