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Roots of public relations in Portugal: Changing an old paradigm

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the roots of public relations (PR) in Portugal, which for the last three decades have been consensually placed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It argues that such a historical paradigm is contradicted by thorough archival research and needs to be revised. In fact the origins of PR activities can be traced back as far as the 1900s, having evolved initially under the terms of propaganda and press relations, with no apparent influence from the United States (U.S.). The specific term and the concept of PR arrived in Portugal only in the 1910s and matured from the 1930s to the late 1940s. They were first imported from the U.S., where in 1915 a Portuguese professor witnessed the PR activities carried out by the agricultural system. However, the modern concept, theory and practice of PR were mostly influenced by the United Kingdom (U.K.). The connecting link was The Anglo-Portuguese Telephone Co. Ltd. (APT), which pioneered the development of PR in Portugal. It directly benefited from the PR work that Basil Clarke did for a British pressure group whose chairman also managed APT. Regarding PR historiography this paper reinforces the thesis that PR developed in Europe independently from the U.S. tradition and long before World War II. It also places Portugal among the first European countries where PR emerged.

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1. Introduction

Despite the evolving historiography of European PR, Portugal is still lagging behind in this field for little is known about how, when and why public relations actually developed in the westernmost nation of Europe. Due to the lack of archival research, the founding milestone usually presented is the inception of the first PR departments in the 1950s, involving the National Laboratory for Civil Engineering (LNEC) and a number of foreign companies operating in the oil and gas industry, namely Shell, Mobil and BP. This narrative has been repeated and republished for the last 30 years, based mainly on oral testimonials and some personal assumptions which have been reproduced as undisputed facts in textbooks (Fonseca, 2001, 2011; Lampreia, 1988; Soares & Mendes, 2004; Tojal, 2006) and scientific articles (Soares, 2011). No political, economic, social, cultural or technological explanation has, however, been provided as to why PR started in Portugal in that specific time period or why LNEC and the above mentioned companies had the need to communicate with stakeholders.

To move on from this paradigmatic narrative, exploring the early beginnings of PR in Portugal, and to place the history of Portuguese PR on the map of European PR historiography, extensive archival research was deemed necessary. A two-step methodology was used. The first one consisted of consulting a large sample of business reports and accounts issued from 1900 to 1950 (encompassing the last 10 years of the constitutional monarchy and the first 40 years of the Republican regime), which

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are deposited in the National Library of Portugal. When propaganda or public relations activities/departments were identified in such reports, a second step was then performed involving the practice of extensive research on the private archives of each company. The main archival sources were the Historical Archive of the Portuguese Communications Foundation and the Documentation Center of the EDP Foundation/Electricity Museum. This methodological approach was complemented by researching the *house organs* and a number of institutional brochures of the principal companies (either public or privately owned) operating in Portugal between the 1900s and the 1950s and by searching a set of keywords – “relações públicas [public relations]”; “relações com o público [relations with the public]” and “propaganda” – in the PORBASE (the Portuguese National Bibliographic Database) digital catalogue. All the methodological procedures revealed the special importance of two companies: the Anglo Portuguese Telephone Co. Ltd. and CTT (the Portuguese Postal Company); both operating in the communications business. Additional research was carried out in the government field; focusing only on the Foreign Ministry archives. The selection of this specific Ministry was made under the assumption that its potential exposition to foreign practices would make it the most prone to pioneer PR practices and structures in Portugal.

Acknowledging the fact that the development of PR depends largely on the global context and idiosyncrasies of each society (L'Etang, 2008), a special emphasis was put on explaining the framework of political, social, economic, cultural and mass communication conditions from which public relations emerged in Portugal.

The research presented in this essay is limited by the fact that it purposely placed more emphasis on companies (especially in the APT case-study) than on government or public organizations. It also acknowledges the difficulty in establishing boundaries between PR antecedents, or proto-PR (Watson, 2013), and modern PR (Bentele, 2013; Nessmann, 2000), as well as the main PR historiography challenges (Hoy, Raaz, & Wehmeier, 2007; L'Etang, 2008; Pearson, 1992; Watson, 2014a). Regarding the role Mário de Azevedo Gomes played in introducing the PR term and concept in Portugal, as an import from the U.S. agricultural system, this article lacks more insight into the early 20th century PR goals of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the U.S. state university colleges of agriculture. The author could not however access the bibliography on these subjects – namely reports and other documents from the early 20th century – which is U.S. based.

2. Emergence of PR as term and concept

The term public relations, and a proto-PR concept, first emerged in Portugal in 1915 through an article written by Mário de Azevedo Gomes (1886–1965) entitled *A Universidade Americana nas suas Relações com o Público: a Obra da Extensão Universitária e os Progressos da Agricultura* [The American University in its Relations with the Public: the Work of University Extension and the Progresses in Agriculture] (Gomes, 1915). Azevedo Gomes was an agronomist who lectured at the Instituto Superior de Agronomia (ISA) in Lisbon from 1915 to 1955, and in the 1920s served as Minister of Agriculture. He traveled to the U.S. in April 1915 with the objective of studying “the general organization of the university agricultural education” (Mayer, 1915, p. 179) in three universities: Michigan, Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Wisconsin–Madison. Azevedo Gomes was especially surprised and interested by “the good relations the American University maintains with the public” (Gomes, 1915, p. 211). He identified the publics targeted by the “university propagandists” (Gomes, 1915, p. 227), including students, former students, parents, farmers and companies. He also specified the communication media used by those propagandists – namely railway propaganda excursions, magazines, letters, press relations, exhibitions and train exhibits, product sampling, posters, conferences and contests – and the partners involved in the communication process, including railway companies, rural banks, farmers' institutes and farming associations. Gomes (1915) was aware of Edwin Emery Slosson's work, particularly his book *Great American Universities* (Slosson, 1910). This American journalist and chemist who popularized science argued that universities should employ people able to communicate with the public about science.

As for the PR concept, Gomes (1915) never stated it clearly, at least not as Grunig & Hunt (1984) defined it: “the management of communication between an organization and its publics” (p. 6). However, he did mention the “need for mutual understanding” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 7), which is an effect used by some authors (Black, 1962) to define PR. Accordingly, Gomes (1915) stated that “raising the general level of culture entrusted to the university action cannot take place without bringing down the classic barriers between university life and the life of the surrounding environment in terms of a more or less close mutual interpenetration” (Gomes, 1915, p. 210) and that “to be well understood [the university] needs to be able to speak the same persuasive language” (Gomes, 1915, p. 213). Another defining element of PR which Gomes (1915) noted in the university relations with the public was the need to generate goodwill, which is part of the definition of PR by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR, n.d.). He stated: “the university organism aims, as is natural, to further strengthen that wave of external support; it sees in it the purpose of the hard mission it imposed on itself; and all its effort is to capture new everyday energies that will join its own energies” (Gomes, 1915, p. 212). Finally, we can find in Gomes (1915) an echo of Cutlip, Center, and Broom's (2006) classic definition of PR: “Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (p. 1). The notion of dependence on the public is visible when Gomes (1915) stated that through the relations with the public, the university “defends [...] the maintenance of its living conditions” (p. 215) and shows the State “by which is subsidized and almost exclusively supported” (Gomes, 1915) and the public why universities should be financed by public taxes and investment. It is also interesting to note that Gomes (1915) used the term ‘relações com o público’ (‘relations with the public’) instead of ‘relações públicas’ (‘public relations’), a term which was only much later adopted in Portugal. He also referred to the practice as ‘propaganda’ and not ‘public relations’, and addressed the practitioners of PR as ‘propagandists’.

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