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Public Relations Review



We are what we teach: The impact of persuasive communication on Philippine PR history and contemporary PR education

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 September 2015
Received in revised form 15 March 2016
Accepted 22 March 2016
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Public relations education
Philippines
History
Colonial influences

ABSTRACT

The history of the Philippines is one of colonial struggle. It is no wonder that the indelible marks of three and a half centuries of Spanish colonization followed by five decades of American occupation are still intensely palpable in every aspect of Philippine society. The aftermath of centuries of domination is no more pronounced than in the education of its citizens. This paper aims to trace the evolution of Philippine public relations education, examine its influences and critically evaluate the content and status of the public relations curriculum using a post-colonial lens. Public relations is one of the Philippine imports from the United States after the Second World War. This study interrogates how this Western transplant is addressing the dueling interests of multiple stakeholders and the competing priorities of a developing country steeped in the traditions of a colonial past. Through a primary analysis of 20 Philippine undergraduate and graduate programs, personal interviews and secondary research, the historical analysis revealed private, mostly Catholic, universities as key providers of PR education. The study also found that Philippine PR education is still nascent, elitist, and requires a research culture to help professionalize practice.

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1. Introduction

The history of the Philippines is one of colonial struggle. It is no wonder that the indelible marks of three and a half centuries of Spanish colonization followed by five decades of American occupation are still intensely palpable in every aspect of Philippine society. The aftermath of centuries of domination is no more pronounced than in the education of its citizens. This paper argues that the colonial influences that shaped Philippine public relations continue to constrain the further development of public relations education in the country.

There are only a few published studies on Philippine public relations. Of the sparse scholarly literature, Philippine PR education is given but a brief, cursory attention (e.g. [Jamias & Tuazon, 1996](#); [Sarabia-Panol, 2000](#); [Sison et al., 2011](#); [Sison & Sarabia-Panol, 2014](#)). By focusing entirely on the topic, this study is an attempt to ameliorate the dearth of research on

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PR education in the country. As a modest initial endeavor, this paper will trace the evolution of Philippine PR education, examine its influences and critically evaluate the content and status of the PR curriculum using a postcolonial lens.

It has been claimed that postcolonial perspectives reveal the colonialist and imperialist legacies that have shaped contemporary culture and discourse. Postcolonial theory, according to Dutta and Pal (2011, p. 196) “examines the symbolic representations and material relationships that underlie processes of colonization. . . that challenge the systematic erasures of the narratives of oppression and exploitation.” Moreover, a postcolonial approach “involves a studied engagement with the experience of colonialism and its past and present effects, both at the local level of ex-colonial societies, as well as at the level of more general global developments” (Quayson, 2000; p. 2). Thus, a postcolonial lens provides a useful framework to investigate the impact of Philippine and PR history on contemporary PR education.

Public relations is one of the Philippine imports from the United States after the Second World War. This study will interrogate how this Western transplant is addressing the dueling interests of multiple stakeholders and the competing priorities of a developing country steeped in the traditions of a colonial past.

Based on published materials and personal inquiries, this research will unravel how the legacies of the country’s Spanish and American tutelage manifest in the nation’s PR curricula. In particular, we will ponder and attempt to answer the following questions: Are there differences in the way public/secular and private/religious universities approach PR curricular offerings? How is the public-private dichotomy carried over in the industry? What are the current trajectories of Philippine PR education?

This preliminary exploration of the PR education ecosystem in a small but growing industry in a developing country hopes to contribute to a greater understanding of the challenges that face Philippine PR education through a more nuanced look at the past. Through this study, we hope to highlight the need for PR education programs, which are basic requirements for professional PR practice in any country.

2. Research approach

This historical study used both primary and secondary research. The primary research involved a website analysis of degree programs in Metro Manila universities and colleges from the Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and various university websites. We analyzed the content descriptions of 22 undergraduate and graduate programs that either offered a degree, major or courses in public relations, corporate communication and integrated marketing communication (IMC) as well as development communication and public affairs. Where available, the curriculum and course descriptions as well as a small convenience sample of course syllabi were reviewed. The focus given to Metro Manila is based on the urban-centricity of media-related industries and professions (Maslog, 2007). Mautner (2005, p. 821) argues that despite the challenges of websites, being ephemeral for one, “discourse on the web is now a key factor in constructing representations of reality and social relationships.” She suggests that with their dynamism and flexibility, websites are more accessible than print media and its affordances reflect issues of “colonization/appropriate, globalization/localization/, reflexivity/ideology, identity/difference” (Mautner, 2005; p. 821). In addition, a few interviews with academics and practitioners from the Philippines were conducted. Secondary research consisted of published materials on Philippine history, education and the public relations industry.

3. Colonial influences on Philippine education

3.1. Spanish times

Historians have chronicled how Spain used the sword and the cross to gain imperial power and ensure the world dominance of the Spanish crown. The colonial policy of the United States, on the other hand, centered on “benevolent assimilation” (Miller, 1982). For both colonial masters, however, education was a potent weapon in their vast arsenal, which they used to complete the subjugation of the conquered archipelago.

The Spanish colonizers established schools and offered locals, particularly the Chinese, free education in order to convert them to Christianity. However, locals were discouraged to learn Spanish for fear that it would “become too united and join in opposition to the government” (Forbes, 1933; p. 156).

Since the establishment of the first Jesuit *colegio* in 1595 and the Dominican counterpart in 1619, the enormity of the influence of the Spanish religious orders in shaping education in the Philippines continues to this day. According to Simpson (1980) the Jesuits and Dominicans led the “Hispanization” of the islands. Even if they were outnumbered by the Franciscans and Augustinians they “totally monopolized the institutions of higher education until the end of Spanish times” (Simpson, 1980; p. 3).

The Jesuit-run Ateneo de Manila University and the Dominican-owned University of Santo Tomas (UST) continue to be venerable institutions of higher learning today. It is noteworthy that Ateneo’s Department of Communication offers advertising and PR as one of four concentrations in their curriculum. UST currently offers PR within an interdisciplinary bachelor’s degree in communication arts as well.

A welcome transformation in the Spanish colonial educational system came about with the Educational Reform Law of 1863. The law provided “a system of compulsory primary education with free instruction in Spanish language and grammar, Christian doctrine, arithmetic, geography, agriculture, music, the history of Spain, and courtesy” (Kramer, 2006). This reform

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