



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Public Relations Review



Public relations practice in the emerging 'powerhouses' of South East Asia: Some views from within

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 February 2015

Received in revised form 23 July 2015

Accepted 1 October 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Asia
South East Asia
Politics
Media
Values
Power
Ethics

ABSTRACT

Much has been written and theorized about public relations practice and the ways in which practitioners view themselves and their work. But little of the available international research has embraced the worldviews and perspectives of practitioners operating in the rapidly developing countries of South East Asia, which include Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, its sister state, Malaysia, the nearby international business hub, Singapore, the increasingly vigorous yet still tightly controlled one-party state of Vietnam, the business-friendly but politically fragile Thailand, and Asia's only majority Christian nation, the Philippines. The broad social, political, economic and cultural diversity to be found among these major member countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) arguably may have important implications for the ways in which public relations programs should be conducted in these locations. This paper reports on a doctoral research project conducted among public relations practitioners working across the ASEAN region, giving glimpses into how successful operators in these locations view their work, their working environments and the challenges they face in seeking to balance sensitive considerations of localism, regionalism and globalism in increasingly fluid cross-cultural environments. The concerns they report confirm some general observations around 'cultural difference' raised previously in other quarters, but also highlight more strongly some particular pre-occupations including sensitivities around political power, personal values conflicting with the values of clients, employers and target publics, the importance of understanding local linguistic issues, the distinctiveness of local media systems, and pressures arising from rapidly increasing pace of life in countries of the region. The paper argues that local and regional issues of this nature deserve greater recognition by public relations scholars as a step toward the development of more truly inclusive international theories and models over time.

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1. Introduction: the quest for more inclusive perspectives

In recent years, a small but steadily growing number of public relations scholars has sought to broaden the horizons of public relations theory beyond earlier models of inquiry which focused primarily on the ways in which public relations

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practice supports the achievement of ‘excellence’ in the performance of large organizations (see, for example, Dozier and Broom, 1995; Grunig, 1992).

Some contemporary scholars (for example, Bardhan and Weaver, 2011; L’Etang, 2011) have begun to challenge the assumption that public relations can best be understood in the context of how it serves the needs of large organizations, whether they might be of the ‘eastern’ or ‘western’ variety. In doing so they have built on distinctive cultural and locational insights contributed in preceding years by a range of public relations researchers outside of North America, including Sriramesh, Kim, and Takasaki (1999) and Verčič (2000). Such authors broke new ground in challenging the extent to which commonly accepted western public relations models could be seen to be valid in ‘non-western’ cultural environments where individual and group behavior and motivations might differ from those commonly found in North American and Western European environments.

More broadly, in an era of globalization, their work has prompted growing consideration of how much we yet know about the interplay of local customs and outlooks, emerging regional groupings and increasingly complex international influences in shaping the characteristics of specific local operating environments. Writers including Bardhan and Weaver (2011), Pal and Dutta (2008), and L’Etang (2011) have come to advocate paradigms which go beyond ‘organizational excellence’ in an effort to help scholars attain deeper insights into the profession’s operations on a global level: for example, L’Etang (2011) argues that an ‘anthropological’ and ‘ethnographic’ perspective might shed much more light on the profession’s sense of self-identity, its rituals and its functions, and reveal more about how the profession’s work relates to the functioning of society as a whole; Pal and Dutta (2008), for their part, argue that a perspective of ‘critical modernism’ might help us understand more about what role the profession plays in the context of shifting power structures and relationships in society at large. Bardhan and Weaver (2011) rightly note that “the globalization of the public relations industry is widely acknowledged and yet remains under-researched and meagerly theorized” (p.5). Sriramesh (2009, 2004) similarly notes that a lack of empirical evidence on the linkage between environmental variables and public relations practices in most regions of the world means that such linkage can still only be broadly conceptualized or based on anecdotal evidence. In specific relation to Asia, he notes: “The body of knowledge of public relations in Asia is sparse and growing at a slow pace” (Sriramesh, 2004; p.323). While making this observation more than 10 years ago, it arguably holds no less true today. In the view of Malaysian public relations educators Jamilah Ahmad and I Gusti Ngurah Putra (2012), American-style curriculum remains generally favored in public relations teaching in the region not because of any confidence in its local relevance but because of a lack of sufficient contemporary local research which might prove more useful. In their words: “In Malaysia and other Asian countries, there exists a limited body of public relations materials, information and research related to and from Asia. . . Among those very few references available are an out-of-date reference on public relations, which dates back more than a decade... Hence the preference of most academics from Asian countries and Europe. . . for the US curriculum” (p.4).

With these and other localized and sometimes more critical perspectives evidently in mind, Edwards and Hodges (2011) go as far as to suggest that in the early 21st century public relations research may be reaching a “socio-cultural turn” (p.1): a “turn” which might ultimately enable public relations practice to be viewed in more diverse and more penetratingly insightful ways.

In the countries of Asia, more critical and societally-based perspectives do not appear, as yet, to have been explored to any great extent. However, there have been some valuable efforts made since the turn of the new century to understand more about what effect local cultural dynamics might have on the capability of organizations in non-western locations to achieve public relations ‘excellence’ of the kind advocated by Grunig (1992). Authors including Sriramesh (2009), Lim, Goh, and Sriramesh (2005), Rhee (2002), Ekachai and Komolsevin (2004) and others have made valuable contributions to this end. Most recently, a new anthology on public relations practice in Asia (Watson, 2014) has sought to distil, for an international audience, some of the more significant of the cultural and environmental factors which might shape contemporary public relations practice in Asia in ways which align it with broader societal understandings both inside and outside particular organizations under study, drawing on a range of earlier studies. The Chinese concept of *guanxi* (personal networks, referred to as *quan hệ* in Vietnam, and also found in variants in India, Taiwan and, to a lesser extent, in Japan) is given particular prominence in this regard. These and other efforts have, if somewhat obliquely at times, brought to light questions about the extent to which ‘organizational excellence’, ‘communication symmetry’ and other key concepts embraced by Western public relations scholars can still be viewed as sufficient for an understanding of what ‘good professional practice’ means in widely varying cultural contexts.

Beyond raising implicit questions about the relevance of ‘communication symmetry’ to societies in which little symmetry may exist between groups of people at any other levels of the society under study, recent Asia-oriented scholars implicitly prompt more far-reaching questions about what fundamental role the public relations profession is playing – or could potentially play – in influencing the economic, social and political development of countries and regions that are undergoing rapid transitions and exhibiting tensions between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ outlooks.

The research project upon which this paper is based has sought, at least tentatively, to explore such issues concerning the social, economic and political dimensions of the public relations profession operating in the dynamic and fast-growing countries of South East Asia. In particular, the research has sought to explore these issues from the point of view of practitioners themselves, asking: How does the world of public relations practice look in South East Asian locations, **through practitioners’ own eyes?**

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