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Professionalization of public relations in Latin America: A longitudinal comparative study

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the evolution of professionalization of public relations in Latin America and the potential influence of three contextual variables – economic performance, political system, and press freedom- in this process. Over 1400 public relations professionals completed online surveys in 2009 and 2015 (674 and 803 respectively), creating two data data sets for analysis. The study used eight measurement items grouped in two dimensions: institutionalization and specialization. Statistically significant improvements were found for five indicators: formal study of public relations in higher-education institutions, ideological and ethical principles that emphasize societal well-being, associative organizations that unite professionals, availability of a formal scientific knowledge, and a system of employment access and promotion. Results show also the influence of economic performance on the levels of professionalization in Latin America.

1. Introduction

The global public relations industry – comprising practitioners, public and independent firms – grew approximately 11%, 7%, and 5% from 2013 to 2015, respectively (Sudhaman, 2016; The Holmes Report/ICCO, 2015). The robustness of the industry has spurred the desire to acquire a greater level of professionalization, understood as the process of attaining an exceptional standard of practice in a profession (Yang & Taylor, 2013; Yang & Taylor, 2014). However, growth in the industry is not guaranteed to remain constant; just as the profession may continue to advance, it could also stagnate or regress.

The region is facing socioeconomic and political challenges that influence the development of public relations and require practitioners to seek strategies for positioning themselves inside and outside of their organizations. Latin America, a culturally diverse continent, makes up 64% of the population of the Western Hemisphere but only represents a relatively small part of the world economy (Reyes & Sawyer, 2016). Although the region has achieved considerable success in reducing extreme poverty over the last decade, its still-high levels of income and wealth inequality have stymied sustainable growth and social inclusion.

Despite the increasing number and quality of publications on global public relations, there is a recognized need to continue systematically documenting the practice in various parts of the world, especially in underrepresented regions, such as Latin America.

The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to conceptualize the construct of professionalization and its dynamic nature through a longitudinal comparative study conducted in 2009 and replicated in 2015, and (2) to analyze the impact of political and economic contextual variables on the practice of public relations.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Public relations in Latin America

There are several reasons that explain the lack of research on the practice of public relations in Latin America. On one hand, the authoritarian regimes and dictatorships imposed on the region during much of the twentieth century slowed down the development of a professional public relations field. On the other hand, the diversity of professional and educational contexts, and the weakness of professional organizations hampered the professionalization process (Molleda, Moreno, Navarro, & Stephen, 2016). Moreover, language barriers, a non-existent critical spirit, difficulties in accessing books, and the low level of participation in international associations negatively affect the scientific production (Ferrari, 2011; González, 1999).

The history of public relations in Latin America is rather short. Although the beginning of public relations can be traced to 1914 with the creation of a department of public relations at the Sao Paulo Tramway Light and Power Company Limited (Brazil), it can be argued that the profession appeared in the early 1970s, with the fall of the various military governments in Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, Uruguay, Peru, Brazil, and Panama (Mellado & Barría, 2012; Sharpe & Simoes, 1996). Ferreira (1993), however, traces the real advancement in 1960, the date of the first Inter-American Conference on Public Relations (FIARP), founded with the goal of promoting unity and reciprocal collaboration among public and private public relations professional organizations. Brazil, according to this author, was also the first country in the world to regulate the field in 1967, establishing degree requirements for entry into the profession, followed by Panama in 1980 and Peru in 1990.

Despite the numerous obstacles in the development of the PR industry, the Latin American School of Public Relations, born in the 1960s, has tried to emancipate from imported models, focusing on the interests of the community and practice of public relations according to their own economic, social and political circumstances (Molleda, 2001). The Latin American School is considered more humanistic and socially oriented, closer to the European orientation, anchored in social and communitarian concerns to serve society.

Recent years have seen a greater interest in public relations in Latin America as a result of the improved economic situation in the region, the effects of globalization and the strengthening of media systems in many countries. Numerous articles on the situation of public relations in different Latin American countries have been published during the last years (e.g., Álvarez, Yaguache, & Paladines, 2016; De Brooks, Penaloza, & Waymer, 2009; Mellado & Barría, 2012; Molleda & Moreno, 2006; Molleda & Suárez, 2005; Molleda, Athaydes, & Hirsch, 2003). However, the *Latin American Macro-survey of Communication and Public Relations* (Molleda, Moreno, Athaydes, & Suárez, 2012) was the first attempt to investigate the trends, the professionalism, and social roles of the profession in the subcontinent through opinions of a representative sample of professionals. Since 2014, the Latin American Communication Monitor (Moreno, Molleda, Athaydes, & Suárez, 2015), linked to similar studies in Europe and Asia, enables the comparison of the practices and challenges faced by Latin American communicators with those faced by their counterparts around the world. The Monitor reveals that Latin American professionals occupy fewer leadership positions and have less professional experience than their peers in Asia and Europe. In addition, the number of communicators working in government-owned, public sector and political organizations is higher, the importance of professional associations much lower, and they are less satisfied with their salary.

2.2. The construct of professionalization

As public relations theory and practice has developed at different rates around the world, a broad understanding has been reached about the benefits associated with professionalization, including respect, prestige, and a positive public image (e.g., Abdullah & Threadgold, 2008; Li et al., 2012; Park, 2003). Yet, despite the desirability of professionalization of public relations, the tenants of professionalization have not been widely integrated into the industry (Meintjes & Niemann-Struweg, 2009).

A potential hindrance to the adaption of professionalization of public relations could be attributed to a failure to fully comprehend the parameters of the concept. The concepts *profession*, *professionalism* and *professionalization* are often confused and, erroneously, used interchangeably. Sociologists have long attempted to define the term *profession*, but ultimately have been unsuccessful in clarifying the differences between professions and other occupations and identifying what makes professions distinctive.

According to Johansen (2001), *professionalism* can be conceptualized as an attitudinal predisposition towards focusing on the interpersonal/societal benefit of work rather than the intrapersonal/self-serving. Coombs, Holladay and Signitzer (1994) noted that the professionalism construct is related to the importance practitioners attach to the characteristics of a profession.

The construct of professionalization refers to the process – undertaken either by an organization or an entire industry – of attaining a sufficient level of quality and practice representative of excellence in a profession (Caplow, 1954; Yang & Taylor, 2013; Yang & Taylor, 2014). According to Wilensky (1964), in order to reach professional status, occupations need to establish training schools, form professional associations, regulate practice through legal protection, and adopt a formal code of ethics. Nessmann (1995) also identified education, professional associations, and codes of ethics as foundational steps toward professionalization.

Wilensky (1964) definition of professionalization has been criticized for failing to account for societal conditions and political challenges and to adequately acknowledge how evolving politics and regulation impact the abilities to educate professionals and establish professional associations (Ritzer & Walczak, 1986).

Although there have been numerous attempts to outline the parameters of professionalization in public relations, none have resulted in true consensus among practitioners (e.g., Cameron, Sallot, & Lariscy, 1996; Niemann-Struweg & Meintjes, 2008; Parsons, 2008). Merksens (2011) identified two dilemmas in the professionalization process regarding with who benefits from professionalization, and who would find professionalization most desirable. While the first dilemma has found a pragmatic solution (although theoretically unstable), there has been no clear resolution to the second one. Together these two dilemmas contribute to the lack of

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