

The Use of the Concept “Public Relations”: A Bibliographic Comparison between Europe and the USA

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Abstract: *The strategic approach to public relations was consolidated academically in the 80's and it broke into the professional field in the late 90's of the 20th Century. Nowadays, it is still in force in both collectives. The aim of our work was focused on analyzing the presence of the concept 'strategy' in the most recent professional and academic European and American literature. We wanted to identify the main topics, processes related to publics, and some possible conceptual and epistemological absences, in order to verify whether there is or there is not a convergence between professionals and scholars.*

Keywords: *Corporate Communication, ECM-European Communication Monitor, Europe, Public Relations, Strategy, United States of America (USA).*

1. INTRODUCTION

Having a general idea of how public relations are structured in Europe, both academically and professionally, it is not an easy task. The continent is highly linguistically and politically fragmented and academic approaches vary significantly from country to country. Historically, this reality has produced significant difficulties in understanding how the discipline has been developed in the territorial whole, according to Beurer-Züllig, Fieseler & Meckel, 2008, 2009; Miguez, 2007; Nessmann, 1995; O'Connor & Muzi, 2004; van Ruler, 2000; Desanto & Moss, 2004; van Ruler Rogojinaru, Verčić & Hamrefors, 2007; and Verhoeven & Aarts, 2010.

If to all this we add an unequal panorama regarding an atomized existence of professional associations at national level¹, barriers impeding the global understanding of the object of study are even more intensified (Moreno, Navarro & Zerfass, 2012: 118). On the contrary, this complexity is not found in the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia, countries in which the establishment of a panoramic has result much easier because they share the same language.

Moreover, the fact that English is the academia's *lingua franca* has allowed the covering of other geographical non-Anglo-Saxon regions with written postulates in English. And that's the case of most European states, which are linguistically discriminated (Yukio, 1992).

The history of public relations academic field is relatively new. From 2010, the EPRHN-European Public Relations History Network and its International History of Public Relations Conference (2010

¹ CERP-Confédération Européenne des Relations Publiques (1958); SNCRP-Syndicat National des Conseils en Relations Publiques (1960); AFREP-Association Française de Relations Publiques (1955); Maison du Verre (1950); ACP-Association de Communication Publique; IPRA-International Relations Association; ECPSA-European Committee for Promotion and Sponsoring of the Arts; Agentur für Kommunikation; FEIA-Federación Europea de Comunicadores de Empresas e Instituciones; CERP- Confédération Européenne des Relations Publiques (1979); Association Européenne de Directeurs de Communication d'Entreprise (1993); BAIE-Communicators in Business (199); ICO-International Committee of Public Relations Consultancies Associations (1989); ASCAI-Associazione per lo Sviluppo delle Comunicazione Aziendali in Italia (1974); ASSOREL-Associazione italiana delle Agenzie di Relazioni Pubbliche (1982); GIK-Corporate Communication Association (1990); Associação Portuguesa de Comunicação de Empresa (1991), etc.

to 2013), approved as a project by EUPRERA-European Public Relations Education and Research Association (2013) [<http://www.euprera.org/?p=3>], develop cross-border projects and explore the characteristics of public relations history across the continent: 'Its aims are to develop and produce information about the history and historiography of public relations in Europe through the identification and formation of archives, transnational research, joint research bids and the production of publications in print and online formats'. Recently, Public Relations Review has published two special issues on public relations history (2012 and 2013, Tom Watson Ed.), which has published selected papers from the International History of Public Relations Conference (IHPRC) [<http://blogs.bournemouth.ac.uk/research/tag/european-public-relations-history-network/>].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Van Ruler & Verčič (2004), with the sponsorship of the EUPRERA, were the first authors who decided to conduct qualitative research to provide empirical data, country to country, about the evolution of European theory, praxis and education related to public relations (the Project Ebok). And they were also the first ones to lay the foundations of a first state of the art.

Three years later (2007), the EUPRERA, with the collaboration of the EACD-European Association of Communication Directors [<http://www.eacd-online.eu/>], encouraged the systematization of a new Pan-European annual study, the ECM-European Communication Monitor. This new study, which extended considerably the previous one, aimed at identifying the future evolution of public relations in Europe and the major professional challenges to face (Zerfass *et al.*, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014). It has been also the largest annual online survey of the European continent on public relations profession, involving managers from agencies and all types of organizations, public and private. Furthermore, in each of its six editions completed to date, it has covered different areas of study.

As will be seen later (Chapter 4), the authors must add a new obstacle in all this, but this time relating to the discipline: the different definitions of the notion of public relations that appear in the literature and that, to authors knowledge, go far beyond the simple question of semantic disagreement characteristic of all new academic and professional discipline in its early stages². Probably, it is because their many approach perspectives, as is clear from the literature, that public relations are not easy to identify and even less to narrow. So consequently, 'perhaps we are facing one of the most elusive conceptual categories of all public communication' (Salas Nestares, 2001: 529).

3. METHODOLOGY

Authors has used a methodology consisting of a descriptive study of European literature specialized in the object of study (1995-2013), both from a professional and academic background. Specifically, authors has also used the content analysis of reports results from the transnational annual macro-study of future trends in communication management and public relations ECM-European Communication Monitor (2007-2014), sponsored by the EUPRERA, the EACD and the Communication Director journal, which, in 2012, involved 2,200 professionals from organizations and agencies from 42 countries, and in which authors identifies the existence of the concept 'strategy' and the most important issues considered of strategic interest by participants and as professional challenges to achieve.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the course of the analysis authors has noticed that, in its first four editions, the ECM had incorporated the concept 'public relations' in its title 'Trends in Communication Management and Public Relations' in the editions of 2007, 2008 and 2009; 'Status Quo and Challenges for Public Relations' in the edition of 2010, but that, from then on, the term completely disappeared, being replaced by that of 'Strategic Communication' in 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014.

² "But when we use the techniques of descriptive analysis, it become abundantly clear that the things PR men actually do are marked to a very large extent by variety, not by uniformity. The trouble is not that the phrase 'public relations' has no meaning; the difficulty is that it means too many different things", in S. Fitzgerald, Public Relations: a Profession in Search of Professionals, Public Opinion Quarterly, 10(2), Summer, Pp. 191, (1946).

It was in 2011 when the ECM first analyzed the perceptions that participating European professionals generated around the term 'public relations'. The results were that 41.6% blamed the media for devaluing the concept, which for the 73.7% represented such a loss of prestige that seriously and directly affected the waterline of the level of trust in the professionals called themselves as 'public relations'.

What is more, respondents preferred to opt for the use of other replacement concepts such as 'strategic communication' (61.3%) or 'corporate communication' (67.9%) (Moreno *et al.*, 2012: 126). At least initially, these answers seem to indicate that all of the concepts were considered as synonyms.

Therefore, it doesn't look like a coincidence that precisely in the 2011's edition, authors of the study decide to remove the term 'public relations' and incorporate the title of 'strategic communication' instead, as noted above.

In the same way, in 2011's ECM, authors has observed a certain terminological and conceptual gibberish, which did nothing to clarify things and, thus, the authors of the study referred to 'corporate communication', 'marketing/brand communication', 'crisis communication', 'corporate social responsibility and sustainability', 'investor relations/financial communications', 'internal communication/change management', 'public affairs/lobbying', 'international communication', or 'personal coaching-training' as disciplines [*sic*] in the performance of public relations [*sic*] and 'communication management' (Moreno *et al.*, 2012: 133-135).

Namely, from what authors exposes, it might be deduced that: (a) there are disciplines within another discipline –'public relations'–; (b) that they are not strategic; (c) that in turn they do not 'manage communication' and that, from the 'strategic communication', sometimes they 'communicate' and in others, they 'relate' (concretely, only to investors).

The authors emphasize this terminological change because, in their opinion, it could mean a serious limitation to our study. And that's because, at this point, they wonders if the sudden change of name in the object of study of the ECM of 2011 and 2012 will not be invalidating their research, which, as authors remember, is to analyze the strategic issue in the field of European public relations. And after the abrupt disappearance of the title of the last four editions of the ECM, public relations seem not to deserve the consideration of 'strategic', in one hand, and neither to be able to 'manage the communication', in the other.

Under these circumstances, the authors are perplexed, since those who subscribe these words exercise university teaching/research in a Spanish degree called Advertising and Public Relations, validated by the EHEA-European Higher Education that, according to what authors has exposed, and from the perspective of the professionals involved in these studies, from the EUPRERA, the EACD, the authors of the report of ECM and the eleven European universities driving it, this degree seems lacking of meaning and immersed in a *limbo* of strange and difficult scientific location.

Matilla (2007: 76) states that communication is a term with different meanings and therefore marked by a great ambiguity and after an exhaustive literature review, she notes that the new wave of corporate communication, of U.S. origin, includes public relations within it, associating them only to publicity and event management techniques, as reflected in vol. 10, no. I, August 1996 of the Management Communication Quarterly, where various authors –P.A. Argenti; E. M. Eisenberg; D. K. Mumby and C. Stohl; N. L. Reinsch Jr.; or A. Shelby and L.R. Smeltzer, among others– made a notable effort to define the various communication disciplines involved in the dynamics and operation of companies and institutions. This new corporate communication tendency or school –leded years later by Fombrun (1995) and Fombrun & Shanley (1989)– spread a few years later through Europe from the Netherlands, helped by the Dutch scholar van Riel (Fombrun & van Riel, 2003).

The emergence of corporate communication produces a first breach in the academic field. In the United States of America, it will move away from the systemic canonical and bidirectional line of public relations, epitomized by J.E. Grunig (1992), who argues that tasks belonging to corporate communication and institutional communication are called 'public relations and communication management', being completely excluded from them those related to marketing and advertising (Matilla, 2007: 80). According to Heath (2001: 33), public relations are 'mutually beneficial and satisfying relationships'.

In this new emerging paradigm, the term public relations, which has progressively stopped being associated exclusively to the communicative function, invested of functional hierarchical power and, at the time, of staff, contrasts in some aspects with the theory that, in recent years, has been called integrated communication function (or total communication or corporate communication), led by the figure of the director of communication –‘dircom’-.

Indeed: the use of the term public relations, with the passage of time, was not longer used homogeneously, especially in the last fifteen years or so, both in the field of practice and professional literature, and in the academic one. Thus, recently, new terms appeared that, not with wish of synonymous, have begun to displace the original and historic of public relations, as is the case, for example, of notions such as communication management, corporate communication, integrated communication, total communication, and reputation management, among others, whose differences are not merely semantic. In fact, there are two major trends or lines of thought that have led to a lengthy theoretical corpus, mainly in the early 90's (Matilla, 2007: 86).

In Europe, the term public relations –introduced in the U.S. in 1882 (Goldman, 1948: 2; Chaumely & Huisman, 1963: 8; Cutlip, 1995: 2008)– was used for the first time in Germany in 1937 (Nessmann, 1995: 151-160) and the beginning of its practice in the Eastern countries was documented in 1989 (Moloney, 2000: 40).

The European vision, since its inception, has considered the discipline as an independent directive function, whose focus is on obtaining trust relationships with publics (Boiry, 1989) through the communication management (Prat Gaballí, 1958; Matrat, 1970: 27, 37-49; Ugeux, 1973: 32-33). This vision was still in full force in 2002, when the European study on public relations, the Bled Manifesto on PR, was published (van Ruler & Verčič, 2002).

This directive character unbreakably involves strategic orientation (Matrat, 1970: 27; Arnaldi, 1971: 217) that exceeds the asymmetrical dimension of public relations as a persuasive element and, of course, their purely tactical orientation, as pointed out by some European professional associations in the last forty years, as the British Institute of Public Opinion, the Dansk Public Relations Club of Denmark, the IPRA-International Public Relations Association (meeting in The Hague, May 1960) or the CERP-Confédération Européenne des Relations Publiques (Code of Athens, 1965).

In 1982, Peters and Waterman published ‘In Search of Excellence’, presenting a series of values that were not reflected in the balance sheets of companies, despite being part of their assets. Nine years later, Hiroyuki Itami (1991) named them as ‘invisible assets’ and presented them at Harvard University, claiming that they should be planned and managed as tangible counterparts. This speech had such a huge international impact on professional and academic management during the last decade of the 20th Century that has even reached nowadays.

It is in this context that culture, corporate image and reputation, as seen from the new financial accounting perspective, acquire an absolute main role and communication management, omitted until then in organizational and business theories, hold a strategic position, especially for large listed corporations that operate in a broad territorial scenario governed by the new philosophy of growth, globalization, stock options and oriented to the maximum benefit for shareholders.

That context becomes the perfect Petri dish to produce the abrupt appearance of the new theory of corporate communication, which reduces the historical concept of ‘publics’ characteristic of public relations (Míguez, 2010; Oliveira, 2012) to only four stakeholders: shareholders, customers, employees and suppliers –those that matter the most to business objectives-; which displaces the organization for the benefit of the company; and which replaces the philosophy based on the nature and quality of the relationships of trust with publics (Ledingham & Bruning (2000), by the one of accounting profitability of results of investments in communication.

Continuous fusions, joint ventures and acquisitions that occur fast-paced in that period justify a new business phenomenon: postmodernist globalized huge corporation's direction is now guided by financial engineers. Consequences of this shift are evident in corporate culture and management philosophy, covered in a current of thought/action that will provide necessary mechanisms to redefine the role responsible for managing communication in this new framework –communication director or ‘dircom’-.

A role that is now integrally understood (Meffert, 1979; Knecht, 1989; Aberg, 1990), that is to say also including and integrating the management of that commercial and marketing communication, referred by van Riel (1995) as 'communication management'. Public relations will be conceived as publicity management or, in other words, they will be restricted as a specific instrument for supporting marketing at the tactical level (contribution made by Kotler, 1988 and collected by van Riel, 1997: 11, 14). Agencies and consultants will adjust their services portfolio to the one demanded by the new interlocutor's profile in client companies.

This new conception of the professional practice of integrated or total communication management, developed in the United States of America and the Netherlands from a commercial, mercantilist and persuasive perspective, will radiate to other countries in Europe, including the UK. And it will root and displace quickly the more social and humanist philosophy, based on the characteristic influence of canonical public relations. Thus, the culture of 'corporate' and 'reputation management' (Morley, 1998) will be hegemonic in practice and in European business schools in the last decade of the 90's³, integrating the hard and the soft⁴ from management, and slowly but surely occupying large areas in degrees and in postgraduate studies of European communication faculties during the first decade of the new millennium.

Consequently, the so-called 'reputocratic revolution', understood as radical change in the concept of corporate reputation, which constitutes an intangible key asset for the valuation of a company, displacing even the physical and financial assets, has exponentially increased the role of integral/total/corporate communications in managing [*sic*] the intangibles (brand; experience; management credibility/employee commitment; public trust) and to the extent that, in the words of Hannington (2006: 9), according to a survey by the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2004, 25% of senior executives who attended the event considered reputation as the main factor to be considered in the strategy of a company, only below the quality of products and services. Senior managers thought that corporate reputation was a fundamental pillar on which the sustainability of their businesses was settled.

Both public relations and corporate communications define themselves as strategic and resort to social research for diagnosis (Cuenca, 2012) and final evaluation (Marca, 2011), while in the second case they stand for establishing indicators to undertake the measuring (Arboleda Naranjo, 2004).

Once analysed, the results of all ECM reports (2007-2012) showed that, in Europe and in the same period, despite occurring substantial differences between different regions/countries and types of organizations, all together:

- In the first three editions the authors observed a sustained trend for which almost half of the participants considered that the main challenge was to achieve a consolidation of the professional aspect of value added creation: the alignment of communication strategies with business strategies, taking the first position of the ranking. From the fourth edition on, this item, despite not having been reduced its percentage of interest, will be moved to the 2nd position, below the issue of digital evolution and social networks. A new issue that still remains in the lead in the ECM 2012, since has become a star.
- During the first three years (2007-2008-2009) a tendency to increase discreetly the interest on control development as well as new effectiveness evaluation methods was revealed, even though, afterwards, the subject would drop dramatically in 30 percentage points, to occupy the 7th position in the list in 2010 and the 9th in 2011.

5. CONCLUSIONS

From the literature reviewed, the authors have observed that:

³ Thus, for example, in the UK, a short distance from London, in Oxfordshire, in the School of Thought Leadership at Henley Management College, it was established, a few years ago, the School of Reputation and Relationships.

⁴ The authors refers to the '7 Ss' advocated by McKinsey. The hard ones are: Structure, Strategy and Systems. And the soft ones are: Style, Staff, Shared Values and Skills.

Europe follows the same trend that began in the late 90's in the United States of America and Oceania: professionals and certain academics define a new functional area –corporate communication, which will have the figure of the 'dircom' as responsible. Corporate communication breaks into play with unusual force and in less than two decades it spreads rapidly amongst both groups, globally – even in the non Anglo-Saxon Europe–, with strategic purpose.

Professionals lead this process and part of the academy legitimizes it with a new theoretical production that knows, but seems to ignore, the previous canonical public relations, appropriating the majority of their concepts, techniques and tools and relegating them to the limited role of their origins: mediated transmission of messages to public opinion (publicity).

- In parallel, on both sides of the Pacific and the Atlantic, the classic academic line of public relations is still maintained. A line that began a century ago, based on the four-step strategic model of Marston (1963) and that was occasionally revitalized with the contribution of the 'relationship management' made by Ledingham & Bruning (2000).
- The American historical tradition, which complemented its theoretical contributions with applied research, loses its monopoly with the transition to the new millennium, since the academic community of the old European continent will incorporate this type of studies to its research. No conceptual differences were perceived in different continents/countries and the theoretical basis is still common, even though the authors evidence an opening rift between the public relations current, constrained exclusively to a limited academic area, and professional practice, aligned with the principles of corporate communication, enfolded and supported by a large majority of professors and researchers from business schools and university faculties, and by most professional and academic associations, including the oldest ones, and the ones with the most historical anchor tradition within the discipline of public relations.

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