

PUBLIC RELATIONS: CONTRIBUTIONS FROM LJUBLJANA

Abstract. Public relations emerged as an academic discipline in the 1980s in the US, and in 1990s it institutionalised itself in European academia as well. Work at the Marketing Communication and Public Relations department, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, has been instrumental in the Europeanisation and globalisation of the predominantly US public relations theory and contributed to the development of the reflective model of public relations.

Keywords: communication management, public relations, strategic communication

Public relations as a communication and management discipline (Botan, 1989; Botan, 1992; Botan and Taylor, 2004; van Ruler and Verčič, 2005b; Verčič and Grunig, 2000) first entered academia in 1920s when Edward L. Bernays, one of the founding fathers of public relations who invented the name for the emerging profession, wrote the first book on the subject (*Crystallizing Public Opinion*), published the first article in an academic journal ('Manipulating Public Opinion: The Why and the How' in *The American Journal of Sociology*) and taught the first course in public relations at the New York University (Bernays, 1923; Bernays, 1928; Bernays, 1965; Verčič, 2005). But it was not until the 1980s that public relations established itself in the US academia: from 1984 to 1985, The Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) published three issues of an experimental journal, *Public Relations Research and Education*. From 1989 to 1992, the journal was published under the name *Public Relations Research Annual*, and then it became the regular quarterly *Journal of Public Relations Research*. (The other top academic public relations journal published in the US is *Public Relations Review*, which started in the 1970s, also transformed itself through the 1980s into an academic journal publishing original research articles.) The first book on public relations theory was published in the US in 1989 (Botan and Hazleton, 1989). In Europe, the institutionalization of public relations research

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and education emerged in the 1990s. Slovenia is one of the core countries in Europe contributing to the development of knowledge in the field: public relations has been taught as an academic subject at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, since 1994. Since 2009, public relations is a constituting member of the Department of Marketing Communication and Public Relations, offering public relations subjects at the undergraduate level and full degrees at the graduate and a doctoral level.

Broad introductions to public relations scene, its history and performers in Slovenia have been provided elsewhere (J. Grunig, L. Grunig and Verčič, 2004; Podnar and Verčič 2011; Verčič, 2002; Verčič, 2004; Verčič, 2009). This article focuses on the theory development in the past twenty years, the current status and the future of public relations as an academic discipline and contributions by the Department of Marketing Communication and Public Relations at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana.

The Emergence of Public Relations as an Academic Discipline and its Globalization

In the introductory chapter to the book *Public Relations Theory II*, Botan and Hazleton wrote that “It is probably fair to say that the United States is the birthplace of public relations theory and has been dominant in public relations research in recent years. One of the most important developments in the field of public relations – perhaps the most important – is that the U. S. dominance is fading.” (2006: 13) The most notable example of the US dominance in building public relations theory has been The Excellence theory (J. Grunig and L. Grunig, 2006). The Excellence theory is a result of the Excellence study funded by the IABC Foundation with a grant for \$400,000 awarded in 1985. Its project director was James E. Grunig (University of Maryland, USA) and his research team consisted of Larissa Grunig (also University of Maryland, USA), David Dozier (San Diego State University, USA), William Ehling (Syracuse University, USA), Jon White (Cranfield School of Management, UK) and Fred Repper (who had recently retired as vice president of public relations for Gulf States Utilities in Beaumont, Texas, USA). A decade of research into literature review, theory construction and empirical research that also involved a quantitative study in 327 organizations in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, and a qualitative study in 25 organizations. The Excellence study concluded:

To summarize, excellence in public relations can be conceptualized in three broad arenas: expertise, mutual expectations between the dominant coalition and the public relations department, and a participatory organizational culture. Participatory culture provides a conducive

environment for excellent communication programs – but only when given the necessary expertise in the public relations department and a set of shared expectations about communicating with the dominant coalition. (Grunig, 1997: 298)

The full report on the study is available in three books: *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (Grunig, 1992), *Manager's Guide to Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (Dozier, L. Grunig in J. Grunig, 1995) and *Excellent Public Relations and Effective Organizations: A Study of Communication Management in Three Countries* (J. Grunig, L. Grunig and Dozier, 2002).

The Excellence study received wide international attention and it was soon replicated in other countries. The most extensive work was done by Verčič, L. Grunig and J. Grunig (1996) and L. Grunig, J. Grunig and Verčič (1998) who proposed a global public relations theory of generic principles and specific applications based on the Excellence theory, where generic principles means that the core principles of public relations are the same worldwide, while specific applications means that these principles must be applied differently in different settings. The core principles are the generic principles of (excellent) public relations and they are: (1) the involvement of public relations in strategic management, (2) the empowerment of public relations in the dominant coalition or a direct reporting relationship to senior management, (3) an integrated public relations function, (4) public relations as a management function that is separate from other functions, (5) the role of the public relations practitioner, (6) a two-way symmetrical model of public relations, (7) a symmetrical system of internal communication, (8) knowledge potential for managerial role and symmetrical public relations, and (9) diversity embodied in all roles. The specific variables affecting the application of the generic principles are: (a) the political-economic system, (b) culture, (c) the extent of activism, (d) the level of development, and (e) the media system. The work on a global public relations theory based on the Excellence project was further elaborated by Sriramesh and Verčič (2001) who condensed the five environmental variables into three factors (the country's infrastructure, the media environment and societal culture) and proposed a framework enabling the operationalisation of variables for future research. With colleagues from other countries, they are continuing work on the globalisation of public relations (Sriramesh and Verčič, 2009) and the role of culture in public relations and *vice versa* (Sriramesh and Verčič, in print).

Public Relations in Europe

The globalisation of the dominant US public relations theorising resulted in a reaction in Europe. In 1998, the then CERP Education and Research (today: The European Public Relations Education and Research Association – EUPRERA) initiated the European Public Relations Body of Knowledge project. The EBOK project was a reaction to the parochialism of the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) Public Relations Body of Knowledge Task Force, which published 'The initial readings to be codified in the public relations body of knowledge' in 1988, an initial list of 800 bibliographical items (updated in 1989 and in 1993), with nearly all the listed items being from the US and all in English. Instead of the public relations body of knowledge, it would be appropriate to call it the North-American public relations body of knowledge.

The EBOK project was "to codify the existing body of public relations literature in Europe and to enable its fuller use and affirmation, which is at present restricted by linguistic, cultural and administrative barriers" (Verčič 2000: 343). Its project coordinator was Dejan Verčič (Slovenia) and the members of the project team were Gerhard Bütschi (Switzerland), Bertil Flodin (Sweden) and Betteke van Ruler (the Netherlands). The project consisted initially of a bibliography in construction that soon turned into a Delphi study as it became obvious that public relations meant different things in different countries in Europe and it was therefore impossible to construct a pan-European list of literature. In 1999, a Delphi study on the meaning of the construct 'public relations' was initiated in 25 countries with a very simple question in focus: What is public relations? Questionnaires were distributed and answers were received in three rounds between January 1999 and March 2000. All correspondence was done via e-mails in the English language.

After three rounds of the Delphi study, researchers found out that the difference between conceptualizations of public relations as "communication management" or "relationship management", which are so pertinent in the US (see Hutton, 1999), is meaningless in Europe. The difference between the US and Europe was hidden in what the EBOK team labelled the four dimensions of European Public Relations:

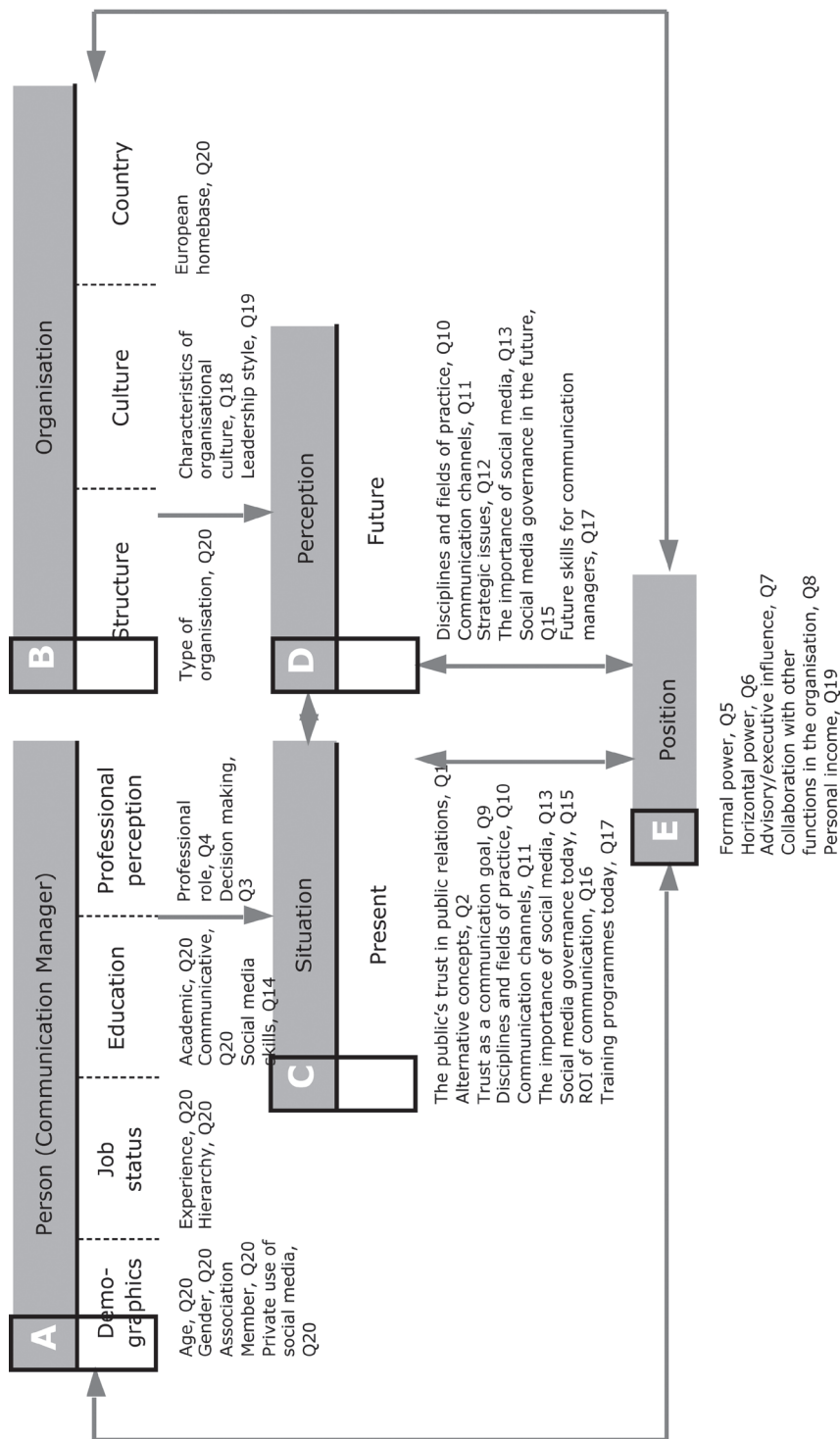
1. Reflective: to analyse the changing standards and values and standpoints in society and discuss these with the members of the organization; to adjust the standards and values or standpoints of the organization accordingly. This characteristic is concerned with organizational standards, values and views and is aimed at the development of mission and organizational strategies.

2. Managerial: to develop plans to communicate and maintain relationships with public groups to gain public trust or mutual understanding, or both. This characteristic is concerned with commercial and other (internal and external) public groups and with public opinion as a whole and is aimed at the execution of the organizational mission and strategies.
3. Operational: to prepare means of communication for the organization (and its members) to help the organization formulate its communications. This characteristic is concerned with services and is aimed at the execution of the communication plans developed by others.
4. Educational: to help all the members of the organization become communicatively competent to respond to societal demands. This characteristic is concerned with the mentality and behaviour of the members of the organization by facilitating them to communicate, and is aimed at internal public groups (van Ruler, Verčič, Bütschi and Flodin, 2004: 54; c.f. van Ruler and Verčič, 2005b; Verčič et al., 2001).

At that stage of the research, it was concluded that “Europe has a large and well founded public relations industry” (van Ruler, Verčič, Bütschi and Flodin, 2004: 55). However, after studying its professionalization, the researchers decided to name a theory on its professional domain in Europe “The Jelly Theory of Public Relations as a Professional Domain” (ibidem) – because it was very shaky. As the initial sentence of the next stage in the research worded it: “Public relations is widely practiced in Europe, although rarely under that name.” (van Ruler and Verčič, 2004a: 1) The EBOK project concluded with a collection of theoretical essays and country reports in *Public Relations and Communication Management in Europe: A Nation-by-Nation Introduction to Public Relations Theory and Practice* (van Ruler and Verčič, 2004b).

The EBOK project, which was a qualitative and an exploratory study, was followed in 2007 by the *European Communication Monitor (ECM)*, which immediately became the largest annual survey of public relations and communication management in the world. So far, five surveys have been completed (Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič and Verhoeven, 2008; Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič and Verhoeven, 2009; Zerfass, van Ruler, Rogojinaru, Verčič and Hamrefors, 2007; Zerfass, Tench, Verhoeven, Verčič and Moreno, 2010; Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, Moreno and Verčič, 2011). The project coordinator is Ansgar Zerfass (Germany) and the members of the project team are Angeles Moreno (Spain), Ralph Tench (the United Kingdom), Dejan Verčič (Slovenia) and Piet Verhoeven (the Netherlands). Its research framework and questions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND QUESTIONS, ECM 2011



The results of the ECM are receiving attention from around the world and it is in the process of replicating its research framework in other continents.

Reflective Communication Management

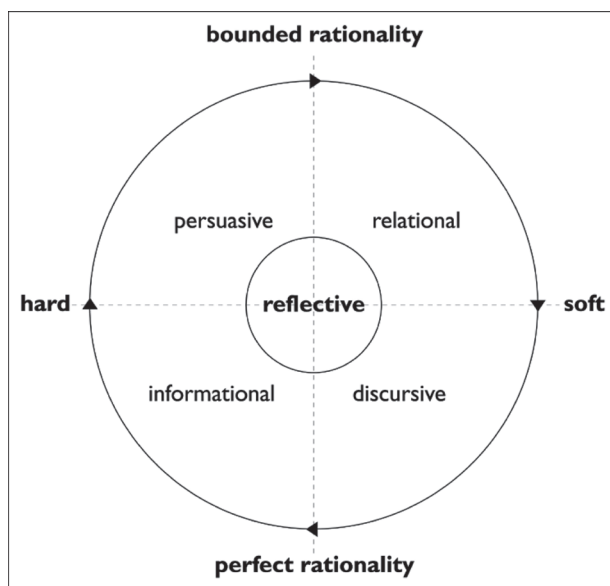
As a part of the EBOOK project, the *Bled Manifesto on Public Relations* was published in 2002 as a text to stimulate a debate at the 9th International Public Relations Research Symposium, held annually in Bled, Slovenia, since 1993 (and thus the oldest annual international public relations research conference worldwide). Its final paragraph states:

Seen from this standpoint, public relations is not just a phenomenon to be described and defined. It is first of all a strategic process of viewing an organization from an "outside" view. Its primary concerns are organisation's inclusiveness and its preservation of the "license to operate". As marketing is viewing organization from a market view, public relations is viewing organization from a public view ("public sphere"). We, therefore, like to broaden the relational and communicative approaches to public relations with or into a public or reflective approach, of which the relational and communicative approaches of public relations can be seen as parts. (van Ruler and Verčič, 2002: 16)

In theory, EBOOK produced a complementary approach to viewing public relations merely as a professional management function: public relations as communication management needs to be viewed as the "co-creation of the public sphere" (van Ruler and Verčič, 2008). Based on the works of organisational and managerial scholars, van Ruler and Verčič (2005b) arranged approaches to public relations and communication management into four clusters organised around two dimensions: the amount of openness in the communication and management processes (closed-open) and the understanding of human nature in decision making (rational-natural). This perfectly covered the four existing clusters of approaches to public relations and communication management in the existing literature: the informational model (to inform, educate, enlighten, to change cognitions), the persuasive model (to promote, influence and control, to change attitudes), the relational model (to adjust, negotiate and interact, to change behaviour), and the dialogue or discursive model (to debate, converse and reframe, to change meanings). Reflective public relations or communication management in the context of these four models adds "the lens of organizations as institutions that construct their social legitimacy in an ongoing reflective communication process" (van Ruler and Verčič, 2005b: 253). There is no

right or correct model to use, all four are valid and their enactments depend on situations and settings: “Reflectivity is the counterpart of causality: It is an ongoing, interactive process and not a discrete, linear one” (van Ruler and Verčič 2005b: 261). A visual representation of the reflective model is The Wheel of Reflective Communication Management (see Brønn, van Ruler and Verčič, 2005; on models see also van Ruler and Heath, 2008).

Picture 1: THE WHEEL OF REFLECTIVE COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT



Based on the arguments presented above, we get a new definition of public relations as communication management that states:

Communication management is engaged in constructing society by making sense of situations, creating appropriate meanings out of them and looking for acceptable frameworks and enactments. This reflective communication management approach sees communication management concerning itself with maximising, optimizing or satisfying the process of meaning creation, using informational, persuasive, relational and discursive interventions to solve managerial problems by coproducing societal (public) legitimation. (van Ruler and Verčič, 2005b: 266)

Such broadening of the definition of public relations and communication management offers ways to broaden some traditional approaches to public relations management, such as the co-orientation model (Verčič, 2008a) to national and international levels (Verčič, Tkalac Verčič and Laco, 2006;

Verčič and Tkalac Verčič, 2007), to add to the literature on public diplomacy (Van Dyke and Verčič, 2009) and defining public relations as being “about soft power that operates through influence and attraction” (Verčič, 2008b: 271), which opens a view on public relations as strategic communication (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič and Sriramesh, 2007).

Conclusions

“Public relations is where management and communication meet” (van Ruler, Tkalac Verčič and Verčič, 2008: 4). For various reasons, the communication component in management and the management component in communication have both been increasing and gaining in importance. In a recent summary of the state of public relations theory, Botan and Taylor (2004) concluded:

Over the last 20 years public relations has evolved into a major area of applied communication based on research of significant quantity and quality. Public relations has become much more than just a corporate communication practice. Rather, it is a theoretically grounded and research based area that has the potential to unify a variety of applied communication areas. (p. 659)

The Marketing Communication and Public Relations Department at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, is engaged in this endeavour.

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