

Public Relations in An International Context

In dealing with public relations, we usually think of it as a diverse and complex activity. In fact, it is complex and thus not easy to explain. As we began to define this special issue, we thought we would encounter difficulty finding scholars who understood the concept and perspective, and who would want to take part. Fortunately, this was not the case. In fact, the reflections you have in your hands support the general idea that the management of relationships makes the world more interconnected and more interesting for those who inhabit it. “Global Public Relations in a changing world” is a title that signifies more than just a conjunction of points of views. It attempts to explain the evolution that international public relations has undergone.

What has happened in recent years has caused a series of conceptual changes. The Study of Excellence in Public Relations led by James Grunig has become a point of reference throughout the world as well as one of the studies in our sector that best sets out a framework for good practice in our profession. The existence of a group of forums and conferences and a desire to define a solid conceptual basis for global public relations is just one indication that the public activity of organizations is gaining strength. A good example of this is what The Global Communication Project, led by Dr. Volker Stoltz, has been doing for the last seven years, engaging professors, scholars and students to work closely together on advancing international public relations projects. In this sense, ten universities from all over the world have just created the Global Communication Institute with the intention of making an in-depth analysis of the area of public relations in dif-

ferent parts of the world. To date, in its embryonic state, the Institute has published two special editions on this subject in Italy and Portugal, and has organized five symposia in Barcelona, Gorizza, Ciutat de Mallorca, Lisbon and Abu Dhabi, two of which were organized by our university. The following articles are closely related to this project because many of these researchers are taking part in it.

But the main question for people getting started in the profession is: what do we mean by Public Relations and by International Public Relations in particular? Despite the many definitions of public relations, we believe that the easiest way of explaining the concept is that public relations is the process by which an organization becomes socially engaged, in particular, in social areas of interest. *Engagement* is a word that has been much used in internal public relations so far, but it is increasingly used to express the desire of organizations to connect with publics in a broadly interconnected society. As we have said, the point of view of this issue is based on the Excellence Study¹ in the management of public relations, and the work of James Grunig, widely known and recognized by our contributors. This means that the authors have a view of public relations that is imminently sociological and that they see companies and organizations as playing a role in a larger, global society. During recent years, the sociological sphere of influence of organizations has grown considerably with the institutionalization of relationships with opinion leaders or key people (from the cultural, financial, or political ambit) who spread the message to third parties, thus reaching public opinion and creating a favourable attitude. This phenomenon is known as *third-party endorsement*. So the social functions of public relations, or, in other words, the sociological role of public relations in an organization, is to make organizations more permeable and more sensitive to their social surroundings in order for both parties to benefit, in terms of investment, public awareness and legitimacy.

A new challenge in obtaining this legitimacy is when organizations play the role of citizens, both locally and globally. The same thing happens when we are talking about the internal and the external effects of good Public Relations practice in a company. When you achieve employee engagement, both internal and external publics consider the organization more highly. This

1 GRUNIG, J. *Excellence in Public Relations and Communications Management*. Hillsdale [New Jersey]: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1992.

is, in fact, the same situation as when talking about localization as the first stage of globalization. The investment in local social activities such as conferences, forums, public equipment and activities has always been a good way to develop the global practice of the profession well. This is what big companies tend to do and develop in their communication activities. It doesn't matter if you call it Public Relations, Advertising or Marketing. What counts is that it helps managers to deal with the strategies of global brands and make them better known which creates positive behaviour. And in fact, the better we combine the local language and values with general global messages and broad corporate values, the more excellent we can consider the practice of this profession to be. The involvement of local opinion leaders is always a good way to achieve global legitimacy.

To sum up, explain by convincing. That is what we do. Convince who? Opinion leaders, first local ones, starting with the employees, and then those with wide influence: the media, public institutions, social and cultural bodies, among others. We hope that the articles that follow can help you discover a practice that is more than necessary in a free market space such as ours.

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