

## LANGUAGE, MEANING, CULTURE IN INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS

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### Abstract:

The present paper aims at tackling the issue of international public relations from a cultural studies perspective, having in mind the cultural specificity, given the variety of forms of public relations in the world.

The public relations field has evolved all over the world with increased intensity nowadays, having become a genuine 'global industry', covering countries with extremely varied cultures, political systems and development. With a wide span across the globe, from the US to Asia and lately Africa, from Ireland to Russia and Eastern Europe, this field has evolved fast, based on the creation of institutional structures that define the way in which the public relations work and legitimate themselves. It is an ascertained fact that the public relations have become a significant 'business' at a global level, with an increased development, faster than that of the global economy on the whole.

According to the PR data base, in Romania there are around 40 public relations agencies nowadays, compared to only one in 1992[public-relations.ro]

The present paper focuses on the fundamental aspects of the public relations activity, in an attempt at showing the way they are practiced around the world, highlighting the importance of culture in any activity of international public relations. From the very wide references in the field, the approach illustrated by Curtin, P. & Gaither, K. was a highly valued source of understanding and reinterpreting phenomena in the field, as well as the articles offered by various international public relations associations in the country and abroad.

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**Key Words:** Cultural Specificity, Professional Communication, Multiculturalism, Public Diplomacy, Credibility

In the nowadays world of the third millennium in which we live, communication plays a vital role. Those in favour of a professional communication support this field as meant to generate maximum interest and to highlight the importance of communication throughout the society. The field of international public relations is on the increase as a result of a tremendous development of the field. Successful international PR programs exist in most of the top universities in the world, particularly at the faculties of Communication Sciences, Journalism and Political Sciences, but as of late the study of international public relations was introduced also at the faculties of international relations and economic sciences. This tendency has seized Romania as well, having been introduced at the beginning of the year 2000 being a highly promoted and encouraged field in continuous development. A good command of the communication strategies is required by both professors and students alike, as well as employees of a public institution, a multinational, in the media and last but not least, in diplomacy, as people interact incessantly with the foreign environment. In the analysis of a specific country, in the present case – Romania – one has to have in mind the cultural specificity of that particular country, mentalities, values, beliefs as well as the needs of the target public.

The practice of international public relations has developed after WWII and is on the continuous increase, given the fact that international tourism and trade evolve more and more rapidly and governments of more and more countries aim at acquiring more influence at world level. Concepts such as 'multiculturalism', 'ethnocentrism', 'intercultural communication', 'individualism', 'collectivism', among others are more and more widespread and largely used, acquiring more and

more complex meanings [ H.E. Miculescu, S-M. in Curtin & Gaither:7, 2008]. The globalized world seems to be ‘shrinking’ day by day, the borders having faded out, companies merge, the language of advertising has become universal, the slogans of the marketing campaigns alike and the new technology advances rapidly throughout the globe.

A positive image of a nation, meaning one of trust and reliability for the other actors of the international system is an important factor for a country’s place on the world stage, being at the same time one of the main objectives of the international public relations. Thus, in the context of a world in which the image of a country is determined and influenced by so many factors, knowledge of the international public relations principles in order to better implement them at a high level of professionalism become compulsory elements of the activity of any country’s government. Given the high speed communications era, the international public relations practitioners are compelled to work out communication programs meant to transcend the international borders in order to function at global level. Therefore, adapting public relations for their harmonization with the local conditions is of utmost importance, and distinguishing what works for one country and what not in various contexts.

The field of international public relations redefines itself permanently. With increased frequency, this field acquired a new basis, grounded on the cultural aspects, the changes occurring in the environment and the permanent process by means of which people all over the world try to understand the world they live in. The clashes between cultures occur at the work place, technology seems to compress time and space, producing new realities even in the least developed areas of the world, whereas *power* remains a constant element, in any relation throughout the globe.

#### *Defining the public relations field*

Any attempt at studying the field from no matter what specialty literature would start by answering the question ‘what is public relations about?’. In the United States there are the most numerous agencies and associations in this field, there existing a wide array of books offering various definitions of public relations. Besides the definition, researchers have identified a number of key-words meant to help understand the way they apply to the public relations, such as: *reputation, credibility, managerial*, thus shaping the activity in the field. According to the Public Relations Higher Institute in Great Britain, public relations is a ‘field of study concerned with reputation with the aim of gaining trust and support and in order to influence the public opinion and behaviour’[...]The diversity of the ‘public’ specific to public relations is one of the factors that make more difficult the formulation of a functional definition of this field, going towards normative approaches, i.e the ones describing what should public relations be and provide a framework for practicing PR. Thus, the ‘public’ consists both in employees that would form the internal one, and administrations, NGOs, groups, alliances and citizens, embodying the external public. In international public relations, it is of particular significance to be critically analysed the theory and the extent to which this applies in political and social-economic systems other than the country of origin.

#### *Semantics and functions associated to public relations*

Defining the public relations becomes even more complicated when taking into account the *meanings* in different languages. The term itself has its roots in the US. Subsequently it was adopted all over the world, but in the sense that the functions associated to it in the US were taken over, alike. Many European languages do not have a proper word for public relations, e.g. Germany (Valin, 2004). In Romania there is an expression for public relations but it is often confounded with ‘relations with the public’, implying office information function and work with the customers.(GAPR, 2004). The field is not a fixed or static one, but rather it implies *creating ideas and generating meanings* (Curtin & Gaither, p. 20). Nonetheless, irrespective of the numberless definitions of public relations, according to the above-mentioned authors, they imply ‘*a process of communication, be it written, verbal or other form, with a particular purpose, that constitutes a process*’. This means that no single or unique definition can be applied and that such a perspective offers a solid ground for re-analysing concepts associated to public relations at the international level, such as persuasion and publicity. The public relations must be approached from a global, comprehensive perspective, that should cover the various meanings conferred to it, in order to illustrate adequately the diversity of the communication processes occurring throughout the world.

### *Short history*

This type of relations has started to be studied as a social science in the XX-th century, there is evidence with regard to practicing this activity during the ancient civilizations of Egypt, China, Greece and Rome. According to the researcher, councillors practically applying public relations techniques as well as the elements of the field date back to ancient Egypt and even earlier than that. In time, the field developed in varied ways, being applied under various forms all over the world.

The public relations field has evolved all over the world with increased intensity nowadays, having become a genuine 'global industry', covering countries with extremely varied cultures, political systems and development. With a wide span across the globe, from the US to Asia and lately Africa, from Ireland to Russia and Eastern Europe, this field has evolved fast, based on the creation of institutional structures that define the way in which the public relations work and legitimate themselves. The number of public relations agencies and organizations clearly shows the rate the field has developed lately. More than twenty European countries register public relations agencies or associations. In Italy, for instance, there is the Italian Federation of Public Relations. In Romania there are about 40 public relations agencies, there having been set up the Romanian Association of Public Relations. In Bulgaria this field develops rapidly and according to the authors (Boshnakova & Zareva, 2005) the public relations agencies compete with the western ones already. In China, according to the research made in the field, the public relations agencies are over 1,500. In Russia, alike, the public relations field is on the increase. Conclusively, from a predominantly American industry, the public relations have extended globally in this century, covering countries with extremely different backgrounds at all levels.

Given the variety of forms of public relations in the world, the field is marked by discrepancies between different perspectives of the purpose and way in which this activity is practiced. A great amount of studies on the field, particularly the American approach show that certain conditions are required for the field to exist, i.e. democracy, economic freedom, freedom of the press and civic liberty. In regions of the world which do not fulfill these conditions, public relations are practiced under one form or another, however, not in the American understanding of the theories of the field, which favour the bidirectional communication, instead of the one-way communication in which power controls information and the media. One element that cannot be analyzed by block descriptions of the national identity is *culture*. By observing the way in which common situations clash and combine, one can identify common ground for practicing this activity.

### *The importance of culture in the public relations activity*

By culture one understands characteristics, practices and norms of a society. To employ a wider definition of cultural studies, one would take into account Hall's definition of culture as being '*the process by which meaning is produced, transmitted, consumed, asumed, reproduced and continuously negotiated within the society*' (Hall, 1980).

Culture constitutes the basis of a system of common significances of a society. We confer meaning to things by defining and presenting them; we build significance at social level. Between culture, meaning and language there is close relationship. The language, meaning and culture occur in the shaping of discourse or concurrent truths. The dominant American discourse raise the public relations at the level of managerial function, focusing on the relationship between the power players and equal rank. Taking the example of the American realm, for instance, one can notice the difficulty of defining and applying public relations. Thus, in an attempt at comparing the American public discourse on public relations to that of the American practitioners, who, often times do not read the publictaions in the field and/or do not belong to a professional association, it is to be concluded that public relations, the way they are approached by theoreticians have little to do with what they actually do; activity they often define in terms of image management, impressions, persuasion and the spread of information. Journalists themselves use a different discourse. The majority of the American practitioners in the field were ex-journalists, for whom the public relations were something they were not supposed to be: journalism. The two professions are closely connected therefore, most public relations specializations are carried out within the journalism studies, in spite of the feeble relationships between the two. To the common American citizen, the public relations are a form of reinterpretation rather than a reliable source of information, therefore granting less credibility to the

public relations practitioners. These examples and perceptions demonstrate the way in which language, meaning and culture intervene in the forming of discourses or reliable 'truths'. This shows that culture represents not only 'the rules and traditions' of a civilization; rather it is interwoven in all social activities, constituting the 'sum of their interactions' (Hall, 1958, p.58). The cultural studies have evolved based on this view on culture, there having been created by a group of British theoreticians the 'cultural model circuitry', underlining the way in which culture and power intermingle, in order to generate meaning (Hall, Janes, MacKay & Negus, 1997).

#### *Cultural concepts and their wide usage*

The cultural concepts do not affect the practising of public relations; rather they form the core of practising public relations. The Asian cultures provide different 'layers' of cultural concepts essential for understanding the oriental forms of public relations. The various cultural practices according to gender and age, from cultures such as Chinese or Korean are generating misleading meanings and interpretations for those unacquainted to sound information of public relations, who cannot adapt to or grasp the meanings of the oriental background, in which society is defined by sophisticated and systematic social relations. To a foreigner, one aspect is clear, namely that linguistic skills do not suffice in order to make a public relations campaign abroad, since those activating in the field of public relations are often foreigners trying to penetrate the meaning and complex network of written or unwritten rules that form a culture. Cultural idiosyncracies play the same important role in modelling a proper milieu for effective communication as language itself.

*Summing up*, it is to be highlighted that culture plays a prominent role in international public relations, the practice of which differ a lot from one region to another by semantic nuances and often contradictory definitions employed. The cultural nuances not only render a different meaning to the definitions, but also alter the meaning of the international public relations activity as such. According to specialists in the field (Curtin & Gaither, p. 29) culture represents the thresholds with which public relations are confronted with in order to reach the common situations at the core of international public relations, be it about constructing the national image, or attracting tourists, or stimulating economic growth or mediating the misunderstandings with rival groups and/or nations. The culture layers go beyond international borders, from the developed countries to the developing ones, from democratic regimes to authoritarian ones. Thus, accepting the cultural diversity and nuances constitutes the key element for understanding the various specific characteristics to practicing public relations in the world.

To end up with a quote on the challenges of the international public relations field past and future, one would mention Edward Bernays, 'father of public relations' and 'leader in opinion making', who stated: *"The three fundamental elements of the public relations are practically as old as humankind itself: informing the individuals, persuading them, and creating relationships among them. Of course, the means and methods have changed in time, the way society has, as well"*.

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<http://www.prsa.org/> Public Relations Society of America

<http://arrp.ro/> The Romanian Public Relations Association

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