

The Landscape of Today's Global Public Relations

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Abstract

Public relations are now well established around the world after the major growth in the field over the last decade of the Twentieth Century. A review of today's landscape in global public relations is, at best, an intimidating task because the field is so broad and diverse. Nevertheless, we can make some general statements about today's practice of global public relations and what trends are currently shaping and re-defining the public relations industry. This article will explore three basic issues: the maturity of public relations in a changing world, the increased significance of public relations in today's global economy, and blogging and podcasting as examples of the democratization of information.

Key words: global public relations industry, economy, democratization of information, blogging, podcasting.

Resumen. *Perspectiva actual de las relaciones públicas mundiales*

Actualmente las relaciones públicas están bien establecidas en todo el mundo después del enorme crecimiento de este ámbito en la última década del siglo XX. Un análisis del panorama actual de las relaciones públicas mundiales es, en el mejor de los casos, una tarea intimidante, dado que se trata de un campo muy amplio y variado. Sin embargo, podemos hacer algunas afirmaciones generales sobre la práctica de las relaciones públicas mundiales de hoy en día y sobre qué tendencias están actualmente conformando y redefiniendo la industria de las relaciones públicas. Este artículo examinará tres cuestiones básicas: el pleno desarrollo de las relaciones públicas en un mundo cambiante, la importancia cada vez mayor de las relaciones públicas en la actual economía mundial, y el «blogging» y el «podcasting» como ejemplos de la democratización de la información.

Palabras clave: industria de las relaciones públicas, economía, democratización de la información, «blogging», «podcasting».

Summary

1. Introduction
2. The maturity of public relations as a discipline
3. Increased value of public relations
4. The democratization of information
5. In conclusion

1. Introduction

Public relations, as an industry and a profession, has rapidly advanced throughout the world during the past decade. In fact, the field has now matured to the point that it is now an integral part of the landscape in modern, industrialized nations around the globe. Public relations is now commonly used by all institutions of society —be it government, NGOs, corporations, professional and trade union groups, activist groups, and even individuals to effectively communicate information and their viewpoints to a variety of publics.

But public relations has come to mean more than one-way communication. In today's more modern, sophisticated form, it's also a way for organizations to establish a two-way dialogue to create mutual understanding. In many cases, public relations plays a very important role in conflict resolution between groups and even organizations. At the same time, it should not be overlooked that public relations also performs the valuable role of accomplishing organizational objectives, whether its maintaining the organization's reputation or the selling of products and services.

A review of today's landscape in global public relations is, at best, a daunting task because the field is very broad and diverse. We can, however, make some general statements about today's practice around the globe and what trend lines are currently shaping and re-defining and even revolutionizing the public relations industry. This article will explore three basic themes:

- The Maturity of Global Public Relations
- The Increased Value and Importance of Public Relations in today's global economy
- The Democratization of Information Around the Globe.

2. The maturity of public relations as a discipline

Although the basic concepts of public relations goes back to the ancient Egyptians and Greeks, the concept of public relations as we know it today is a 20th century phenomenon that owes its existence, in large part, to the advent of the industrial revolution in Europe and the United States.

This is not the place to discuss the evolution of public relations through history, but suffice it to say that the term «public relations» only came into existence in the late 1880s, and no one probably called themselves a public relations practitioner until the start of the 20th century. That hardy band of early practitioners would be pleasantly surprised, no doubt, to know that their craft is now the major occupation of literally millions of individuals around the world.

2.1. *The Large Number of Today's Practitioners*

The maturity of public relations as an occupation is reflected in the number of practitioners on a world-wide basis.

Reed's Worldwide Directory of Public Relations now lists 200 public relations professional societies in 70 nations with an aggregate membership of 150,000 members. In addition, the Global Alliance of 60 national membership groups estimates that about three million people worldwide practice public relations as their main professional activity.

The numbers of practitioners in various nations is instructive. In the UK, for example, there are an estimated 50,000 public relations practitioners. The United States Department of Labor, in its last report, estimates that there are about 200,000 public relations practitioners in the U.S.

China is the new «frontier» for the rapid increase in the number of practitioners. The China International Public Relations Association (CIPRA) reports there are now 20,000 practitioners in the country, and there are now 2,000 public relations firms—an increase of 500 from the previous year.

According to the Hoffman Agency, an American public relations firm with offices in Beijing and Shanghai, «Public relations is emerging as a powerful and lucrative communications tool in China's business market, presenting unlimited opportunities and challenges for local and international agencies».

The agency further reports that practitioners in China are rapidly learning from their Western counterparts and are getting more sophisticated in offering such specialties as crisis management, investor relations, multimedia programs, and integrated marketing strategies. And *The Economist* reports that the public relations market in China will be \$1.8 billion by 2010.

There have been rapid increases in practitioners in other nations as well. Some major growth nations have been India, Russia, Brazil, Poland, and other newer members of the European Union such as Estonia and Latvia.

2.2. *The Development of Public Relations Education*

An activity eventually becomes an occupation and ultimately a discipline and a profession because the skills and major concepts are eventually codified into a university curriculum. In other words, individuals start studying and preparing for a career in public relations instead of «drifting» into it from other forms of work.

In this regard, the number of colleges and universities that offer a major or a course of study in public relations has steadily grown over the years. This is yet another sign that public relations around the world has matured into its own discipline.

In the United States alone, more than 200 universities now have majors or sequences in public relations. In Europe, almost a 100 universities now offer a curriculum in public relations and it is becoming a popular subject

among the students. During the past decade, the number of colleges and universities that offer public relations has also rapidly expanded in the Russian Federation, the Baltic States, Poland, Czech Republic, and Romania. Much of this expansion has been the result of these nations embracing free-market economies and joining—or striving to join—the European Union.

The growth of public relations education in the nations of the former Soviet Union has been quite impressive, to say the least. This author still remembers that he gave the first public lecture in public relations at the University of Tartu in Estonia back in 1994—which wasn't that long ago.

There has also been rapid growth of public relations education in the universities and technical schools of Asia. At one point, the China International Public Relations Association (CIPRA) estimated that there were 500,000 people studying public relations in the country.

Other Asian nations where public relations education is firmly established and growing in popularity include Thailand, India, Malaysia, Singapore, and Japan. Australian universities in particular have had a strong public relations curriculum for a number of years. In Africa, the Republic of South Africa is the acknowledged leader in PR education, but programs are also developing nicely in such nations as Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya.

2.3. Major Expansion of the Body of Knowledge

The number of students majoring in public relations on a world-wide basis is one mark of the profession's maturity, but another equally important benchmark is the major expansion in the public relations body of knowledge on a global basis.

In the United States alone, several hundred books about public relations are published annually. Many of them are published by academics such as myself, but there's also a great number of books that are written by working public relations professionals.

The body of knowledge, in particular, is enhanced by a whole new generation of scholars (armed with Ph.D.s) who have virtually doubled the number of scholarly articles about public relations every year for the past decade. Today, there are many academic journals that carry the results of research and new theories about public relations that not only shape the credibility of public relations as a respected academic discipline, but also give meaning and shape to the claim that public relations is more than an occupation, but it's also a profession.

This new generation of scholars are not just from the United States or Europe, but also from such nations as China, Korea, and Japan. Indeed, the majority communications Ph.D.s in the United States are now awarded to students from these nations. They explore a number of social science aspects as it relates to the public relations field by researching such topics as (1) the roles of public relations managers, (2) crisis communication typologies, (3) framing of issues, (4) diffusion of new technologies, and (5) ethical decision making modeling.

The following is a list of recent article titles in scholarly journals that build and enhance the body of knowledge in public relations on a global basis:

- «Cultural Identity in the Segmentation of Publics: An Emerging Theory of Intercultural Public Relations»
- «Hong Kong Consumers' Evaluation of an Airline Crash: A Path Model Analysis»
- Coordination Theory in International Relations: The Case of Slovenia and Croatia
- «Contested Notions of Issue Identity in International Public Relations: A Case Study».

2.4. *The Age of Conglomerates*

For better or worse, another mark of maturity in the public relations industry worldwide is the rise of large holding companies, or communications conglomerates. Indeed, it is estimated that up to 60 percent of the worldwide billings in public relations are now generated by firms owned by these conglomerates. Put another way, nine out of ten of the world's largest PR firms are owned by a conglomerate that also owns multinational advertising agencies, marketing firms, direct mail operations, billboard companies, and special event firms.

The six largest holding companies, which are global in scope, are as follows, according to *PRWeek* (April 18, 2005):

Omnicom (New York)

Worldwide revenues of \$9.75 billion

Operates in 100 nations

Major PR firms owned: Fleishman-Hillard, Ketchum, Porter Novelli

WPP Group (London)

Worldwide revenues of \$8 billion

Operates in 104 nations

Has 1,700 offices around the world, 72,000 employees

Major PR firms owned: Burson-Marsteller, Hill & Knowlton, Ogilvy PR

Interpublic Group (New York)

Worldwide revenues of \$4.45 billion

Operates in 130 nations, 43,000 employees

Major PR firms owned: Weber Shandwick, Golin Harris

Publicis Groupe (Paris)

Worldwide revenues of \$4.92 billion

Operates in 104 nations, 36,384 employees

Major PR firms owned: MS&L, Publicis Diagog

Havas (New York)

Worldwide revenues of \$1.92 billion

Major PR firms owned: Euro RSCG, Magnet & Abernathy MacGregor

Incepta (London)

Worldwide revenues of \$340 million

Major PR firms owned: Citigate Sard Verbinnen, Citigate Cunningham, Citigate Broad Street

One beneficial aspect of these communication conglomerates is the concept of synergy. In other words, these groups view communications holistically and strongly feel that they can offer clients an array of communication specialties under one umbrella, so to speak. This, in many ways, has elevated public relations to the same level as advertising and marketing as a major communications tool in today's society. It has given public relations firms much more visibility and has paved the way for more convergence (integration) of communication functions for multinational organizations. This concept of integration and convergence, to support the marketing mix, will be re-visited later.

2.5. A Strategic Tool of Management

Today, there is widespread recognition that public relations is a strategic and problem-solving management function. Such recognition, a considerable distance from the days of the publicist or the press agent, is yet another indication that the public relations industry has matured.

Today's strategic public relations is more than media relations and disseminating information. It involves the following aspects:

- Relating communication objectives to organizational objectives
- Developing long-term relationships (trust and credibility) with key audiences
- Emphasizing mutual understanding and conflict resolution
- Formulation of consistent messages on a global basis using multiple channels
- Training management to implement global strategies on a local basis
- Coordinating the communication activities of local managers and consultants around the world
- Maintaining and enhancing organizational reputation on a variety of levels
- Tracking, analyzing trends, issues that can affect the organization.

2.6. Advancement of Ethics and Professionalism

The final aspect of maturity for global public relations, I believe, is a heightened awareness of ethics and articulation of professional standards. Professional public relations groups around the world have codified standards of performance for practitioners, and much work has also been done at the global level through such organizations as the International Public Relations Association (IPRA).

It was the IPRA, for example, that launched an international campaign to reduce the incidence of unethical and sometimes illegal practices in the relationships between professionals and the media. In more basic terms, to reduce bribery and the concept of «pay for play» that is found in many nations, particularly ones with unstable economies or a weak, independent press.

To date, the Media Transparency Charter has been adopted by public relations practitioners in more than 100 nations, by 50 national and international public relations associations, by 850 consultancies, and an estimated 250,000 practitioners worldwide.

In addition, such journalistic organizations as the International Press Institute (IPI) and the International Federation of Journalists (representing 500,000 members in more than 100 nations) have endorsed the idea that «pay for play» is unethical for both public relations practitioners or journalists. The practice basically undermines the credibility of the press and ultimately, the credibility of the information that public relations practitioners disseminates to the media.

On other fronts, organizations that traditionally had «no comment» when members or public relations firms violated ethical standards have now begun to speak out. The Council of Public Relations Firms (CPRF) in the United States, as well as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), for example, did speak out when Ketchum—a major firm—signed a contract with the U.S. Department of Education that also included the payment of \$240,000 to a journalist/pundit for promoting a particular government program. There was widespread condemnation of Ketchum in the public relations community, and the incident gave public relations a «black eye» among the public.

Helen Ostrowski, CEO of Porter Novelli and this year's chair of the CPRF, made it clear. She wrote in *PRWeek*, «Transparency is critical to achieving organizational objectives. As with any credible and trusted relationship, whether personal or professional, the ability to influence is based on being transparent about who you are and what you stand for». She added, «Three principles in particular are key to this transparency. First is the highest possible standards for ethical behavior. Second is accuracy of information, Third is disclosure».

Ethical behavior, on the part of public relations practitioner and organizations, requires transparency in everything we do—which will be discussed in more detail later. Ostrowski is correct when she says, «The issue of transparency is of global importance as we seek to develop trusted relationships around the world».

3. Increased value of public relations

So far, we have discussed the various developments and trends that have made public relations a mature industry around the world. We should now turn our attention to the landscape of today's role of public relations in the executive suite (often called the C-suite), within the marketing mix, and the constant pressure to show that public relations is not just administrative overhead, but

also contributes to the «bottom-line» of an organization. And last, we'll discuss the newest mantra in global public relations: CSR —or Corporate Social Responsibility.

3.1. Role of Public Relations in Upper Management

Today, the trade press often refers to CEO's office as the «C-Suite» and whether the head of public relations (often called a managing director or a vice president) has a seat at the policy-making table. Happily, throughout the world, it does appear that public relations has made progress in recent years and is definitely part of the «C-Suite.» This is particularly true in the United States and Europe; it is less prevalent in other areas of the world.

PRWeek, in its annual survey of CEOs (Chief Executive Officers) always asks «To whom does the communications/PR report at your company?» and the 2005 survey found that public relations reports to the chair or CEO almost 50 percent of the time. In second place, but still a considerable percentage, was the head of marketing (31.6 percent). In many companies, at least in the United States, public relations is often part of the marketing department —which we will shortly discuss when we talk about the increase in integrated communication programs.

According to the survey, CEOs believe public relations proves its effectiveness most in the area of improving organizational reputation. Then, in descending order was

- (1) awareness of brand/products,
- (2) sales,
- (3) employee satisfactory
- (4) positive media coverage.

CEOs in the survey were also asked to rank order the importance of public relations in accomplishing various objectives. The top five objectives for public relations were

- (1) raising brand awareness,
- (2) increasing sales,
- (3) enhancing corporate reputation,
- (4) safeguarding image
- (5) communicating a company's position on an issue.

It is noteworthy, I think, that media relations as an important activity of public relations gets a much lower ranking than concepts that are more business-oriented. This is a considerable shift from the traditional concept that the value and effectiveness of public relations should be effective media relations. It also signals the fact that today's public relations manager must develop more management and business skills to advance to the «C-Suite».

3.2. Role in the Marketing Mix

The landscape in marketing communications has also changed in the last several years. Today, in global communications, the emphasis is on public relations as an integral and important part of the marketing mix. Although this seems quite logical, the traditional role of public relations in most global companies was that of a separate entity in its own self-contained «silo». Or, if part of marketing, it was always considered the poor stepchild receiving the least respect—and financial resources.

In that day, advertising was king. But no more. A number of factors have toppled advertising from its kingly perch. One factor has been cost of mounting a global advertising campaign that usually is a multi-million dollar investment. Another factor is decreased penetration as media around the world have fragmented and audiences in any particular medium have been shrinking. A third factor is the limitation of advertising as a credible source of information for most consumers. This, combined with the advent of the Internet and more personalized tools of communication (which will be discussed later) means that corporations are seeking other cost-effective ways to reach audience.

Consequently, the once neglected stepchild of public relations has been rediscovered by marketing executives as a meaningful alternative—or at minimum a supplement—to advertising. It has also been recognized by marketing managers that public relations is best suited for the launch of a new product or service, and it even does a better job in many instances of building brand awareness. Popular books, such as the «The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of Public Relations» by Al and Laura Ries, has also reinforced the idea that public relations is a vital component in the marketing mix.

Indeed, a recent *PRWeek* survey of marketing executives revealed some interesting data. First, 70 percent of the respondents believe PR firms have the capability to work on strategic branding. Also, marketing executives, when asked who they would seek as a partner to explore advertising alternatives, listed a consulting company first, but a PR firm was a close second.

More telling, perhaps, is the marketing executives' response to the question, «Which marketing discipline is the most “effective” for each of the following tasks». There were 14 tasks listed and public relations was rated higher than advertising or marketing in nine of them. The «tasks» where public relations was rated the highest in terms of effectiveness was the following:

- Strategy development
- Launching a new product/service
- Building awareness
- Generating word of mouth
- Message development
- Brand reputation
- Corporate reputation
- Cultivating thought leaders
- Overcoming a crisis.

Procter & Gamble, as well as Unilever, who spend billions of dollars on advertising and promotion annually on a global basis, are also signaling that advertising—in the future—will receive less budget as they explore alternatives in the new digital media. Unilever, for example, now spends 65 percent of its budget on traditional print and broadcast advertising, but this is down from 85 percent several years ago. This will be discussed in another section.

So what does this mean for public relations? First, today's standard around the world is integrated communications. Some public relations firms like to call this «convergent» communications—but the concept is the same. The idea is that today's global public relations is part and parcel of a total communications program for launching a new product or service. Instead of separate entities doing their own «thing», the more common approach is a team effort that *equally* involves marketing, advertising, and public relations. It is the synergy that the communications conglomerates, which was discussed, is attempting to offer its multinational clients.

It should be noted, however, that the concept of public relations being fully integrated and an equal partner in the marketing mix is still evolving. Although marketing executives seem to be enthusiastic about the value of public relations in the marketing mix, the reality is that most corporations report that their marketing mix is only «somewhat» integrated. In addition, about half of the marketing executives report that public relations was «underutilized» in the marketing mix.

But the reality, on a global basis, is that public relations will continue to expand its role in the marketing mix and that most global corporations are moving toward more integration of its communication activities. As Larry Cohen, general manager of corporate communication for Microsoft says, «Nirvana is true integrated communications».

3.3. *The Search for ROI*

Although public relations is now considered a vital part of the corporate strategy and marketing mix, this has also brought new pressures to the field in terms of being accountable and justifying its contribution to the bottom-line. In other words, the parlance today is ROI—Return on Investment.

The call for measurement of effectiveness has been around a long time, but it has a new urgency now as public relations carves out an ever-increasing role in the marketing mix. The idea of ROI, however, is somewhat foreign to many public relations practitioners who, by coming to the field through journalism or other fields, thought it was enough just to be creative and to write well. All of a sudden, the landscape has changed. Instead of stacks of press clippings, called the clip book, executives are now asking the hard question—how has this activity (and cost) contributed to the bottom-line? In other words, clips are nice but did they make a contribution to sales?

Jessica Kersey, director of worldwide public relations for Polycom, says it best: «Everything is being measured these days because budgets are tight. You must

do more with less, and you must prove the value of what you do for the dollars that you're using».

The answer is not simple, but new software programs that can monitor media coverage and analyze a host of other variables, are providing some answers. In the old days, a stack of press clips was standard. Today, thanks to software programs, these same clips can be sliced and diced in many different ways. Instead of just counting clips, for example, one now has to evaluate messages and whether key points were mentioned.

This is called the metrics of press coverage. This means that press clips are evaluated and analyzed on several levels:

- *Impressions*. How many people were exposed to the article or broadcast clip?
- *Share of voice*. How much of the company's coverage comprises the entire amount of coverage about the industry or subject?
- *Tone*. Was the slant negative or positive? How does it «score» in points?
- *Competitor tracking*. Measurement of your organization's coverage against your major competitors to determine if it differs in quality and quantity.
- *Spokesperson*. Is he/she on message in terms of getting key points across in an effective manner?
- *Third-Party Endorsement*. What are bloggers, customers, traditional media, message boards, etc. saying about the organization?

There are measurement/monitoring firms such as Bacon's Information, Biz360 Carma International, and Vocus that can do this evaluation on a real-time basis. The key point to remember is that these firms can produce data, but the analysis and decision making about what to do about it is still in the hands of the public relations staff.

Other firms, such as Ketchum, have developed their own measurement (ROI) criteria. Ketchum, for example, takes the following approach:

- Media impressions. Equate coverage with cost of obtaining it.
- Ad-PR equivalency. How much is the coverage worth?
- Track sales against media coverage.
- Survey target audiences about where they heard about the product/service.

In other words, executives like to measure ROI on the basis of sales. Ideally, they want figures that break down every sale in terms of advertising or public relations costs. For example, one metric might indicate that every dollar spent on advertising generates \$1.08 in sales. In public relations, it generates about \$8 in sales.

Other methods to evaluate ROI would be (1) visits to the web site, (2) number of email or phone inquiries, (3) discussion about a product on Internet message boards, (4) sales of product or services, and (5) comparison of stories against stories about the competition. There are many ways to evaluate the

effectiveness of public relations; the key point is that you should do ROI in terms of what is most important to your management.

Procter & Gamble, one of the world's largest consumer companies, added some «buzz» to the important role of public relations by announcing the results of an 18-month study. Basically, the results were best summarized by the lead paragraph in *PRWeek*: «A new internal measurement tool developed by Procter & Gamble has shown a greater ROI from PR than other marketing disciplines in four of the six brands tested».

Although such a study confirms the role of public relations as a vital part of the marketing mix, *The Economist* points out that P&G currently spends only 1 percent of its \$4 billion global marketing budget on public relations. Whether the amount budgeted for public relations will be increased remains to be seen. *PRWeek*, in reporting the results of the P&G study, was more optimistic. Its coverage indicated that such a study by a global retail organization would give a new emphasis on the use of public relations in the marketing mix.

Some experts, however, wonder if comparing public relations to advertising and direct mail or promotion is even appropriate. Is, it, they say, comparing apples to oranges? Advertising traditionally is designed to drive revenues through sales. Public Relation more frequently is positioned for such purposes as increasing brand awareness and enhancing reputation —concepts that can't be easily measured through ordinary ROI techniques. These are valid points, but the «bottom-line» in today's world is that ROI has also become an integral part of public relations.

3.4. *The New Mantra: CSR*

Somewhat new on the landscape of global public relations is the concept of CSR —or Corporate Social Responsibility. According to Julia Hood, editor of *PRWeek* in the US, «Corporate social responsibility is an increasing critical part of global communication».

The rise of CSR is, in part, based on the impact of today's giant multinational corporations. Their operations deeply affect:

- The environment
- The employment of thousands
- The financial, social, and well-being of millions.

Indeed, the power and influence of a large multinational corporation is often much greater than the total GNP of many nations. Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, has \$256 billion in global sales Mobil/Exxon has \$246 billion in global sales.

The size and influence of large multinational corporations has led to a number of pressures:

- Higher expectations of customers for safe, high-quality products
- The insistence by NGOs that corporations have the responsibility to problems of human rights, poverty, and sub-standard health care.
- The vital need to build public trust and credibility
- The public demand, as well as government, for transparency.

It's important to realize that CSR is not a public relations program, but involves the whole corporation on multiple levels. Julia Hood adds, «In order to be truly meaningful, CSR has to be layered into everything from labor relations to plant operations. It's not just about doing good; it's about doing business». The core areas of CSR are:

- Ethics
- Governance
- Human rights
- Environment
- Social duty

The two basic levels of CSR are:

Operational Responsibility

- Product safety
- Environmental protection
- Fair treatment of employees
- Satisfying customer concerns
- Ensuring an ethical supply train

Citizenship Responsibility

- Solving social problems
- Reducing the division between the rich and the poor
- Promoting sustainable development
- Human rights
- Corporate philanthropy/sponsorships

Public relations personnel are engaged at all levels of CSR, but also have some specific roles to play. They include the following:

- Establishing a dialogue with various stakeholders
- Ensuring that the organization does have disclosure and transparency in all of its operations
- Communicating an organization's core values around the globe
- Managing «citizenship» programs on a global and localized basis
- Monitoring ongoing «issues» and make recommendations to management
- Researching and writing annual CSR reports for widespread distribution

4. The democratization of information

So far, we have discussed global public relations from two perspectives —the maturing of the field and its new-found status as a valuable and important concept in most, if not all, organizations. We now turn our attention to perhaps the most dramatic, almost revolutionary, change in the landscape of global public relations that has occurred just in the last several years.

Jon Iwata, senior vice president of corporate communications for IBM Corporation, calls it the «democratization of information». What he means is that, in today's world, now everyone has access to large amounts of information via the search engines and other new information technologies.

Margit Wennmachers, president of Outcast Communications, says it best: «The thing that strikes me most is something we've known for a long time —there are no secrets. It's just that now everything is available in Internet time». Such a dramatic change— what Thomas Friedman has called the «flattening» of the world really does make it possible for the common man to have the same access to information as the rich and the powerful at virtually no cost. Thus, the «democratization» of information. Nathan Misner, writing in IPRA Frontline, makes the case:

Technology has aided this shift by enabling everyday Jacks and Jills to become, in essence, distributors, tastemakers, and content creators. This technology has torn down barriers and opened up news, points of view, and information to a truly worldwide audience —in essence flattening the globe to exert influence unburdened by nationality, time zone, and corporate marketing muscle.

This has major implications for organizations and public relations personnel. First, now more than ever, global corporations must incorporate disclosure and transparency into their core values and conduct themselves as if the whole world was watching. Indeed, the scrutiny of the general public and special-interest groups, in particular, places a major burden on corporations to ensure that their operations —whether its deep in the Indonesian jungle or in the river delta of Nigeria, or even in Paris— can withstand the glare of public exposure as individuals ferret out documents on the Web, bloggers post opinions, and listservs make one person's comment accessible around the world in a matter of seconds.

One downside to the new media is that not all the information on the Web is accurate, nor are all of the opinions expressed informed. Such postings can seriously affect corporate reputation and credibility, and the public relations staff must continually monitor the Internet to know what is being said about the organization, and to correct any false or misleading information.

At the same time, the new media gives public relations personnel a great opportunity to reach very specialized publics and groups without the need to use traditional media. Let's spend a few moments discussing some of the more exciting and interesting ways to reach audiences via the new media. The following sections discuss blogging and podcasting.

4.1. *Blogging*

Blogging is a worldwide phenomenon. What started out as periodic postings by some individuals for their friends and relatives has now blossomed into a major media tool in its own right. Although the vast majority of blogs (also called weblogs) are still the province of amateurs and don't have much of an audience, blogs also are increasingly recognized by business and public relations personnel as an extremely cost effective way to reach large numbers of people.

The United States is the center of the blogosphere with 24 million blogs in existence as of January of 2006. In Europe, France has embraced blogs the most of any European nation with 3.45 million regularly updated sites and at least 10,000 French business blogs as of June 2005. At the same time, the Germans seem to be more cautious and still had only 100 business blogs. Nathan Misner, writing in *IPRA's Frontline*, also notes, «Spanish-speaking companies are less interested in internet-related activities and have not exploited the medium to any great degree».

In Asia, China now has more than four million blogs and the numbers are increasingly rapidly, despite Chinese government censorship controls. Blogging is also booming in Japan, particularly among women. About 25 percent of the women under 30 are now active in the blogosphere, according to Misner.

The format and mechanics of blogs make them very attractive for several reasons:

- Almost anyone can create a weblog with open-source software
- There is virtually no start-up costs except your labor
- The format and writing are informal, which can give an organization a friendly, youthful human face
- Links can easily be made to other blogs, web pages, etc.
- Readers can post comments directly on the blog
- Material can be updated and changed instantly
- Extensive use of syndication technologies allow aggregation of information from hundreds of blogs at once
- Gives an organization an outlet to participate in the online dialogue already being said in other blogs, message boards.

Ben King, writing in the *Financial Times*, summarizes the advantages of blogs (or weblogs) over traditional web sites. He wrote, «The exchange of links, comments, and trackbacks knits individual blogs into a dense network of mutual reference and endorsement, providing a giant boost in traffic for those bloggers who get it right».

Increasingly, organizations are «getting it right» and are using blogs written by executives or even rank and file employees to establish a dialogue with their members, customers, suppliers, and employees. Some examples of corporations that have established blogs:

- General Motors
- Microsoft
- Sun Microsystems
- IBM
- Starwood Resorts

This is not to say that corporations don't continue to have their own web sites, which may include press rooms, annual reports, description of products, human resource job applications, etc. Perhaps the biggest mistake a corporation can make is to treat a blog as if it was a large corporate promotional brochure. A blog, unlike a web site, must be highly interactive and establish a dialogue. As Michael Wiley, director of new media for GM says, «To me, this is what separates blogging from the rest of the web». However, a blog may not be right for every organization. As Ben King notes, «The rapid, spontaneous back and forth discourse of the blogosphere is not an easy fit with the slow, cautious approach favored by most corporate marketing departments».

4.2. Podcasting

Blogging has already become mainstream, and the next technology to revolutionize global public relations —as well as communications in general— will be podcasting. In fact, the editors of the New Oxford American Dictionary selected «podcast» as the word of the year in 2005. The newly minted word is defined as: «A digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the Internet downloading to a personal audio player». In other words, a radio-type show of about 3 to 5 minutes in length that can be uploaded as an MP3 file to the Internet.

Podcasting came of age in June of 2005 when Apple's newest version of iTunes began supporting the medium. Just two days after launching the product, Apple reported that one million people had subscribed to Podcasts through its service. Of the more than 5,000 Podcasts Apple listed in its directory last year (the number of Podcasts are increasing in geometric portions every month), many were from such large companies as IBM, Virgin Atlantic, Oracle, GM, and HP. Disney, for example, first used Podcasts to announce events surrounding its 50th anniversary celebration.

One study indicated that 4.8 million people downloaded a Podcast in 2005. In 2004, only 820,000 had downloaded a podcast. It is projected that the worldwide audience will increase to 45 million users by 2010 but, as in most cases, the use of a new technology usually does much better than the projections as the timeline between introduction and going mainstream keeps shortening.

Podcasts are excellent ways for an organization, whether its an NGO or a corporation, to communicate with its members, vendors, suppliers, employees, and even customers. Essentially, through setting up a RSS feed (Really Simple Syndication), a person that subscribes to a particular podcast even receives alerts via email that a new podcast is available.

The attractiveness of podcasts has given public relations and marketing departments a highly cost-efficient way of reaching audiences interested in certain kinds of information. A podcast, however, can't be just hype and promotion; it must provide credible, trustworthy information of value to the individual.

Increasingly, podcasts are used as an alternative to traditional advertising. One study, reported in *PR Tactics* at the end of 2005 indicated that 16 percent of the companies surveyed were already using podcasts. Another 19 percent were planning to use them in the near future. It's worth noting, however, that 65 percent of the companies surveyed didn't use podcasts —yet.

4.3. *The Video iPod*

Podcasts, essentially short audio files, are now available in video too. Apple launched the Video iPod in November of 2005, which offers even more possibilities for communication.

Burger King, for example, has sponsored short comedy films via a podcast. General Motors is using video to take consumers behind the scenes of how a new car is designed. The video iPod also gives organizations the ability to send video news releases (VNRs) directly to individuals instead of relying on the traditional television station. This also applies to satellite media tours, video clips of new products, news events, etc.

Larry Moskowitz, CEO of Medialink, told *PRWeek*, «Every screen is now a TV screen, be it your phone, PDA, or the screen at the office. It's a wake-up call». Indeed, the advent of blogs and podcasts have changed the landscape of global public relations forever, and it has become a major source in addition to traditional media —which is not exactly going to disappear.

Indeed, the value of traditional media should not be completely dismissed. Judith T. Phair, president of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) said:

It's easy to read the headlines in trade and business press about all the new «hot» new media channels and start to believe that the traditional press is *passé*, but... Americans still use news, seek news, and place their trust in the traditional sources.

At the same time, we must be aware that the landscape of modern communication has changed. Podcasting, by audio and video, has been called the advent of «personalized media». Adam Brown, director of eKetchum digital media development, writes in *PR Strategist*, «What will continue to make blogs and other personalized media attractive is that they are extremely easy and cost-effective to deploy. What used to take months to develop and hundreds of thousands of dollars of licensing software fees can now be done with free or very inexpensive open-source tools». But he adds, «These are all merely tools, new ways to do what we already do best —communicate with different audiences consistently, compellingly, and creatively».

5. In conclusion

We have surveyed the landscape of global public relations from several perspectives —the maturing of the field, the increased acceptance of public relations as a vital management tool, and even the latest new media technology that has «democratized information» in today's world. I hope this has given you some idea and perspective, but I would like to end by commenting on what skills and competencies will be needed for the next generation of public relations professionals:

5.1. *Business Skills*

Traditionally, creativity and writing was valued. Tomorrow's practitioners will also need these skills, but they will also be expected to know a lot more about management.

5.2. *Marketing*

Public relations staff should know the role of public relations in the marketing mix, but they also need to expand their knowledge base regarding all aspects of the marketing mix and how they interact with each other.

5.3. *Global Thinking*

Increased knowledge of intercultural communication, working across borders, and on a global basis. Being multilingual is an increasing valuable commodity. Europeans, who are already multilingual, will be more employable than their American counterparts.

5.4. *Strategists*

We say public relations is a strategic function, but we need to make this more than just a buzz word. We also need to demonstrate this by thinking more strategically about the «big picture».

5.5. *Scientist*

Although everyone agrees that measurement is important and necessary, too few companies are spending money on measurement as part of their budgets. ROI, or the bottom line, is extremely important in today's business climate. Only those PR programs —and staff— that can show «value» will be around next year.

5.6. *Technocrat*

New media and technologies are arriving every day. It's important for public relations personnel to keep up with developments —and to continually assess how the new technology can be applied to effective message dissemination.

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