The impact of divergent historical and cultural factors on convergence in global communication practice

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Abstract

Communication practice is increasingly converging around globally consistent approaches and techniques shaped by both globalisation and globalising communications technologies. However, this paper argues, national and regional practice histories and cultural characteristics have shaped, and continue to shape, practice in individual markets. The paper analyses the extent of that these divergent histories and cultures have shaped the structure and practices of the public relations industry in Australia and other countries. The paper challenges the common assumptions about public relations development and industry practice having developed from a predominantly US-based model progressively disseminated globally. It traces the history of public relations in Australia, counter-pointing its distinctive origins, to the US-origin thesis. It also examines the impact of demography and diverse national culture on industry shape and practice, comparing the Australian industry to that of other industries around the world. It uses mini-case studies of campaigns in specific countries to assess the extent to which they are culturally-bound by historical and cultural differences and the extent to which they are capable of being transferred or adapted to individual markets. For instance, assumptions about globally-consistent brand identities are contradicted by McDonalds’ branding practices in markets such as Canada and Japan. The paper also discusses how emerging market PR industries are being shaped by distinctive and divergent cultures and development paths and may create new structural and practice models as the emerging economies becoming dominant internationally. The authors suggest that history and cultural diversity continue, and will continue to, shape national and regional practices.

Introduction

For the last half of the 20th century the dominant paradigm regarding public relations history and practice was US-centric (L’Etang, 2001). Public relations history was assumed to have started in the late 19th century in the US and was developed through the activities of early practitioners such as Lee and Bernays.

In the early 21st century the historical paradigm has increasingly been replaced within public relations academic circles by scholarship exploring the history of public relations in many countries ranging from India to European nations and Australia. Yet so far the implications for public relations practice of differing national and regional histories, cultures and societies has been less studied.

Discussion of public relations history have generally been largely from the perspective of the PR industry (Olasky, 1987, Hill and Knowlton 1967 etc). They have sometimes, while mentioning historical figures who practised image management, failed to explore relevant developments in mainstream historical studies which have systematically researched the representation and image of rulers and institutions, and the use of persuasive techniques to shape those images and representation and maintain consensus among the ruled.

Trends in public relations history

Within this context it is possible to identify four broad trends in the development of this history of PR represented by: first, the US-centric periodization of public relations history as exemplified by Bernays,
(1952); second, the US-centric event and fact-based narrative public relations history such as Cutlip, (1994, 1995); third, the emerging histories of public relations globally and in individual companies (L’Etang, 2008, 2001, 1999; L’Etang and Pieczka, 2006; Watson 2008; Croft et al 2008; in Spain (Salcedo, 2008; Miller 1999) and, fourth, the mainstream historical research on communication, representation and image undertaken by Eisenstein (1979), Sharpe (2009), Burke (1992) and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).

Raaz and Wehmeier (2010) remark that most of these public relations academic trends have lacked theoretical underpinnings beyond a periodization model in which ‘linear maturation’ is the major feature. This perspective is also reflected in L’Etang (2008) who argues that the US bias in public relations history writing “may have limited theoretical developments” and has ‘profoundly shaped the discipline’. The situation is further complicated by confusion about the nature of the word propaganda, a word freighted with negative connotations from the 20th century, but which had previously had a more straightforward meaning closer to that of other persuasive techniques. A further complication arose as a result of an anachronistic imposition of concepts of symmetric and unidirectional communication and asymmetric communications on previous public relations history aiding the development of the Whiggish (Butterfield, 1965) historical periodization model in which public relations inexorably progresses from asymmetry and press agentry to symmetric communications and social media while ignoring the fact that not all modern public relations practice necessarily follows a symmetric model. Equally anachronistic is the tendency in some histories of public relations to use the search for the first appearance of the words ‘public relations’ as the beginning of public relations history. This is lexicography rather than history. Moreover, in the past few decades there has been a proliferation of terms used to describe public relations function ranging across corporate relations, corporate affairs, corporate communications and so on. If there is not common agreement on what terms describe the function today it is unproductive to ignore the possibility of different terms describing the function or activities in the past. Indeed, in historiographical terms this entire approach is antiquarian (Woolf, 2011) rather than historical.

An Australian history

A narrative, event and fact-based view of Australian public relations history illustrates why the US-centric model is not valid. For instance the Tasmanian Government had undertaken public relations activities as part of tourist and immigration promotions from the 1820s when the artist Joseph Lycett (who never visited Tasmania) produced lithographs to encourage immigration and investment in the colony (McPhee, 2006) and official photographers were appointed from 1895 (Reynolds, 2012) to promote tourism. Lithography played a part in 18th century British promotion as well as illustrated by William Hogarth’s role in developing strategies for, and depicting the Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens in London (Coke and Borg, 2011). In the early 20th century Australian trade and tourism promotion by the Australian Government and the Australian Dried Fruits Board (Turnbull, 2010) mirrored similar UK efforts under the leadership of Sir Stephen Tallents (Huxley, 1970) as part of the Imperial Trade Preference and Imperial Trade Promotion campaigns throughout the British Empire.

Most nations can now begin to point to similar events and facts which push the public relations historical development further back and situate it within national contexts. Yet, while this corrects the US-centric view of public relations history, it does not provide a strong theoretical base or framework for understanding how and why persuasive techniques around representation and image have evolved. For this we need to turn to mainstream histories of human and national development. Within this context two hypotheses can be suggested. First, that the drive to communicate is inherent in the development of human consciousness since our earliest days as illustrated by rock art (Lewis-Williams, 2002) and other pre-historic developments (Renfrew, 2007). Second, that is how this drive to communicate developed and was used is rooted in the different historical, religious, cultural and economic developments within different countries and regions at different times.
Why it might be so?

The problem is to relate this to modern public relations practice and to interrogate its implications for global public relations practice. To address the problem it is useful to look at the very persuasive reasons for adopting a US-centric view of public relations history and practice as this. In Australia such reasons include: the impact of US text-books on the body of knowledge explored by undergraduates studying public relations; the lack of knowledge of history and earlier forms of public relations; and, the impact of globalisation and the power of US culture.

Balanced against these issues are the way language, cultural sensitivities, demography, religion, culture and social practices impact on public relations practice. For the purposes of this paper we illustrate through case studies how these influences impact public relations practice nationally and regionally rather than converging globally.

References

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