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PR through a western prism: Why nations should not ignore their defining points of difference

The US PR model is held up as a desirable paradigm around the world. But that does not mean it should automatically be accepted as best practice. By Mark Sheehan.

History is written by the victors – right? So it is in public relations and the winners in 20th century communication were US public relationsTHEm, practitioners and educators. But there were many successes in many nations and as every victor knows different terrains require different strategies.

Move forward to the second decade of the 21st century and communication practice is increasingly shaped by both globalisation and globalising communications technologies. However, what we often fail to recognise are practitioners in the national and regional histories and cultural characteristics that have shaped, and continue to shape, PR practice in individual markets.

Increasingly the growing area of public relations history challenges the common assumptions about public relations development and industry practice having arisen from a predominantly US-based model which progressively spread around the world. This predominant view is still held and promoted by many American public relations thinkers. Clearly interprets public relations history in the context of his reading of the United States Constitution’ (Pearson, 1990) and more recently Vos’s statement that ‘PR practitioners will likely find it easier to embrace a field that is American rather than un-American’ (Vos, 2011).

A once dominant paradigm

For the last half of the 20th century it can be argued the dominant paradigm regarding public relations history and indeed practice was US-centric. Motzkin (1993) remarked that in democratic nations, public relations was a growing business and public relations practitioners and principles resemble those in the United States. Public relations have 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 Berenice. So US methods were inadvertently identified as best practice through primary. But what if they weren’t the first practitioners of public relations?

In Australia, for example, activities recognised as lobbying and advocacy had a particular genesis in the pre-federation colonies. These distinct and individual activities, recognisably undertaken by the late 1890s (fifty years after white settlement), show a persuasive communication genre responding to local conditions and developing in a nationally unique way with little external influence.

In the 20th century, American century, the growth and far-reaching spread of multinationals led to the primacy of US type public relations practice but underlying it was often a local, home-grown PR way of doing things. Early this century when the documentary Super Size Me was released, McDonalds US adopted a fortress style response. But McDonalds Australia and UK chose an open and free method of communication which minimised damage and maintained consumer confidence.

The challenge is to relate and implement this thinking to modern public relations practice and to interrogate its implications for global public relations practice. In trying to account for the dominance of US practice each practice – First to Third World – will have unique reason or reasons. But broadly speaking we can say that such reasons may be ignoring a defining point of difference that is critical to the practice’s existence and survival.

Imitation through a western prism

In developing nations whose PR practice is immature or restricted by structural constraints such as government or media control it is sometimes the case that they seek to imitate and view public relations through a Western prism ignoring their own history and development – and how public relations has functioned in-country. For example, in attempting to fit a national PR practice into Hunt and Grunig’s four models, a country’s profession and its scholars may be in danger of distorting. This is critical to the practice’s existence and survival.

There is in my experience, as editor of an international PR journal for educators and practitioners through submitted articles, a desire to develop or practice of public relations, evidence of a cultural conglom in the developing nations – the old ‘West is Best’ argument. The practitioners and educators in these countries often seek to dominate the nascent national offers in PR and make their past and present practice reflective of what they judge to be best, i.e. – what would the West do?

This discussion should not be framed in the context of winners and losers, but should alert all involved in public relations that just as we must take into account culture and language when developing a new global strategy, we should look around and see what has defined a nation’s PR practice.

Born out of different needs

The role of PR in India commenced a CSR program in the early 20th century; in the 19th century the colonies in Australia and New Zealand appointed tariff agents to lobby the British government on trade and colonial policy. And US corporations developed unique PR machines that reflected the needs and nature of that growing nation. We were all born out of different communication needs and our profession is a reflection of those birth pangs.

So importantly, the PR practitioners and educator, when taking a global perspective and taking into account a nation’s language, culture and society, needs to seek out and examine those home-grown and good PR practices.

Change of practice is critical as we engage in the 21st century. Assumptions based on US-centric PR practice or one global, convergent approach to public relations practice will be difficult to maintain and may not even be appropriate!

Thought Leader Profile

Mark Sheehan is Senior Lecturer in Public Relations in the School of Media and Communications at Deakin University. He has a Master of Business Administration (Communications) and is the Associate Head of School – Regional and Development.

Mark was appointed to the Board of the NSW Council of Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) in 2006 and has subsequently been a Board member, Secretary (2006) and Treasurer (2008) on Executive Committee member of PRIA (National Branch) in 2007. He is currently a Vice-Chair of the PRSA National Education Advisory Committee.

He is also a Senior Associate and Honorary Life Member of the Financial and Securities Institute of Australia and an Associate Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management. Mark holds a B.A. degree from Latrobe University, an MBA from RMU University and a Master of Economics (Public Affairs) from The University of Sydney.

He commenced his PR career in consultancy work, spent a decade in publicity roles in the publishing industry and then undertook senior management PR roles in industry and professional associations in the Australian finance sector.

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