When Public Relations Becomes Government Relations

By Michael L. Kent and Maureen Taylor

C ultural dynamics affect the practice of public relations in different regions of the world, yet most discussions come from an American perspective. The American perspective embodies Western values and may not be effective when practitioners conduct public relations in other nations. To help practitioners plan for interna-

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tional public relations, this article discusses two issues that occur when public relations becomes government relations: K. Sriramesh's model of personal influence and Geert Hofstede's concept of power distance.

When discussing the similarities and differences in international public relations, a Thai colleague would joke about the practice of public relations in his country. He would shake his head and say: "If you did that in my country you would end up visiting the crocodile farm." His humorous response points to a realization that in Thailand cultural and governmental constraints make for a very different public relations landscape. Thankfully (or unfortunately in some cases) public relations practitioners are rarely fed to crocodiles in the U.S., but we still fail to realize that American public relations practices and assumptions are not always exportable to different nations.

To effectively engage in public relations in international contexts it is necessary to understand how public relations is practiced in a variety of nations (Culbertson and Chen, 1996). This essay takes up the idea that one function of international public relations will be "government relations." And government relations may be the best descriptor of public relations functions in many developing nations. Indeed, in many nations of Asia, Africa and South America, communication to and with government officials is one of the most important tasks for practitioners (Gibson, 1998; Strenski and Yue, 1998).

Why is government such an important public in some nations and not in others? Culture is one reason why government officials in some nations may have substantial power while officials in other nations are merely bureaucrats with little discre-

tion in decision-making. Special consideration should be given to government officials because "they represent the ultimate legislative authority in a society... [and] establish the rules — the laws and regulations — within which every organization must function" (Mintzberg, 1983, p. 44). Thus, an examination of the role that culture plays in public relations is the first step to understanding government as a key stakeholder in public relations.

The Impact of Culture on Public Relations

Hofstede defined culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another. Culture in this sense, includes systems of values; and values are among the building blocks of culture" (Hofstede, 1984, p. 21). Culture is composed of the assumptions that are brought into an organization through the experiences and attitudes of employees. It plays an important role in the public relations communication of an organization. The field of public relations needs to learn more about the link between societal culture and public relations communication. Although the concept of culture has been investigated in many disciplines, only recently have public relations researchers and practitioners recognized the significance of culture as a variable that affects public relations (Botan, 1992; Epply, 1992; Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, and Lyra, 1995; Kruckeberg, 1998; Sharpe, 1992; Sriramesh, J. Grunig, and Buffington, 1992; Sriramesh and White, 1992).

It is now widely accepted that the particular economy, location, and history of a nation will influence the practice of public relations and that culture is linked both internally and externally to the practice of public relations. Corporate culture, as an internal organizational variable, has a direct and indirect effect on the public relations practice of an organization. Culture as an external factor also influences communication messages, relationships, and national approaches to public relations.

Avoiding Ethnocentrism

Research into the role and influence of culture reflects a growing concern for ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism suggests that "a single theory is appropriate for all society, although the theory developed reflects the cultural assumptions of the society from which it originated" (Vercic, Grunig, and Grunig, 1996, p. 33). Ethnocentrism in public relations is a belief that what is known about public relations in one country is applicable in all countries (Botan, 1992). To avoid ethnocentrism practitioners must understand how culture

influences communication (Banks, 1995). While it is true that many other nations imitate U.S. public relations techniques, this begs the question of whether or not U.S. theories, models, practices, and assumptions are comprehensive and appropriate enough to explain global public relations practices.

Communication to and with government officials is one of the most important tasks for practitioners.

In spite of the growing body of research on the practice of international public relations, many practitioners often mistakenly believe that what works in Chicago can work in Shanghai. Many scholars also assume that their Western approaches to public relations can still describe the dynamics of the practice in the international arena. For instance, according to the 1992 IABC study, two-way symmetrical public relations should be the goal of all public relations communication (Grunig, 1992). Symmetrical public relations is based on such principles as "equality, autonomy, innovation, decentralization of management, responsibility, conflict resolution, and interest group liberalism" (Grunig, 1992, pp. 38-39). But, if we look closely at the societal structure of many nations, many of the assumptions that guide Western public relations concepts are absent or in nascent stages of development. In Malaysia, for example, where the government is responsible for approving licenses, business permits, and the allocation of scarce resources, many newly privatized

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businesses are not on equal footing with the government (Kynge, 1997 a & b). Similarly, in Thailand, social status, not equality, is one of the primary factors shaping public relations practices (Ekachai and Komolsevin, 1996). In India where "public relations unit[s] dealt mostly with one public: journalists," the concept of interest group liberalism means little (Sriramesh, 1992).

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Culture, then, will also influence the power of government as a public. Government publics present a host of challenges and opportunities for practitioners. It can hinder the functioning of international organizations that seek to operate in their nation or it can support the efforts of organizations who contribute to national development. Either way, public relations practitioners need to be able to operate in any international context to best serve their organizations. Two cultural frameworks are useful in understanding the roles of government in international public relations landscapes: power distance and personal influence. The concepts of power distance and personal influence help practitioners better understand and more effectively communicate with government publics.

Power Distance and Personal Influence

Hofstede's (1984, 1991) concept of "power distance" refers to "the interpersonal power or influence between [a superior and subordinate] as perceived by the least powerful of the two" (1984, pp. 70-71). Hofstede says that power distance is based on human inequity (1984, p. 65). In the West where most theories of public relations have been developed, power distance is not a major factor in communication. That is, in the U.S., for example, each citizen not only has a belief in his/her own self-worth but also possesses legal protection of individual and civil rights. As noted above, it is the belief in individual self-worth and civil liberties that guides the call for two-way symmetrical communication as the preferred model of ethical practices (Grunig, 1992).

Power Distance

Power distance may affect both the internal and external workings of an organization. When organizations operate in high power distance nations, key internal publics such as employees may be less willing to speak freely about important issues, less willing to critique decisions made by management, and less willing to step out of traditional roles for the improvement of the organization. In external communication, organizations operating in high power distance nations may waste time and resources securing government approval for the simplest matters. High power distance is a reality of international public relations and once an organization knows that it is working in such a culture, it can begin to plan for its communication and relationship-building.

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A second framework, Sriramesh's cultural perspective of personal influence, is also useful for explaining some contexts in international public relations (1992 & 1996). Sriramesh's perspective is an extension of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations. Sriramesh, however, identified a fifth model of public relations, practiced in India and other developing nations, that has practitioners cultivating close relationships with external publics to minimize government regulation and secure positive media coverage (1992). The personal influence model characterizes the practice of public relations in many developing nations and is not unlike what once characterized the political landscape in the U.S. in the 40s and 50s where individuals possessed enormous political power and influenced national affairs. (Aitken, 1993; Truman, 1972). In many developing nations, however, personal influence is not simply the exercise of power by corrupt or selfish individuals but rather it describes highly formalized social systems based on ideas such as hierarchy, power distance, family name and ethnicity, and one's "proper" place in society. Public relations professionals who understand the importance of personal influence are able to recruit highly influential nationals to help with public relations efforts. Moreover, personal influence networks can help communicators

to reach untapped key publics by seeking out individuals with ties to desired publics.

In many developing nations, power distance and personal influence may affect the organization-government relationship because government officials may be more powerful than public relations representatives of the organization. When this occurs, balanced communication about mutual needs, opportunities, and cooperation may be hindered. Moreover, when government officials dominate the communication relationship with organizations, instances of bribery and patronage may occur. This is not what good public relations should be about. But what is a practitioner to do when working under these international constraints?

In many nations of the world, government rather than consumer publics will emerge as the key public. Power distance and personal influence explain why this may occur. An understanding of the roles played by power distance and personal influence in international public relations is the first step to successfully operating in these contexts. Here are some suggestions for practitioners who must communicate with these powerful government publics.

Implications for Government Relations

Select Key Publics

Societal culture influences the practice of public relations, including the direction of communication, relationships with the media, and the identification of key publics. A common assumption of Western public relations is the notion that practitioners should focus on a variety of key stakeholders — consumers, employees, shareholders, and activists. As Taylor and Kent point out "[e]ver since Ivy Lee handed out the first fact sheets to journalists in 1906, public relations has been described as a mediated communication activity used to reach multiple publics" (1999, p. 1). However, many Asian cultures are not based on assumptions of freedom and autonomy, rather, they are based on notions of hierarchy and patronage (Pye, 1985). In countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Japan, the general public may not be as influential as in the West because public protests and grassroots public relations campaigns are rare. One of the reasons for this difference between key publics in the West and key publics in the developing nations of Asia lies in the different national objectives. Many of the newly industrializing nations (NICs) of Asia are making the transition from government dominated economies to free market economies. In these economies, both organizations and citizens are discouraged from publicly criticizing the government. Such criticism is seen as anti-progress and unpatriotic. Because of a lack of tolerance for

activism and dissent, organizations can no more take their messages to the people, than the people can take their messages to the streets.

Foreign or multinational organizations may want to retain respected national figures to represent their interests. In some nations, athletes such as soccer stars may be perceived as highly credible. In other nations, cultural icons such as actors or artists may serve as important spokespeople. Another tactic is for organizations conducting business in a particular region to partner with local public relations firms to learn the correct communication and cultural behaviors.

It is important to note, however, that even though the general public may not be immediately relevant for the visiting organization, it is imperative to begin to build relationships with certain citizen publics if the organization seeks a long-term presence in the region. Societal culture reflects the economic and political level of development in a particular nation. It can and will change as societal factors such as political and economic growth develops. Thus, it is important to plan for the day when the public becomes an active player in national decision-making. Until then, organizations need to identify key decision-makers for relationship-building.

Access to Decision-Makers

Grunig and Repper suggest that publics are composed of regular citizens who have banded together over a common cause and who can exert power to influence the fate of organizations (1992). This is not the case in many of the NICs. Many nations operate economies that seriously restrict opportunities for individuals outside of the dominant social or cultural group. According to Sriramesh, personal influence is a "pervasive public relations technique" in many other cultures and nations (1992). As a result of this personal influence model, media campaigns are not the key to winning public support. Rather, close relationships with key decision-makers are necessary in order to minimize government regulation, secure government approval, and ensure positive press coverage. Successful international public relations professionals may want to recruit individuals with prestige to seek out relationships with key leaders. Personal influence with key decision-makers rather than public influence needs to be recognized and incorporated into the public relations strategy if organizations wish to be successful at reaching key constituencies. Indeed, Zaharna (1995) studying source credibility in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia found that the person who delivers an important message is often more significant than what is said. In other words, organizational messages are

accepted when credible spokespeople are behind the messages. Nationally recognized figures can increase the chances of access to decision-makers.

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Organizations that are interested in gaining access to decision-makers should recognize these challenges and opportunities. For instance, public relations should seek out relationships with both elected and appointed leaders. Special interest should be given to emergent political leaders, especially democratic ones. Moreover, organizations should also seek out voluntary associations such as professional, trade union, and cultural groups. As nations experience economic and political development, the public will become more interested and involved in national policies. Thus, communication with these people and organizations will plant the seeds for future relationships.

Recommendation

There are many constraints when dealing with government publics. While these constraints might seem discouraging to Western public relations practitioners, all is not lost. The ability to practice ethical international public relations is still possible provided organizations are willing to commit resources to researching the needs of constituent publics. Indeed, money that is saved by international organizations on institutional advertising, public information campaigns, and dealing with public advocacy groups can be invested in local community development and improving international working conditions. Moreover, if relationships with emergent leaders are viewed as an investment into the future, the community leaders of today may be the political leaders of tomorrow.

In cultures where power distance is great and personal influence important, messages often contain many levels of meaning. Thus, only individuals from that particular culture can fully appreciate and understand the subtleties of local messages. This is not to say that international public relations is not possible without the assistance of resident

nationals (although it would be inadvisable). Rather, organizations wishing to practice effective public relations abroad cannot simply import Western assumptions and theories whole cloth. Organizations must be polycentric — willing to listen, learn and adapt to the culture of their host nation.

We have now come full circle, back to the original concern with the practice of ethnocentric public relations and whether it can be avoided. The suggestions discussed herein are but some of the broadest considerations. Public relations as a field still has little more than an inkling of the possible and appropriate strategies applicable outside of the West. Practitioners and agencies are, as always, responsible for their actions. In the future the field will continue to develop more sophisticated strategies to deal with international public relations. As Dean Kruckeberg has noted the, "practice of public relations inevitably will encourage non-democratic nations to become more democratic" (1995-1996, p. 38). But, for now, we have a starting point — recognize the power of government publics while, at the same time, plan strategically for the day when citizen publics become more important.   PRQ

References available on request to *PRQ*.

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