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Challenging Assumptions of International Public Relations: When Government Is the Most Important Public

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ABSTRACT: To learn more about international public relations it is important to explore the assumptions underlying each nation's practice. Through such analysis, we learn that many of the assumptions that guide Western theories and practices are not applicable in other regions of the world. This article examines one assumption—that the practice of public relations targets a variety of key organizational publics. In many developing nations it is government officials rather than the general public who are of greatest importance to effective public relations. If government is the most important public in developing nations, then this relationship will influence the practice of public relations.

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INTRODUCTION

Ever 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. Prevailing opinion has been that public relations practitioners are "in an ideal position to bridge the gap between the media and the general public."[1] While it is true that public relations practitioners often perform this boundary spanning function, the general public is not always the target of public relations activities and communication. In some international contexts, the offices of government are the key public.[2]

To learn more about international public relations, it is important not only to explore the *similarities* between the practices of public relations in the United States and other nations, but also to examine the *differences*. This critical approach is common in other fields. Journalism scholars, for example, have examined the roles, functions, and assumptions about the press in different nations and have found that legal, political, and educational systems affect journalistic practices.[3] The field of public relations will also benefit from such analysis.

J. Grunig suggested that the field of public relations should carefully examine its assumptions to understand where the field currently is, and more importantly, where the field is going.[4] One way to understand the similarities and differences in international practices is to compare the assumptions underlying each nation's practice of public relations. After detailed introspection, public relations practitioners may find that many of the assumptions guiding Western public relations are not applicable to the growing field of international public relations.

One particular assumption, that the practice of public relations focuses on a variety of key publics—shareholders, employees, suppliers, activists, the media, and consumers—is the subject of this article. In many developing nations, however, it is the government officials rather than the general public who are most important to public relations practitioners. If government is the most important public for organizations in developing nations then this relationship will influence the practice of public relations. To explore government as key public, this article first examines the international and governmental public relations literature. It then provides a case study of Malaysian public relations practice and discusses some of the implications involved in conducting international public relations based on Western public relations models.

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS

Although the first articles discussing international public relations emerged only a little over a decade ago, an increasing number of research articles, books, and journals now describe, theorize, and critique the international practice of public relations. To extend public relations theory, scholars have looked beyond U.S. practices and have questioned whether Western assumptions hold true in cross-cultural public relations contexts. The fact that many scholars of international public relations recognize the importance of cross-cultural research is worth noting. Botan discussed how culturally biased assumptions obscure how public relations can help organizations to better understand their publics.[5] Moreover, Botan argued that an ethnocentric public relations perspective may actually reduce the chances of Western public relations scholars learning about potentially useful, but unknown, practices. Wakefield, has offered a framework for research in international public relations.[6] Wakefield's framework suggests that cultural, management, societal, and communication theories will help better explain the practice of public relations in international contexts. Banks also examined the assumptions of how organizations communicate in multicultural settings.[7] Banks offered scholars and practitioners suggestions for improved intercultural public relations communication based on culturally sensitive assumptions for dealing with activists, internal publics, and community members.

To develop internationally applicable theories and practices, public relations scholars must reflect on the research traditions that guide our theories. American public relations theories have their roots in democracy and capitalism.[8] However, the theories that guide other nation's public relations practices are often rooted in very different cultural values and circumstances. Nessmann, for example, identified some underlying assumptions of European public relations theorists.[9] He noted that early European discussions about the "press" and "PR" can be found in the works of social critic Max Weber. In Asia, public relations is often more influenced by Eastern theology and hierarchic relationships. Ekachai and Komolsevin looked at the functions and roles of public relations practitioners in Thailand and identified social status as one value that shapes public relations practices.[10] Examining the assumptions behind public relations theory serves to enrich our knowledge of the underlying communicative and human relationships in public relations practice at home and abroad.

Public relations takes many forms and serves many functions throughout the world. However, as Banks,[11] Botan,[12] and Nessmann[13] have argued, researchers may be looking at the practice of public relations through ethnocentric lenses; that is, public relations scholars and educators implicitly and explicitly make certain assumptions about the practice of public relations in other parts of the world. These assumptions need to be critically examined.

ASSUMPTION OF "PUBLICS"

L. Grunig identified publics as groups of two or more individuals who organize to influence others.[14] Public relations research suggests that active publics can affect organizations and their missions.[15] Grunig and Repper argued that "organizations should construct communication programs with publics rather than segments . . . because they have a greater chance that those programs will be effective."[16] The assumption behind these positions, that publics, composed of regular citizens, actually have and can exert power to influence the fate of organizations, may hold true in the United States and other Western nations where there is a history and tolerance of activism. However, what happens in other nations where activism is rare and citizen power negligible?

Effective public relations in many parts of the world may not follow from communication and relationship building with clearly identifiable and segmented mass publics. Multiple publics may be an important part of public relations communication in the developed world; but in the developing world, specific publics such as journalists and government officials may actually be more important publics. For example, Sriramesh found that in the developing nation of India, "public relations unit[s] dealt mostly with one public: journalists."[17] Similarly, in other nations, government officials and bureaucrats make important decisions about licenses, contracts, and business permits. Those who control access to scarce material resources may actually be the key public for practitioners in the developing world.

GOVERNMENT AS THE TARGET OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Although government has always been included in discussions about public relations, it is the issue management literature that most clearly identifies government as an important public to be watched and analyzed.[18] Jones and Chase suggest that issue managers conduct an integrated management strategy that places the offices of government on equal footing with citizens and business groups.[19] Similarly, Crable and Vibbert critiqued and expanded Jones and Chase's model of issue management and offered a "catalytic model."[20] In the catalytic issue management model, corporations are counseled to "initiate, rather than react to, policy discussions."[21] In later issue management research, Heath and Cousino acknowledged that organizations must communicate with key stakeholders such as government officials to benefit from favorable public policy decisions.[22] Heath's advice for issue managers is clear—organizations need to know the relevant "persons who create law or ordinance that prescribes which actions are rewardable or punishable."[23] Issue management is the tool to identify and communicate with these government publics.

The management literature has also addressed the importance of the government as an organizational public. Mintzberg viewed government as one the most important external publics for organizational communication.[24] Mintzberg argued that organizations should always give special consideration to government officials because "they represent the ultimate legislative authority of the society . . . [and] establish the rules—the laws and regulations—within which every organization must function."[25]

The issue management and business management literature suggests that "using business expertise to influence government decision-making has emerged as a crucial factor in business success."[26] Successful public relations efforts to governmental publics require more than merely targeting particular officials. Effective public relations must also consider the unique social, economic, and political conditions of a nation. That is, every nation has a slightly different view of the uses and functions of public relations and this view is determined by the unique history and living conditions of that nation. Van Leuven observed that as nations progress in development, the practice of public relations also changes.[27] Factors such as rapid economic development may result in a shift from public relations for nation building purposes, to market development, and finally, to public relations efforts to establish and maintain regional interdependence.[28]

The former Soviet Union and its Eastern Bloc allies are excellent examples of how political and social conditions affect the existence and practice of public relations. During communism, public relations was most often limited to government communication efforts.[29] The emergence of capitalism and democracy has engendered new rationales for the practice of public relations. The former Eastern Bloc is not alone in its recent explosion of public relations communication. The Newly Industrializing Nations (NICs) of Asia are also making the transformation from a government-dominated economy to a free-market economy. Businesses that were previously state-owned and managed are now moving toward private ownership. This push for privatization has created the need for private corporations to reassure governments that they are capable of managing the newly privatized sectors of the economy. In doing so, these organizations implicitly and explicitly communicate to the government about the successes and needs of their organization.

The issue management literature shows that government can be a key public for practitioners. Moreover, the relationship between public relations practitioners and government officials will be partly determined by the social, political, and economic development of a particular nation. To illustrate the dominance of government as a key public, the next section of this article reports data from interviews with practitioners who carefully manage their organization's relationship with government officials.

CASE STUDY OF GOVERNMENT RELATIONS IN MALAYSIA

This case study explores the similarities and differences of American and Malaysian public relations. The case study offers an in-depth look at public relations challenges and opportunities in Malaysia. The data for this case study consist of professional presentations, in-depth interviews, and personal communications with seven public relations practitioners working in the capital of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. This study was conducted during Fall 1995, and the sample included Malaysian practitioners of Malay, Indian, and Chinese ethnicities, as well as one American practitioner. All interviewees held management positions in their organizations. Organizations represented in this study include an American-based public relations agency, two Malay-owned agencies, a Chinese-owned conglomerate, a small business, a public relations educator/practitioner, and a newly privatized industry.

Interviews were loosely structured and in-depth, to allow the researcher to gather rich descriptions of interviewee experiences and attitudes. Interviewees were asked to describe the practice of public relations in Malaysia and to identify key publics. Although the sample includes practitioners from various ethnic groups and business interests, the sample was not randomly selected and will not be generalized to all public relations practitioners in Malaysia. Rather, the sample offers a case study of actual practitioner experiences in the newly industrializing country of Malaysia.

Public Relations In Malaysia

Like many nations, Malaysia is moving from government-owned public services such as energy, water, and travel to more privatized services. Van Leuven described Malaysia as a noteworthy country for the study of international public relations because it illustrates "how professional practices change in response to economic growth, integration of language groups, shifting societal norms, and the expansion of the media along with other communication outlets."[30] Since Independence in 1963, the Malaysian government has used public relations for nation building.[31] However, Van Leuven noted that Malaysian public relations is slowly shifting from a preoccupation with nation building to a new focus on market development.[32] The Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s will no doubt foster increased roles for public relations.

The practice of public relations in Malaysia thrived in the economic boom of the 1990s. Dozens of local, national and international public relations agencies actively serviced the needs of traditional and new businesses. In addition to the growth of public relations agencies, professional development in the field is also growing. One professional organization, The Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) is an active body with over 400 members. The IPRM holds regular meetings, organizes guest lectures, and publishes a monthly newsletter (Berita) for members. The IPRM also takes an active role in public relations education at the university and college level.

Public relations practitioners in Malaysia share many common interests and concerns with practitioners in the United States. Indeed, five of the seven interviewees had some educational experience in the United States. Like their United States counterparts, Malaysian practitioners write news releases, plan communication efforts, work closely with marketing departments, and attempt to garner favorable publicity for their organizations and clients.

There are, however, some distinct differences in the practice of Malaysian public relations. Perhaps the most significant aspect of public relations in Malaysia is the relationship between media and government. The media are controlled by the government. In the past, newspapers have lost their licenses when editors or journalists publicly criticized the government. Television and radio stations are also dominated by government demands. The media in Malaysia follow a "development journalism" pattern rather than an "investigative" pattern. That is, journalists report pro-government and pro-business news and are not active in uncovering potentially embarrassing stories. The media are slowly becoming privatized, but new media owners are reluctant to challenge the source of their recent good fortune. Like other nations, placement of positive organizational information in the media is considered important and practitioners equate public relations success with favorable media coverage.

Another difference in the practice of Malaysian public relations is the issue of language and cultural identity. Bahasa Malaysia is the official language of the nation, however, there is an active Indian and Chinese press. Language and culture specific media outlets represent unique challenges to practitioners, especially when practitioners need to communicate to ethnic outlets outside of their own ethnic group. Language and cultural issues also shape how messages are framed. For instance, in Malaysia, advertisers follow a code of conduct set by the Advertising Standards Authority that monitors advertisements for adherence to social, religious, and cultural criteria. Advertisements that do not adhere to these guidelines are not approved.[33]

A third important factor that influences public relations practice is the level of activism in Malaysian society. Consumerism in still new in Malaysia. Consumers are generally passive and citizens have little or no history of picketing corporations, boycotting products, or attempting to influence organizational behavior. This lack of activism makes the practice of public relations less crisis driven than in the West because the Malaysian public does not actively question organizational policy. Organizations in Malaysia *do not* yet need to expend scarce resources communicating with the general public. Organizations *do* need to expend resources to communicate with government officials.

Communicating with the Government

Minimal power by the media, cultural and linguistic conditions, and the lack of activism in the general Malaysian public have all led to the emergence of government as a more important target of public relations communication. As the economic and social status of the nation changes, government becomes the target of most public relations efforts, rather than the source of them. In Malaysia, close relationships with government officials and bureaucrats can help organizations "win lucrative projects"[34] and is considered "the secret of corporate success."[35]

For this case study interviewees were asked to identify the important publics for their organization. All seven reported that public relations efforts in Malaysia included communication with government officials. Moreover, interviewees noted that even when they did not communicate directly with government officials, they always *implicitly* considered potential government response to organizational messages. For instance, practitioners who work in public relations agencies noted that clients want to reach key members of government through the placement of favorable stories in the media. One informant reported that getting a prominent and positive story into the newspaper pleased clients. Moreover, story placement was considered one measure of the agency's effectiveness.

The act of informing government officials of organizational actions appeared consistently in the answers of the interviewees. One interviewee discussed the implicit government public during a recent crisis involving the accidental deaths of two-dozen corporate employees and private citizens. The practitioner related that as soon as the CEO of the company was informed of the accident, he called the Prime Minister's Office. The government was informed immediately, even before the families or employees of the organization, because it was a newly privatized company. Although the organization is now in private hands, the government is still heavily involved in its operations. The government still possesses the power to rescind the sale of the company and assume day-to-day operations.

Other interviewees agreed that communication with the government is imperative in times of organizational crisis. One communications director who works in a Chinese-owned conglomerate noted that the organization always needed to be careful because it would be an easy target for the government to "make an example of." This practitioner's organization included one particular business operation that the government frowned upon—gaming. The practitioner noted that the organization rarely mentioned its gaming interests in corporate communications and instead used public relations to do everything possible to disassociate the corporation from this controversial portion of its holdings. One major project for the practitioner was to create a new corporate image and logo that would focus on other more socially acceptable aspects of the corporation.

Malaysian practitioners also view the government as an important source of public relations business. One interviewee noted that the government often hires public relations agencies for contract work. When asked if his agency was ever hired the practitioner reported that it is usually Malay-owned agencies that are selected. That is, the national government retains public relations agencies that are owned and operated by ethnic Malays. Although the government is not a client for his organization, this practitioner noted that his agency is vigilant about keeping up to date on government initiatives and positions not only for the agency's well-being, but also for its clients' interests.

It appears that in Malaysia the government has the ability and inclination to influence the practice of public relations. Government, rather than assorted citizen publics, is an important public for organizational communications. What this means for public relations practice and theory development is discussed next.

Considerations for Practitioners

The case study of Malaysian public relations practices shows that Americans may need to reconsider some of their assumptions when practicing in developing nations. Based on this case study, two frameworks for understanding public relations relationships in the developing world need to be considered in more detail: Hofstede's concept of "power distance," and the "personal influence" model described by Sriramesh. Both of these frameworks suggest particular constraints on the practice of public relations. For example, the practice of symmetrical communication between an organization and its publics is clearly outlined in the literature.[36] Moreover, the potential for this two-way communication in international practices of public relations is also evident.[37] However, what happens when it is government rather than segmented publics that organizations must communicate with?

Two-way symmetrical communication implies that organizations and their public have equal status, albeit varying resources. However, when the public, in this case government, has more power, then unique public relations situations occur. For instance, in Malaysia, the government is responsible for approving a wide variety of important business activities—licensing, business permits, and even the availability of scarce resources. In this type of relationship, the two parties are not equal and the lack of equality creates constraints for public relations practice.

Power Distance

According to Hofstede, certain cultural dimensions exist: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individuality, and masculinity.[38] These dimensions are not only present in organizations but also have the potential to impact the internal and external communication of organizations. It is the cultural variable of power distance that is most relevant in organizational public relations to targeted members of government. Power distance is "a measure of the interpersonal power or influence between [a superior and subordinate] as perceived by the least powerful of the two."[39] According to Hofstede, power distance is based on "human inequity."[40] Because power distance is present in communicative relationships, it is a factor in public relations.

Hofstede focused on power relationships within organizations.[41] In developing nations, power distance can also affect external communication between an organization and its publics because government officials have the power to approve or reject organizational requests. Because of potential governmental intervention, public relations practitioners in nations such as Malaysia have little opportunity to engage in two-way symmetrical communication as prescribed in the IABC study. J. Grunig suggested that symmetrical public relations is based on equality, autonomy, innovation, decentralization of management, responsibility, conflict resolution, and interest group liberalism.[42] However, Asian societies, including Malaysia, are not based on these symmetrical characteristics. Rather, many Asian societies are based on beliefs, customs, and value systems that maintain and respect hierarchy and authority. Lucien Pye, a noted scholar on Asian social and political thought, described Malaysians as a people who respect authority and have a highly personalized sense of power. In a high power distance nation, authority is to be accepted, not challenged.[43]

Personal Influence

The personal influence model, coined by K. Sriramesh,[44] extends Grunig and Hunt's models of press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical communication.[45] Sriramesh's "fifth model" of public relations describes practitioners' cultivation of close relationships with external publics to minimize government regulation, secure government approval, and ensure positive press coverage. Sriramesh also noted that in many nations in the developing world, organizations can ignore the perceptions of the "masses" and focus primarily on the cultivation of relationships with journalists and governmental publics.[46] Personal influence is not limited solely to the Indian practice of public relations but rather is a "pervasive public relations technique" in other cultures and nations.[47] Pye noted that in many Asian societies there are highly formalized structures guiding relationships and that personal influence remains an important part of political and social relations.[48]

Societies that value personal influence over public influence present many challenges to the foreign public relations practitioner. Foreign practitioners may be at a disadvantage if they focus on a media campaign rather than fostering a personal relationship with key officials. The practice of personal influence also presents challenges for public relations theorists and ethicists. The presuppositions of equality and autonomy that Grunig and others speak of stand in stark contrast to the practice of public relations in Malaysia. In the high power distance nations of Asia, hierarchies exist and these hierarchies are intensified by the stakes of successful public relations. In nations such as Malaysia, personal influence often counts for more than "good business practices."

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS

Power distance and personal influence are two frameworks for understanding the practice of international public relations. As Botan noted, international public relations scholarship has often suffered from an ethnocentric bias.[49] Researchers have often unconsciously relied on their own Western theories of public relations practice to understand and evaluate the practices of other countries. However, in Malaysia, and other newly industrializing countries, public relations may be best understood as government relations.

Given the amount of power and influence of government officials and bureaucrats, the potential for high power distance and reliance on the personal influence model has implications for the practice of two-way symmetrical communication. The major implication concerns the publics who are ignored. Efforts to communicate with all publics are rarely a realistic goal—even in organizations that operate in democratic societies. But in democratic and capitalist societies, even publics with modest resources have the capacity to communicate with organizations and impact their economic and political affairs. Organizations in developed economies are less constrained by government bureaucrats and officials and more constrained by external publics. Organizations that discriminate, monopolize, or ignore public dissatisfaction are corrected by a variety of social mechanisms including legislative, legal, and public appeals. As discussed above, such corrective mechanisms are rarely employed in the developing world. Boycotts, corporate investigations, and government corruption are rarely reported because the government uses the media mostly to foster "national development" initiatives.

The question remains, then, how should public relations practitioners respond under such a system? Current literature on international public relations suggests that it is unacceptable for multinational organizations to simply "do as the Romans do." What then becomes of Western notions of corporate virtue and ethics associated with two-way symmetrical communication in cultural and economic environments where such practices are not necessary, useful, or even possible? How can two-way symmetrical communication be the most ethical model of communication in an environment where it is often not possible or necessary? In national environments for example, where bribery, patronage, and prestige are often more effective business strategies than are "full disclosure" and "public information," large, well connected, politically "powerful" organizations necessarily have the advantage. Public relations in such cultural environments often is little more than press agentry or marketing.

Public relations is in the business of altering relationships between organizations and publics.[50] An organization can choose to negotiate relationships with the groups it deems most relevant. Although the negotiation of relationships should extend to all groups affected by or related to an organization, such is not the ideology in developing nations where "need to know" is standard governmental procedure. Obviously there is no easy answer to this question. However, what is important at this early stage of understanding of international public relations is the questions that need to be asked. By questioning assumptions we become aware that new frameworks of public relations theory and practice are needed, that the public relations profession cannot simply export Western theories and explanations to foreign contexts, and that what works at one stage of national development or in one economic context does not necessarily work in others.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to advance international public relations theory by challenging the assumption that citizen publics are the most important. There are important practical differences in public relations that exist in international contexts. The practice of challenging the field's presuppositions shows that just as notions of democracy, capitalism, and freedom vary from country to country, so too should theories of effective public relations.[51] The interviews with Malaysian public relations managers showed the differences between countries, beliefs, and social practices that exist. For "international public relations" to be truly effective, it must account for the "international" dynamic in various contexts.

The developing world is rapidly moving towards privatization, as the impetus for economic development shifts from national governments to private sector corporations. During this time of transition, government offices are emerging as especially powerful publics to the corporations that want to participate in and benefit from the economic opportunities. One task for public relations practitioners is to successfully build, maintain, and change relationships with key government officials. Privatization is but one of the many factors shaping international public relations and creating unique conditions for the practice. Studies on international public relations should acknowledge the important role government plays in developing economies and how it may shape the practice of public relations.

Organizations operating in NICs may have an ethical imperative to practice two-way public relations with constituent publics. However, when the political/legal framework of a country or region precludes this type of communication because of the fear of "damaging" a governmental or international standing, what are the effective theories of public relations practice that organizations should rely upon? "Power distance" and "personal influence" may be more accurate descriptive frameworks for the practice of public relations in NICs. Thus, for the field of public relations in general, and international public relations in particular, to continue to grow, scholars and practitioners must realize that the importation of Western theories may not be the best way to conduct public relations in international contexts.

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