

REDEFINING “PUBLIC RELATIONS” IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: Understanding that “Public Relations” represent a dynamic and evolving practice, a number of influential professional associations (PRSA, CIPR, CPRS) embarked, in the last 10 years, upon the mission to redefine the notion. This debate has consequences both on the communities of practice in PR, and on the education of future professionals. While the debate includes an increasing number of ideas, the social media evolution puts pressure on the communication sciences area, to acknowledge and formalize additional tasks for the PR practitioners. The paper looks into the results of the debate and reflects upon the teaching and research that should follow the attempt to revolutionize the PR profession and practice.

Keywords: definition, professional association, communities of practice, public relations, communication science

1. Introduction

Communication science is a relatively new addition to the realm of humanities, attempting to claim a territory rather well covered by philosophy, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, rhetoric, marketing – and the list can be continued. Building definitions, developing terminology, producing evidence for specific knowledge are all elements of a long and difficult process of setting the boundaries of scientific approaches. This process is even more striking in the particular case of public relations, a domain which is identified as service, practice, topic of training/diploma and/or certificate programs. In Romania alone communication science programs in higher education sprang in the last decade of the 20th century inspired by American and Western European models and actively tapped into the mainstream debates regarding the essence, uses and practices specific for PR. The definition debate is not over. The seminal article signed by Rex Harlow in the ‘70s, Building a public relations definition (Harlow: 1976) is still relevant, the multitude of understandings for the domain keeping scientists, practitioners, employers in a constant alert with respect to the realities of PR. Recently relevant professional associations relaunched the definition debate, claiming that in the 21st century a consolidated approach is legitimate. Increasingly more scientists, reflecting upon professions and professionalism, agree that, in order to socially recognize a profession (with all incumbent legal and practical consequences) the respective activity needs to be socially relevant, its practitioners need to have command over a body of knowledge, there should exist a standard educational curriculum and mechanisms of control over entry and exit to the field (Newsom: 2004, Ibarra: 2011).

2. Defining public relations

The first 75 years in the existence of the term *public* relations were aptly summarized by Rex Harlow. Who pointed out that almost 500 definitions of the concept shed light on

different aspects of the topic. Definitions should ensure clarity, transparency and reasoning. They need to be comprehensive, specific, clear, relatively short, and acknowledged and accepted by the professional communities. With PR the case is difficult. Some definitions look into the conceptual aspects (what is PR), other – into the instrumental part (what are the practices, activities, services rendered by PR professionals). Some of the definitions adopt a positive standing, stating what PR is, what are its features, methods, characteristics, how these can be identified/recognized and standardized. Other definitions state what PR *is not*, how PR is different or contrasting with other areas in communication practices (Balaban: 2008).

Edward Bernays (1952), almost unanimously recognized as a founding father of the public relations focused on the activity of PR and its effects, discussing the topic in terms of “engineering of consent”: “This phrase means quite simply the use of an engineering approach – that is, action based only on thorough knowledge of the situation and on the application of scientific principles and tried practices in the task of getting people to support ideas and programs”. The Encyclopedia of Public Relations (2005) clearly points at the large variety of approaches in defining the term public relations and to the consequences these definitions bear upon the teaching, practice and standards of the profession. The Canadian Public Relations Society defines PR as the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals and serve the public interest.

In Europe, the definition debate is quite vivid. On one hand, Michael Kunczick (2003) points out that PR practices can be traced as far as the 17th century, on the other – the term on PR as such was imported from the American practices and nuances are added to the term. The German Public Relations Society gave its own definition of the practice and revisits the documentation to underpin the recognition of the profession and describe its functions. Jon White comes to a similar conclusion (1995), stating that “Europe presents a particularly difficult challenge in terms of public relations. It also illustrates the difficulties in establishing a coherent communications policy across borders” since PR practices are relevant for an organization in terms of image, influence, financial success, business advantage, capacity to manage crises – and the list goes on. For French practitioners RP is : “Ensemble de méthodes et techniques utilisées par de groupements (entreprises, syndicats, Etats) et spécialement par des groupements d'intérêts, pour créer un climat de confiance dans leur personnel et dans le public, en vue de soutenir leur activité et d'en favoriser le développement”. (Le Robert). Also, Syndicat National des agences-conseil en relation publiques): “Le RP permettent de définir et de mettre en œuvre de manière continue ou ponctuelle, tout partie d'une politique de communication ou d'information au service d'une entreprise, d'une administration, d'une collectivité ou de toute autre entité en direction de ses publics et interlocuteurs, qu'ils soient internes ou externes”.

Even if some opinion leaders claim that “There is no such thing as European Public Relations”, Dejan Verčić (2001) poses a legitimate question: is there a way of bridging the differences in public relations definitions? An overview of 43 countries revealed that in Europe PR is tied to four major roles: managerial, operational, reflective and educational, the last two being stronger claimed than in US definitions and practices. His further research (2014) show that European practitioners perceive five issues as the

most important for their work: “linking business strategy and communication, coping with the digital evolution and social web, building and maintaining trust, dealing with the demand for more transparency and active audiences, and dealing with the speed and volume of information flow”. Comparing these features with the 2012 definition given to the activity by the Public Relations Society of America that PR is the strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics, no wonder that some commentators argue that the definition of the 21st century owes too much to the 20th century lenses. PRSA consulted largely the public regarding the acceptability of the definition, even the possibility to define it in ethical terms (to counterbalance voiced that blame PR practitioners for manipulating the public). Most respondents favoured the “keep it simple” rule and did not make room for references to ethical communication or standard. But also the digital aspect remained outside the definition, PRSA considering that this is more a detail rather than a feature salient for the practice.

3. Discussion and consequences

The definition debate bears heavy consequences for the teaching and research community. What is the educational promise, opposite the labour market and opposite those who pursue education in the field? What should be the research topics, how to build a relevant corpus of knowledge for the field? In many countries, access to the PR profession is not necessarily tied to a specific type of education. USA gives the tone, Romania – among others, leave the access to profession open. Universities, however, offering PR programs within the communication studies umbrella, shape their offer and curricula according to standards which are constantly challenged. Going back to the five features of 21st century PR identified by Verčič (2014), educational programs need to give proof how future professionals will be able to:

- link business strategy and communication,
- cope with the digital evolution and social web,
- build and maintaining trust,
- deal with the demand for more transparency and active audiences,
- deal with the speed and volume of information flow.

The concern is not singular: competence and evidence-based programs gain importance world-wide (Flynn: 2014). Most programs in Romania, for instance (www.rncis.ro) still operate according to 20th century standards (www.aracis.ro), dealing with the fundamentals of communication sciences, with PR history and practices which relate mainly to traditional forms of bridging institutions and publics, and less with the challenges posed by the digital revolution and the skills specific for the generations of digitally born students (Cernicova: 2015). Prominence is given to interactivity, dialogical dimensions of the profession, the capacity to write (persuasive) contents and obtain free media, organize events and serve in a multitude of functions, from the position of assistant manager to working in HR or marketing departments. The social action and the capacity to develop relations between institutions (clients) and publics remain main tasks, seen as such from the standpoint of professionals, practices and education providers. But the “how to” – i.e. the instrumental aspect of the definition is still under construction. For the Romanian educational practices, in particular, a 2011 project on creating a National Registry of Qualifications in Higher Education (www.rncis.ro) created

the possibility to compare programs and approaches to these delicate issues. Unfortunately, the much-worked upon registry no longer makes visible the curricula of the education providers, due to a change in the concept on the national level, regarding the use of this instrument as a showcase for the higher educational system. No wonder that researchers and educators struggle side by side with the professional community to find the common ground for understanding and defining what is PR and how to meet the necessities on the labour market (Cernicova, Dragomir, Palea: 2011).

According to the influential PRnewswire (2015), in the new century PR is engages, strategic, multichannel, many other things, but, most importantly, *ever evolving*, leaving room for grows, (re)interpretation, (re)invention of the profession, practices, instruments and uses. Professionals warn that “traditional” PR is only one of the branches of the activities, alongside with advocacy PR and with social media, each of the three having strong claims for attention and investigation. Therefore, the list of definitions cannot be closed in the foreseeable future and needs constant revisiting, revising and reconsideration.

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