

Jonida PETRO (PhD)
University of Tirana, Albania
E-mail: jonida.petro@unitir.edu.al

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING PUBLIC RELATIONS

Abstract

This article focuses on Public Relations as a profession and how the education system is part of effectively teaching public relations' programs in universities. It opens with an introduction to the origins of public relations, its evolution and what the future holds for PR professionals. Furthermore, it outlines the principles, knowledge and skills required by those who, after completing their studies, will become PR practitioners exploring specific career paths and scenarios. This article, as well, touches on issues such as teaching ethics in public relations, communication as a key aspect in succeeding in PR, as well as the distinction between marketing and advertising versus Public Relations. Finally, the article emphasizes that professionals without the relevant education in public relations usually fall into the category of journalists or communication agents, unless they are able to pursue continuing education in this area.

Keywords: *Public Relations; teaching; education; career; ethics; communication.*

Introduction on the origins of public relations

The term *public relations* was used in 1882 for the first time (Grunig, Hunt, 1984: 14). However, public relations (i.e., PR), is a very common term nowadays. It is often mistaken for marketing and advertising, as it is likewise a discipline based on communications. Having a good understanding of public relations and all its skills and tools, makes one understand the differences among the aforementioned disciplines as well as its role and importance.

As the name states, public relations are all about relations with the public. In order to understand the importance of public relations in education, it is crucial to understand how public relations initially emerged and grew towards the direction and concept it has now.

Public relations date back to ancient society sharing information on how to achieve high yields of crop (see Cutlip, 1994, 1997; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994). Also, according to Cutlip et al. (2000; 102): *“archaeologists found a farm bulletin in Iraq that told the farmers of 1800 BC how to sow their crops, how to irrigate. Public relations were used many centuries ago in England, where King’s maintained lord chancellors as “keepers of the King’s conscience.”*

An example of the early public relations campaigns is the Boston tea party, a political and merchants protest of 1773, considered “the greatest and best-known publicly stunt of all time” (Wilcox et al. 2013), which was directed by Samuel Adams, a renowned public relations pioneer.

The modern public relations began in the early 20s with the first practitioners and at the same time most influential figures of the public relations are Ivy Ledbetter Lee (1877 – 1934) and Edward L. Bernays (1891 – 1955), both considered as “the fathers of public relations”. Lee helped shape the future of public relations by adopting the “two-way model” approach to PR, where the public relations help the organisation and the public by sharing information of interest. *‘in brief, our plan is frankly, and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to supply the press and public of united states prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about’* (Extract from Ivy Lee’s “Declaration of principles” released in 1906).

In 1923 Edward L. Bernays published his book “Crystallizing public opinion” aiming to set down the broad principle of public relations, as a profession, which *“...in a few years has developed from the status of circus agent stunts to what is obviously an important position in the conduct of the world’s affairs”* (Crystallizing public opinion, 1923, forward, p vi).

Development of public relations

According to Wilcox (Wilcox et al. 2013) public relations are manifested by deliberating, planning, establishing and maintaining mutual understanding between the organisations and public, i.e., it is a two-way practice, unlike marketing or advertising. This is a rather modern

concept. The first public relations courses date back to 1920's in the USA, with Edward Bernays leading a public relations course in 1923 – 1924 at the University of New York. However, as D. K. Wright writes *“most of the early university based public relations education programs in the USA were based at major, research-oriented universities... [, but] much of this 1970s expansion took place within smaller, regional and mid-major institutions. and although most of the original public relations degree programs in the USA were based in journalism colleges, schools or departments, a good number of these new programs were located in speech-communication departments, many of which would later drop ‘speech’ from their titles and become known as communication departments”* (Wright, 2011, p. 244).

However, the discipline has evolved to respond to the demands of the society and businesses, by preparing public relations professionals ever more capable to add value to the organisations and the society with their work, through undergraduate and postgraduate study. The initial one-way communication approach was developed into the present known definition of public relations as establishing and managing relations with the public. Gruning and Hunt moulded into the well-known 4 models still searched for by students today: i.e., the press agency/publicity; public information’ two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric models, with the latter being considered most valuable as it upholds the win-win situation between organisations and society.

In spite of missing financing into public relations education, enrollments have increased substantially in recent years, so that in 1987 15% of the graduates from schools of journalism and mass communication were attending public relations tracks. In a study developed by Northern Illinois University, it was demonstrated that 127 colleges and universities in the U.S. deliver a single course in public relations; 34 others deliver at least two courses in the subject; 97 have degree programs (e.g., public relations as a major) at B.A. level; 23 have courses at M.A. level; and 10 provide degrees at doctoral level.

The present-day courses are much broader, including topics, which help in better defining both the public relations and the future public relations professionals, such as identifying the strategy, analysing the audiences, public relations writing and practicing public relations

under the light of the ethics that guard the public relations professional's behaviour and actions.

However, the teaching of public relations starts with the history in the field and its founders. In order to build the foundations for the understanding of public relations, students should first learn how the need first rose for public relations, the grounds where it started and the various models that public relations have developed throughout its history.

Once gaining thorough knowledge on the origins and foundations of the public relations, students will be better placed to understand public relations and its definition, as well as further build their comprehension on the modern practices and fine distinctions of the field.

The public relations course contains more hands-on skills, and students focus on learning how to write professional press releases and design effective public relations campaigns, also through identifying audiences and analysing them, determining the types of publics, writing for public relations with persuasive eloquence, etc., preparing interviews and answering different types of interviewers based on the key messages they want to convey on television as well as all types of media.

Students are able to not only study the theory, but also to put their knowledge into practice. They practice on producing press releases, designing public relations campaigns, and how to best tailor them under professional supervision, gaining invaluable public relations skills.

Students are required to work on case studies in public relations. They learn how public relations works in real life situations through the given scenarios and how to assess what happens when public relations fail to yield the expected results. More in details, students practice their skills on identifying the stakeholders, choose the public relations theory or models appropriate to the specific case, analyse the communication process and evaluate success or failure of practices. The work and evaluation process are done both individually as well as in teamwork with peers, focusing on developing critical thinking and discussion and coming forward with potential recommendations for improvement, as appropriate.

In order to put into practice their public relations writing skills in writing press releases, students write press releases using the standard public relations formatting guidelines and in associated press style. This helps students to identify audiences, and the best way to reach them. They draft the press release based on the provided facts of a given event and are requested to develop organisational messages that would generate positive reporting of the

event in the media. In addition, students are prepared to organize full scale events, create strategies for crisis management, forge business networks and connections.

The future of public relations

No matter who the stakeholders are, the role of public relations is becoming ever more prominent and the demand for public relations professionals with up-to-date expert knowledge and skills is increasing. The development of social media has helped to provide for a better setup for the two-way symmetry approach, by giving the means to all parties to express their opinions and give/receive feedback. However, all these increasing number of social media channels are more used to express opinions within the given space of the medium, thus affecting the messages to be exchanged.

These changes in technology vary also the way the public gets the information and how the organisations provide information. The increasing number of social media channels has provided the opportunity to more people to write whatever they like about a business or organisation, whether true or not, with the latter not always in a position to respond.

Furthermore, organisations/businesses do not always have the same access to reach their audiences online and in all the social media channels. In these scenarios, the role of a professional public relations becomes more crucial, as the only remedy to gaining the trust for organisations, by establishing and maintaining a positive communication with the public/consumer.

These developments put a challenge on keeping up with the technology updates, and the public relations writing, in order to be able to best convey the organisational message to the public. It also makes it more difficult to identify and analyse the audiences in order to appropriate the messages with a view to culture communication and persuasion. The aforementioned progresses further highlight the importance of public relations educations and its role in the modern reality.

In the beginnings public relations was associated with many issues related to ethics due to the fact that sending information to the media often meant a frequent absence of truth. All of this undoubtedly influenced the unethical reputation of public relations today

(Bowen, 2007). Thus, another aspect that students are guided in the public relations course is also the ethics and the public relations ethical dilemmas, with the PRSA code of ethics as basis for the ethics of public relations professionals, but also in maintaining the ethics of the professions throughout the course of their careers, in order to build a strong public relations profile and reflect high degrees of professionalism in establishing communication in the appropriate way, at the right time for accurate reasons with both the organisations/businesses and the public. Many believe that the best way public relations activities serve an organization is when they act as its ethical conscience (Voza, Vuković, Riznić, 2009; Black, 2003). We live in a time in which almost everything is virtual and information is free of charge, thus, public relations has evolved into a very effective instrument in affecting values and beliefs that shape our life.

Conclusion

Public relations should be considered as a profession of the past, present and more so of the future, while the education system and the society must recognize its importance. As initially stated, public relations are most commonly mistaken for advertising and marketing. Inger Jensen (2001) in comparing marketing with public relations defines the former as “there are no collective or social solutions in marketing, only individual action”, i.e., identifying it as one-way communication, which unlike public relations does not reflect the feedback of the public opinion. In particular when working with students from majors other than communication, lecturers need to make sure that they clearly understand the definition of public relations and how it differs from advertising and marketing from the very beginning of the course.

As mentioned earlier on another key aspect of the public relations course is focusing in a career in public relations. This occurs only by contributing in the preparation of competent, meticulous, and ethical practical relations professionals through knowledge and practice, but also introducing them to the public relations market. Students study about building trust and understanding a target audience, acting on a crisis strategically to tackle the unknown.

Indeed, students learn how “Public relations is 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” (Flynn, Gregory & Valin, 2008).

Since societies evolve, the process of education should never stop, including that of preparing good PR practitioners in our universities. Future public relations professionals should be well prepared and know how to apply theoretical knowledge to understand how people act and react.

Teaching Public Relations should be regarded for what it is, unless it will never reach the status of a profession of the importance it really has without the relevant course of study in the field. Professionals without the relevant education in public relations will continue to fall into the category of journalists or communication agents, if they are unable to pursue continuing education in this area.

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