

Public Relations in France: An Analysis of the Discipline and Its Practice

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Abstract: Public relation practice is extended all over the world, however, each country's characteristics produce effects in the way public relations are conceived. France shares certain aspects with global and European public relations, but also shows specific characteristics. This theoretical paper explains how the genesis of the discipline in France shaped public relations, and turned the humanistic point of view into an essential concept to understand French scholars and practitioners. The conception of public relations and its history in the country are vital to understand the discipline, nevertheless, other cultural aspects also affect the discipline. In France, for example, perception of their government and politics, conception of business, existence of a private sphere and tolerance of crises are key aspects to have a whole picture of the country's public relations. All of these characteristics give birth to a discipline in many ways different to the public relations known in the United States.

Key words: public relations; France; Europe; French public relations; international public relations

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1. Introduction

The world has become even more global than what it was before because of the popularization of social media. This has also happened in the public relations field (Grunig, 2009). However, because of a country's infrastructure, culture and media, there are differences in the way public relations are practiced and conceived (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003).

At the same time, global trends become more common, and local aspects gain importance. The combination of global and local aspects is vital to the point scholars and practitioners recommend to include both when professionals develop strategies and campaigns (Joseph & Joseph, 1993).

While it may look like Western Europe countries have similar contexts and cultures, this is just an impression. A clear example of this is the diversity of languages spoken in those countries. The characteristics of each country make their public relations different, but there are two dominant trends among them: The French trend and the German trend (Nessmann, 1995).

These trends reflect also the rivalry for the dominance and ruling of Europe of France and Germany, two neighbor countries which have been quarreling several times since the 17th Century.

The objective of this research is to analyze how public relations are envisioned in France and the way their different conception from the one prevailing in the rest of Europe reflects on its outputs. This is a theoretical paper, which should provide orientation to develop future research. Thus, this article is divided in three sections, the first

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one is a description of specific characteristics of public relations in France, the second is a revision of public relations history in this country, and the last one focuses on the similarities and differences of public relations between France and the rest of Europe.

It is important to observe the history of public relations in the country of study, since it is the key to understand how public relations are shaped today in France. This knowledge will help to understand how the discipline and its practice were introduced and how they were developed in a different direction than the rest of Europe.

Even if currently there are some differences, there are also commonalities (Nessmann, 1995; Taylor, 2000). Commonalities are the product of cultural and infrastructure similarities and a shared starting point, which is the European School and doctrine (Xifra, 2012). But, even if there is a common ground, French public relations have special characteristics that make them different.

2. Literature Review

2.1 A Description of Public Relations in France

Public relations in each country are shaped by different factors, like infrastructure, culture and media (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003). France is a “nation that dislikes the entry of any global products into its culture” (Taylor, 2000, p. 286). This makes it more difficult for international public relations agencies to establish offices in France (Taylor, 2000), and not only agencies, but also it increases the barriers to entry to international brands.

In France, trust in business and government is low (Pritchard, Ahles & Bardin, 2005). This country’s citizens, and also its government are not easy to reassure (Taylor, 2000). An example of this is Coca Cola’s crisis in Europe in 1999. France was especially difficult to manage because of its citizens’ characteristics, its culture and conception of business (Taylor, 2000).

Being a citizen implies respect to aspects of people’s private lives. There is a separation of public and private spheres much bigger than in other countries (Frame & Brachotte, 2015). The private sphere is then a taboo, also for people whose lives are more exposed because of their fame or work for the public sphere, like politicians (Frame & Brachotte, 2015).

France has a low tolerance of crisis, risk, ambiguity and conflict (Taylor, 2000), which creates big challenges for practitioners of the crisis communication area. Therefore, crisis communication is an area which is growing since the 90s decade, since there is a need to have conflicts managed so that the impact on enterprises and institutions’ reputation is lower (Joseph & Joseph, 1993; Pritchard, Ahles & Bardin, 2005).

However, because the main conception of public relations among publics — not practitioners or scholars, public relations are limited to relations with media (Dagenais, 2012; Pritchard, Ahles & Bardin, 2005). Therefore, practitioners also cultivate more carefully their relationships with key journalists (Joseph & Joseph, 1993). This reality is also affected by the way public relations are called often in France, organization communication or institutional communication (D’Almeida, Carayol, 2014).

But public relations go beyond this appreciation, since there are many public relation’s objectives that show the wide range of activities the discipline gathers, and also because of the nature of the discipline’s goals: building public opinion and sharing the public sphere (Dagenais, 2012). Indeed, there are multiple tasks included under public relations’ domain, shaping the discipline, making it a “mosaic field” (D’Almeida, 2015).

Another specific characteristic of French public relations is the importance of symbols in the content created

by practitioners. This means that non verbal communication is more common in France, considered a “high-context culture” (Pritchard, Ahles & Bardin, 2005, p. 423). The weight of symbols in public relations is also perceived in protocol. Even the way politicians are standing in a solemn act has a deeper meaning underlying.

Analyzing media in this country implies affirming the importance of the public media, sustained by government but at the same time independent of them and their ideological line (Pritchard, Ahles & Bardin, 2005), and also the still slow adoption of media platforms like Twitter — in 2015 only 10% of French citizens used the social network- (Frame & Brachotte, 2015).

Practitioners often use an operative language and consistent and logic work procedure. They also describe the need of actualization (Pesqueux, 2004), which explains the constant search of models of work. Professionals have detected new models of doing public relations in the last decade, including “slow pr” (Libaert, 2010). Slow public relations make practitioners come up with durable developments, and also long lasting strategies and objectives, so that enterprises and organizations show solid characteristics and directions by sticking to the same strategy and final goal (Libaert, 2010).

But slow public relations are just a new trend. There are many ways to understand public relations and many models that practitioners can apply while working. To understand French public relations, it is indispensable to review their history, since the base for their current conception comes from their origins.

In the French scholar field, there are three main topics: public relations in Europe, co-production of public space, and French and Canadian issues (Carayol, 2010). However, the disenchantment towards public relations and misconceptions about the field have created a gap of scholarly production. “While in France the profession of journalism has been given much attention, those linked to communications remain widely unstudied” (Carayol, 2010, p. 168).

2.2 History of Public Relations in France

Public relations in France were practiced since World War II, more linked to propaganda and politics (Xifra, 2012). The American influence because of Marshall Plan forced American enterprise to settle subsidiary offices in France, making the practice of public relations start to achieve positive production levels in the market (Xifra, 2012). The first public relations in France were oriented to public affairs (Noguero I. Grau, 1995).

But public relations as a discipline came linked to a name, Lucien Martrat. He worked for a petroleum subsidiary office. French scholars even call him “founder father” (Arzeno-Martin, 2012). He was part of a practitioners’ association called *Club de la Maison de Verre*, where public relations were a behavior and information tool, key to create relationships based on trust (Noguero I. Grau, 1995).

During the 50s, Martrat was already highlighting the social role of enterprises and their social responsibility. Back in the 50s, this social side of the enterprises was far away from the trends which became prominent in the United States, where the core principle was efficacy (Arzeno-Martin, 2012).

The French theorist did not think that social responsibility and efficacy were opposites, but linked. The first step to him was focusing on staff. He defined the integration of personal in the enterprise and its values as the key to progress (Arzeno-Martin, 2012), being this the birth of internal public relation, which action are taken by different enterprise departments in the United States.

It is worth to mention that this humanistic perspective is not totally positive, otherwise it would not make sense that more countries all over the world were not adopting the same model. The confusion of publics it is one of these not that good effects, which occur because of the lack of linkage between management and public relations functions (Pritchard, Ahles & Bardin, 2005). Public relations practitioners in France try to gain visibility

and make the discipline legitimate (Carayol, 2010).

People provides work, ideas and capital. They are not the organization, but they, internal and external publics, can change the organization. There is a systemic dependency between stakeholders and the enterprise (Xifra, 2006). Taking care of workers and publics needs and motivations is, according to Martrat, the right tool to keep balanced both social and economic systems (Arzeno-Martin, 2012).

Martrat's social interest comes from his own formation. His studies in sociology and anthropology had influence in his view of the enterprise and public relations. Furthermore, because of his humanistic studies, he considered the "social man" to be three kinds of men at the same time, these having desire of dignity, of collaboration and opinion making (Noguero I. Grau, 1995; Xifra, 2012).

Public relations in France, then, are conceived as a profession because of the influence of the United States, but observed from a humanistic perspective on the way they were developed in France (Xifra, 2012). Observation makes the discipline in France ethnographic.

These notions were introduced in Europe in the Code of Athens, besides some other ethic and moral considerations (Xifra, 2006). These codes had high impact in Europe. Public relations as a discipline have the Code of Athens as a common root in Europe, making similarities arise in the practice and scholar materials all over Europe (Xifra, 2012).

2.3 Public Relations in Europe

Since the Code of Athens in 1971, there is a common background in the European public relations, with an importance of internal public relations, and the appreciation of structural anthropology as an ideology, not as a method (Xifra, 2012).

Nevertheless, European public relations are far from being similar in each country (Taylor, 2000). Indeed, this surpasses doctrine and affects practice, "the same strategies and tactics that work in one nation are often not successful in another. Although these nations are part of the European Union, each maintains its own unique cultural values" (Taylor, 2000, p. 289).

Public Relations in the United Kingdom, for example, has always been closer to the United States trends (Nessmann, 1995). In addition to the French doctrine, there is another predominant faction in Europe, the German doctrine (Nesmman, 1995). There are two prominent authors that shaped the German doctrine, Habermas and Freud.

The German ideas are closest to those in the United States than to France. Bernays, who had strong influence in the United States theories was Freud's nephew. Bernays included Freud's ideas in psychology when developing his theories (Nessmann, 1995). There is, then, a linkage between German and United States theories. Plus, Europe has always been oriented to the United States trends (Nessmann, 1995) and the classic academic line is maintained at both sides of the Atlantic (Mantilla, Oliveira & Compte-Pujol, 2015).

There are then multiple similarities between French public relations, the discipline in the rest of Europe and the whole world, although in France, Grunig's theories are considered idealistic, and not very realistic (Dageneis, 2012). French scholars think that the Anglo-Saxon world does not often integrate cultural models in their theories (Dageneis, 2012), making this the main point of discordance between the discipline in France and everywhere else.

3. Conclusion

History of public relations in Europe is one of the many factors that shapes the way doctrine and practice are considered in each European country. It is necessary to understand the environment to develop effective public relations (Taylor, 2000).

Even if there are distinct characteristics in each country, the main trend in public relations tend to be the same all over the world (Mantilla, Oliveira & Compte-Pujol, 2015). Research has found that the current trend describes the importance of strategy and outcomes, even if this means the reduction of studies and practices oriented to humanistic or social trends (Noguero I. Grau, 1995), even if these trends used to be the main ones in Europe a couple of decades before.

The humanistic point of view, in spite of being dropping in the global era (Noguero I. Grau, 1995), is the root of public relations in France. As explained before, history's role is vital to understand the discipline the way it is today. In the case of France, the model is humanistic and ethnographic because of Matrat (Arzeno-Martin, 2012; Xifra, 2006; Xifra, 2012).

Even if the humanistic perception contributes in many ways to the French public relations, it also makes the discipline less understood in the country, because the link between public relations and management seems to be lost (Pritchard, Ahles & Bardin, 2005).

On the other hand, Matrat's approach helps overcoming the speed of the always changing world where human's lives are constantly in process of being modified because of technology (Dagenais, 2012), including people's workplaces and functions, not forgetting their needs and motivations and balancing the socio economic environment (Arzeno-Martin, 2012).

Differences produce not only by history but also by culture and each country's characteristics have made popular the expression "think global, act local" (Joseph & Joseph, 1993), an expression that clearly defends the combination of global and local trends. Practitioners should observe the knowledge of global aspects, at the same time they have on mind characteristics which make each country different, like those explained by Grunig and Hunt's theories (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003).

This makes French public relations more focused on stakeholders (Arzeno-Martin, 2012; Xifra, 2006; Xifra, 2012), than in the effects of public relations and strategies. Their logic implies strategies being far from reality, were practitioners and scholars are working on idealistic cases rather than in reality (Dageneis, 2012).

Future in French public relations looks positive since the presence of the profession is more than evident, and so the work done by practitioners to improve public relations legitimacy (Carayol, 2010). The professionalization of the field, the continuation of the internationalization and the specialization in sub-fields will be constant in the close future (D'Almeida, Carayol, 2014).

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