

# International Public Relations: An American Perspective

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*En un món cada vegada més interconnectat i interdependent, la internacionalització de les relacions públiques s'ha convertit en una realitat, a més a més d'una preocupació tant per a acadèmics com per a professionals que veuen com una crisi que es va iniciar en els mercats americans ràpidament va afectar tant nacions desenvolupades com nacions en vies de desenvolupament. En aquest article exposem la perspectiva teòrica americana de les relacions públiques, en general, i la seva aplicabilitat internacional i transcultural, en particular. D'una banda, ressaltem les fundacions teòriques de l'excel·lència en la pràctica de les relacions públiques, codificades en un conjunt de principis genèrics; d'altra, proporcionem una avaluació crítica sobre l'aplicabilitat transcultural d'aquests principis genèrics i examinem el relativisme cultural d'aquests principis. Finalment, concloem amb algunes reflexions al voltant de la recerca necessària per poder desem-bolicar les relacions públiques internacionals.*

**KEY WORDS:** International Public Relations, American Perspective, Generic Principles, Cultural Relativism, Excellence Theory, Model of World-class Public Relations.

**PARAULES CLAU:** relacions públiques internacionals, perspectiva americana, principis genèrics, relativisme cultural, teoria de l'Excel·lència, model de relacions públiques mundials.

## GENERIC PRINCIPLES FOR EXCELLENCE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

**I**n the early 1990s, and even as recent as the mid-1990s, there was a shortage in information on international public relations practices and insufficient theory building to guide and standardize the way public relations functioned in the multinational entities around the world.<sup>1</sup> The groundbreaking theoretical development in this domain was the Excellence Theory (Dozier, L.A. Grunig, & J.E. Grunig, 1995; J.E. Grunig, 1992; L.A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). This theory offered for the first time a set of generic principles for effective public relations practice, applicable anywhere. These principles included “knowledge and professionalism by the public relations unit. They also required understanding of and support for public relations by senior management”<sup>2</sup> and such conditions for excellence as a participative culture and support for diversity. The Excellence Theory proposed establishing “a set of theoretical benchmarks by which to help solve the practice problems of public relations.”<sup>3</sup> The generic principles outlined under this theory to determine excellence in public relations practice are:

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1. *Involvement of Public Relations in Strategic Management.* The public relations department helps the organization build relationships with both internal and external publics and supports the organization’s efforts to achieve strategic goals and objectives.
2. *Empowerment of Public Relations in the Dominant Coalition or a Direct Reporting Relationship to Senior Management.* The strategic management of public relations must be an integral part of the strategic management of the overall organization, and the public relations unit has to practice public relations according to professional principles.
3. *Integrated Public Relations Function.* Excellent public relations departments integrate all public relations functions into a single

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1 WAKEFIELD, R.I. “A Retrospective on World Class: The Excellence Theory Goes International”. In: TOTH, E.L. (ed.). *The Future of Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management: Challenges for the Next Generation*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2007, p. 545-568.

2 GRUNIG, L.A.; GRUNIG, J.E. “Public Relations in the United States: A Generation of Maturation”. In: SRIRAMESH, K.; VERCIC, D. (eds.). *The Global Public Relations Handbook: Theory, Research, and Practice*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2003, p. 323-355, 324.

3 TOTH, E.L. “Introduction”. In TOTH, E.L. (ed.). *The Future of Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management: Challenges for the Next Generation*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2007, p. 17-20, 17.

department or have a mechanism to coordinate the units' multiple efforts, so they can be managed in a more strategically meaningful fashion.

4. *Public Relations as a Management function separate from Other Functions.* Avoiding the sublimation of public relations to other departments such as marketing or human resources, for example, thus, allowing the public relations practitioners more freedom and independence in executing their activities and communicating with the various publics.

5. *The Role of the Public Relations Practitioner.* The excellent public relations unit should be headed by a manager, rather than a technician, so it can be part of the dominant coalition within the organization.

6. *Two-Way Symmetrical Model of Public Relations.* This is a model based on research and uses communication effectively to promote understanding and conflict resolution with strategic publics. However, in some cases it is possible to combine some elements of the two-way symmetrical model with the two-way asymmetrical model creating a "mixed motive" model.

7. *A Symmetrical System of Internal Communication.* Excellent organizations allow a wide margin of autonomy to their employees and enable them to participate effectively in the decision making processes within the organization.

8. *Knowledge Potential for Managerial Role and Symmetrical Public Relations.* Excellent public relations departments should ensure that their practitioners have the needed theoretical and professional knowledge required to carry out their roles effectively.

9. *Diversity embodied in all Roles.* Excellent public relations units should integrate both men and women in all roles, as well as practitioners representing different racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. This is especially important to communicate effectively with varied publics.<sup>4</sup>

The previous generic principles make the Excellence Theory the most comprehensive and holistic attempt to provide benchmark information guiding public relations practice through gathering theories inside and outside the field and testing them against all

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4 VERCIC, D.; GRUNIG, L.A.; GRUNIG, J.E. "Global and Specific Principles of Public Relations: Evidence from Slovenia". In CULBERTSON, H.M.; CHEN, N. (eds.) *International Public Relations: A Comparative Analysis*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1996, p. 37-39.

aspects of public relations practice.<sup>5</sup> “The result was a set of principles to guide and measure excellence in public relations and among its practitioners well into the 21st century”.<sup>6</sup>

However, despite the thoroughness and groundbreaking value of the Excellence Theory, it was criticized by some scholars for overlooking one of the most rapidly expanding arenas of public relations practice, namely: international public relations, at least in its very early stages.<sup>7</sup> This encouraged some researchers to test the international applicability of this comprehensive theory in cross-cultural contexts and among various multinational organizations.

### TESTING THE INTERNATIONAL APPLICABILITY OF EXCELLENCE THEORY: THE WORLD-CLASS MODEL

One of the best attempts to come up with a critical assessment of the international applicability of the generic principles proposed by the Excellence Theory to a cross-cultural, multinational context, was the research conducted by the American scholar Robert I. Wakefield from 1995 to 1998 which “evolved into three cumulative studies that combined the wisdom of 79 public relations experts in 30 countries... using the excellence variables as the measuring stick”.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, the three studies yielded sufficient evidence to support the validity of the Excellence Theory in the global arena and its applicability in the international, multinational context, since they “offered confirmation of the excellence variables from senior public relations people who were orchestrating the strategic activities around the world”.<sup>9</sup> Most importantly, “With these characteristics of excellence in place, it was possible to develop a model for public relations practice in the multinational organization. The model could be used to evaluate a multinational’s public relations program and predict its potential for achieving and maintaining a solid representation around the world”.<sup>10</sup> Wakefield called this

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5 WAKEFIELD, R.I. “A Retrospective on World Class: The Excellence Theory Goes International”, p. 545.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*

8 WAKEFIELD, R.I. “A Retrospective on World Class: The Excellence Theory Goes International”, p. 555.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 558-559.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 559.

model the “model of world-class public relations”, and he identified four different classifications underneath it ranging from the lack of sufficient resources and personnel to achieve the required goals to highly qualified personnel and global staffing. He called the four classifications under this model the dormant program, emerging program, sophisticated program, and world-class program.<sup>11</sup>

Another very important finding which emerged out of Wakefield’s research is that, despite the universally shared fundamentals for determining excellence in public relations practice across multinational organizations, “there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ prescription; organizations will always differ in philosophies and structures depending on the industry in which they operate, country of origin, size and financial resources, and many other factors”.<sup>12</sup>

This last point draws our attention to the importance of examining the cultural relativism of the Excellence Theory and its applicability in the domain of international public relations.

## THE CULTURAL RELATIVISM OF THE EXCELLENCE THEORY IN INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS

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The fact that the Excellence Theory proposed a set of generic, normative principles determining what constitutes excellent public relations practices across different cultures and political/economic systems, does not mean that this theory ignored the potential differences and the possible variations between different countries and organizations all over the world. In fact, “a theory of generic principles would not deny that different forms of public relations practice can be found in different locations. Instead, it would maintain that not all of these forms of practice will be effective in helping organizations resolve conflict and build relationships with their publics”.<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, in light of the above points, the Excellence Theory, which is indeed a “normative theory” describing how public relations *should* be carried out, rather than how it is actually done, could be seen as “developing a middle-ground theory be-

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11 WAKEFIELD, R.I. “A Retrospective on World Class: The Excellence Theory Goes International”, p. 559-560.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 559.

13 VERCIC, D.; GRUNIG, L.A.; GRUNIG, J.E. “Global and Specific Principles of Public Relations: Evidence from Slovenia”, p. 34.

tween cultural relativism and ethnocentrism",<sup>14</sup> since its purpose it to develop a general theoretical framework for public relations practice while also taking into account specific strategies and applications of those principles in different countries, based on different cultural, political, and economic factors.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, while listing the previously mentioned generic principles for determining excellence within the domain of public relations practice, the Excellence Theory also proposed the following specific, contextual variables which can explain some of the potential limitations or constraints on the applicability of these generic principles in certain countries around the world:

1. *The Political-Economic System.* The type of political and economic system in a particular country and the degree of freedom tolerated and practiced in it are important determinants of the possibility of excellence in public relations practice. For example, it can be argued that an authoritarian political system is most likely to suppress freedom of expression and democratic practice and, therefore, is more inclined to foster and promote propaganda, rather than professional journalism. The problem with propaganda, however, is that "It is not about communication between organizations and their publics; it is about discommunication".<sup>16</sup> In other words, it disables the formation of publics and, thus, hinders professional public relations practice, through blocking the two-way symmetrical model of communication, which is one of the generic principles of excellence in public relations practice.<sup>17</sup>

2. *Level of Development.* This variable refers to the degree of achieving economic and technological growth in a certain nation. "The development level often determines who controls public relations. In developed nations, public relations is a tool for market competition; in developing nations, it assists the government in rallying its citizens. The development levels also influence literacy rates and the media that are available for public relations activities".<sup>18</sup>

3. *Culture.* This is a highly complex and ambiguous concept, which

14 VERCIC, D.; GRUNIG, L.A.; GRUNIG, J.E. "Global and Specific Principles of Public Relations: Evidence from Slovenia", p. 33.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 32.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

17 VERCIC, D.; GRUNIG, L.A.; GRUNIG, J.E. "Global and Specific Principles of Public Relations: Evidence from Slovenia", p. 42-43.

18 WAKEFIELD, R.I. "Preliminary Delphi Research on International Public Relations Programming: Initial Data Supports Application of Certain Generic/Specific Concepts." In MOSS, D.; VERCIC, D.; WARNABY, G. (eds.) *Perspectives on Public Relations Research*. New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 179-208, 186.

is usually difficult to define and to study, yet the influence of communication on culture is widely accepted, and, therefore, the study of the impact of culture on public relations practice is also important, because public relations and communication have also been largely seen as synonymous and interlinked.<sup>19</sup> Four particular classifications defining cultural groups have been particularly highlighted and analyzed in terms of their potential impact on public relations practice, namely: the fostering of individualism or collectivism, the social distances between the powerful and the unpowerful (power distance), the extent to which uncertainty is avoided or welcomed (uncertainty avoidance), and the extent to which typically masculine or feminine characteristics are prevalent.<sup>20</sup>

4. *Extent of Activism.* Activism is another highly complex and elusive term, which is highly relevant to public relations, in general, but is especially acute in the realm of international public relations, in particular. The form and extent of activism varies widely across different countries and cultures, in light of the type of political, economic, and social system prevailing in each society. Responding to activists and issues is more challenging in the international domain. This is because multinational organizations face more stakeholders than domestic organizations, which makes it more difficult to identify international issues and publics. Also, multinational organizations face interest groups that transcend boundaries. Finally, issues resolution in the domain of multinational organizations involves the challenging task of communicating across cultures.<sup>21</sup>

5. *Media Systems.* There is no doubt that the type of media system prevailing in any society affects the way public relations is handled and practiced. The degree of freedom of expression allowed in the media, as well as the level of development and sophistication of the media system certainly affect the ability of public relations practitioners to perform their job professionally and to communicate effectively with their respective publics. Different interest groups and activists manipulate the media to achieve their goals and objectives and to make sure that their voices and demands are heard.<sup>22</sup> Today, the proliferation of many channels and sources of

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19 *Ibid.*, p.187-188.

20 GRUNIG, L.A.; GRUNIG, J.E. "Public Relations in the United States: A Generation of Maturation", p. 334-335.

21 WAKEFIELD, R.I. "Preliminary Delphi Research on International Public Relations Programming: Initial Data Supports Application of Certain Generic/Specific Concepts", p. 189.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

information internationally, especially through television giants and the Internet, ensured the fast and effective flow of information more than ever before. However, “the media monopoly in foreign information can create unrealistic images about other countries, or about individuals and organizations from those countries”.<sup>23</sup> Yet, despite this huge expansion of international media systems, “effective public relations comes down to local communication”.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the actual success of public relations efforts and practices should be assessed first and foremost on the local level, which usually determines the possible level of effectiveness on the wider international scale.

After providing this brief overview of these five qualifying principles by which to consider global principles of excellent public relations, it is important to mention that when Wakefield tested their validity in the three research studies which he conducted cross-culturally, he also added a sixth principle, which is “language differences”.<sup>25</sup> He argued that the importance of adding this sixth principle was because language has an obvious effect on how public relations could be conducted, especially since many nations have multiple official languages and differing dialects, which, in turn, complicates the task of executing public relations successfully in the international domain. Moreover, despite the fact that English has become a universal language, which is spoken by almost one quarter of the world’s population, the fact remains that, even with a global language, intercultural misunderstandings can still take place, sometimes leading to serious or tragic effects.<sup>26</sup> It is for this reason that Wakefield recommends “giving local practitioners the autonomy to communicate directly with their publics rather than being forced to parrot global verbiage. Although consistency in organizational messages is important, the messages must be broad enough to allow for local adaptation”.<sup>27</sup>

After providing this overview of the American perspective on conducting international public relations and the variables that can affect the application of these generic principles in diffe-

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23 WAKEFIELD, R.I. “Preliminary Delphi Research on International Public Relations Programming: Initial Data Supports Application of Certain Generic/Specific Concepts”, p. 191.

24 *Ibidem*.

25 WAKEFIELD, R.I. “A Retrospective on World Class: The Excellence Theory Goes International”, p. 553.

26 *Ibidem*.

27 *Ibidem*.



rent societies, we now conclude by highlighting some of the potential prospects for future research in the realm of international public relations.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS: PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

We adopt the view that the Excellence study generic principles and specific applications are a beginning point only for understanding global public relations, especially since "International public relations is still in the early phases of theory building, with much to be discovered."<sup>28</sup> Therefore, many additional topics can be explored in this domain of research and many new questions can be posed, such as: "is there truly a developing universal foundation for the practice of public relations worldwide? Are American corporations beginning to structure their public relations programs looking at the world first and then their home country, as opposed to the traditional way it has been done in most companies?"<sup>29</sup>

These are just a few questions that can be posed in today's highly interconnected and interdependent world, where more and more public relations is practiced "across cultural, political, and economic borders that make up the world of international public relations".<sup>30</sup>

We argue that a number of emerging phenomena in recent years necessitate paying closer attention to how and why international public relations efforts are conducted internationally, and whether they tend to achieve their desired goals and objective or not. Three of these new phenomena deserve special focus in future international public relations research, namely: the information revolution with all its huge impacts on the diffusion and exchange of information cross-culturally, with special focus on the role of the Internet in this regard; the political changes which dominated the world and affected the formation of cross-cultural stereotypes and misconceptions of other nations and peoples, especially after the September 11th attack and the political events which followed it; and finally the pressing economic crisis which is currently imposing itself on the United States, as well as many other parts of the world today, in an unprecedented fashion, and

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 565.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 566.

which is already reshaping the political, social, and economic relationships between the countries of the world.

We believe that these three important angles, in particular, deserve further exploration and investigation in any future research dealing with international public relations, due to the complex, influential, and interrelated effects of events that cause organizations to consider differently how they are shaped by relationships rather than seek to shape international relationships.

Finally, we emphasize the importance of exerting more rigorous efforts to continue building theoretical models and conceptual frameworks, which can successfully contribute to the existing body of knowledge in public relations, in general, and international public relations, in particular; challenge some of its existing underlying assumptions; and, hopefully, propose new variables and angles for further analysis and investigation in the rapidly changing and expanding field of international public relations.