Public Relations

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Although definitions vary, public relations is a major field of professional practice and discipline of academic research that empowers entities of all sorts to seek recognition and support from society, from other organizations and groups, and from individuals important to their success. The term is widely recognized but has fallen out of favor in many organizations for a variety of reasons. Instead public relations units go by names such as communication management, corporate communication, and corporate public affairs. Notably, strategic communication and public relations are sometimes equated.

Among specializations associated with public relations are investor relations, marketing communications beyond paid advertising, publicity and media relations, consumer/customer relations, supplier/industry relations, employee relations/internal communications, and community relations. Other functions associated with public relations include fundraising and development by not-for-profit organizations, health communication, information/social marketing campaigns, and public affairs (including political communication, public diplomacy, government relations and lobbying, and government public information). Public relations units typically orchestrate or are integrally involved in crisis communications and issues management. Public relations strategies can be employed by for-profit enterprises in developed countries worldwide, but is more widely practiced by governments, and not-for-profit and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) in less developed areas of the globe.

Although antecedents of public relations can be traced to antiquity, modern public relations emerged in the late nineteenth century in Europe and the United States. The antecedents to public relations in the United States can be traced to efforts by colonists to attract settlers beginning in the seventeenth century. In Europe, public relations began with civil servants in the Netherlands who regularly reported on shipping, trade, and industry and later with *voorlichters*, who were government and other specialists who wandered the country to provide citizens with valuable information about health, good farming, housekeeping, education, and politics. The first corporate press officers were known as *literate*, who read newspapers and wrote articles for organizations. The first corporate press/publicity office dates to Krupp in Germany in 1870—two decades before the first American corporate department was established by Westinghouse in 1889.

Consulting firms began with independent publicity bureaus in the United States in the year 1900. By the early1910s, the publicity function was widely recognized and was bolstered later by public awareness of the success of government propaganda efforts to sway public opinion in both Europe and the United States during World War I. By

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the 1920s, public relations gained notoriety in the United States, personified by the work of pioneer practitioners Ivy Lee and Edward L. Bernays. Despite the emergence of American corporate departments, public relations in many nations remained primarily vested in government entities. Corporate practice and consultancies did not flourish in many parts of the world until after World War II—and not in former communist countries until the 1990s.

Definitions and implications for practice

From its beginnings, succinct definitions of public relations have been elusive. Late in his career, pioneer American practitioner Ivy Lee used public relations and publicity interchangeably. He continued to prefer the word *publicity* to describe what was the essence of modern public relations work, which he described as "everything involved in the expression of an idea or of an organization—including the policy or the idea expressed" (Lee, 1925, p. 8). Consultant Edward L. Bernays popularized the term *public relations counselor* as an alternative to the already then-maligned terms *propagandist* and *press agent*.

From its beginning, *Effective Public Relations*, a leading textbook during the second half of the twentieth century that was translated into several languages, focused on influencing opinion as the core of public relations. According to the authors, public relations could be used to refer to: (i) relations with groups or small publics which comprise the general public; (ii) the quality or state of an institution's or an individual's relationships with those publics; and (iii) the ways and means used to achieve satisfactory relations (Cutlip & Center, 1952, p. 4). As late as its fifth edition, *Effective Public Relations* defined the field as the "planned effort to influence opinion through good character and responsible performance based upon mutually satisfactory two-way communication" (Cutlip & Center, 1978, p. 1). However, a major shift occurred with the addition of a third author, Glen M. Broom, and a redefinition of public relations as the "management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends" (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985, p. 1). This definition has appeared in subsequent editions and constitutes the definition of the field adopted by the 28,000 members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA, 2011).

Neither of the two major international public relations organizations offer a succinct definition. These include the International Public Relations Association (composed of practitioners: www.ipra.org; IPRA, n.d.) and the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (a confederation of various national and regional associations of practitioners and consultants: www.globalalliancepr.com). However, various regional and national professional societies have negotiated definitions that stress key elements identified through the years.

For example, the UK's Chartered Institute of Public Relations states, "Public relations is the discipline which looks after reputation" and is "the planned and sustained

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effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics" (CIPR, n.d.). These same elements are addressed in the definition adopted by the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA, 2016), whereas the Canadian Public Relations Society states that public relations involves strategic management of relationships "to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals and serve the public interest" (CPRS, 2008).

In Europe, the Danish Association of Public Relations Consultancies points out that public relations builds relations between companies and their environments in line with management disciplines such as marketing, law, policy, and human resources (PRB, n.d.). The German word *Öffentlichkeitsarbeit* literally means "public work" and can be translated as working in, for, or with the public, or public sphere work. Thus the German Public Relations Association's definition includes securing favorable political, economic, and social action through public opinion processes, disseminating truthful information, strengthening the judgmental capacity of the public and dialogue groups, building confidence, and ensuring fair conflict communication (DPRG, n.d.).

In Asia, the Korean PR Association continues to embrace PRSA's earlier definition, which explained, "Public relations is the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or organization with the public interest, and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance" (KPRA, 2005). Meanwhile, in China public relations is often translated as *guanxi* or "network of relationships," along with *gao guanxi*, which means relying on personal relations.

These definitions suggest public relations is an activity of organizations. However, public relations be practiced by any public entity, including social movements, loosely knit grassroots activist groups, and public figures such as political candidates or entertainment celebrities who promote themselves or their brand. Public relations activities can be directed to the public at large but often focus on target groups that share mutual interests or concerns with the entity. These groups can include *publics* (created around issues), *stakeholders and stakeseekers* (who can influence or can be influenced by the organizations), *markets* (distributors or purchasers of the organization's products or services, including fans), and *constituents* (people represented by the entity in some capacity). Public relations involves *perceptions about* and *actual experiences with* entities, and can be examined within frameworks of public opinion, reputation, trust, and goodwill.

Seeking recognition and support are posited to involve organizational relationships. The term "relationship" is a multidimensional construct: at the macro level, relationships can involve an entity's role in and interaction with society as a whole; at the meso level, relationships focus on how entities are dependent upon organizations, institutions, or groups that can provide or withhold vital political, economic, social, or technological resources; at the micro level, an entity's relationships with people can be examined from the perspectives of an organization's actions or gestures directed toward them as well as people's reactions. The latter are typically measured based on people's *knowledge*, *attitudes*, and *behaviors* (including communications with and about the organization and routine patterns of interaction, including transactions). Although the assumption is that positive relationships are desirable, and a desirable

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outcome of public relations efforts, the goals of most entities typically extend beyond relationship building to the achievement of economic, social, or political outcomes that are ideally mutually beneficial.

Establishing and maintaining relationships relies on the underlying process of *influence*, or attempts to affect the opinions and behavior of others. Peculiarly, many public relations academics reject the study of influence and persuasion as being unethical and manipulative. However, persuasion is merely the use of communication to influence others and build relationships, and is inherently more ethical compared to other options (payoffs, patronage, political power, physical force, penalties, or punishments). By contrast, practitioners routinely refer to their work as efforts to inform, persuade, convince, influence public opinion, or prompt action. Thus there is often an unnecessary disconnect between public relations professionals and academics.

Public relations as a professional practice

Public relations can be examined as an activity conducted by organizations or by individuals within an organization regardless of whether they hold a public relations title. However, most attention and research focuses on the activities of public relations workers, who are referred to as public relations *practitioners*. Similar to other occupations, practitioners join together in local, regional, and national associations to organize educational programs, promote best practices, establish minimum standards of ethical behavior, seek recognition for the field as a profession, influence curricula, and fund research. In at least one country, Brazil, professional associations are involved in the professional licensing of practitioners.

Counselor versus communicator roles

From the earliest years, public relations theorists and practitioners have emphasized the dual role of practitioners as *counselors* and *communicators* (e.g., Bernays, 1923, p. 57; Lee 1925), suggesting two levels at which influence occurs.

As counselors, public relations practitioners can play critical roles in advising entities and influencing their policies and practices. This emphasis differentiates public relations from many other disciplines in strategic communication. This counseling function underscores a major tenet in the field that public relations success is grounded in what an entity organization does, not merely what it says. As communicators, practitioners strive to showcase and explain an entity's actions.

In most private enterprises and public institutions, public relations is typically a *staff* or support function. (Notable exceptions include consulting firms that sell public relations services and not-for-profit organizations where public communication and education are considered operating or *line* functions.) In the typical corporate or governmental entity, line functions have the primary responsibility for communicating and maintaining relationships with other entities and groups critical to the organization's success. For example, operations directs activities and involves employees in the production and delivery of products and services. Public relations complements and

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supports the relational activities of units such as operations, marketing, supply chain management, finance, legal, and human resources by providing expertise and advice as well as communications support.

By default, public relations typically assumes primary responsibility for groups not directly involved in the entity's line activities—groups that might otherwise be ignored or overlooked. In systems theory terms, public relations staff serve as organizational boundary spanners for segments of the external environment not specifically assigned to other units, thus only indirectly involved in or affected by an organization's routine activities. Examples include citizens in geographic communities in which an organization operates, workers in the same industry or field (including competitors), government officials who do not directly legislate or otherwise regulate the entity, special interest groups concerned with relevant issues, and media personnel.

In advising management, public relations has the potential—and responsibility—to examine the organization's activities holistically, not from the narrow perspectives typically found among managers with line responsibilities. A critical counseling function is to bring forth the perspectives of groups not otherwise represented at the management table—and to raise concerns when extant or proposed policies or practices conflict with the needs, concerns, and interests of various stakeholders. Counseling effectiveness requires access to and the respect of the organization's chief executive, directors, or policy-making body. Some theorists suggest that the public relations practitioners should assume the role of an internal *activist*, even to serve as the *conscience* of the organization. However, at best, public relations counselors can advise management about the attendant *risks* confronting an organization in terms of public expectations and opinions and threats to the organization's *intangible assets* or *symbolic capital* represented in its reputation, perceived trustworthiness, and goodwill. These critical risks need to be weighed by directors and managers against the various other market, product, financial, legal, regulatory, human, information, and technological risks confronting the organizations when making decisions.

As communicators, public relations professionals are typically called upon to command a repertoire of communication skills. Good actions by organizations are not sufficient unless communicated to others in today's tumultuous environment. Traditionally, public relations communications have relied on publicity and media relations. These were supplemented by an array of printed matter, speeches and presentations, special events and exhibits and, to a limited extent, institutional, financial, event and issues-based advertising. Today, public relations employs an ever-increasing array of communications strategies and tactics, often now with first consideration given to digital and social media.

Today, public relations practitioners continue to battle the widely held perception that public relations practitioners contribute to organizations primarily through their communications efforts, not their counseling acumen. In part, the perception is based on the uneven preparedness of practitioners to assume a senior counseling role—a situation that is changing, slowly.

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Organization and fragmentation of practice

Public relations professionals work in a variety of organizational contexts, leading to considerable fragmentation of the field. Many entities appoint a chief public relations officer who leads a central support staff responsible for all PR functions. However, many medium- and small-size entities rely on consultancies to provide counseling or communications services and meet other communication needs through other staff. Public relations departments also hire consultants, agencies, contract labor, or freelancers and work with vendors for special projects. As a result, the mix of counseling versus communications provided by practitioners can vary widely.

A further splintering has resulted because various public relations specializations have become more complex. This has led to parsing and distributing public relations functions to various operating units: investor relations to finance, government relations to legal, employee communications to human resources, marketing communications and product publicity to marketing, and so on. The benefit of such an arrangement is a closer working relationship between PR professionals and operating personnel. However, practitioners also can become insulated and lose the access, independence, and authority required to raise concerns or question problematic policies or practices.

Fragmentation of the practice has been further exacerbated with the emergence of corporate holding companies, regionalized corporate structures, and international operations. Wholly owned subsidiaries typically manage their own public relations, and many large organizations operate on a regional reporting basis, with public relations support assigned to each geographic territory. International operations invariably require local (or at least regional) public relations support by practitioners who understand local culture, customs, language, politics, and economic and media systems.

The result of these trends is that public relations operates as a loosely organized collaborative effort in many postmodern organizations wherein a chief public relations officer is appointed at the corporate level and leads a small staff that focuses on matters such as corporate policy, executive communications, corporate news, public affairs, corporate branding and identity, corporate social responsibility, and corporate philanthropy. Meanwhile routine public relations activities are managed at the division, region, or individual country level.

Nomenclature and competitive issues

With the rise in specializations, and practical need for units performing various public relations related functions to have distinct names, the popularity of "public relations" as a term used by organizations continues to decline, even though employment and expenditures continue to rise. In Europe, negative connotations of the term, and coupled with reactance to the field's heavily American origins, have prompted corporations to adopt alternative nomenclature. In the United States and elsewhere, organizations also avoid the generic term "public relations department" so that consumer complaints or problems are properly referred to customer care centers for resolution.

Pressure on public relations' identity also comes from external sources. In the United States, for example, federal agencies are prohibited from expending public funds on

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public relations or publicity unless specifically appropriated for such purposes. Thus, at all levels of government, public relations is typically labeled *public information* or *public affairs*.

The trend toward integrated marketing communication that began in the 1990s continues to create ambiguity about the roles of public relations vis-à-vis marketing. The issue has been confounded further in today's digital world by the emergence of brand journalism, content marketing, and the debate over whether marketing or public relations people ought to manage social media and online communities. The distinction between paid and nonpaid (earned) exposure, the traditional mainstay of publicity, has faded with the rise of native advertising and with micropayment systems used to promote and assure exposure to social media posts.

Practicing public relations strategically

Strategic planning frameworks in public relations include *programs* (ongoing or annual activities), *campaigns* (specified-term initiatives with a single focus), and *projects* (single activities or materials). Today, the level and detail of public relations planning can become complex, especially in a fully integrated effort that involves a variety of strategic communication tactics. Planning frameworks can be *proactive*, that is, initiated and timed at the discretion of the entity. However, others are *reactive*, that is, *contingency plans* created in advance and implemented only if needed, such as in a crisis or dispute, or plans organized spontaneously.

Practitioners in the United States envisioned strategic approaches to public relations beginning in the early 1920s. One early trade book argued the first step to effective publicity involved laying out a comprehensive plan beginning with an "exact, desirable and definite object" or intended outcome (Wilder & Buell, 1923, p. 64).

Pioneer public relations counselor Edward L. Bernays articulated similar notions in a 1927 book chapter wherein he outlined four key steps in public relations: *analysis of the public* to determine its relationship to the client, *analysis of the clients' activities* that the public might approve or disapprove, *formulate policies* governing the general practice and habits of the client on all those aspects in which the client comes into contact with the public, and *interpret the client*, its products, and services to the public (Bernays, 1927, pp. 287–288). In 1935, Bernays reframed the process as *formulation of objectives*, *analysis of public attitudes*, study of the analysis that results in *formulation of client policies* that balance the public's interest and client's private interest, and the *use of media to dramatize ideas* (Bernays, 1935, pp. 85–87). He expanded further upon his ideas when he outlined his famous notion of "the engineering of consent" (Bernays, 1947, p. 120).

In the first edition of their classic text, *Effective Public Relations*, Cutlip and Center (1952) codified public relations as a *process* by suggesting public relations involved *fact-finding, planning*, and *communication*. With the inclusion of the additional step of *evaluation* in the second edition, the current *four-step process* was completed (Cutlip & Center, 1958). Despite inherent shortcomings, the four-step process serves as a convenient heuristic for teaching public relations and is used by the Public Relations Society of America as the basis for both its practitioner accreditation program and annual Silver

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Anvil awards judging. Notably, many practitioners have adopted more complex planning frameworks that correspond to the common elements of strategic communication planning identified in this volume's master entry.

Public relations as an academic discipline

Scholarly research about public relations can be traced to early writings in academic journals by Bernays beginning in 1928, which was followed by sporadic contributions by practitioners and academicians in academic journals focused on communications, such as *Public Opinion Quarterly* and *Journalism Quarterly*, both beginning in 1937 (Hallahan, 2012).

As with most fields, early public relations scholarship dealt principally with aspirational theorizing, description, and functional analyses. Through time, the field has evolved to adopt theoretical approaches rooted in communications, managerial/systems, rhetorical, cultural, and critical theory. Early studies in the United States relied heavily on empirical social scientific methods, especially surveys. However, since the 1990s qualitative studies have flourished in keeping with the rich tradition of critical scholarship in Europe and the general trend in social sciences such as sociology. Public relations is fully recognized as a distinct subdiscipline in communication; surprisingly, it is rarely addressed by many organizational communication scholars despite the allied nature of the two subdisciplines.

Today public relations scholarship represents six broad, sometimes overlapping, approaches that draw from different research traditions.

Managerial/functional approaches

A continuing tradition focuses on examining the historical activities of practitioners and their client activities. Few efforts have tried to examine the field's evolution conceptually; a notable exception was Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations (press-agentry, public information, one-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical communication), but assumptions in this critique have been questioned by later historians and theorists.

Case studies about contemporary public relations programs are comparatively few, except for critiques of the extraordinary or dubious handling of major crises or public controversies. In-depth interviews, ethnographies, or qualitative content analyses related to strategy or decision making are relatively rare.

Early research identified theoretical roles played by practitioners only to conclude that practitioners can be characterized as either managers or technicians. More recent important threads of research sought to understand how practitioners gain influence within organizations and the nature of public relations leadership.

By far, the most extensive effort in the managerial/functional tradition was the landmark Excellence study conducted by James Grunig and his colleagues from 1985 to 2002. The field's largest privately funded research project sought to validate several threads of normative theorizing. The outcome was identification of 14 characteristics

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deemed to constitute excellent public relations and how public relations units should operate (Grunig, 2006).

Research about public relations' role as an integral part of the media and public information systems of various countries dates from the 1950s. Studies examined media workers' perceptions of public relations, the relationships between practitioners and journalists, and acceptance of public relations materials by media gatekeepers. Public relations has been examined as a form of *information subsidization* of media operations and as a process of *intereffication* in which journalists and sources engage in reciprocal induction (education) and adaptation. More recently, considerable research has focused on practitioners' adoption, use, and reliance upon digital and social media, including best practices.

Behavioral/relational approaches

A second early research stream relied on behavioral research to study individuals as members of publics and their perceptions about organizational successes in fostering relationships. This organization-centric focus, rooted in systems theory, predominated much mainline research in the United States for about two decades beginning in the 1980s.

Drawing on the notions of two-way communication that can be traced to Bernays and organizational and interpersonal communication theorists, James Grunig posited that public relations is ideally practiced as two-way symmetrical communication. Grunig initially argued that organizations uniformly should take into account the needs and concerns of publics. However, Grunig later acquiesced to critics and acknowledged in the Excellence study that organizational responses actually array along a continuum from pure accommodation to pure advocacy depending on circumstances.

Separately, James Grunig and others proposed ideas for classifying publics to identify factors that contributed to individuals and groups becoming engaged as activists on an issue—problem recognition, involvement, and constraint recognition. The original situational theory of public was later extended to a more generic situational theory of problem solving that also addressed active information seeking versus passive information processing. However, others pointed out this theorizing ignored inactive publics who represented the audiences to whom many public relations programs were actually directed.

Relationship-based theory and research came to the forefront in the late 1990s as several researchers pursued the idea that public relations can be defined as relationship management. Much of this research involved surveys about individuals' perceptions of organizations (e.g., trustworthiness, commitment, control, mutuality, and openness) but did not examine the quality of relationships themselves, the perceptions of organizational leaders about publics (including their co-orientation on relevant topics), nor the actual consequences of merely adequate or possibly negative relationships.

Rhetorical approaches

Beginning in the 1980s scholars from speech communication in the United States recognized public relations as an important and practical area for application of

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rhetorical and textual analysis. Whereas relationship-focused researchers rejected persuasion as purely asymmetrical manipulation, rhetoricians such as Robert L. Heath argued that principles of effective argumentation and persuasion dating back to Aristotle and recently to Kenneth Burke, George Herbert Mead, and Martin Buber are inseparable from public relations.

Today, rhetorical scholars address the role of dialogue, dialogic principles, and actual communication exchanges, including negotiation and conflict resolution, as enactment processes. Similarly, they examine discourse and deliberation as the foundation for a robust democratic public sphere that contributes to social interaction and problem solving, the formation of social capital and, in turn, to the formation of a fully functioning society and civil society. For rhetorical scholars, effective public relations involves fostering understanding by creating shared zones of meaning, the cocreation of meaning, a sense of community, and shared identities and communitarian values.

Messaging strategy is central to public relations, and is generally considered to be informational or persuasive. However, entities can rely on a variety of other messaging forms depending on the audience and circumstances; these can involve facilitative, power/coercion, bargaining, and cooperative problem solving strategies, among others.

Notably, message design and effects receive attention from behavioral researchers sometimes considered on the periphery of public relations research. These scholars are often engaged in funded research from government and nonprofit entities and charged with conducting and evaluating programs, campaigns, and projects intended to promote community/public health and well-being, the avoidance of risk, and social causes. In this arena, psychological research about social cognition and consumer behavior finds its principal application in public relations.

Among persuasion-based theories and models that have gained acceptance in the field are models related to responses to perceived risks, as well as the MAO model that argues effective messaging involves enhancing the motivation, ability, and opportunities for audience to process persuasive messages. Message framing theory similarly has received wide attention, drawing from sociology, behavioral economics, psychology, political science, and media studies. Theory-driven strategies for how organizations might alternatively respond to crises and issues focus on the contingent use of apologia, attribution and acceptance of responsibility, and image restoration techniques.

Constructionist and sociocultural approaches

Other research focuses on client actions and messaging within the framework of the construction of social reality and culture. The cultural-social model, which can be examined from the perspective of either social science or the humanities, suggests that public relations is a cultural phenomenon wherein culturally resonating meaning is created.

Constructionism's influence on the field can be traced to journalist Walter Lippmann's famous observation (1922, p. 1) that people act based on "the pictures in our heads," not objective reality. Not surprisingly, much public relations scholarship has

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roots in *symbolic interactionism* and derivative notions such as *image, impression management*, *self-presentation, advocacy*, and *agenda building*. For example, Güntler Bentele's (2008) theory of the role of public relations in the *reconstruction* of reality requires comparing depictions with underlying realities.

Drawing on theories of dramatism suggested by Kenneth Burke and later dramaturgical theories proposed by Erving Goffman, cultural theorists suggest public relations can be examined as public theater wherein public figures act out comedies and tragedies. In these sociodramas, the actors seek acceptance while audiences strive to ascribe the actors' motives.

In the tradition of the Frankfurt School, public relations practitioners can be considered cultural intermediaries who contribute to today's postmodern, promotion-driven popular culture by touting celebrities and popular entertainment fare, filling the news with staged pseudo-events, and orchestrating spectacles. The cultural approach is increasingly ripe for examination in light of the growing recognition of narrative (versus argumentative) persuasion, and organizational and media storytelling.

Researchers have recognized culture as the basis for deconstructing public relations, both within and across cultures. Circuit of culture theory argues influence is moderated through a combination of "moments" in the cultural production process that involve regulation, consumption, representation, production, and identity (creation of meaning). Meanwhile, researchers examine how public relations strategies are shaped by underlying dimensions of culture, such as those identified globally by researchers Geert Hofstede and Fons Trompenaars.

Comparative and cross-cultural approaches

Excellence study researchers suggested that there are (or ought to be) universal principles of public relations that apply globally. However, skeptics question such ethnocentrism and call for focusing on the rich differences in how public relations is practiced in different nations and regions of the world.

Today, public relations activities and academic research are carried out in three broad global settings: (i) in advanced industrialized countries in the Americas, Europe, and Asia; (ii) in postcommunist transitional countries, primarily in Central and Eastern Europe and China; and (iii) in developing countries in Africa and Asia. In the latter two arenas, public relations was pioneered by the government entities and only recently embraced by for-profit enterprises.

Recent years have seen an explosion in scholarship describing public relations in nations worldwide. Much of this research remains descriptive, but an increasing proportion of it examines theoretical questions without regard to locale. Importantly, only a handful of transactional studies have empirically or critically examined the same questions across two or more nations or analyzed international campaigns to determine under what conditions "glocalization" is important.

Today, public relations receives attention as a tool used for nationbuilding and for advocacy of national economic and political interests outside a country's borders. Public diplomacy similarly employs public relations strategies and tactics in dealing with

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the political and opinion leadership of other nations, while military psychological operations and propaganda strive to win the hearts of residents in war-torn regions of the world such as the Middle East.

Social and critical theory approaches

Beyond cultural consequences, investigations of the impact of public relations on society have mostly relied on qualitative analyses grounded in critical theory. Critical scholars, especially in Europe and Asia, have increasingly recognized and relied on prominent social theorists to frame and explain public relations. Examples include sociologist Max Weber and modern-day critical social theorists such as Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Bruno Latour, Niklas Luhmann, Lewis Mayhew, and Robert Putnam (Ihlen, Van Ruler, & Fredriksson, 2009).

Critical scholars typically examine the negative consequences of corporations acting in their private interest (*corporatas*) versus the public interest (*communitas*). The reflective model of public relations, widely recognized in Europe, calls for creating organization-wide cultures that strive for organizational legitimacy, confidence, and public trust—outcomes that can only be achieved through socially responsible organization actions, avoidance of undue risks, and sustainability initiatives. The support role played by public relations is to help to sense, integrate, and communicate shared societal values and priorities.

From a Marxist perspective, quite apart from any role in government propaganda, public relations is engaged in the exercise of symbolic power and can be viewed as an instrument of social control wherein practitioners are complicit in helping powerful corporate or political clients impose their political, cultural, and social beliefs and values on society through the public's tacit, hegemonic acceptance of their legitimacy.

For example, many critical scholars argue that contemporary global communications are tantamount to cultural imperialism—a modern-day analog to the political and economic domination of the world by a handful of nations from the fifteenth to early twentieth centuries. Critics similarly argue that the development communications undertaken in Africa and elsewhere beginning the 1950s—ostensibly intended to promote modernization, agricultural and industrial productivity, and democracy—only served powerful interests in the West. Meanwhile, ongoing postcolonial activities in subaltern regions of the world continue to exploit and discriminate against local, marginalized groups.

The most prominent social critic of public relations itself is Jürgen Habermas, who has pointed to the destructive impact of modern public relations and advertising on the robust discussion of public issues he argued constituted the public sphere in Europe during the eighteenth century. Other major issues addressed by critical scholars include the exploitative feminization of the field and the perpetuation of a patriarchal society, practitioners' lack of ethnic diversity, and the overemphasis on corporate practice versus how public relations can be employed by advocacy groups to effect social change. More generally, critics fixate on the allegedly dubious ethics of public relations. Analyses range from simplistic condemnations related to deceptive practices and ineffectual codes of professional standards to more robust theoretical critiques based on principles

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of moral philosophy such as utilitarianism, deontology, social justice, and conflicted senses of duty.

State of the discipline

Although advocates argue that public relations deserves to be recognized as its own discipline, public relations remains an applied academic discipline that is hardly unified by a single distinguishing paradigm. Instead, public relations continues to borrow from and to be enriched by other disciplines in the social sciences, humanities, and management. Although growing, the number of academics engaged in public relations scholarship is small. As a result, public relations is typically housed within larger academic units in most universities—departments of communication, journalism, or advertising in the United States and programs of communication science or management in Europe and elsewhere.

Public relations scholarship is supported by organizations such as the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (euprera.org) and the Institute for Public Relations (instituteforpr.org) in the United States; both bring together educators and practitioners interested in advancing research and education. Public Relations divisions in the International Communication Association (www.icahdq.org/group/public) and the National Communication Association (ncaprdivision.wordpress.com) and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (aejmc.us/prd/) in the United States have attracted a growing number of international scholars as members. Meanwhile, research is showcased at a growing array of independent global conferences, including the International Public Relations Research Conference (founded in 1997; ipprc.org), BledComm (2004; bledconference.org), the International History of Public Relations Conference (2010; microsites.bournemouth.ac.uk/historyofpr/), and the Barcelona International PR Conference (http://www.uoc.edu/portal/en/symposia/prconference/index.html; 2011).

The number of scholarly articles published in the field also grows steadily. Major outlets for research include *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Public Relations Inquiry*, PRSA's online *Public Relations Journal*, and PRaxis's *PRism* online journal. Meanwhile, public relations research is also being published in journals such as *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, *Journal of Communication Management*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Corporate Communication*, and regional communications journals around the world. The field benefits from its own *Encyclopedia of Public Relations* (Heath, 2014) and updated handbook, *The SAGE Hand-Book of Public Relations* (Heath, 2010), plus several additional handbooks devoted to specific aspects of the practice.

SEE ALSO: Activism; Advertising; Branding/Brand Management; Civil Society; Communication Consulting and Consultancies; Communication Excellence; Communication Management; Communication Planning; Communication Strategy; Communication Tactics; Community Relations; Corporate Communication; Crisis Communication; Critical Theory; Cultural Analysis; Customer Relations; Dialogue;

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Digital Strategy; Dominant Coalition; Engagement; Framing; Fully Functioning Society; Gatekeeping; Health Communication; Impression Management; Internal Communication; Investor Relations Communication; Issues Management; Legitimacy (Legitimatizing); Negotiation; Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) Communication; Persuasion; Practitioner/Communicator Roles; Propaganda; Public Affairs; Public Diplomacy; Public Interest; Publicity; Public Sphere; Reflective Management: A Reflective Paradigm; Relationship Management; Relationships; Reputation; Rhetoric; Rhetorical Arena; Risk Management and Communication; Social Media; Social Movements; Stakeholder; Storytelling; Strategic Communication; Strategic Communication Contexts; Strategic Relationships; Supply Chain Communication; Symbolic Capital; Target Groups; Trust

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