Public Relations in Europe: A Comparison with the United States

Karl Nessmann

ABSTRACT: This article provides a brief survey of the historical development and current status of Public Relations (PR) in Western Europe with particular reference to the German-speaking countries of Austria and Germany, illustrating the similarities, differences and mutual influences of theoretical and practical PR on both sides of the Atlantic.

The comparative analysis also takes into account cultural differences within Europe. Finally, an analysis of papers presented at conferences in Europe reveals that current research tends to concentrate on symmetrical models of communication.

Karl Nessmann is assistant professor at the University of Klagenfurt (Austria), Institute of Educational Technology and Media Pedagogics, Media and Communication Studies–Public Relations.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public relations developed more or less simultaneously in Europe and the United States during the 19th century. In Europe—and more specifically in Germany—Carl Hundhausen was the first to use the term PR with its present-day meaning in 1937 when he wrote an article on “Public Relations” (cf. Flieger & Ronneberger, 1993). The phenomenon of PR had in fact been
discussed much earlier, but more in terms of social criticism within the European tradition. The main topic of scientific analysis was the relationship between the press and PR, especially the influence of PR and/or press offices on the media and newspaper reporting. Literature written in German often mentions Wuttke (1866), Kellen (1908) and Max Weber (1910) as proof that PR was a subject of scientific debate at an early stage. Critical discussion on PR in Europe continued between the wars and reached its peak at the Seventh German Sociology Conference held in Berlin in 1930, which was also concerned with the topic of the press and public opinion (cf. Kunczik, 1994, p. 232).

After the Second World War, Hundhausen and Oeckel (1950–1974) continued to encourage discussion on PR as we know it today, developing the concept further in both theoretical and practical terms. For this reason, they are considered to be the fathers of German PR (cf. Flieger & Ronneberger, 1993). Initially, attempts were made to Germanize the designation PR and the weekly magazine ‘Die Zeit’ even announced a competition to this end in February 1951. Although 1522 entries were submitted, the first prize was not awarded as not one of the suggestions was really satisfactory. This is still true today. Although the German translation “Öffentlichkeitsarbeit” has managed to assert itself since, many PR experts are not happy with it. For this reason, the American term “Public Relations”, or its abbreviation “PR”, is used in German-speaking countries of Europe.

The fact that the American designation was adopted in Europe does not mean that European PR developments are directly linked to the history of PR in the United States. The following names are often mentioned in literature on the history of PR in the United States: O.P. Hoyt (1827), Hugh Smith (1842), Dorman B. Eaton (1882) (cf. Newsom et al., 1989). Even though the first PR agencies were founded in the United States at the turn of the century (professionalization of PR), in particular by Ivy L. Lee and Edward L. Bernays, and even though many American ideas and approaches subsequently crossed the Atlantic to Europe, PR theory and practice in Europe and the United States have largely developed independently of each other. Indeed, the historical references given here show that there is a European, and even a German, tradition of practical and theoretical PR.

As far as scientific discussion on PR is concerned, critical analysis in Europe was even diametrically opposed to communication science in the United States, as is clearly illustrated in Robert K. Merton’s comparison between European and American research on mass communication (cf. Kunczik, 1994, p. 234). While Europeans were more interested in the “whys and wherefores” at the time, Americans were looking at the effects of PR, influenced by the requirements of commissioned research.

Manfred Rühl and Franz Ronneberger, two important German PR theorists today, are currently trying to answer the question “Is there a Europeanness to PR”, illustrating how much PR—as a special form of public communication—is dependent on specific social conditions, in our case on a bourgeois European society (cf. Rühl, 1994, p. 171).
The development of PR theory in the United States and Europe is characterized by ideas traveling in both directions, with Americans influencing Europeans much more than vice versa in the past and present. In other words, theoretical and practical elements were devised by Americans (especially by Bernays), taken up by European authors, especially Germans such as Hundhausen, Oeckel and Ronneberger, and further developed in their own right in a European context.

In certain specific fields, however, the development of PR theory was more strongly influenced by European authors. Take, for example, Sigmund Freud's considerations on "mass psychology". Edward L. Bernays, Freud's nephew, based some very fundamental aspects of his theory on elements adopted from his uncle's ideas on mass psychology. According to Cline et al.: "The roots of modern public relations are solidly planted in persuasion theory based on Freudian psychology, an understandable situation because pioneer Edward Bernays was a double nephew of Sigmund Freud and often consulted with psychologists in planning campaigns" (quoted in Kunczik, 1993, p. 95). As Bernays acknowledged in his autobiography, Freud had a very great influence on him.

The transfer of Sigmund Freud's theories from Austria to America via Edward Bernays is not the only example of Europeans influencing the development of PR in the United States.

Ideas evolved by the German researcher Jürgen Habermas were also adopted widely in the United States—in particular his first publications in English translation "Legitimation Crisis" (1975) and "Theory of Communicative Competence" (1970). Pearson wrote in 1989, for example, that: "Habermas' ideas can be made to yield some useful guidelines for public relations practice. Ethical business practice can be analyzed in terms of speech acts where ethical communication is operationalized as the opportunity among communicators both to engage in all types of speech acts and to move the discussion towards levels of increasing abstraction (or concreteness)" (quoted in Kunczik, 1993, p. 221). Habermas' thoughts on the topics of symmetrical communication, discourse, mutual understanding, dialog and consensus—all key words in modern definitions of PR—were particularly influential in the development of PR theory.

Despite these two examples (Habermas and Freud), which sketch out the European influence on the development of PR in the United States, it should not be forgotten that European PR is strongly oriented towards the American scene. This orientation becomes particularly clear in definitions of PR.

**CURRENT DEFINITIONS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Definitions—of which there are many—vary according to the particular approach taken to organizational, social or marketing theories (cf. Signitzer, 1992). Despite these differing points of view and approaches, most definitions have one thing in common in their classification of PR as "planned communication" (cf. Windahl and Signitzer, 1992, p. 89). Some American
definitions have also been adopted in Europe, especially organizationally-oriented approaches, as defined by Grunig and Hunt (1984), for example: "Public relations is the management of communication between an organization and its public." Or the definition introduced by Culpin et al. (1985): "Public relations is 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." At present, Long and Hazleton's (1987) description of PR as "a communication function of management through which organizations adapt to, alter, or maintain their environment for the purpose of achieving organizational goals" is considered to be the most exacting analytical definition (cf. Signitzer, 1992; Faulstich, 1992; Kunczik, 1993), at least from the point of view of PR theorists.

That is to say, the above-mentioned American definitions are not accepted to the same extent throughout Europe. Indeed, there are significant differences in what practitioners do and what they think of public relations in their own countries. For example, according to MacManus' comparative analysis of PR in Austria and the United Kingdom/UK¹, 88% of UK practitioners agreed with Grunig and Hunt's definition, whereas for Austrian respondents the figure was 66%, likewise only 8% of UK respondents disagreed with this definition whereas 32% of Austrian practitioners disagreed (cf. MacManus, 1994, p. 12).

Definitions coined by European PR theorists and practitioners—in a similar manner to their American equivalents—generally consist of a list of aims and functions. An analysis of definitions identifies the following elements:

- Creating (building on, producing, developing, establishing, changing, guaranteeing) trust, comprehension and sympathy;
- Arousing attention, interest and needs;
- Creating (cultivating, preserving), communication and relationships;
- Creating mutual understanding and agreement;
- Articulating, representing and adjusting interests (harmonizing, adapting and integrating interests);
- Influencing public opinion (forming opinion, creating consciousness, of problems in particular);
- Resolving conflicts (conflict communication); and
- Creating consensus (Presented in more detail in Ronneberger and Rühl, 1992).

In relation to the functions of PR as mentioned in the literature, there are fundamental differences between theory and practice. For example, many practitioners are still of the opinion that PR seeks to manipulate public opinion and represents the unethical and asymmetrical dimension. With respect to the function of "creating mutual understanding" practitioners are not so sure
either and consider it to be a rather vague and unprecise concept (cf. MacManus, 1994, p. 13).

Ultimately, most PR definitions clearly express that PR has a management function. While this fact has already been accepted in the United States, PR professionals in Europe are still fighting for management positions in many organizations and companies. All too often, PR is only seen as an appendage to marketing, above all in the United Kingdom, as MacManus’ study shows, where 94% of practitioners believe that PR is a tool of marketing. Indeed, most consider that this will not change much in the future: three quarters of the respondents predicted that public relations would become more allied with marketing, whereas only a quarter thought it would become more distinct from marketing (cf. MacManus, 1994, p.14).

Traditional struggles for dominance between the various branches of communication science (marketing, advertising, PR) have not yet been laid to rest. Professional PR associations are still staking their claims to management positions: the Austrian Public Relations Association (PRVA), for example, talks about PR consultants in terms of “architects of communication”. Recently, people have come to realize that the various instruments of communication will have to be coordinated and networked in a better fashion—along the lines of integrated corporate communications.

Frequently, corporate communication is considered to be the collective name for all communication disciplines. This may well be a good idea in practice but as long as the individual disciplines of corporate communications, corporate identity, corporate culture, social communications and public relations etc. have not been defined precisely in theoretical terms to prevent them overlapping, this can only be seen as an aid and not as a long-term solution. The problem has been the subject of much serious discussion in Europe—the last Euroforum conference in Munich in 1993 was entitled “Integrated Corporate Communication”.

PROFESSIONALIZATION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Over the last few years, public relations in Europe has evolved into an independent discipline of theory and practice. More and more companies, organizations, associations and other social groups have recognized the necessity of PR and are making use of it on a professional basis by setting up their own PR departments or press offices or by hiring independent PR consultants. Given the increasing importance of PR as a profession, associations, such as the Austrian Public Relations Association (PRVA) for example, have been set up in various European countries to represent professional interests. Most of these associations belong to CERP (Confédération Européenne des Relations Publiques), Europe’s professional body for PR and to IPRA, the International Public Relations Association. Universities are also responding to this development by providing more PR programs.
In Western Europe, there are 79 programs where public relations can be studied at higher education level, 61 (or 77%) of these at university level (Willems, 1991). However, this is no cause for celebration as “in only a handful of these institutions are degree courses specifically for public relations. In other courses it is an element, sometimes optional, in a broader communications or business degree” (MacManus, 1993, p. 32).

In the United States, more than 160 colleges and universities have a PR sequence or degree program. Most PR programs are associated with schools or departments of journalism or mass communications.

There are significant differences in the structure and nature of PR programs in the United States and Europe: “The first difference is found in the level of generality found in degree programs. Higher education in the United States is significantly more general than the degree programs of Europe.” (Hazleton & Cutbirth, 1993, p. 193). The two authors, who compared PR education in the United States and the European Community, believe that “European students receive a heavier emphasis on theory than on basic, practical skills. It is assumed that students learn basic skills before entering the Institute, or that they will quickly acquire them through job experience. European public relations programs are more clearly oriented toward preparing students for management positions. In the United States, the heavy emphasis on job related training leads to a preoccupation with teaching technical skills in order that students might compete effectively for entry level jobs. Finally, Europeans devote more time and effort to the study of public relations and relevant communication theory than students in the United States” (Hazleton & Cutbirth, 1993, p. 192, 193).

Hazelton and Cutbirth’s general statements are, however, to be taken with a pinch of salt as they ignore cultural differences between individual European countries, for example between the United Kingdom and other Western European countries. UK programs in public relations are similar to the American PR programs described above in terms of structure, approach and emphasis. Strong cultural links with the United States are also clear in practical PR work. MacManus’ study revealed that a majority of UK practitioners questioned on this topic thought that UK public relations is similar or very similar to the United States. In contrast, the Austrians said that public relations in Austria is different or very different from the United States.

For MacManus these answers are not surprising given the closer cultural ties between the United Kingdom and the United States. In connection with Hofstede’s studies (1991) MacManus notes: “This is supported by the much closer alignment of scores for power distance, uncertainty avoidance and individualism between the UK and USA than between Austria and the USA” (MacManus, 1994, p. 16).

The study by Coombs et al. (1994) on the professionalization of PR also shows that PR is very different depending on the country where it is practised. In a comparative analysis of international PR, Coombs et al. investigated similarities and differences between PR practitioners in Austria, Norway and the United
States in terms of professional orientation, fulfillment and practitioner roles. One of their findings was that “Austrian practitioners reported a stronger professional fulfillment than Norwegian and American counterparts. Other differences and similarities are identified and explained using culture-specific, work-related values. For example, strong professional fulfillment in Austria is viewed as a function of the value this culture places upon training and education” (Coombs et al., 1994, p. 23).

The results of these studies reveal the enormous influence of cultural aspects on practical PR.

PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH ON SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION

Public relations research in Europe takes place on an international basis, involving cooperation between many countries of the world, but especially the United States. In this respect, PR research today, as mentioned in chapter one, is characterized by mutual influences on both sides of the Atlantic, reflected in joint publications and conferences, such as international conferences organized by the Herbert Quandt Foundation, which supports exchanges between European and American PR scientists (cf. Avenarius & Armbrecht, 1992; Armbrecht et al., 1993; Armbrecht & Zabel, 1994), or the first “International Public Relations Research Symposium” in Bled/Slovenia (cf. Vercic, 1994, p. 9).

If papers submitted to the “European Association for Public Relations Research and Education” (CERP Education Research Committee) are anything to go by, the following points can be made on the current state of affairs of PR research in Europe according to MacManus (1993), who analyzed all contributions:

Most papers examine “specific questions about the theoretical basis of public relations and issues about legitimacy and social responsibility.” Moreover, in most of the papers “the work of Jürgen Habermas forms a significant part in the analytical framework adopted, the most featured aspect being Habermas’ theory of Communicative Action” (MacManus, 1993, p. 34).

A further topic enjoying lively debate in Europe is Grunig and Hunt’s “two-way symmetrical model of public relations” developed in 1984. It is treated in both theoretical and empirical studies (cf. Signitzer, 1992; Kunczik, 1993; Burkart, 1993 a, 1993 b; Armbrecht & Zabel, 1994, for example).

Today, proponents of PR theory are more frequently heard to demand that PR should take place as a symmetrical or dialogical discourse between equal partners. In the United States, Grunig and Hunt (1984) in particular referred to symmetrical PR and in German-speaking countries, Burkart and Probst (1991) were the ones who analyzed the problem theoretically and empirically.

While asymmetrical models (press agentry, public information, the two-way
asymmetrical model) predominate in practice (to the tune of about 85%), PR research concentrates mainly on the “two-way symmetrical model.”

Thus, Grunig endeavored to find empirical proof for the superiority of this model by undertaking large-scale investigations, also presented in his book “Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management” (J. Grunig, 1992), where he writes that the two-way symmetrical model is most effective in solving organizational problems. Two years later he is still urging PR experts to “develop the tools to put the model into practice” (cf. J. Grunig, 1994, p. 86).

The question as to how the two-way symmetrical model could be fully implemented in practice is also of interest to the Austrian communication scientists Roland Burkart and Sabine Probst from the University of Vienna. Starting out from the unsatisfactory situation that most textbooks on PR do not give more precise descriptions on how the goals of the symmetrical model (harmonization of interests, mutual understanding, consensus) can be achieved, they developed a special approach, which is called “consensus-oriented public relations” (Verständigungsoorientierte Öffentlichkeitsarbeit) (Burkart & Probst, 1991; Burkart, 1993 a, 1993 b).

This model describes a particular form of PR communication “which aims at an agreement with the target groups or publics on those interests that PR advocates on its customer’s behalf. Such an adjustment of adverse interests seems necessary in particular, if the PR communicator meets rejection of his plans. In such cases it seems unavoidable to initiate a communication process, which aims at a real consensus in the sense of mutual understanding” (Burkart, 1993 a, p. 11). The theoretical background of this model is largely taken from Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action. Burkart presumes that requirements for public relations can be deduced from the conditions of communicative action.

The two authors investigated this concept empirically in connection with the planning of a hazardous waste landfill, a typical case of conflict. The results of the empirical investigation confirmed the concept of consensus-oriented public relations, illustrating that consensus is closely connected with successful two way symmetrical communication. This evaluative study also showed that it is very difficult for PR practitioners to create such ideal conditions for communication in the field.

On the one hand, the symmetrical model of communication is considered to be a most ambitious one, especially in theoretical and ethical terms. On the other hand, it is also said to be utopian, illusory and useless in practice. An analysis of literature on this subject reveals that criticism is mainly directed at the very heart of symmetrical public relations, namely its benefit to all, its openness and honesty, mutual understanding, dialog, harmonization of interests, consensus and discourse, as defined by Habermas (cf. Kunczik, 1994).

The topic of “symmetrical public relations—the great illusion or the foundations for the profession” will continue to interest PR theorists and practitioners in Europe. Social changes especially provide the challenge to do so. The profession has already accepted this challenge as future publications and conferences will show.
NOTES

1. MacManus’ study “A Comparative Analysis of Public Relations in Austria and the United Kingdom” has not yet been completed. These results are based on preliminary research findings from 100 questionnaires (50 from Austria, 50 from the United Kingdom) filled in by PR practitioners from both countries.

2. A comprehensive review of PR research and teaching at Austrian and German universities is given in Bentele’s “PR in Forschung und Lehre” (PR Research and Teaching), a catalogue of all PR courses, doctoral and masters degree dissertations and research projects, published regularly since 1991.

REFERENCES


