
Italian public relations in a changing world: Historical overview, current questions and future challenges

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to try to fill the gap of studies in international public relations by providing more information on the history and development of public relations in Italy. It presents, through an historical overview, the ways that Italian public relations has been conceived and practised. It also discusses current trends and other questions related to the profession, including some examples of best public relations practices. It then concludes by introducing some of the main future professional challenges as a result of the process of globalisation.

Introduction

In the introducing chapter of *The Global Public Relations Handbook*, Sriramesh and Verčič (2009) underline the compelling need for a text describing and explaining public relations practices and body of knowledge in different parts of the world. Public relations as a profession is not necessarily understood and practised in the same manner all around the world. This is not news per se, as several scholars (e.g. Valentini, 2007, 2006; Rhee, 2002; Taylor, 2000; Verčič, Grunig & Grunig 1996; Sharpe, 1992), for many years have underlined that public relations requires a global understanding of cultural differences. Different studies (Lee, 2005; Kent & Taylor, 1999) show that public relations practitioners are increasingly required to be able to communicate with different international publics, no matter the size of the organisation they are working for, or whether it is private or public, including non-profit organisations. It is not only a question of whether a company is present in multiple countries, but also for organisations operating within their

national borders, that communication activities have increasingly become global.

The free movement of people in different countries has created more and more multi-ethnic cities, regions and nations with citizens, customers and business partners from different cultural backgrounds. This has implications for organisations too, since immigrants are also part of communities where organisations operate and thus they should be considered in organisations' strategic planning. Public relations practitioners cannot establish mutual and beneficial relationships with organisations' main stakeholders without knowing the appropriate ways to speak, behave and deal with people in a specific cultural context. Beside, the effect of globalisation has accelerated over the last decade with the development of new communications technologies such as satellite communications and the internet (Valentini, 2007), not to mention the impact of social media.

Globalisation has also highlighted the extreme ethnocentricity that currently exists in public relations practice and scholarship (Sriramesh, 2008). Proponents of cultural approach in international public relations (e.g. Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009; Taylor, 2000) believe that in order to be successful the generic principles of public relations need to be reinterpreted according to local applications and practices, which are influenced by the following main factors: cultural, political, economical and media systems, level of economic development and the extent and nature of activism (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). Therefore, they claim that the international academic community needs to focus on acquiring more knowledge of those factors in different parts of the world. Yet,

those factors are of little use if not contextualised through a comprehension of how the profession has originated and developed within a specific nation, of its current trends and professional questions and concerns. Sriramesh (2008) also noticed that there is still a lot to research and understand in several parts of the world, especially in several African and Latin countries. Xifra (2009), in a recent article reviewing comparative literature on Mediterranean public relations, noticed that little is known in this area as there is “scant intellectual production coming from continental Europe, particularly the Mediterranean arch countries: Italy, France and Spain”. He also remarked that, although something exists in those countries, it “has been practically ignored by the Anglo-Saxon community”.

As investigations of Italian public relations are very few, this paper tries to fill the gap in studies of international public relations by providing more information on the history and development of public relations in Italy. It does not include a discussion on main factors influencing the specific Italian applications of the principles as other articles are available on the subject¹. Rather, it presents, through an historical overview, how Italian public relations have been conceived and practiced. It also discusses current trends and other questions related to the profession, including some examples of best public relations practices. It then concludes by introducing some of the main future professional challenges as a result of the process of globalisation.

Italian public relations – old roots for a new profession

Thinking about the history of Italy one may think that professions in the communication fields must be as old as the oratory skills of the Roman emperors and senators. In fact, oratory played a central part in the political life of the Roman Republic, where popular decision-making and aristocratic dominance

intersected to create a fertile environment for persuasive speeches. Information, persuasion, reconciliation and cooperation were the main elements of Roman public activities. Smith (2008) claims that these elements can be considered the foundation of today’s public relations, and speaking about the Roman time he mentioned some examples of Roman emperors’ public relations activities. For instance, the Emperor Julius Caesar’s order to post “Acta Diurna” to keep the citizenry informed is regarded as the first example of public newsletter. Another example of persuasive communication aimed at creating public support is Virgil’s epic poem “The Aeneid”. This poem was commissioned by Emperor Augustus, who realised the importance of the support of the people in order to reign successfully. The epic poem is very persuasive and propagandistic as it identifies Rome as the fulfilment of a divine plan and depicts Augustus as being ordained by the gods to save and rebuild Rome after the collapse of the republic.

If oratory and other informative/persuasive activities played an important task in old times – and some may say they still play an important role today especially within the political arena – the role of communication as a structured and defined discipline in Italy has been recognised only recently when people realised that being able to communicate effectively is not something that is naturally embodied in Italian genetics. In respect of public relations as a ‘science’, the history is even younger. From this viewpoint the first public relations initiatives can be traced back to the years preceding WWII, when the propaganda machine was developed and largely implemented by Mussolini (Muzi Falconi & Kodilja, 2004, p. 229). However, the first organised experiences that could be correlated to public relations activities date back to the 1950s. It is important to notice that those activities were not identified as public relations until very recently. During this period public relations were conceived either as activities supporting marketing and thus focused on product information, or as activities aiming at enhancing companies’ reputation through

¹ Among the most complete articles published in English on the topic, see Muzi Falconi (2009).

cultural and social entertaining programmes (Scarpulla, 2006). As a marketing support function, public relations' main task was to provide and distribute written informative texts about companies' products and services, whereas in the cultural and social entertaining function, its task was organising remarkable events of high public visibility. Both approaches were, however, present only among big, multi-national corporations, like Esso, Shell and Mobil Oil, and some public and private companies like Italsider, Montecatini and Olivetti. For the majority of Italian companies, which are small and medium-sized, public relations was an unknown profession.

It is the mid-1950s that the first public relations agencies were constituted in Rome. Their methodologies and techniques of communication were strongly influenced by US approaches. Some scholars (Introvigne, 2007; Muzi Falconi, 2005) believe that it is exactly from the direct work with Americans at the Italian office of the United States Information Services (USIS) that some Italian public relations professionals were trained in and learned to do public relations. In its early conception, public relations was considered, in the best case, a more subtle and indirect form of publicity, or an 'activity' dealing with organising dinners, receptions and events. As a result, public relations practices were understood as something that it was occasionally relevant to organisations' operations. There was not a strategic approach to public relations, as there was no business interest in understanding stakeholders' opinions and needs. Business affairs were regarded 'private matters' relevant for only owners, shareholders, stock market actionists and businessmen. Business matters were meant as something that only specialists could understand (Scarpulla, 2006). No other public was relevant for companies. It should be said that until WWII, Italy was mostly an agricultural country with a high percentage of the population illiterate. Interests and participation in organisational activities and the influence of public opinion and groups in companies' decisions was

limited to the people involved in companies' affairs like shareholders and businessmen. The need to distribute information outside the 'private circle' was therefore not so important. Actions of spreading information were even excluded in small and medium-sized organisations. These were even more reluctant in disclosing companies' information to external publics.

The situation started to change in the 1960s as a consequence of the economic boom and the increasing diffusion of mass media which brought education and development. In the new era Italian working people increased their awareness of economical and political matters and subsequently trade unions and worker associations played a crucial role in business life (Muzi Falconi, 2005). From the originally private circle of businessmen, companies started to include trade unions, workers associations and the political elite in their stakeholder groups. A new approach of public relations was developed as a result of the rapid changes in the political, economical and social situations of the country. This new approach to public relations is recognised to have a more 'Italian style' than the previous one.

People and organisations became more and more interconnected. Companies realised the need for external communications; communications that could bring companies' opinions into different aspects of citizens' lives. The original public relations mission of selling products and services became a mission of 'image management', where the main task of public relations officers was to make customers associate products and services with companies' names (Scarpulla, 2006). Media relations and lobbying activities were also the public relations practices of that time. In the 1960s public relations also acquired an autonomous status as a profession and was recognised as such in larger public and private organisations. Public relations did not work only for increasing consensus upon organisations and in image management. By the late 1960s public relations officers were assigned to analyse companies' potential public relations issues and to change negative opinions found in the society. Especially in the 1970s,

public relations shifted again. It was within the movements of 'peace and love' that public relations acquired its new strategic mission of helping companies in avoiding conflicts, mediating interests, and creating conditions for mutual and trustworthy relationships between different parties. In this phase, public relations activities also played a new role in employee relations. The situation, however, was not the same for Italian public relations agencies, which continued to operate specifically in support of advertising and marketing (Invernizzi, 2001).

A further step was made in the 1980s when public relations started to be seen as an important profession for managing relationships with different publics. It is in these years that public relations activities increased exponentially within larger private organisations and became more specialised with regards to particular branches of business goods or services. Companies spent more on market research on their effects of their communication than on what consumers thought of their products (Muzi Falconi & Kodilja, 2004, p. 233).

The 1990s were characterised by further developments. The national scandals, which shadowed the public relations profession too, led toward a more professionalised and regulated way to carry out public relations. In 1992 when the Mani Pulite scandal erupted², it involved several public relations professionals who were implicated in mediating illegal operations between businesses, political and media organisations (ibid, p. 233). This corruption scandal had a strong impact on the reputation of public relations as a profession; specifically questions about ethical and legal practices were raised among the Italian community. The activities of national public relations

² Mani Pulite [trans. 'Clean Hands'] was a nationwide Italian judicial investigation into political corruption held in the 1990s. Mani Pulite led to the demise of the so-called First Republic, resulting in the disappearance of many parties. Some politicians and industry leaders committed suicide after their crimes were exposed. The corruption system that was uncovered by these investigations was usually referred to as Tangentopoli, or 'bribeville'.

associations and federations like FERPI³ and ASSOREL⁴, which were created in the 1970s and 1980s, played a critical role to push forward the process of professional recognition, and professionalisation of Italian public relations. Additionally, the 1990s were characterised by an increment of agencies' activities as more and more small and medium-sized companies recognised the importance, besides undertaking advertising and marketing activities, of engaging their publics through more specific public relations activities.

At the educational level, university degrees and specialised schools of public relations and communication management started very late. The majority of public relations professionals of the past 50 years were thus people from different backgrounds; many were journalists, others were from economic and political areas. Hence, public relations education and preparation was 'on-the-job'. The first course in public relations was offered in 1992 by IULM University in Milan. After a few years many more universities started similar courses. Nowadays almost every university in Italy has a general programme in communication science, where public relations courses are also taught and six universities have specific public relations programmes.

Current trends, professional, image and best practices of Italian public relations

For the past 50 years public relations in Italy has generally addressed selected stakeholders representing specific organisations' interests. These interests dealt mostly with organisations' key publics, such as consumers and customers, news media people and the political decision makers at local or national levels. Public relations practices widely concerned product information, through media relations, lobbying and 'recreational' activities such as organising dinners, parties, receptions, etc. Accordingly, public relations were activities in support of

³ FERPI is the Italian Federation of Public Relations, more information on its mission and activities is at <http://www.ferpi.it>

⁴ ASSOREL is the Italian Association of Full Service Consultancies, more information on its mission and activities is at <http://www.assorel.it>

marketing and advertising. For several years public relations professionals did not show an interest in differentiating their work from that of marketing and advertising people. This confusion allowed practitioners to engage in different types of activities within traditional public relations areas, but on the other hand it created blurred perceptions and undermined professional public relations identities. A typical association with the concept of public relations is of a manipulative profession with no other aim than seeking to entertain companies' influential publics. Many people either do not know exactly what public relations is all about or they have a misconception of its functions and roles (Valentini, 2009). Also, many specialists still tend to use diverse terminologies to define themselves. It is more common to use external relations, image, communication, press officer, etc. Such terms, which represent only some of the functions of public relations, may create the illusion that public relations are something different. The poor credibility of public relations in Italy is also related to a problem of accreditation and regulation of the profession at state level. As there is no specific law, anybody who has his/her own consulting business could theoretically claim to do public relations (Valentini, 2009; O'Connor & Muzi Falconi, 2004). Nonetheless in the last few years the role of communication as a strategic component of organisation' wellbeing has grown, taking a share from other marketing and communications disciplines (Assorel, 2007), and consequently more and more organisations have started to appreciate the added value that public relations can offer to them.

Currently Italy is paradoxically in a situation where some best practices and excellence in public relations co-exist with arcane public relations activities focusing on press-agentry/publicity concepts. A recent example of best practice is the case of Luxottica Group Spa, an Italian company that designs, manufactures and distributes vision and sun glasses. In February 2009 the company launched an initiative aiming at re-

launching the purchasing power of its employees and their families by offering some welfare benefits, such as free dental and paediatric cares and specialist visits, social assistance, educational grants and support, etc. (Iotti, 2004). This action is considered a good example of symmetrical public relations actions since it is the outcome of negotiations between representatives of the company, trade unions and employees. Because Luxottica Group was ready to listen to the concerns of its employees in a situation of international economic crisis, to identify potential relational problems with its employees, and was also prepared to act in supporting those needs, it has shown its responsible dimension towards one of its main stakeholders and was at the same time able to manage possible conflicts. Another example is ENI, the Italian energy company that won the 2009 CSR Online Award for having developed the best online communication addressing main stakeholders' need for information on ENI's Corporate Social Responsibility activities. Giovanni Rana, the owner and producer of fresh Italian pasta, is also considered to be one of the best communicators in Italy. Not only because of his capacity for creating very good and synergic relationships with his employees, but also for his strong sense of innovation when integrating communications into internal and external company activities. These examples confirm that Italian public relations can exhibit excellence and also be responsible and ethical by playing an important role in the Italian communities. However, as other scholars (e.g. Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Dozier & Broom, 1995; Grunig, 1992) noticed, this is possible when public relations is regarded in its strategic and reflective roles rather than in its technical functions. Therefore, good examples of public relations activities are more likely to be seen in organisations which have a senior public relations practitioner among the members of the dominant coalition. A recent study conducted by Invernizzi (2008) on PR/corporate communication managers of some of the largest Italian public and private companies shows that among the 318 companies contacted, 240 have a public relations or corporate communication manager

as part of the dominant coalition. However, in Italy the number of those practising public relations is much larger. Currently 100,000 people are estimated to work in this field, of which about 60,000 are in the public sector, 10,000 in the non-profit and 30,000 in the private sector, including solo consultants and consultancies (Valentini & Muzi Falconi, 2008). These numbers are not precise as there are grey zones in distinguishing between public relations and other communication-related jobs. For instance, many journalists who still retain their professional status work in media relations departments of public institutions⁵. So, the finding of Invernizzi's study represents only a specific typology of public relations practitioners, which is not representative of all public relations activities. Because the majority of public relations officers are not part of the dominant coalition and/or work in managerial positions, it follows that in Italy public relations practices are mostly conceived as technical/operative. In 2007, the top areas of public relations for share of revenue were media relations (27.3%), product communication (18.5%) and corporate communications (16.8%), with the three categories accounting for more than 60% of the total turnover. Growing fields include public affairs (+35%), organisation of events (+21%) and environment and social communications (+11%) (Assorel, 2008b). If communication activities have generally increased in terms of companies' investments, it is because more and more senior manager start appreciating and recognising the benefits of these activities for organisations. On the other hand, recognising the usefulness of public relations does not translate automatically into a position among the dominant coalition. Senior managers still have some concerns about the role that public relations should have within the organisation. The perceived image and role of public relations among CEOs of some large Italian

⁵ According to the Italian law (n.150/2000) that recognises the role of communication as a strategic task for the Italian public sector, only members of the journalistic guild may access and work for a media relations departments in the Italian public sector.

organisations is not promising; many describe public relations as something 'ephemeral, undefined', but still a 'useful means' for establishing 'relations' with different stakeholders (Assorel, 2008a, p. 5). Public relations are considered an important element of companies' activities, but they are generally speaking still an 'accessorial', often 'non-strategic' activity. It appears that public relations activities in Italy are very complex and surely differentiated, but at the same time ambivalent. Especially the profession, although much more professionalised than in the past, is still looking for its own specific identity. As other scholars (Introvigne, 2007; Scarpulla, 2006) have also noticed, public relations practitioners are more and more interested in obtaining specific qualifications and training. However, public relations professionals are frequently considered to lack know-how and their actions are seen as not as sophisticated, advanced and well-structured as in other Anglo-Saxon countries (Assorel, 2008a, p. 13). Moreover, there is still a firm belief among CEOs that public relations is a job that is 'learnt by doing' rather than a real profession. Consequently, public relations is regarded as an activity that 'welcomes' specialists from disparate fields looking for a 'second chance' (Assorel, 2008a, p. 14). For some CEOs, having among their public relations practitioners people with different backgrounds and experiences is an advantage for the organisation; for others it is a weakness as they believe public relations officers not coming directly from public relations training lack specific competences.

Public relations practitioners' opinions of professional standards

A recent study (Valentini & Muzi Falconi, 2008) investigating different dimensions of public relations practitioners' and journalists' self-perceptions and perceptions of the other profession provides additional insights into what Italian public relations practitioners think about their professional standards. The concept of 'recognised standards' for practicing public relations in Italy is rather blurred one, as frequently its definition depends on the

background of practitioners and on their work experiences. Frequently standards are perceived as something more personal rather than related to the profession. Similarly, when asked whether or not public relations codes of ethics are required to prove that public relations is a profession and a reputable one; whether or not having and adopting a code of ethics means for public relations practitioners to be more credible among the general public and above all among the dominant coalition and clients, public relations practitioners do not believe that their professional codes of ethics would actually increase their professionalism, nor would necessarily increase their credibility and reputation among their clients and/or among the senior management of the company they work for. Besides these views, public relations practitioners recognise that the problem exists and they are even aware of the need for developing common professional standards, but yet a solution is far from being reached.

“I would like to see recognised public relations professional qualities for what they are and not by whom they are applied. I would like that trustworthy relationships between CEOs and PR/Corporate communication officers were less important. If compared with other professions, public relations managers’ positions within a company are much more dependent on their relationship with the CEOs than on the recognition of public relations professionalism. Today, the first person that changes position within an organization that has changed its CEO is the corporate communication/PR director. It is completely normal that this happens, but it seems to me that it happens too frequently. Public relations managers should be valued more on the basis of their professionalism rather than on their relationships with their bosses.” (Interviewee n. 4 quoted from Valentini & Muzi Falconi, 2008).

Muzi Falconi (2009) speaks about the Italian society as a society rotated around the concept of *cronyism*, where personal relationships, i.e. being part of a specific network and cultivating interpersonal relations, is a decisive asset for success. Thus, this cultural aspect of the Italian society has a relevant impact on the way public relations is practised and on its development as a profession, as the quote above also shows.

The fact that public relations standards are considered more at the individual rather than at the professional level is also correlated with the fact that public relations is not fully recognised by the state nor by the society. The majority of respondents believe that a deeper knowledge of what public relations is and does among the general public would help to increase professional credibility and would work as a stimulus for further professionalism. The same would argue that for Italian public relations what is the most important is legitimacy of the society rather than state recognition. Nonetheless, there are a number of practitioners who believe that an increment of public relations professional credibility will lead to a concrete recognition by the state and another group that thinks it is the state recognition that will lead to a professional credibility.

Future challenges

Despite the international crisis, Italian public relations seems to be quite healthy according to recent statistics (Assorel, 2008a). In the past few years public relations has enjoyed more visibility and appreciation by private and public organisations. Yet, both the academic and professional communities see the consolidation of the profession through better qualification, standardisation and professionalisation as extremely important ingredients for overcoming the process of globalisation. It is considered more and more urgent to find a solution to the question of whether public relations should be state licensed or simply accredited by recognised associations. FERPI has put forward a motion to Parliament in order to guarantee its status of an Italian public relations accrediting association, similar to the Chartered Institute of Public Relations in the UK. If approved this proposition will provide to

FERPI accredited members the opportunity to have a sort of recognised 'quality certification'. It appears that this is the most supported option as the majority of Italian public relations practitioners would not see as beneficial to have a professional guild similar to the National Journalism Guild (Valentini, 2009), which is state licensed.

If the identity and professionalism of Italian public relations are the two major topics of discussion, others, more related to the practice in respect to Italian competitiveness within the international market, are worth mentioning. According to some recent surveys in the field (Assorel, 2008a, 2008b), specialisation and segmentation of tasks were considered extremely relevant in order to cope with increasing global challenges. Public relations practitioners working in agencies believe that knowing how to do everything in public relations does not make you a master or a valuable asset for competing with multinational PR/communication companies. Therefore, there is a need for more specialisation in one specific branch or field of activity combined with innovation and creativity in offering personalised and original solutions to clients (Assorel, 2008a, p. 27).

A second trend, also in line with other international studies, concerns the increasing importance of social media. Public relations practitioners and CEOs of different private and public organisations ranked the use of social media and the development of one-to-one communications among the top three priorities for the upcoming years. There is a clear understanding of the potential of virtual communications as well as of the disadvantages related to the control of authenticity and accuracy of information providers. Professional associations, like FERPI, regularly offer courses for its members on how to integrate different social media within organisations' diverse strategies. However, monitoring, controlling and evaluating the impact of social media are still a challenge for the majority of Italian organisations.

A third issue is the development of a more professionalised and structured manner to conduct public affairs and public communication. Public affairs and public communication play an important role within Italian society, especially since 2000 when Italian public administrations changed their approach to communications and subsequently to their main stakeholders. In the past, public administrations were highly authoritative and bureaucratic entities with limited obligations of creating and maintaining dialogue with their stakeholders. Communications, when they occurred, were thus rather one-way. With the new approach, public administrators are called upon to play a more dialogic role within the society by promoting and encouraging citizens' participation and stakeholders' involvement in their decisions (Milini, 2004). Noticeably, new media tools have hampered the need for public officers to learn not only how to deal with public-organisation relationships, but also how to use and manage online communications. The different approach also had an impact on public administrators' role within the Italian society, which is now more active. Moreover, private and non-profit organisations have recognised the importance of communicating with public institutions as an effective strategic factor for their development and not only as a way to compel legislative duties. It is important to mention that about 60% of all public relations practitioners in Italy are working in public organisations (Muzi Falconi, 2004, p. 13). In this respect, a future challenge of Italian public relations is to integrate best practices into public administrators' general management.

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