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College of Communication and Public Relations – NSPSPA

6 Povernei St., Sector 1, Bucharest

Tel.: 201 318 0889; Fax: 021 318 0882

elena.negrea@comunicare.ro; www.journalofcommunication.ro; www.comunicare.ro

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Sorin NASTASIA*

A Cross-Country Comparison of Public Relations Practices Employing Critical Theories and Mixed Methods

Abstract: This study analyzes the configurations of public relations practices in France and in Romania, and the connections between such configurations and U.S.-based models of public relations, through critical theoretical lens, and with the aid of mixed research methods. The study has employed a content analysis of website materials and a thematic analysis of interviews. In the quantitative component, the websites of 50 firms in France and 50 firms in Romania – 25 nationally-based firms and 25 headquarters/affiliates of international firms for each country – were content analyzed. In the qualitative component, 20 practitioners from public relations firms in France and 20 practitioners from public relations firms in Romania were interviewed. Overall, data collected through thematic analysis of interviews support data gathered through content analysis of websites. Regarding public relations activities, headquarters/affiliates of international public relations firms in France and in Romania, as well as nationally-based firms in Romania, share two main features: they are heavily influenced by U.S.-based public relations practices; yet they are associated with lower public relations models. By contrast, nationally-based firms in France carry out a different form of public relations, more independent from U.S.-based theories and practices and in the same time more connected to higher models of communication.

Keywords: international public relations; critical theories in public relations; comparative public relations research; mixed research methods; Europe.

1. Critical Theories of Public Relations

As multinational for profit and even nonprofit organizations are gaining economic control, social influence, and cultural dominance on United States markets as well as on other markets around the world, such institutions are shaping the ways in which people live their everyday lives, the ways in which they dress, eat, work or play, raise their children or grow up, enjoy themselves or are entertained, perceive or produce information and news. Critical considerations about the characteristics and the roles of public relations in non-U.S. settings seem all the more necessary, as these issues of control, influence, and dominance have become increasingly important to consider in a world torn between globalization imperatives and recession pressures, and as people's everyday lives, activities, thoughts, and feelings have been changed and sometimes crushed because of such imperatives and pressures.

As this study attempts to problematize public relations rather than take it for granted, it belongs to and it becomes part of the critical paradigm of public relations studies. In a critical approach, discussing institutional and corporate communication discourses and practices regarding a particular society becomes a way to understand the power of institutions and cor-

* Assistant Professor Ph.D., Public Relations, Department of Speech Communication, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, United States of America, snastas@siue.edu

porations over various publics and regular people in the respective society, or to assess the ideological and the hegemonic tendencies in the respective society and internationally (Moffitt, 1992, 2005; L'Etang & Pieczka, 1996, 2006; Mickey, 2003). Additionally, in a critical approach, documenting people's ideas on how public relations is and how it should be is turned into an opportunity to document sites of power and issues related to justice or injustice domestically and internationally (Badaraco, 1990; Toth & Heath, 1992; Leichty, 2003; Roper, 2005; Heath, Toth, & Waymer, 2009). This study features a combination of the critical reflection on U.S.-based public relations with the applied research on how U.S.-based models shape French and Romanian public relations practices.

Inspired by the considerations of Stuart Hall (1980, 1982) and of other theorists who have attempted to depict historical and current features of the critical paradigm (see Jansen, 2002), this study looks for and at points where lines are disrupted and elements are displaced in discourses and practices, namely for and at those points where lines are disrupted and elements are displaced in the communication and the activities of public relations firms and professionals in France and Romania. For example, the study examines discrepancies between official statements of international corporations claiming to work in different parts of the world with diversified practices and research results showing that there are few differences among the ways in which such corporations function in various settings. I also reflect on discrepancies between the claims of regional independence in public relations practices made by numerous practitioners in France and Romania and often the uniform ways in which they conduct business.

In addition, following the examples of several critical scholars in public relations, this study examines public relations in France and Romania in terms of ideological implications. For example, this study considers the availability or lack of availability of certain public relations activities in connection with the material resources and power relations identified. Thus, this study provides an opportunity for a type of public relations research that is well grounded in comparison not only in what concerns spaces but also in what concerns issues.

2. Mixed Methods for Considering Public Relations

In their book *Quantitative-Qualitative Research Methodology: Exploring the Interactive Continuum*, Isadore Newman and Carolyn R. Benz (1998) write:

Qualitative and quantitative research strategies and their underlying presuppositions have been increasingly debated since the early 1980s as though one or the other should eventually emerge as superior. We reject the dichotomy assumed by this debate. We take the position that the two philosophies are neither mutually exclusive (i.e. one need not totally commit to either one or the other) nor interchangeable (i.e. one cannot merge methodologies with no concern for underlying assumptions). Rather, we present them as interactive places on a methodological and philosophical continuum... (p. xi)

Placed on a continuum, methods can be understood not in terms of whether or not they employ numbers, but rather in terms of how they consider quantification. Researchers at the quantitative end of the continuum affirm the assignment and the analysis of numbers as entirely independent of the researching subject, whereas researchers at the qualitative end of the continuum reject the attribution and interpretation of numbers as solely dependent on the researching subject. In-between these extreme positions, there are numerous possibilities to collect and utilize numerical data while acknowledging that the collection of such data is not neutral and the usage of such data is not absolute (see Berger, 2000).

In tune with the idea of the continuum is the notion of mixed methods research. According to Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), mixed methods research is “a class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative research techniques... into a single study” (p. 17). Proponents of mixed method research are grounded in the belief that middle of the way positions on the continuum are not ontologically, epistemologically, and ideologically incompatible but may be closer to one another than to the extreme positions, whereas extreme positions on the continuum are indeed incompatible. As such, proponents of such research have stated that when they are used in conjunction quantitative and qualitative methods not only complement one another but also have potential for informing each other (see Johnson & Christensen, 2004).

Mixed methods research has several advantages. As Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) wrote, quantitative research methods have often been directed toward theory verification and qualitative research methods toward theory generation, but with mixed methods a researcher can do both. In addition, mixed methods provide opportunities to explore the multifaceted aspects of various issues. Whether results of the quantitative and qualitative parts of a mixed method study converge or diverge, such results lead to insights into the complexity of the problematics researched. And whether the results of the quantitative and the qualitative parts of the mixed methods study provide a coherent image or offer fragmented images of the issue analyzed, such results give the researcher to continuously reassess the issues as well as the means for interpreting issues (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 17).

To depict and interpret a variety of issues about public relations in France and Romania, including their similarities and differences and their dependence on or independence from U.S. public relations theories and practices, as well as to challenge and problematize predominant and long taken for granted notions about public relations, this study has employed a content analysis of website materials and a thematic analysis of interviews. Efforts have been made to corroborate the data from the content analysis with the data from the interviews and to provide as many connections as possible between the two sides of the study.

In the quantitative component of the study, the websites of 50 firms in France and 50 firms in Romania –25 nationally-based firms and 25 headquarters/affiliates of international firms for each country – were content analyzed. The critical interpretation of the content analysis offered opportunities for considering the dissemination of public relations practices, and the formation of institutional ideologies through public relations, in the European context. In the qualitative component of the study, 20 practitioners from public relations firms in France and 20 practitioners from public relations firms in Romania were interviewed. Interviewees were selected from among public relations practitioners in nationally-based as well as in international firms in France and Romania, such as to include individuals with different demographic profiles who work in different organizational environments. Interviews provided a chance to document and interpret opinions about how the public relations profession is and should be in organizations in the two countries examined.

3. Selected Results from the Content Analysis

One set of elements considered through the content analysis of website materials were the number and the types of activities pursued by nationally-based public relations firms and by headquarters of international firms in France and Romania. These issues are significant be-

cause examining how many things and what kinds of things public relations practitioners are deemed to do on a daily basis gives the researcher an opportunity to examine what types of influences and authorities are at work in a public relations firm.

Regarding the number of activities, the data reveals significant differences between nationally-based public relations firms and headquarters of international public relations firms in France. As identified from information presented on the websites of the nationally-based firms examined for France, two such firms feature under three types of activities, 12 firms showcase 3-5 types of activities, 11 firms feature 6-10 types of activities, and no firm had over 10 types of activities. As reported on websites by French headquarters of international firms, six such firms feature 3-5 activities, 13 firms showcase 6-10 types of activities, and six firms present over 10 types of activities. Quantity of public relations items seems to be related to amount of money and number of resources available: it is clear that French headquarters of international firms have more capacities than nationally-based firms in this country.

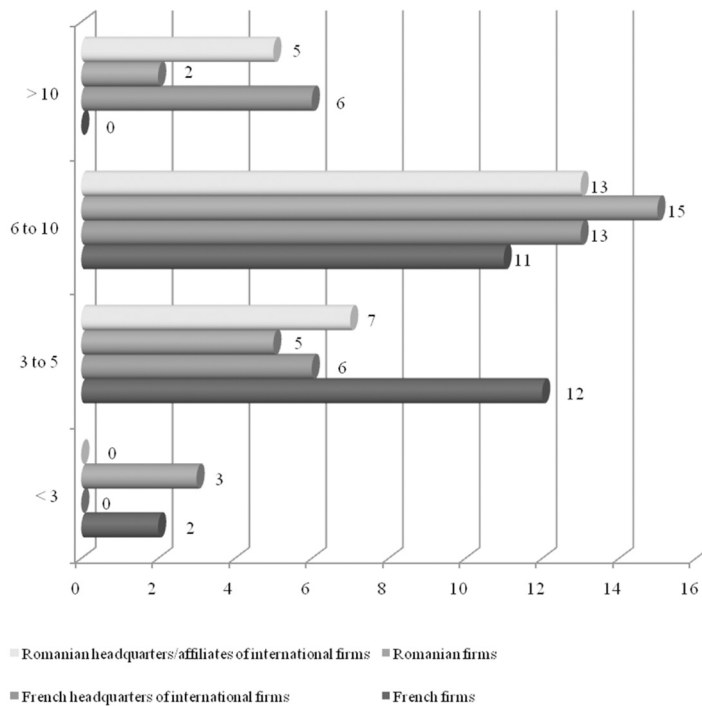
Additionally, it has resulted from the website analysis of public relations firms in Romania that three of the 25 nationally-based public relations firms analyzed have under three types of activities, five such firms have 3-5 types of activities, 15 have 6-10 types of activities, and two have over 10 types of activities. It has also resulted from the website analysis that seven of the 25 headquarters/affiliates of international public relations firms analyzed for Romania have 3-5 types of activities, 13 headquarters/affiliates have 6-10 types of activities, and 5 such firms have over 10 types of activities. It can be asserted from the data collected that the numbers of activities reported on the websites of nationally-based firms and of headquarters/affiliates of international firms in Romania are similar, with most public relations firms featuring on the websites 6-10 activities and a smaller number of firms declaring on their websites 3-5 activities.

Overall, the highest number of activities as reported on the websites was recorded for nationally-based public relations firms in Romania. In close proximity in terms of number of activities specified on websites were the headquarters/affiliates of international public relations firms in Romania. Also in close proximity in terms of number of activities declared on the websites were the headquarters of public relations firms in France. It seems interesting that nationally-based public relations firms as well as headquarters/affiliates of international public relations firms in Romania report such high numbers of activities, even higher activities than headquarters of international public relations firms in France, although another component of this study shows that headquarters of international public relations firms in France have more clients. One possible explanation, that to some extent shows flexibility and to some extent might raise ethical issues, is that public relations firms in Romania declare on their websites all of the activities that they know of and they might consider performing if clients ask or in the future, rather than declaring on their websites the activities that they have offered or they currently offer. Another possible explanation is that public relations firms in Romania contract full packages of public relations activities and then outsource some of the activities to other firms on the market; thus, multiple firms work collaboratively on the same project although only one firm has won the pitch. It has also resulted from this research that nationally-based public relations firms in France select much more carefully the portfolio of activities that they showcase on their websites, and that some such firms are more specialized in terms of activities. This data is presented synthetically in Figure 1.

In addition to the number of activities, types of activities were considered. The types of activities featured in the coding scheme correspond to the four models of public relations

coined by several U.S. scholars of a functionalist orientation (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1978/2000; Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006): writing and editing, multimedia production, and media placement are connected with the one way asymmetric model, project administration, research, and media contacts are linked to the one way symmetric model, training and counseling are connected to the two way symmetric model, and conflict resolution and integration are linked to the two way symmetric model. In addition, to leave space for formulating ideas that might not be in tune with those expressed within the U.S. dominant paradigm of public relations scholarship, a rubric of “other (specify)” was added to the coding scheme.

Figure 1. Number of activities.



Among the 25 nationally-based public relations firms examined for France, 21 report on their websites to have activities related to writing and editing, seven to multimedia production, four to project administration, three to research, 23 to media contacts, seven to training, 17 to counseling, six to conflict resolution, and 10 to communication integration. In comparison, among the 25 French headquarters of international public relations firms analyzed, 23 specify on their websites to have activities related to writing and editing, 22 to multimedia production, 23 to media placement, 21 to project administration, 17 to research, nine to media contacts, seven to training, ten to counseling, four to crisis management, and two to communication integration.

Several observations are particularly interesting to be made. While both nationally-based public relations firms and headquarters of international public relations firms in France have a heavy load of public relations writing and editing, the international organizations also do a lot of multimedia production while the nationally-based organizations are less oriented towards