

Some remarks for the history of Public Relations in Portugal

ABSTRACT

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Public Relations is considered, especially by its critics, as a very powerful industry, capable of really improving the freedom of citizens but also a possible influence for misguiding and spinning. This seems to be the major problem for the institutionalisation of the profession in Portugal, at least, it has been for the last fifty years where advances and setbacks have been constant. To be able to override its detractors both practitioners and academicians felt the need to offer a definition that would enable a clear distinction from advertising or propaganda, the main professional areas in the first half of the 20th century in Portugal. But this seems a never-ending struggle as nowadays more or less the same problems are faced concerning the so-called 'content marketing' areas. Moreover, the ambiguity of the expression 'public relations' in the Portuguese language has often helped to create all sort of misunderstandings. As for its place as an academic subject, the way has been a bit easier but the future might be disappointing due to important misconceptions that tend to present the discipline as a sub-discipline of the marketing.

KEYWORDS: Communications director. Global. Governmental sector. Relationships. Strategic management.

INTRODUCTION

If we had to choose a title other than the literal one here proposed, this article would have been called “a profession in search for itself” or “a profession plagued by nagging doubts”. According to some authors – almost in the same sense as we can speak about a Portuguese first globalisation (the first global commercial empire in history - the Portuguese seaborne empire) in the 15th and 16th centuries (PERES, 1947; SOARES, 2011), forms of proto-PR can be traced back to that same period. The *Regimento das Casas das Índias e Mina*¹ of King D. Manuel I in 1509, an important document which stated the rules of government of the Portuguese trade empire, clearly expressed the concerns of the kingdom with its main stakeholders (as we would say today): *merchants* and all the other persons who undertook any businesses with the Portuguese kingdom. It is notable that the need for dialogue was expressed, as the document literally stated that all must be listened to, treated fairly and that any complaint should be taken under consideration.

Due also to its amazing geographical localisation, Portugal has a long history of communicating in diversity: diversity of languages, of cultures, of religions, of life styles. Located at the most western point of Europe, the country speaks the same language as Brazil or Mozambique, with an important history of diplomatic and commercial relations with the UK, essential political and military relations with the USA, and in the last three decades of the 20th century, academic relations with French-speaking countries due to a group of scholars who returned to the country, after living, for a decade or more, due to political reasons, in France or Belgium. Spanish professionals, due to the geographical proximity, have always been good interlocutors too as well as those from Brazil. The public relations (PR) field in Portugal has always been a mosaic of schools, projects and references in different mother tongues without ever being able to demonstrate its power and importance in other countries due to a lack of systematic research and publications from its scholars. I think the non-existence of master degrees and PhD programmes until 2009 has been a major handicap for a well-consolidated body of knowledge. Moreover, the market has never acknowledged the social and economic importance of the public relations professionals. If aspects that concern PR practitioners are considered, it is evident that the concept of PR technician (dominant till the late 1980s), that existed in many governmental departments, enterprises and in the military forces has been lost. It had been introduced in the middle years of the 20th century by many multinational enterprises operating in Portugal. Promoted by some pioneers during the fifties and the sixties, the activity was understood as a staff profession (AVELLAR-SOEIRO, 2007; RAMALHO, 1983; MOURA, 2014). We may say that in many of these local organisations it was propaganda, but in general that was not the case, as in Portugal before the 1974 revolution, this area was a specific one under the designation of “information”, “information and propaganda department”, or even “government information”. We must note however that if censorship was a reality in all aspects of the public life including also, for instances, advertising, PR departments belonging to international corporations were not object of any kind of censorship processes (MOURA, 2014). After the revolution, many PR practitioners moved to the public sector as during the first years the big multinationals kept a very low profile. These aspects may explain why there are, nowadays, more governmental departments called public relations than in the commercial sector (VIEGAS; MARQUES, 2004).

The designation has become some form of “communication” in almost every private or non-governmental enterprise. However, the armed forces have kept the primary designation of public relations officer as well as some ministries. In some multinational companies PR is conceptualised exactly as White, L’Etang and Moss (2003) suggested concerning the UK: even if the profession exists and its importance is acknowledged, PR is most often referred by CEOs as “communication” (SOARES; MENDES, 2004).

Another aspect where Portugal seems to follow other western countries is that the practice remains lightly regulated and mainly expected to manage through self-regulation. Although the profession has been given government recognition in the late 1970s it has still, in this second decade of the new millennium, no professional charter. Again, Portugal can share the insights of White, L’Etang and Moss (2003) that, in some aspects, the PR graduate levels are still not given full credit by the industry which does not accept that a specialist degree be a necessary condition for entry into the practice.

If the profession has clearly been influenced by the British perspectives due to the companies operating in Portugal during the last years of the 19th and all the 20th century, even under the dictatorial regime, PR as a subject and as an academic discipline due to its beginnings in late 1960s and its consolidation in post-1974 democracy has had great influence from the Spanish and French “schools”. To be fair the influence of the concept of *directeur de communication* (French) or *director de comunicacion* (Spanish) was a problem to the quite well implemented notion of “public relations” in some sectors of the Portuguese economy till the late eighties, as well as the emergence of “new” concepts as the “organisational communication” one (RUÃO, 2005).

A “PROFESSION” IN SEARCH FOR ITSELF

Even though nowadays we are quite used to the idea that the public relations activity is a non-existent profession in Portugal, this is not correct. Due to the new possibilities of communication in the last decade, it is quite easy to be influenced by the other countries’ realities moreover if we cannot find among our scholars and professionals a consensus about these themes.

I believe this definition, as proposed by Lesly, remotes at least to 1971, even though his main ideas were already quite well defined since the first edition of his first *Handbook* in the early fifties. According to him, “public relations can be defined as the activity that helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other” (LESLEY, 1998, p. 5). This idea is, with slight differences, the one defended in Portugal during the sixties and, that has, with minor divergences and some strong discussions, been the prevalent notion till our days.

The first approach to a professional charter goes back to 1971 and it was not possible due to a lack of an entity (according to the Portuguese legislation at that moment, a syndicate). In 1979 public relations was defined as a profession² by the entity responsible for the professional classifications in Portugal. The definition proposed was that of a public relations technician (the sociology of professions was not an issue for the proponents so we must not understand the concept “technician” in its strict sense): “exerts a deliberate activity, planned and continuous to communicate in order to establish, maintain and improve the

knowledge and understanding between entities or groups and the publics with whom these entities are connected in a direct or in an indirect way” (WEINSTEIN, 1983, p. 73). The definition proposed was the one that was being discussed since the 60s by the Portuguese association SOPREP and it is not by chance that when the first official definition was proposed, in the text where the concept is developed and clarified, it took in consideration the need to state in a very accurate way that it could not and should not be confused with any forms of propaganda, advertising or promotion (understood as one of the elements of the marketing mix).

Americo Ramalho (1983) in its professional endeavours, as well as in his classes during the seventies, used the expression of “organisational identity” as characterised by four main dimensions: human, physical or material, psycho sociological and questions concerning quality. For him these were the main areas of intervention for the public relations professionals. His approach was far from considering public relations as being a mere discursive function but he saw it in the same sense as Grunig still defends it today, that is, as a strategic management function (GRUNIG, 2011). Maybe we should also note that this group of professionals that had started their careers in the big multinational companies in the forties and the fifties had a very accurate sense of what we could consider today as a humanist perspective for the profession. Xifra-Heras (1983) in an article published in the early eighties resumed this idea quite well, that was shared both by the Portuguese and the Spanish pioneers, saying that public relations should be seen as belonging to the realm of the communitarian dialogues keeping the idea of free speech and the right of the citizens to have access to accurate information.

The first “Foreign office” that is thought about it as the first form of a public relations office was established at the LNEC (the Portuguese laboratory of civil engineering) in 1960 by Avellar-Soeiro considered as the first Portuguese public relations professional (CABRERO, 2001; AVELLAR-SOEIRO, 2007). He had started his activity in the British Eastern Telegraph Co. that was operating in Portugal since 1890 where he had acknowledged the concept of “public relations officer” during the Second World War (AVELLAR-SOEIRO, 2007).

It was however during the fifties and sixties that many Portuguese professionals started to work as public relations officers for international companies especially for the American ones as Mobil or BP. In the sixties Mobil had, what we would call today a special project under the corporate social responsibility label, then, just called a special project, concerning the education for traffic security (with roads, cars, buses for children) in the Zoological Garden in Lisbon.

After 1974, and for more or less a decade, due to the new political and economic instability, only the governmental areas were able to develop the public relations field as the private sector was seeing the public relations as a risk not worth taken.

If the functions offered by the in-house departments and its designations covered the core areas of the public relations activity, from employee communications, to external relations, from media relations to special events or projects, the emergence of the consultancies in Portugal transformed the scenario of the public relations field. From the realm of what we could call corporate communications in all its elements and aspects (RAMALHO, 1983) we testified the

emergence of a greater preoccupation with isolated aspects of the public relations function, as media relations or political communications, that are still today some of the major business areas for the PR consultancies. Even though the data are not quite clear it's possible to state that the first PR consultancies were created as branches of the big advertising companies that were already operating in Portugal with all the bias that we could have expected. Ironically, Paixão-Martins (2014) refers himself to this aspect as the USP discourse.

The first Portuguese small PR agency opened its doors in 1976, the CNEP (International Center for Communication). It belonged to Martins Lampreia (1978), now working also in Brussels and in Brazil, who had just arrived from France, where he had studied public affairs and management. Only in the eighties, however, with the reorganisation of the Portuguese political and economic systems we did observe the development of the concept of PR consultancy. After entering the EEC on first January 1986, Portugal is giving its first steps as a European country both in its social and political aspects. With a moderately liberal with social concerns government, to use the expression of Paixão-Martins (2014) and the incoming of European Community funds and foreign investment on a large scale, the country watches the rebirth of its economy. New businesses were created and Paixão-Martins (2014), not by chance, and both at its literal and metaphorical sense, refers three new trades: the first mall and the first hypermarket were opened as well as the first counter of the first private banking. It was precisely in 1986 that the first Portuguese PR consultancy in its proper sense, that is offering all the aspects of services that we could find in the international consultancies was launched by Paixão Martins. LPM is still, nowadays, one of the most important PR groups in Portugal. The big boom only happened however in the last decade of the previous millennium with the big boom in the economy. Even though all consultancies offer media relations as one of their most important assets in the nineties, other areas as financial communications, public affairs and political communication became also important areas of investment.

Portuguese PR and Communication Consultancies - we must say that some are much more relevant than others both in number of employees or the kind of services offered - have suffered the greatest development in the first years of this millennium. According to APECOM data, in 2005, the net affairs volume of the whole sector is stabilising around 30 million euros per year, with a labour force between 500 to 600 professionals, the majority of which have undergone university studies. In Portugal many of the major international groups like Ketchum, Fleishman-Hillard, Hill & Knowlton, Porter Novelli, Weber Shandwick, Citigate among others, have been present for at least the last 20 years.

The turning of the century led also to some other important conquests for the Public Relations, understood as an activity, even if under some other designations as media relations, communication, or communication and image departments, just to quote some of the designations we've found when public relations entered the civil society organisations in Portugal to develop activities other than the classical fund raising. From a scholar point of view this is also important as we are offered the opportunity to explore the connections and to enable the dialogue from public relations understood in a more restricted sense with other subject areas as communication in the public interest of communication for development (EIRÓ-GOMES, 2006; EIRÓ-GOMES; NUNES, 2012).

The financial crisis of 2007 left the Portuguese economy reeling. Due to the economy crises and the difficulty in consolidating their positions, or at least being able to grow in a country where the Portuguese and small enterprises are facing great difficulties, and the big international groups negotiate with major multinational consultancy groups, the novelty in the last years is the growth to other markets alone or as part of greater networks. If we can nominate some of these new markets we would first refer to some of the Portuguese speaking countries in Africa (Angola, Cape Verde and Mozambique) and to Brazil, but also the Middle East. In what concerns major companies (both Portuguese and multinational) in different sectors it might be worth referring that when some of these companies moved their Communication or Public Relations departments to other countries they were glad to take along some of our best graduate students in Public Relations.

PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION: HALF A CENTURY IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCY

Communication studies in Portugal began in the late 70's of the 20th century with the Mass Communication Studies degree of the New University of Lisbon, when the country recovered freedom of press and speech after years of a dictatorial regime. In the eighties, another institution that now belongs to the University of Lisbon, the Instituto de Ciências Sociais e Políticas also launched its Mass Communication Studies degree. Both undergraduate degrees were centred in a theoretical approach to the mass communication studies similar to those degrees offered by the central European countries. Due to the political, social and economic moment both offered specialisations in journalism. In a certain sense, we were experiencing what in certain eastern European countries has been understood, ten to twenty years later, as a transitional³ period for the communication sciences due to the transition from a dictatorial regime to democracy. Both degrees, as well as the one offered by Universidade do Minho, and the one offered by Universidade da Beira Interior are now designated as Communication Sciences degrees even if students can choose to study as a minor public relations or advertising. The main focus still is however in journalism in its multiple expressions and media (GONÇALVES, 2009).

However, the first school offering a PR course (not yet considered as a degree) was a public (in the British sense) institution, the Instituto de Novas Profissões⁴ (INP) in 1964, and the first private (in the British sense) degree in Public Relations only appeared in 1990 along with the creation of Escola Superior de Comunicação Social⁵ (ESCS), a college. The major difference among the courses offered by INP and ESCS had to do with the fact that at INP the formation offered was a 4 years licence in Public Relations and Advertising and at ESCS since its early days Advertising and Marketing were offered as a conjoint licence leaving the Public Relations degree as an autonomous formation. Another major difference was that even though both were undergraduate degrees, at INP it was a four years offer and at ESCS a three years course according to the Portuguese legislation at that moment where only universities could offer a four years undergraduate formation.

Due to different reforms in the education sector, Portugal suffered great transformations in the late years of the decade of 80 of the last century as well as the first year of this one. These transformations have encompassed what in Europe has been called the Bologna process. From the official data, we can nowadays

identify about 90 communication undergraduate courses, 10 of which are very closely linked with Public Relations be it as a major or a minor. In the first years of the new century we've witnessed several major innovations in the studies of PR with the creation of doctoral programmes due to a cooperation protocol between ESCS and Madrid's Universidad Complutense and the development of several postgraduate courses in areas like Crisis Communication Management or Strategic Communication Management. It's important to note that only in the last five years is it possible to be enrolled in a PhD programme in Strategic Communication as a specialised branch in the Communication Sciences Doctoral Program in four of the main institutions in Portugal, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Universidade do Minho, Universidade da Beira Interior and Instituto Universitário de Lisboa. In an autonomous form there's a master programme in Public Relations in ESCS since 2007 and INP has been participating in a European Public Relations Master for some years. Nowadays we can count also with a new master in Public Relations and Advertising at the University of Beira Interior.

ACTIVISM

Since their foundations, different European and international associations have counted among their members both Portuguese professionals and scholars. If in the last century we can speak about the involvement with CERP or IPRA, nowadays we have at an institutional or individual level affiliates in all the most relevant associations from EUPRERA to IPR, ECREA or ICA, as well as EACD or Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication.

The first professional association was created in 1968 with the name of Portuguese Public Relations Society and in 1982 it was transformed into Portuguese Association of Public Relations in an attempt to create a professional board to regulate the profession. This association couldn't survive due to internal problems. Other associations have been constituted but without any permanence or great visibility as, for example, ARPP (PR Association of Portugal). Today there are two major business associations: APECOM – Portuguese Association of PR and Communication Counselling Firms, and APCE – Portuguese Association of Business Communication, and one other association that pursues scientific purposes, including not only PR but also other communication areas: SOPCOM – Portuguese Communication Sciences Association. In what concerns students associations, there has been almost a decade ago a development with the creation of the Portuguese Association of Public Relations and Communication Students, the Portuguese representation of the European Association of Public Relations and Communications Students, though it seems without a relevant expression nowadays.

From a bird's eye view perspective, we should say that the capacity to mobilise the professionals and scholars in recent years seems almost inexistent. Two main aspects must be addressed: first, the question that the reality of the profession as an in-house function has been totally hegemonic till the early nineties and less relevant in the last years. All the practitioners that we recall nowadays from the twentieth century worked in the governmental sector or in private companies. With the entrance of Portugal in the ECC the scenario suffered an enormous change and the main Public Relations Agencies, both Portuguese and multinational, became the great employers. With the entrance of the PR agencies

in the market we watched also for the first time to a change in the name of the function with the hegemony of the concept of communication assistant, communication director and so on. As a second aspect, it's important to note that the two great associations represent themselves, in a certain sense, this bipartition: the in-house departments and the PR agencies. If it is true that the professional status, its institutionalisation and accreditation, has been an aspiration for the practice of public relations in Portugal the most significant step was taken almost fifty years ago. Despite all the efforts taken this millennium none of them ever came to a successful conclusion.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

If it is not possible to speak of a Portuguese school of PR we must say that we have been always in the front line engaging in all the relevant discussions for at least 75 years. I'll risk saying that we've even seem to be able to import the best from both the European and the American (north and south) perspectives. We've never been far from the idea – with different approaches and minor differences expressed by Grunig that “public relations provide organizations with a way to give voice to and empower publics in organizational decision-making” (GRUNIG, 2011, p. 14). Maybe the most innovative aspect was the existence of PR practitioners under dictatorship and always with the quite clear notion that PR was not either propaganda or advertising (AVELLAR-SOEIRO, 2007; WEINSTEIN, 1983; MOURA, 2014).

The discipline of PR must be seen as a safety valve for freedom. By enabling adaptation, providing the means to negotiate solutions, promoting innovation, arbitrary decisions and actions become less likely or should be so. We strongly believe that, even if as public relations practitioners we cannot expect to develop the human knowledge, we can and we should fulfil our mission: to promote the human understanding. The great doubt remains however: will the concept of 'public relations' disappear and will it be replaced by some other concept? Will we manage to keep under the 'corporate communications' umbrella approach, in my opinion the lesser of two evils (EIRÓ-GOMES; NUNES, 2014), all the aspects, all the knowledge and multidisciplinary capacity the public relations practitioners are capable to offer to organisations? Will we be able to contribute to strategic management by building relationships with publics and maybe not only those that affect or are affected by the organization, to use Grunig's expression (2011), in a direct way?

Algumas notas para uma história das RP em Portugal

RESUMO

As Relações Públicas são consideradas, especialmente pelos seus críticos, como uma indústria muito poderosa capaz de promover a liberdade dos cidadãos mas também, constructora de percepções enganadoras e responsável pela manipulação da opinião pública. Estes parecem ser alguns dos problemas responsáveis pela dificuldade de uma institucionalização da profissão em Portugal, pelos menos nos últimos cinquenta anos, caracterizados por constantes avanços e recuos face a uma sua regulamentação e institucionalização. Tanto os profissionais como os académicos tentaram posicionar a profissão, e a disciplina, oferecendo uma definição que permitisse a sua distinção tanto da propaganda (entendida na sua aceção em Portugal) como da publicidade, as grandes áreas durante a primeira metade do séc. XX em Portugal. Esta luta parece contudo não ter fim pois nos últimos anos o debate mantém-se, agora centrado nas áreas do marketing. Acrescenta-se ainda que o conceito de "Relações Públicas", tradução à letra da expressão inglesa, permite em português todo um outro conjunto de mal-entendidos. Enquanto área de estudo académica o caminho tem sido um pouco mais fácil mas o futuro não deixa de poder ser desencorajador em especial devido às concepções erróneas que tendem a apresentar as Relações Públicas como uma subárea do marketing.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Director(a) de Comunicação. Global. Sector estatal. Relações. Gestão estratégica.

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NOTES

1 An important document where are stated the rules concerning the government of the Portuguese trade empire during the sixteenth century.

2 We are not using here the concepts “profession”, “practitioner”, “industry” as they are today understood from an epistemological and sociological point of view but as they were used by the writers we are confronting. The discussion, however, is a relevant one with important implications for the future of the public relations but that is not the goal of this paper.

3 While teaching in Sofia in the late 90s this was an expression used, quite often, by Minka Zlateva, Sofia Unesco Communication Chair professor.

4 Institute of the New Professions that still exists nowadays offering graduate and post-graduate courses in Public Relations.

5 Lisbon College of Mass Communication and Media Arts.

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