

Critica al Bled Manifesto

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The Bled Manifesto on Public Relations is an analysis of the status of Public Relations knowledge in Europe and around the world.

It was written by Betteke van Ruler (Free University of Amsterdam) & Dejan Vercic (University of Ljubljana) according to the Delphi research method.

The study aims at determining the field of Public Relations, at discovering the relationship with communication, and at describing the possible differences in Europe as far as theory and practice are concerned.

This article from the President of FERPI is the summary of the Italian answer to this important document. The entire text of the BLED MANIFESTO as well as the integral Italian point of view will be sent to all the EUPRERA members and is available to everyone (one can order from the EUPRERA secretariate: EUPRERA@online.be)

In an attempt to understand and summarise the many interesting and complex original points contained in the Bled Manifesto -definitely the most wide-ranging and intense theoretic reflection on public relations in Europe we have so far - I shall start from its conclusions, which also closely corresponds to the declared aims of the document: to understand if and to what extent public relations in Europe are similar or dissimilar to those in the United States. Here is the statement:

Public relations -write the two authors, the Dutch Van Ruler and the Slovene Vercic - *are not only a phenomenon to be described and defined, but above all a strategic process to observe an organisation from an external viewpoint.*

The priorities of public relations therefore include both the inclusiveness of the organisation and the preservation of its right to operate. As marketing observes an organisation from the market point of view, so public relations observe the organisation from the public point of view (seen, however, above all as 'public sphere'). We would therefore like to broaden the present relational and communicational approaches to public relations, by fitting them into a new approach, which we define as public or reflective.

Starting from these premises, we may therefore pinpoint the suggestions and stimuli contained in the text, only reminding the reader that the methodological path of the paper sparks from a wide ranging, explicitly qualitative and long research study carried out with a Delphi method in three successive rounds from 1998 to 2001 with experts and operators from many European countries (including Italy). The first round did not in fact lead to the identification of a specific European diversity (often stated by participants as existing, but without being demonstrated), and the following rounds contributed to 'provoking' participants into being more specific, in a search for possible distinctive features.

- A first important passage in the text deals with a linguistic question. The term public relations in Germanic and Slav languages indicates relations with the public, while the term public connotes, in the authors' view, a different phenomenon from the analogous Anglo-American one. In German, in fact, public relations are called 'Öffentlichkeitsarbeit', which literally means public work: to be understood as working in public, with the public or for the public. In the Slovene language it means more or less the same thing.

It is, the authors argue, therefore a cultural question: Öffentlichkeit does not mean public, but public sphere.

In superimposing public onto Öffentlichkeit we lose an important analytic dimension which links public relations to questions and values considered publicly relevant and hence correlated to the public sphere. They are therefore not only relations with the public, but - as we were saying - in the public and for the public.

Public relations must also be measured according to the quantity and quality of public sphere they succeed in co-producing in their activity, which, in turn, are linked to öffentliche Meinung, i.e. to public opinion, seen not as an aggregate of individual opinions (Lippmann) but as a benchmark for a political authority, developing in the 19th century in opposition to monarchies and helping to construct the foundations leading to the birth of pluralist parliamentary democracies (Habermas).

In this accepted meaning, public relations carry out a democratic function analogous to that of journalism: both contribute to the free flow of information and to the growth of the public sphere, seen both as a quantitative (how many people take part in the public sphere?) and a qualitative question (at which level do we discuss public questions?). In these aspects, the authors suggest, the terms public and public relations in Europe can mean very different things compared with in the United States.

This would ultimately be that public, reflective approach to public relations in which the authors intend to fit the existing relational and communicative approaches.

- It is of course opportune and necessary to reflect (and we shall do so...) on these last two approaches to fully assess whether the new suggested interpretation actually constitutes a relevant added value in reaching our goal: identifying European specifics regarding the Anglo Saxon model of public relations. I would however like, at least for the moment, to merely comment on what I have so far summarised, which in any case constitutes the core of Van Ruler and Vercic's work.

We ought firstly to be certain that American democracy and, within that context, American public relations, have really developed differently from European ones and with less attention to the public sphere.

The authors themselves warn us that 'it is impossible to see Europe as a single cultural and political system'. My personal opinion is that the difference between American and European public relations is the same as the difference between Italian and French or Korean public relations, as the difference between the public relations of a private firm and a public one, and furthermore, the same as the difference between public relations for a finance company and those for a service company. In short, they are all public relations which, while pursuing different goals, are achieved in different ways.

Public relations in the United States have mainly developed in the private sphere only because the American economic system understood, well ahead of the European one, the great potential of that "outside" approach to organisation (as the authors say themselves). And they quote the American scholar, Marvin Olaski, in whose view the history of public relations is only an on-going process of negotiations between private company and public

sphere and that, before public relations, American free trade fuelled above all what he calls private relations.

Stuart Ewen, in his fine essay “PR, A Social History of Spin”, describes in detail the continuing interactions between public relations and public discourse in the first half of the last century in the United States. The fact that the public sphere in Europe holds more sway in public relations is also to be demonstrated, but even if this were the case, it would be only because the European social model is historically more oriented to the public sphere. Does this mean, therefore, that in the United States the public sphere has little importance in the historical dynamics of public relations?

It would be extremely hazardous to affirm this. The recent book by Fernando Fasce (“La Democrazia degli Affari” (the democracy of business) - Carrocci - 2000) states exactly the opposite. As does the book “Lobbying, Pluralism and Democracy” by Luigi Graziano, published by Oxford University Press. There is a further dimension we must take into consideration: the culture of European public relations, as the authors of the Bled Manifesto authoritatively state, also due to a lack of attention in academic circles, is largely determined by operators, who inside and outside organisations, are fully influenced by the approaches, methods, practices and even terms, of pr multinational agencies, overwhelmingly American in origin and culture, and even when they are national, still influenced by them.

In short, I think that the meaning of a search for a European identity for public relations should be aimed above all at awakening our academic world and sensitising operators to becoming more aware of the overall sense of their activity. This is certainly useful, although it runs the risk of setting up a competition for ‘who’s is the longest...’

I rather believe that it would be more useful and perhaps essential to develop a parallel comparison with American research, examining many of the stimuli provided by Van Ruler and Vercic in greater depth. This American research may well be, as the authors say, mainly pragmatic, but since the gap exists, the theoretic part alone of American research is in any case at least twenty times greater in quantity than the whole of European studies (including pragmatics)...at least as far as our slight knowledge (of the latter) is concerned.

We therefore welcome, and must all commit ourselves to making, reflections on public relations. But they should focus not so much on searching for an unlikely European identity, which in order to be demonstrated ends inevitably by caricaturing both American and European public relations, as on convincing those academic circles so uninterested in allocating human and financial resources to study the impact which public relations have today, in every country, on the dynamics of public discourse and the public sphere.

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Bled Manifesto: Is it so Relevant to Search for Differentiating Characteristics in European Public Relations?