Culture and public relations: links and implications

Public relations can be described as an industry which builds bridges and maintain relationships with an organization and its intended public. At its very core, public relations it about connecting people, making it a very human oriented industry. Because it is so human oriented, it results in a PR person having to interact with many people, who may come from several different cultures.

Culture, as explained by Thwaites, is the ensemble of social processes by which meanings are produced, circulated, exchanged (Thwaites, Davis, Mules, 1994). In short, it is simply the production of meanings by people. It is especially important for PR activity in terms of its role in the meaning-making process. Culture is multi-discursive and can be contested. It is also dynamic and historical. This means that culture is not stagnant and can evolve over time.

This essay seeks to explore the relationship between culture and public relations in depth, especially the importance of intercultural competence in relation to a PR practitioner's work.

In order for a PR practitioner to properly carry out their work, cultural research is essential. To do so, they can adopt the use of anthropology and ethnography. According to the American Anthropological Association (n. d.), anthropology is the study of humans, whether past or present. Sociocultural anthropology explores the social patterns and practices across different cultures, especially how people live, organize, govern and create meaning. Traditionally, the anthropology approach treats culture as predictive, static and a casual variable (Bardhan &Weaver, 2010). However, it is still useful to

examine cultures in different contexts as they offer alternative ways of thinking about public relations. On the other hand, ethnography can help PR practitioners understand public relations and its effects in different ways.

As one come across research from the 1990s and 2000s, they will realize that many of these researches drew on Hofstede's extensive studies, mapping four dimensions of national culture. These four dimensions of national cultures are: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity versus feminity and individualist versus collective. Although extensive, Hofstede's studies show only a static understand of culture, and is focused on understanding the culture of others in order to perform business functions more effectively. In spite of that, public relations should focus more on building and maintaining multicultural relationships and communities.

In this increasingly globalized world, PR practitioners are crossing borders more, whether online or offline. Effectively, PR practitioners can be said as culture workers. Because of this, PR practitioners need to have more understanding of different cultures and the cultural differences. By developing an understanding for cultural differences, they may come to realize that one approach may not work across all cultures. As such, intercultural competence is very important for a PR practitioner. Developing intercultural competence will allow for a PR practitioner to come up with better approaches when working with different cultures.

One example will be the difference between PR in America and China. Using Hofstede's dimensions, one will find that the Chinese culture is very different from the American culture. The Chinese society in China firmly believes that

a wide power distance is acceptable and that inequalities are acceptable; whereas the Americans are more open and there is a very narrow power distance between the higher and lower ranking members of an organization.

PR in Singapore is also vastly different to practices in China. To the Chinese, because China is such a relationship-rooted society, networking and PR activities are expected to include gifting, as well as having to " wine and dine" a client before discussing official business. In Singapore, this is not widely-practiced, and doing so may seem like one is accepting favours or bribes.

Such are examples of how difference in culture may affect a PR practitioner's approach.

Cultures may also be split into three areas, namely: occupational, organizational and education and research.

In occupational cultures, research has to be done as cultural concepts are key to understanding public relations " as an occupational culture as well as a form of culture-worker" (Edwards & Hodges, 2011). The various roles of public relations in culture highlights many different practices, which can be applied to many aspects of client handling. PR in occupational cultures can also be said to comprise of more than one culture such as " consultancy culture" and " in-house culture". These cultural constraints, if understood, can help explain the relationship between PR and society. On top of that, it can also shine light on how cultural and societal conventions influence the industry in different contexts, and shape expectations and generate stereotypes or caricatures (Edwards & Hodges, 2011).

On the other hand, PR in organizational culture approaches research very differently and for different purposes. Anthropological concepts can be used to decipher the role of public relations in order to establish dichotomy of a manager-technician (Edwards & Hodges, 2011). Because the nature of a PR practitioner's work is necessarily cultural, research is instrumental to show that they are doing more outside of what is commonly perceived of them.

In educational and research cultures, PR research can be useful to provide insights into " the existence and origin of resistances and negotiation over the curriculum" (Edwards & Hodges, 2011). Ethnographical research can also be used to look into the cultures of professionals and those who are involved in the education industry.

Because of the diversity of cultures, a PR practitioner has to develop a set of intercultural skills which are crucial to their work. Some examples of such skills will include knowledge of the different cultures, having an open mind as well as having empathy.

Intercultural skills are important to a PR practitioner simply because of the number of different cultures that they will interact with in the span of their career. More often than not, a PR practitioner will find that a single approach will not work across all cultures, that " one shoe does not fit all". As such, honing their intercultural skills is a must in order for them to come up with cultural-appropriate approaches. Intercultural competence involves both intrapersonal and interpersonal skills.

Intrapersonal competencies mostly involve cognitive skills, which is altering one's perspective to see from another person's perspective. It also involves

self-reflection, problem solving, as well as culture-detection (Stier, 2006). In addition, it also deals with understanding why people feel certain ways as well as the implications of these feelings and how people cope with them, which may be triggered by unknown cultural settings (Stier, 2006).

Interpersonal competencies, however, involves interactive skills. Skills such as being able to " detect and interpret non-verbal cues, subtle signals and emotional responses" (Steir, 2006), as well as how to respond to them fittingly.

The most important aspect of intercultural competence that a PR person has to possess is arguably empathy. Empathy, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is the act of understanding and being sensitive to the feelings, thoughts and experiences of another. Being a " culture worker", a PR person's work spans many cultures. One have to understand that imposing their own thoughts and culture on another will not go down well, and that the right approach is to instead take the time to first understand how the culture functions and produce meaning.

Culture plays a very big part in a PR person's work. It is closely related to the way a PR practitioner is able to carry out their work, and PR practitioners have to do adequate research in order to prep themselves for the different cultures they will come across. Common research methods include the anthropological and ethnographical methods.

Other than research, intercultural competence is also very important to a PR person. Because we live in an increasingly globalized community, it is inevitable that we will interact with many different cultures. Understanding

of these cultures and one's own will help one to understand the differences in each other's cultures, so as to come up with better approaches when working with them.

In conclusion, PR work requires cultural competence as it negotiates cultures, crossing boundaries online and off. Practitioners have to be flexible and understand the cultural values which are the foundations of the industry, as well as understand their cultural heritage. PR work also requires global and local knowledge, so as to facilitate to different cultures. Most of all, PR people should focus on building positive multicultural relationships and communities, as well as maintaining them.

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