

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IMPACTING EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES

Ralph Tench :: Dejan Verčič :: Ana Tkalac Verčič :: Hasina Juma

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ABSTRACT *Although there is research focusing on skills, knowledge and personal attributes of communication professionals, there is no definitive research that brings these elements together in a European study. The article examines: (1) how socio-economic issues have shaped the communications profession in Turkey; (2) the disconnect between the competencies required by professional associations and educational institutions in the Netherlands; (3) the competencies required by managers and the need for practitioners to invest in further education in Germany; (4) how crisis communication emerged as a dominant specialization in Spain and the necessary competencies associated with this role; (5) the professionalization of public relations in the UK; and (6) how communication gained a reputation for conspicuous consumption in government and the public sector in Croatia and the consequences for the profession and the challenges for practitioners. The findings are based on the work of the European Communication Professionals Skills and Innovation Programme – ECOPSI (ERASMUS 2011 Ref No: 517691-LLP-1-2011-1-UK-ERASMUS-ECUE).*

KEY WORDS

PUBLIC RELATIONS, COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT, STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE, COMMUNICATION SKILLS, COMMUNICATION KNOWLEDGE

Authors Note

Ralph Tench :: Faculty of Business and Law, Leeds Metropolitan University, UK ::
r.tench@leedsmet.ac.uk

Dejan Verčič :: Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia ::
dejan.vercic@fdv.uni-lj.si

Ana Tkalac Verčič :: Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb, Croatia ::
atkalac@efzg.hr

Hasina Juma :: Master's student at the Leeds Metropolitan University, UK ::
h.juma@leedsmet.ac.uk

The European Communication Professionals Skills and Innovation (ECOPSI) Programme is a European funded project which aims to map and evaluate practitioners' current and future communication management skills across Europe.

The project focuses on the communication sector in Europe, which has developed significantly in the last 20 years. This expansion has been influenced by political, economic and cultural shifts which have seen profit and non-profit organizations recognize the significant role played by communication departments in achieving organizational goals. Part of this recognition is of the role played by communication practitioners (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007).

The ECOPSI program is concerned with communication practitioners operating within this growing communication sector, and even more specifically in Europe. A key outcome of this project is to build a European theory of communication management and a framework to support the professionalization and ethical development of communication practitioners.¹

Although research focuses on the skills, knowledge and personal attributes of practitioners, there is no definitive research that brings these elements together in a Europe-wide study. Given the focus of roles and labeling practitioners according to the tasks they undertake, or their position in the organizational hierarchy, specializations are difficult to define (Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011; Gregory, 2008). What is also clear from the literature, is that there is a lack of research on social media practice within the PR sector, and the skills, knowledge and personal attributes needed to fulfill this role efficiently (Tench et al., 2012).

ECOPSI will take the broad labels provided by prior research, and use them to examine four roles: internal communications, social media, crisis communication and communication director. This will fill a gap in the knowledge about how such roles are enacted across Europe, and the skills, knowledge and personal attributes needed for these roles, which subsequently contribute to competencies needed by practitioners to fulfill these roles efficiently. Figure 1 illustrates how ECOPSI views skills, knowledge and personal attributes.



▲ Figure 1.

Skills, knowledge and personal attributes contributing to competencies

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Definitions

Knowledge can be defined as what practitioners are required to know in order to do their job/role effectively (Commission of Public Relations Education, 1999, 2006; Gregory, 2008).

Skills are the things practitioners are able to do to perform their job/role effectively (Katz, 1974; Goodman, 2006; Commission of Public Relations Education, 1999, 2006; Gregory, 2008) and identifying them is a complex process. Robert Proctor and Addie Dutta define the term as: "goal-directed, well-organized behaviour that is acquired through practice and performed with economy of effort" (1995: 18).

Personal attributes are defined in the literature as separate from competencies. The distinction being that personal attributes can determine how well a competency is performed and secondly competencies can be taught while personal attributes are modeled or fostered (Jeffery and Brunton, 2011: 69).

Competencies are the sets of behaviors a person can perform. These behaviors are based on the application, combination and potential integration of knowledge and skills (Boyatzis, 1982; Bartram, 2005; Gregory, 2008; Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011).

Aims of the research

Although the ECOPSI program aims to map current and future communication management skills. The ECOPSI researchers argue that prior research on the skills and knowledge of communication practitioners has been reductionist in its approach, and this is something the researchers aim to avoid. There is value in viewing practitioners as more than the sum of their parts, i.e. as more than having a set number of skills and types of knowledge. The European literature reveals that although skills, knowledge and personal attributes are dominant areas of research within PR, practitioners' competencies – a concept that is more abstract – is less of a focus in research. As stated in the Netherlands review "there is no research that takes competencies and the underlying constructs as a starting point" (Tench et al., 2013: 15).

Therefore, the aims of the ECOPSI research program are to:

1. Identify which competencies are needed for social media roles, internal communication roles, crisis communication roles, and communication director roles; and
2. Identify the skills, knowledge and personal attributes that are perceived to be important for each competencies, in each of the four roles.

There will inevitably be areas where skills, knowledge and personal attributes will overlap, for example, regarding someone as trustworthy, and this will vary across the countries taking part in this research. It is at this intersection of what practitioners consider to be important skills, knowledge and personal attributes, across the different countries, that will provide a substantial contribution to knowledge and help develop training material aimed at future practitioners.

The impact of socio-economic issues on the communications profession in Turkey

Socio-economic and political contextual elements are factors that influence the way in which the profession is shaped within a country and affects how it advances. In Turkey, the predominance of the agricultural industry between 1850 and 1950 was an important factor that created a "lack of need for PR" (Kazanci, 1971: 155). According to Metin Kazanci "80 percent of the total population was economically dependent upon agriculture" (1971: 155) and as a result most families owned small agricultural businesses in order to sustain themselves over their economic life. A family's priority was to earn enough money to survive and consequently this was a key reason in the non-establishment of a public relations mentality. The public relations (PR) profession started to appear in 1946 when the government placed emphasis on forming good relations between government bodies and citizens. The term public relations started being used in the 1950's by the Turkish Armed Forces and was defined as "relations with the public" (Asna, 1983: 241). The Turkish Armed forces then adopted the American public relations perspective into the army system because of the close ties between the two countries. During the 1950's, understanding about the profession began to emerge and departments were created within governmental organisations (Asna, 1983). However, Turkey's socio-economic problems faced during the period of transition from the Ottoman to the Turkish Republic, coupled with the fact that private sector businesses could not be established until after the Great War of Independence are factors that led the state to form a monopoly over public relations activities (Tench et al., 2012).

In the 1970's the private sector took note of the emerging public relations industry since multinational companies, especially in the oil and airline industry began establishing public relations departments within their companies (Asna, 1983). "When these companies launch PR activities in Turkey as in their native lands, Turkish companies also started to be interested in that field" (Asna, 1983: 236). During the 1980's, Turkey embarked on a process to liberalize its economy in order to integrate it into the global economy and this had a significant impact on the practice of public relations. "Because of the competitive need for Turkish corporations to keep pace with European and United States corporate communication advancements" (Sharpe 1992, quoted in Özen and Saran, 2004, 446), many Turkish corporations began investing in public relations by either creating in house departments or hiring public relations consultants (Tench et al., 2012). Turkish corporations also began embracing modern management principles that changed the function of public relations within organizations. During this period, the public relations profession became recognized in society and gained importance as a field of study. Since Turkey's economy is more intertwined with Europe and the United States of America, the demand for public relations continues today as Turkish companies continue to operate globally (Özen and Saran, 2004). It is evident "the PR profession has developed in tandem with both the economical conditions and cultural changes" (Özen and Saran, 2004: 442-443).

Viewpoints on competencies required by practitioners in the Netherlands

The Dutch professional association for public relations and communication management, Logeion, is responsible for the professionalization of public relations. One of the ways Logeion achieves this goal is by certifying private public relations and communication management courses through a job profile description model. Logeion is working on a new model for job and career descriptions on 6 professional levels. This new model is based on earlier work in the 1990s and early 2000s that described four professional levels as part of the ABCD model. The new job profile model describes the field of activity and the responsibilities of a communication professional in six nuclear roles and six professional levels. The nuclear tasks are: (1) analyzing; (2) counseling; (3) creating; (4) organizing; (5) guiding and supporting; and (6) managing. Every nuclear role can be performed at six levels, from 1 to 6. A higher level indicates an increase in responsibility and the ability to handle difficult and complex communication problems (Logeion, 2012). The association will use the new model to certify private educational institutions that offer public relations and communication courses. Currently, only two private courses, offered by two private institutions, have certification: the VanDerHilst Institute and the Foundation for Marketing Education. The Dutch government certifies all other public educations in public relations and communication management. Each of these educational institutions has their own version of knowledge, skills, personal attributes that make up the competencies necessary to perform jobs in this field. The result is a discrepancy between Logeion and the government on the competencies required by practitioners (Tench et. al, 2012).

Competencies required by managers and the need for further education for practitioners in Germany

Public relations managers require a diverse set of competencies in order to execute their roles. Since the 1990's there has been a change in the required competencies for managers. Public relations is now seen as communication management because of the emerging use of management techniques in the profession. Prior to the 1990's, the ideal profile of a practitioner was someone who was an all-rounder with many different skills sets for different operations (cf. Wienand, 2003; Zerfass, 1998).

Holger Sievert and Arnie Westermann (2008) examined the extent to which German public relations managers possess general management competencies and studied if a new qualification profile was needed for public relation practitioners. Sievert and Westermann (2008) identified a lack of management and leadership qualifications among public relations practitioners due to the "intrusion of non-specialists from other business areas into PR departments" (Dees 1996, quoted in Sievert and Westermann, 2008, 223). The authors provide insight into three types of public relations professionals based on a survey of German PR practitioners: (1) "the classical PR manager, (2) the modern PR manager, and (3) the management-oriented communicator" (*Ibid.*, 225). The classical PR manager is between 40 and 49 years old and considers basic business management knowledge to be unimportant, but rates the value of the job technique to be important. The modern PR manager is between 30 and 39 years old and ranks job techniques very high, but also

regard businesses management knowledge as important. The management-oriented communicators are young participants who are frequently employed in agencies and value business management knowledge. This group "no longer gives job techniques a central position in comparison to business management qualifications" (*Ibid.*, 225-226). The two emerging profiles are the modern PR manager and the management-oriented communicator which both value business management knowledge. In order to propel the industry forward, the authors indicate this competency must be reflected in vocational training and continuing education programs in Germany. An integrated model where business management and communication knowledge would also be more effective than simply adding business management principles to existing programs.

In an ever-changing complex world, PR practitioners need to continuously learn in order to have an evolving career as the most sophisticated competence becomes outdated quickly, and employers need to ensure that practitioners have the right talent for organizational success (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007). In Germany there are many public and private providers that offer courses in PR and they each vary in duration, quality and content. These courses are mostly targeted at public relations practitioners (Tench et al., 2012).

In 2007, three German professional associations (DPRG, BdP and GPRA) created a partnership in an attempt to standardize qualifications in public relations by creating a certification organization called PZOK (Prüfungs- und Zertifizierungsorganisation der deutschen Kommunikationswirtschaft). The purpose of PZOK was to build on the principle of setting a quality standard in public relations training and responding to the growing need for well-qualified public relations practitioners. Education institutions had the opportunity to standardize their programs according to the PZOK standards and 16 institutions modified their programs. Practitioners are accredited with the designation if they have an academic degree, relevant professional experience and successfully completed the standardized examination administered by PZOK (DPRG, 2005). The standards of the examination are based on the qualifications of an ideal profile of practitioner as outlined by the German PR Association and the contents of the examination are based on theory and practice (Siefert, 2010). Despite all the efforts to harmonize qualifications standards in certification, there are providers that decided not to join the PZOK certification or left it after some years. For example, the German Chambers of Commerce provides a certificate in public relations that is based on a combination of courses and relevant professional experience (Tench et. al, 2012).

In the private sector, many agencies and companies have built up their own trainee programs to hone the competencies of their employees. Most graduates from universities begin their career with such a traineeship ("Volontariat"). For new practitioners these programs are valuable as it focuses on the needs of the company (cf. Mickleit and Schick, 2010) and for organizations they are seen as necessary due to the plethora of PR program. Trainee programs also vary significantly from organization to organization and some of these programs are criticized because of low wages and exploitive working conditions (Hörner, 2006).

Crisis communication in Spain

The role of the crisis communicator, especially in communication agencies, is one of the most in-demand specializations in the field of public relations in Spain (Fernández, 2004) and is a recent area of interest for research (Costa and Tuñez, 2005). One could infer the demand for the specialization was not only influenced by global crises, such as the September 11 attacks, but also by other crises that had greater impact and influence in Spain such as the European Currency Crisis or the 2004 Madrid train bombing (Tench et al., 2012). The demand for the specialization also highlights a lack of balance in relation to the distribution of tasks. A total of 62.5 per cent of communication agencies are working on tasks related to crisis communication (Fernández, 2004) and only 36 per cent of companies have a crisis communication plan (Saura and Garcia, 2010). This data is similar to the situation in the 1990's where: (1) companies did not value crisis communication plans; (2) practitioners lacked management communication; and (3) companies as well as practitioners paid more attention to the legal aspects of the crisis and failed to assess the implications on public opinion (Gonzalez, 1997). These findings do not align with the contemporary academic literature on crisis management, which resulted from reflection and analysis of recent local crises (Toral and Pozas, 2004; Álvarez et al., 2005; Costa and Túñez, 2005; Vanaclocha, Natera and Garcia, 2007). This body of literature resulted in a: (1) widely accepted definition (Sanchez 2004); (2) consensus on the relevant stakeholders needing to intervene during a crisis (Sanchez, 2004); and (3) consensus on the appropriate tools to confront a crisis (Rodriguez, 2004). Despite the remarkable growth of academic literature, there is still a premature theoretical definition of the professional role of crisis communication and the research has not reached a level and depth to propose common models for business practices. Nonetheless, crisis communication will be a booming specialization in the future (Tench et al., 2012).

Professionalization of Public Relations in the United Kingdom

Although there is a drive towards professionalization in Europe, it remains inconsistent and the responsibility to professionalize public relations within specific countries is spread across professional bodies, accredited universities and private institutes, with little coordination. In the United Kingdom, professionalization equates to students completing an accredited Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) course, either through a university or through the CIPR itself. However, job searches for public relations and communication roles do not ask for potential staff to be members of the CIPR, nor do they insist on a formal qualification in public relations. Universities, however, do ask for CIPR membership of their PR/communication academics, particularly if their institute hosts an accredited course. This suggests that the drive to professionalize public relations in the UK is limited to the training and education sectors, having yet to penetrate the business sector with any real or lasting impact (Tench et al., 2012).

Examining the theory of professionalization provides insight into the identification of skills needed by the modern practitioner (Tench et al., 2012). Betteke Van Ruler (2005) identified four models of professionalization – knowledge, status, competition and personality. The *knowledge model* identifies the stages that the communications industry must

go through in order to gain the status as a profession – development of theories and methods, regulation of education and the implementation of the theories and methods. Several authors writing this century have included the need for a body of knowledge based on theory in the criteria for public relations to be regarded as a profession (Grunig, 2000; Pieczka, 2000; van Ruler, 2005; de Bussy and Wolf, 2009; Sha, 2011). Van Ruler's (2005) *status model* sees professionalization as a way of improving the image/standing of public relations. The focus is on professional ideology, rewards sanctions and the development of professional behavior. Both Jacquie L'Etang (2002) and Nigel De Bussy and Katharina Wolf (2009) have suggested that public relations struggles to meet the criteria set by the sociology of the professions due to "the failure to establish clearer jurisdiction (control of occupational boundaries), a cognitive base (expert knowledge) or social legitimacy (acceptance of its role and acknowledgement of standards of ethical practice)" (L'Etang, 2002: 46). The *competition model* emphasizes the exclusivity of the occupation, based on individual competencies not held by people outside the profession and like the knowledge model, is "focused on expert, verifiable knowledge" (van Ruler, 2005: 164). Magda Pieczka, using a narrative analysis of public relations case studies, has observed how technical proficiency and ethical behavior – both important definitions of professionalism – are tactics designed to display the PR expert's legitimacy (2007: 351). Finally, *the personality model* states that expert knowledge is not sufficient to be classified as professional and stresses the importance of general knowledge based on professional experience. Van Ruler states that this is like the status model where the emphasis is on things other than expert knowledge, such as "devotion, personality, effort and enthusiasm" (2005: 164). However, Bey-ling Sha (2011b) refutes the argument that age and professional experience can be sufficient substitutes for accreditation in public relations. A survey of members of the Public Relations Society of America found that "accreditation status yields differences in frequency of engagement in public relations work categories, as well as differences in frequency of usage of professional competencies" (Sha, 2011b: 10). Sha has also highlighted an apparent polarization between accredited and non-accredited professionals and suggests that further research should test for differences between these two groups and also look at whether those differences are narrowing or getting wider (Sha, 2011c: 127).

An analysis of the debates about professionalism within the public relations and communications literature shows how roles, competencies and skills/knowledge are at the heart of the discipline's professionalization. However, personal characteristics could arguably play a role as well. Aspects of professionalism such as a code of ethics and a set of professional values could enhance and objectify the importance of characteristics such as integrity, leadership, discipline and judgment. This generates the question, to what extent do personal characteristics matter more than taught skills in the development of the ethical values (Tench et al., 2012).

Public relations as conspicuous consumption in government in Croatia

Nearly a decade ago, Boris Hajoš and Ana Tkalac wrote that "[t]he growing recognition of the importance of public relations in the government [of Croatia] will ultimately lead to its status being comparable with other parts of the world" (2004: 90). That same year Maureen Taylor (2004) published a study on public relations practice in Croatia in

which she had found that the same general characteristics described in literature on contemporary public relations in Eastern Europe also hold in Croatia. In her literature review she identified four distinct features of Eastern Europe public relations:

First, public relations is mostly understood as press agency and one-way communication where truth is not always the goal of organization-public communication. Second, the concept of the "public" is often absent or vague in these nations and this affects public relations tactics, goals, and professional development. Third, research, to either create or evaluate public relations efforts, is not prevalent. Finally, personal relations are an important part of the public relations practice. Personal relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists, government officials, and others in positions to influence their organizations are crucial for organizational survival. (2004: 159)

Nine years later, the importance and status of public relations in the Croatian government is far from becoming comparable to countries with more developed public relations environments – it is deteriorating.

In December 2011, a new center-left government led by a social-democrat Zoran Milanović took power. On June 14, 2012, the Board of Ethics of the Croatian Public Relations Association asked Ms. Zinka Bardić, who became a special adviser to the Prime Minister Milanović while simultaneously remaining an executive director of a public relations agency Madison Consulting, to present her case in the light of a potential conflict of interest (Sud časti HUOJ 2012, June 14). On 19 June 2012, the Board of Ethics of the CRPA published the conclusions of its deliberations stating that by the existing legal norms of the Republic of Croatia, Zinka Bardić is not in a conflict of interest situation. But since she works "pro bono" for the Prime Minister while she is paid by her private agency and that there were media reports on her potential abuse of information and position in relations to private clients, multinationals IKEA and Ggrippen, "the Board of Ethics suggests bodies of public administration and all public institutions to avoid such engagements by (at least temporarily) employing public relations counselors or by signing contracts with public relations agencies. That way the roles and responsibilities will be transparent, and suspicions of a potential conflict of interest will be avoided, while promoting focus on public interest. Also, only that way can the reputation of our profession be protected and in a proper manner value its importance in contemporary political and market communication" (Sud časti HUOJ, 2012, June 19).

On 19 July 2012, the Government of the Republic of Croatia declared an Act on public relations performance with only three articles. The first one forbids any government or public body, including companies in which the Republic of Croatia is a dominant owner, "to contractually engage any physical and legal persons to create or maintain public relations and communication management with defined target groups or publics." The second article states that exceptionally the first article can be void by an explicit decision of the Government of the Republic of Croatia. And the third article states that this act is legally binding immediately (Government of Croatia, 2012, July 19).

To make the situation absurd, the minister of finance in the same government in October 2012 postponed one of his major reforms – the introduction of property taxes

– admitting that because it was not communicated properly to citizens who largely opposed it (PSD, H, 2012, October 31).

In early 2013, the government *Act on public relations performance* is still in effect, and the Croatian Public Relations Association is fighting it in courts. This situation shows that top decision-makers in Croatia see public relations as conspicuous consumption, which they employ sporadically and according to their needs. Professional development is severely constrained and practitioners are denied basic recognition of the role public relations plays in a democratic society.

CONCLUSIONS

The European Communication Professional Skills and Innovations (ECOPSI) program exposes a paradox that public relations practices face in Europe today. On one side, there is a clear need for a European theory of communication management and a framework to support the professionalization and ethical development of communication practitioners. On the other side, there is a diversity of conditions, performances and effects of public relations work in different parts of Europe. The presentation of interesting developments regarding public relations practice and its professionalization in six European countries exposes difficulties in searching for intersections of what practitioners across Europe consider to be important skills, knowledge and personal attributes. The field of enquiry requires further and continued input to support both the individual regions of Europe, but also the practice across the continent.

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SUVREMENA PITANJA O EUROPSKIM KOMUNIKACIJSKIM KOMPETENCIJAMA

Ralph Tench :: Dejan Verčič :: Ana Tkalac Verčič :: Hasina Juma

SAŽETAK Iako postoje istraživanja usmjerena na vještine, znanja i karakteristike komunikacijskih stručnjaka, ne postoji istraživanje koje spaja sve te elemente zajedno u europskoj studiji. Ovaj rad ispituje: (1) kako su socioekonomska pitanja oblikovala komunikacijsku profesiju u Turskoj; (2) nepovezanost između kompetencija koje traže profesionalne udruge i onih koje nude obrazovne institucije u Nizozemskoj; (3) kompetencije koje trebaju menadžeri i potreba da oni koji rade u struci ulažu u svoje daljnje obrazovanje u Njemačkoj; (4) kako je krizna komunikacija postala dominantna specijalnost u Španjolskoj i koje su kompetencije povezane s tom ulogom; (5) profesionalizaciju odnosa s javnošću u Ujedinjenom Kraljevstvu i (6) kako je u Vladi i javnom sektoru u Hrvatskoj komunikacija stekla reputaciju „upadljive potrošnje“ (conspicuous consumption) te s kojim posljedicama za profesiju i s kojim izazovima za praktičare. Nalazi su utemeljeni na radu European Communication Professionals Skills and Innovation Programme – ECOPSI (ERASMUS 2011 Ref No: 517691-LLP-1-2011-1-UK-ERASMUS-ECUE).

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

ODNOSI S JAVNOŠĆU, KOMUNIKACIJSKI MENADŽMENT, STRATEŠKO KOMUNICIRANJE, KOMUNIKACIJSKA KOMPETENCIJA, KOMUNIKACIJSKE VJEŠTINE, KOMUNIKACIJSKO ZNANJE

Bilješka o autorima

Ralph Tench :: Faculty of Business and Law, Leeds Metropolitan University, Velika Britanija :: r.tench@leedsmet.ac.uk

Dejan Verčič :: Fakultet društvenih znanosti, Sveučilište u Ljubljani, Slovenija :: dejan.vercic@fdv.uni-lj.si

Ana Tkalac :: Verčič Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Ekonomski fakultet :: atkalac@efzg.hr

Hasina Juma :: studentica diplomskog studija na Sveučilištu Leeds Metropolitan, Velika Britanija :: h.juma@leedsmet.ac.uk