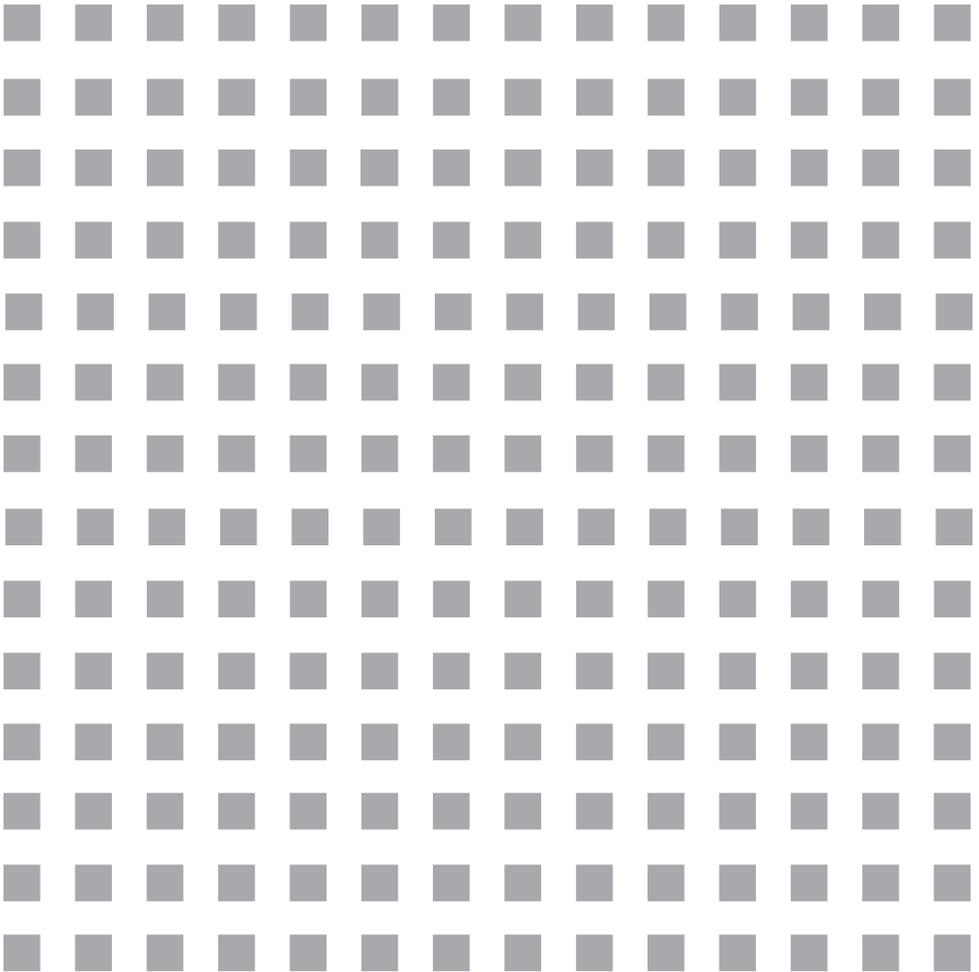




**The Role and Function of Public Relations  
in Contemporary Society.**

**Public Relations between Service  
for an Organization and the Public**





# Editor's introduction: Public relations in a democratic society



**Jerzy Olędzki**

UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND

In most democratic countries public relations activities are founded, above all, on the belief in the capacity of men to communicate with others in the name of common good. A PR specialist is therefore expected not only to conduct dialogue with specific public groups, but also to have practical knowledge about ways and tools that make it effective. Continuous development of those tools, deeper knowledge about human behaviour, as well as technological advances in the area of communication means result in the fact that public relations business becomes richer and covers a broader scope of communications. Evolutionary democratization of communication in the contemporary world has an impact on the development of PR techniques and tools, while rising social requirements enforce better professional PR standards and more focus on the presented values and ethics.

Both literature and professional PR milieu often mention the great role played by PR in developing the image and reputation of an organization. It is a very disputable opinion as image creation and reputation development are complex processes, influenced by many factors, which are independent of us and difficult to define. That is why it is too far reaching to say that it is PR specialists who do it — it would be more legitimate to define the role of PR specialists as responsibility for planning communication activities aimed at influencing reputation of an institution.

A hundred years on after the concept of public relations was established the main driver behind the development of means of communication in the new societies involves constant social demand for contents which suit the society and take account of its needs, aspirations and values. The increase in the quantity of communication entities and the media itself does not seem to be a sufficient development base, unless it goes hand in hand with diversification of views which take account of various social, political and economic needs that exist in every country. “Diversification of views” should not only be understood as including the interests of various groups, but also as a direct — subjective involvement of those groups in the process of more active creation of public communication and participation in it. Thus it can be considered as a natural, evolutionary direction of progressing democ-



and such are the common expectations and assessment criteria related to the activities of any institution, business or social group.

It is now indisputable that public relations specialists have influence on the development of public opinion and this equips them with a special responsibility not only towards their customers, but also towards the society. All authors, also in this *Central European Journal of Communication*, draw attention to the duty to observe the principle according to which public interest matters are of paramount importance and business objectives should be executed in line with the declared mission, while duties should be exercised respecting the values of a given society. We thus confirm the continuance of the pro-social role played by public relations, referred to by members of Public Relations Society of America, by including the following principle at the very beginning of their Member Code of Ethics, already back in 1950:

We serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid informed public debate.

The basic concepts currently in place in all public relations manuals refer to the following features of PR activities: intentionality — organized, planned nature of activities — common good — two-way communication — integration with the institution's management system.

European researches in the area of current public relations practices and theories tried to arrange the existing definitions and ideas, and they separated four dimensions of this discipline: reflective, managerial, technical and educational.<sup>1</sup> The reflective aspect pertains to activities involving the observation and analysis of the social phenomena, standards and values, which are communicated to the organization by PR specialists, to make sure it develops better and adjusts its mission and strategy to the surrounding conditions. The managerial aspect involves working out communication plans with all surrounding groups — internal and external ones, in order to gain and maintain their trust, as well as ensure mutual understanding. The technical aspect involves preparing communication means to be used by an organization. In this case public relations specialists execute plans drawn up by other people who manage the organization. Educational aspect, on the other hand, encompasses a whole system of training courses run by public relations specialists for all members of the organization. Thanks to such training courses, which develop approaches and behaviours, as well as communication skills, the employees are better able to meet the expectations and requirements of the public.

Current considerations on the meaning of public relations represent two types of critical views: an analysis from a normative perspective, where PR is described

---

<sup>1</sup> See B. van Ruler, D. Verčič, G. Bütschi, B. Flodin (2000), *The European Body of Knowledge on Public Relations/Communication Management: The Report of the Delphi Research Project 2000*; Ghent/Ljubljana.

the way it should be, what its social potential is, or an analysis from a descriptive-relative perspective, which presents a common practical business of public relations companies and specialists. Irrespective of that, all those authors analyze PR issues in a micro-dimension, i.e. at a level of a concrete institution, company or organization, or in a macro-dimension — level of corporation, economic and political systems, communication with the public on a state or large communities level. Authors writing about PR in the micro-dimension most often present a real picture of public relations, which functions as a (promotional) tool of business marketing — currently a very popular perspective in the countries developing their free market economy. This point of view is also quite common in marketing manuals, which *a priori* do not see the presence of communication science. On the other hand, macro-dimension represents the basic and universal concepts related to PR genesis and philosophy, which are closer to our interests (and alien to marketing) such as: understanding, dialogue, communicating, liking, trust, communication management, relations between people, credibility, social acceptance, cooperation, search for compromise. This principle is also the closest to the idea behind creating the contents of the current issue of *Central European Journal of Communication*.

The main topic of this volume (*The Role and Function of Public Relations in Contemporary Society. Public Relations between Service for an Organization and the Public*) has invoked vast interest in the scientific circles in many countries — 28 authors from more than a dozen countries responded to our invitation to send proposals of articles. We were faced with a difficult task of selecting a criterion, which could help us compile the issue. We decided that the best principle would be to analyze the delivered abstracts in terms of direct contextual relation with the title of the issue and with the already mentioned macro-perspective in the approach to public roles fulfilled by public relations. The article by Professor James E. Grunig, which opens the collection of published materials, seems to be the most telling, not only from the said perspective.

To sum up, we do hope that all texts presented in this issue will develop our knowledge about the role which is and could be played by public relations in any society. They may also serve as inspiration for further research of roles to be played by PR in communication with the public, with the use of new technologies and Internet possibilities. We would like to perceive PR as an element of democracy, which cannot exist in monoculture and dictatorship. There are no possibilities of development in the climate of mafia-like intimidation, corruption, when access to information is limited, perspectives of regarding or assessing concrete institutions (businesses), people, groups or parties are deformed. Without PR understood in this way public communication will have no sufficient tools of critical thinking and assessment — which we expect of all mass media. However, the question we need to ask is: do the professional people who participate in public relations activities believe it?