



Global versus cultural approaches in public relationship management

Public
relationship
management

The case of the European Union

117

Chiara Valentini

Department of Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to present and compare two approaches (the global and the cultural) to public relationship management and to argue by reference to different cases, why the cultural approach can be considered more effective in establishing good relationships in different national cultural contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – The discussion identifies some of the limitations of recent thinking regarding the nature of a global public and the possibility to define and treat international publics as a global public in public relationship management. As validation of this claim, cases in the European context are presented to show that a cultural approach provides better interpretations of human behaviour in different national contexts and thus better understanding of organisations' publics.

Findings – It is argued, that the idea of a global public in public relationship management does not work in different national cultural contexts, while the traditional cultural approach can work in situations characterised by diversity in values, interests and principles.

Originality/value – The paper intends to demonstrate the enduring validity of the cultural approach in international contexts, especially where public relations activities are directed at establishing good relationships with publics belonging to different nations, cultures and interests.

Keywords Public relations, Globalization, European Union

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The study of relationship management has become one of the most important research topics in public relations in recent years (Ledingham, 2003; Huang, 2001; Ledingham and Bruning, 2000; Hung, 2000). Theorising on relationship management has been done (Grunig and Huang, 2000; Broom *et al.*, 1997), and its applications in different areas, such as crisis management (Coombs, 2000), issue management (Bridges and Nelson, 2000), and community relations (Wilson, 2000). Huang (1997) proposed a set of relationship indicators, including trust, control mutuality, relational commitment, and relational satisfaction, which have since become the major topics of research (Brunner, 2000; Hon and Grunig, 1999). In addition, it is proposed that given that public relations has become a global phenomenon, the influence of culture should be taken into consideration when examining relationship management. Different studies (Lee, 2005; Kent and Taylor, 1999) have shown the increasing need for public relations



Journal of Communication
Management
Vol. 11 No. 2, 2007
pp. 117-133

An early version of this paper was presented at the 8th EUPRERA Annual Conference in "Strategic Communication in a Multi-Cultural Context", Carlisle, UK, 6-9 September 2006.

© Emerald Group Publishing Limited
1363-254X
DOI 10.1108/13632540710747352

practitioners to be able to communicate with different international publics, whether the organisations they are working for are small or large, private or public, including non-profit organisations. The effect of globalisation has accelerated over the last decade with the development of new communications' technologies such as satellite communications and the internet. For public relations practitioners operating in international contexts the fundamental question is whether to stick to the procedures tested in the home country (Barker, 1999; Hedley, 1998; 1999; Main, 2001), adopt formulae that are assumed to represent the international/global standard (Svensson, 2001, Allio, 1989, Yip, 1989, Levitt, 1983) or act in a way which is perceived as typical of the target country, so called glocalisation (Maynard and Tian, 2004, Maynard, 2003, Svensson, 2001, Jessop, 2000). Glocalisation is "the process whereby global corporations tailor products and marketing to particular local circumstances to meet variations in consumer demand" (Maynard, 2003, p. 6). A glocal strategy[1] has been applied to advertising, management and marketing, effectively modifying a product to suit the tastes of the host culture (Jessop, 2000). Glocalisation can thus be considered an attempt to combine a global management approach with a local need approach. However, as Wakefield (2001) asserted, the philosophy "think global, act local" does not necessarily work for all types of organisations. The best option for public relations should be to "think global and local, act global and local". Wakefield's view is that international public relations are highly complex and structured and thus it is simplistic to think that generic principles and local practices can effectively work in all international contexts.

The quest to find a global framework for public relations continues to attract interest among public relations practitioners and scholars, whose interest is in defining the profession along more normative lines (i.e. what might be regarded as best practice). One recent contribution deals with international public relations and the emergence of a global public for public relations activities. According to Lee (2005), in a global world, it is possible to talk about a global public whom public relations practitioners address when seeking to establish a mutual strategic relationship. It might be agreed that international organisations have managed to find a communication strategy which enables them to reach their target publics around the world en masse and that public relations has also been affected by the globalisation process. Nevertheless, caution should be exercised in welcoming this new concept of a global public in public relationship management. While in multinational organisations communications with local publics may be driven by business/marketing interests, public organisations and non-profit organisations address different issues which do not necessarily fit into the logic of a single type of communications for all audiences.

The aim of this paper is to present and compare two approaches to public relationship management, the global one, presented by Lee (2005), and the cultural one, which rests on Zaharna's development of intercultural communication theories (2001; 2000). The author will explain, through various examples, why the cultural approach can be considered more effective in establishing good relationships in different national cultural contexts. Specifically, in the cultural approach discussed in this paper, the peculiar and distinct features of individual cultures are seen as important variables which should be taken into consideration when seeking to establish fruitful relationships with different publics[2].

In this paper, the concepts of relationship management and the role of publics are reviewed first before Lee's idea of a global public is introduced and its implications discussed. The global and cultural approaches to public relationship management are also described and their advantages and disadvantages discussed in relation to the organisation's objectives in maintaining good levels of public relationships. The purpose is to demonstrate the enduring validity of the cultural approach in international contexts, especially where public relations activities are directed at establishing good relationships with publics belonging to different nations, cultures and interests. Finally, the case of the European Union (EU) and its institutions are presented to exemplify the view that a global approach to public relationship management in different cultural national contexts does not work.

Relationship management and the role of publics

Relationship management has been defined as "a distinctive management function [of public relations] which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organisation and its publics. It involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilise change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools" (Harlow cited in Hutton, 1999, pp. 200-201). Studies on this theme support the idea that public relations should be considered as having less of the purely technical function of communicating about an organisation to different publics and more a management/negotiating function in helping organisations to establish mutual and beneficial relationships with their different publics, including inactive publics. It also encourages organisations to take more of an active role in social transformation (Hodge, 2006, p. 83). Public relations has thus increasingly become a tool in shaping public policy and in instigating public debate, thereby playing an active role in shaping society and, ultimately, culture (Banks, 1995).

Publics are important elements of an organisation, especially modern organisations, which are increasingly characterised by complex relationship dynamics. Managing such dynamics – if it is based on the continuous and efficient activity of providing transparent and accountable information – also helps the organisation in situations of uncertainty or lack of information. Publics are important because they have the specific capacity to create public opinion and to generate a shared or negotiated consensus. Through this consensus they can exercise their decision-making power. According to this view, managing good relationships with publics is one of the main priorities of both private and publicly owned organisations. Relationship management has gained importance in the last five years. For example, the new EU communication policies stress the importance of dialogue with publics in stimulating a new approach to communication, one that talks "with" and not "to" Europeans. Publics in relationship management play an important role in the international or global context as well. In fact public relations activities in those contexts aim primarily at "establishing mutually beneficial relations between the organisation and its publics of other nations" (Wilcox *et al.*, 1989, p. 395).

Global approach to public relationship management

A global public has been defined as “a group of individuals or organisations whose primary interests and concerns are pursuing the world as a whole beyond their own national and cultural boundaries. They may or may not be related to specific global issues or situations at a point of time” (Lee, 2005, p. 15). The concept of a global public has a dual dimension: a mass perspective and a situational perspective. The first refers to the fact that the members of this global public need to share similar values, norms and consciousness as world citizens and global players, while the latter refers to how active the public is on various global issues and situations. According to Lee’s definition of a global public, such a public is not so much affected by the cultural origins of its members. For example a company’s stakeholders in Japan will share similar interests with respect to that company as those in China or the UK. Applying a global approach to public relationship management presumes that an organisation operating in an international context can concentrate its attention on specific publics no matter what the country of origin of its members. Lee (2005) affirms that this is a consequence of the globalisation phenomenon. The globalisation process implies some degree of universalization and homogeneity and of the need to sacrifice the values and interests of individual societies. Hence, organisations should view their publics in different countries as a global public, where each individual public is willing to sacrifice some of its cultural and national features in the name of globalisation. This approach shares the idea that there are cultural differences among nations; however, these differences are not critical when compared with the similarities among nations and people’s basic ways of life and thinking (Lee, 2005, p. 15). The global approach to public relationship management considers the levels of involvement and its types of publics (media public, stakeholder public, customer public, etc.) as parameters of strategic planning, but does not consider the historical, economic, political and cultural patterns of each of the countries involved. In practice, organisational strategy is defined by considering the levels of involvement and activeness of each public and by looking at the similarities of values and interests among each of the members.

The advantage of considering a global public as a subject of relationship management is reflected in the work of public relations practitioners. The concept of a global public facilitates the job of public relations practitioners, because it diminishes the importance of cultural and environmental variables that – with the cultural approach – were seen as fundamental before, during and after public relationship management. The disadvantage of this approach is that it bypasses the idea that communication is culture-bound and that public relations practices are based on communication processes and are therefore affected by culture (Verčič *et al.* 1996; Sriramesh and White, 1992; Smith, 1966). Underestimating the effects of culture in the process of establishing good relationships can damage organisations whose legitimacy and work depend on public support. In addition this definition of a global public is applicable only when that public is composed of active members – those who have some interest in making their voice heard by the company. With a shared understanding of and concerns about a specific matter, active shareholders are a good example of this. This cannot be applied in the case of low-involvement members or when the members have different interests and/or values. This is even more so when a controversial policy/regulation affects different countries with different national and

local laws. If the new policy/regulation clashes with a local law in one of the countries where the organisation is operating, then there is a high risk either that one of the organisation's publics will split into two or more groups or that potential/silent publics – those who are inactive and whose involvement in the organisation's activities has been generally low – will awake and become active and opposing publics. The case of the EU wolf protection law and the situation regarding wolves in Finland is an example of a clash between national and EU legislative levels. In 2005 the European Commission acted against Finland in the Court of Justice of the EU over the issue of wolf culling. According to the European Commission, Finland allows the systematic culling of wolves which are protected. Since Finland is a member state of the EU it should abide by the EU law. Finland's reasons for exceeding the wolf culling quota was the increasing number of wolves, especially in the Eastern part of the country and the problems that they present to local farmers and to reindeer, cattle and sheep farming industries. For Finnish farmers, this issue generated negative feelings toward the EU. They felt that their concerns and interests were not being taken into consideration, and that Brussels bureaucrats could not understand the problems of living with wolves. One of the Finnish publics affected by this particular EU law was unwilling to conform to a shared global environmental interest. Some of the silent publics decided to take an active role in the issue by signing a petition protesting the EU move to protect wolves. The issue at stake is not one of controversy over the law itself, but the fact that a European institution applied a global approach to communicating this specific regulation without taking into account local situations.

Cultural approach to public relationship management

Culture can be defined as the repository of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, timing, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a large group of people in the course of the generations through individual and group striving (Valentini, 2005, p. 10). Culture is seen as particularly important in guiding three critical variables in communication: verbal communication, nonverbal communication, and perception. Culture provides the meaning for various forms of communication behaviours, such as spoken language or nonverbal gestures, as well as the rules and norms that govern when and how these behaviours should be used. The influence of culture on perception provides clues on how messages are structured and interpreted. As numerous intercultural scholars have noted, each culture has its own unique "world view" or means for making sense of the world (Zaharna, 2000, p. 87). According to Smith (1966), communication and culture are inseparable. Communication and collaboration are the essence of modern public relations (Verčič *et al.*, 1996, p. 31). Drawing on the cultural component, Sriramesh and White (1992) stated that culture is communication and communication is public relations. It is now widely accepted that the particular economy, location and history of a nation will influence the practice of public relations and that culture is internally and externally linked to the practice of public relations. Corporate culture, as an internal organisational variable, has a direct and indirect effect on the public relations practice of an organisation. Culture as an external factor also influences communication messages, relationships and national approaches to public relations (Kent and Taylor, 1999, p. 19).

Public relationship management taking a cultural approach reflects the idea that there is no such thing as a global public, but that in each country different publics may behave similarly or differently depending on situational and contextual matters. The cultural approach to managing public relationships underlines the fundamental requirement that organisations consider all the possible factors of a specific culture before, during and after defining the best strategy for external and internal relationship management. The important aspects to be considered in communicating with publics internationally are their country profiles, including their political structure, economic structure, mass media, infrastructure, legal structure and social structure; and their cultural profiles. This includes aspects such as high context and low context, monochronic and polychronic, doing and being, future-tense and past-tense, and linear and non-linear (Zaharna, 2001). The cultural approach regards the publics of an organisation operating in different national contexts as unique entities, which are not necessarily willing to adopt common values and interests for the good of the organisation. Each of these publics represents a specific cultural context. The advantages of a cultural approach in defining an organisation's publics pertain to the quality of the relationship desired and desire to increase public involvement. The cultural approach, which is based on close proximity and understanding of local needs and interests is more effective in transforming passive or low-involved publics into active and high-involved publics. This is because the publics of different countries are considered a single entity and require strategic relationship management approaches tailored to their needs. The disadvantages of this approach are mostly practical. The number of publics and interests to be taken into consideration by the management multiply by the number of countries in which the organisation is operating or by the number of culturally different publics with whom they aim at establishing mutual and beneficial relations. In fact, an organisation working in an international context and applying a cultural approach to its publics needs first to consider:

- how many countries/cultures are involved directly and indirectly;
- what types of publics there are in each country;
- the level of involvement of each public in each country; and
- the historical, economic, political and cultural patterns of each country.

Then, for each of these categories apply a specific relationship strategy.

An organisation working in many countries needs to implement different and tailored strategies in order to establish good relationships. However these strategies do not always have to be different from each other. There may be some situations where a public, for example a country's citizens, have the same level of involvement with respect to a specific issue as the citizens of another country. In this case the organisation can develop a similar strategy for that specific group in those two countries. This can be defined as a mixed model of public relationship management. In other situations it is impossible to apply a process of integration whereby the common elements of different cultures merge into a shared organisational culture.

The glocal method of seeking the middle way between global and local approaches can be rather problematic in certain situations. Although the idea of combining the best sides of each culture into a shared culture is apparently feasible, in practice problems

may arise. In theory, one could construct the ideal car by taking the best parts from existing models. But the problem is that those parts are only good in their original context. Detached from the original machine and bolted to another, the part may not function properly at all. This holds true with national cultures as well. A given organisational structure or behavior may work well in some cultural frameworks but not at all in some others (Lehtonen, 2003, pp. 144-145). Paik and Choi (2005), for instance, report how a big global consulting firm, whose strategy was based on the “one global firm” vision, failed in a project with the Chinese because of the lack of consideration to local and regional differences.

Organisations whose business is generally product/market-oriented tend to implement global and glocal strategies so as to preserve their identity in the international context. But for public and non-profit organisations similar approaches do not necessarily succeed. In fact, differences are the *raison d'être* of such organisations. Public and non-profit organisations by definition tend to communicate issues which have specific social and ethical connotations, while business-oriented organisations generally aim at communicating for promotional purposes. Public opinion is more sensitive to social and ethical questions than to brand/product promotion and this affects the level of involvement and activeness regarding the organisation's activities. Publics are less interested in the type of approach organisations use to establish relationships with them when those organisations are perceived as business-oriented, while they are more attentive to communications they receive from organisations whose mission is social and ethical and whose actions affect their values and cultural norms. The former is an example of a low involvement issue, the latter of high involvement. In low involvement cases, people make decisions out of habit because they have no motivation to consider alternatives. By contrast, in high involvement cases, more attention and more information is required before behavioural changes are produced. When communications address high involvement issues people re-elaborate and analyse information through personal experiences and values (Solomon, 1996) and they tend to look at information which confirms their previous knowledge rather than disconfirms it. International organisations know that in order to induce specific behavioural changes in situations of high involvement, they need to communicate with the language, the values and the norms of their publics.

An example of a situation where a cultural approach has proved to work better than a global approach is the case of the World Health Organisation's campaign against female genital mutilation in specific geographical areas[3]. This campaign required the support and the involvement of different publics in order to achieve results. It was not possible to use the same strategies to approach similar publics. The values attached to and perceptions of female circumcision practices differ from one community to another, from one tribe to another. In such conditions, and considering the specific question to be communicated, it is not possible to reach all the relevant publics effectively using a global approach; only activities and actions which include local values and norms can bring about some of the desired results. Organisations whose aims are social and ethical and operate in international contexts rarely find the global approach suitable for establishing good public relationships.

Public relationship management in Europe: is it possible to talk about a global approach to European publics?

Verčič and Van Ruler (2004) in their book *Public Relations and Communication Management in Europe* have collected the work of the most prestigious European public relations scholars and professionals in order to illustrate the state of the public relations field in Europe. Among their interesting findings, there is a common understanding that public relations practices in Europe have some shared features as well as deeper differences. The features shared by different European public relations approaches derive from the basic teaching in the communication sciences, which is based on Anglo American approaches and is replicated in universities throughout Europe. These are the theoretical frameworks underlying European public relations. Publics for public relations professionals in Europe can be generalized to mean all persons not directly associated with an organisation – the public sphere (sometimes called society as a whole). This is the reflective approach taken by European public relations scholars and professionals who are more public-sphere-oriented in their approach to public relations practice compared to their organisation-oriented American counterparts (Van Ruler *et al.*, 2000). European theorists have a special concern for the implications of organisational behaviour toward and in the public sphere. Van Ruler and Verčič (2002, p. 4), for example, cite Ronneberger and Röhl's (1992) argument that public relations is to be measured by the quality and quantity of the public sphere it co-produces through its activities. In particular, it has a responsibility to contribute to the free flow of information. Similarly, participation in the public sphere highlights the use of legitimacy and legitimization as one of the central concepts in European public relations (Jensen, 2000). European public relations is characterised by the societal function (Holmström, 2004), where PR activities are considered according to the implications of organisational behaviour for the public sphere. If the majority of public relations activities in Europe embrace this societal function, then this demands a shared understanding among public relations practitioners of the importance of publics for public relations practices to be as close as possible to the community's needs and for a cooperative approach with their publics. In order to establish good relationships, proximity and mutual understanding are required as well as a good level of involvement and activeness on the part of those publics. These conditions cannot completely be satisfied with the global approach, but can be better encompassed with the cultural approach.

If the profession of public relations is perceived to have some shared features in many European countries, at least in their interest in publics and a common theoretical base, the actual practices are different and they depend mostly on culture. Ihator (2000) identified four variables among cultures that affect the practice of public relations: individualism versus collectivism; high context versus low context communication styles; degree of media independence and the impact of culture on media content and channels; and orientation to time. These variables are affected by historical, economic and political patterns and sometimes determine the uniqueness of, in the present instance, each EU member state's approach. One of the main tasks of the EU is to regulate, re-organize, and somehow unify different national policies regarding communication, broadcasting, consumers, trade issues, environment etc. (Valentini, 2005). This process of policy homogenisation in all member states can be perceived as

an attempt to reduce the complexity of the European context in favour of a single and undifferentiated system of regulations. In theory EU-wide regulation could assist in a global approach to communications where policy paves the way for subsequent behaviour and attitudes, since these regulations should help organisations operating in different European countries to achieve similar normative conditions in those countries. However, regulations affect organisational structures, norms and behaviours; they do not affect public perceptions and cultures. Assuming that all the organisations in Europe follow similar rules does not necessarily influence public perceptions of organisational actions. Public perceptions and public legitimisation depend on personal experiences with the organisation and on the values that the organisation holds. When the organisation's values clash or are perceived to be different from those of the community, there is either imperfect perception or insufficient legitimacy. In situations where regulations are alike, as in the case of protection of wolves, public opinion may differ from one country to another and within the same country. It is thus extremely difficult to predict the effect of public reactions on organisational policies when the cultural context is not adequately considered. Moreover there may be situations in which the organisation's structure and management style are required to change in order to accommodate the interests of local publics.

The case of the European Union

The EU is composed of many public institutions, which have many characteristics. They are affected by the same issues as other public organisations. EU institutions need to deal with managing conflicting demands such as bureaucracy versus efficiency, cost savings versus social model expenditures, high versus low relationship management of different stakeholders and publics, transparency and accountability of information versus security, and high versus low public involvement. Moreover, there are many studies which see public management moving in the direction of the New Public Service approach (NPS). The NPS approach advocates treating and valuing of citizens as partners. In the NPS approach citizens are involved in a dialogue and are helped to understand and participate in public discourses and decision-making rather than being controlled. In the NPS approach relationship building is important because public interests and responsibility are shared, and thus the goal is not just to find quick solutions but to create a stable and reliable collaboration between citizens and their institutions (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000). One NPS concern is public involvement and support (Vigoda, 2002, Weikart, 2001, Terry, 1998, Hays and Kearney, 1997, Peters, 1996). Public involvement and support are factors that are more important for public organisations than for private organisations. Good levels of public involvement and support are central to public organisations for three main reasons. They legitimate the organisation and its work and by legitimating the organisation and its work they give credibility and power to the organisation. They gain support for taxation or other fund-raising initiatives to increase their activities. They are pre-requisites of democratic and effective systems, where the organisation sees the participation of its publics as a necessity for their growth and improvement. Public organisations can involve publics through strategic relationship management. Since EU institutions are defined as a type of public organisation, they have an interest in developing good levels

of involvement and support by their publics. However, levels of public support for and involvement in the EU have not changed in a positive direction during the last five years. About half of the citizens in the EU support their country's membership, while the number of those who do not has risen from 26 per cent to 36 per cent. The number of Europeans who have a positive image of the EU has fallen by 5 per cent in five years while the number of those who have a negative image of the EU has risen by 7 per cent in the same period (Valentini, 2006a, pp. 86-88). Since 1979 when Europeans first voted in the European Parliamentary elections, the rate of participation has fallen from 63 per cent to 45.7 per cent (Flash Eurobarometer, 162, 2004, p. 4). There is thus less interest and involvement in EU affairs today than in the past.

A recent study of EU media relations (Valentini, 2006a, b) supports the idea that EU institutions are applying a global approach throughout their communication activities. In this study, Finnish and Italian journalists were interviewed about EU media relations to discover how they perceive their relationships with EU information officers. Almost all the journalists in both countries were dissatisfied with the relationships they have with EU officers, mostly because EU officers tend to send similar information packs to journalists in different countries, paying little attention to local media concerns. EU material rarely suited their editorial style, often did not have a local and thus interesting perspective and was extremely difficult to understand and to frame on national news coverage. While EU officers aim at disseminating a single version of communication, and so apply a global approach to EU media relations, the national mass media want more local and cultural approaches. The campaigns to support the Constitutional Treaty in France and in the Netherlands in 2005 are another example where a single version of EU communications did not work. The campaign both in France and in the Netherlands failed to create behavioural changes in citizens' opinions. French and Dutch people rejected the Constitutional Treaty because they did not have clear information about the treaty or on the consequences of its implementation and because they were dissatisfied with their national economic and social situations (Flash Eurobarometer 171 and 172, 2005). The vote for the Constitutional Treaty was a high involvement decision, but it was treated as a low involvement issue and general themes were discussed with little information being given on its actual effects on citizens' lives. The information was not tailored to the needs of the general publics of those countries. It was one-way communication from the institution to its publics and not vice versa. The EU communicated what it considered important to know, not what people wanted to know.

The inability of the EU to communicate with its different publics has been seen in terms of the EU's inability to listen to the concerns and demands of these publics (Anderson, 2004; de Vreese, 2003) and the concomitant failure of communication and public relations strategies (Gröber and Riedel, 2005). The European Commission has sought to present EU membership and governance as the best of all worlds and it has tried, first, to enhance the image of the EU through different marketing activities and, subsequently, through public relations activities. According to Rézmúves (2005) EU institutions have implemented strategies of information/communication management and marketing communication, known as the technical/operative professional role of public relations, in their information campaigns in order to improve EU credibility and reputation among different EU publics. Specifically, past EU campaigns, such as the

introduction of the euro, EU enlargement and the constitutional treaty campaigns were developed and organized according to marketing concepts and practices generally reminiscent of the marketing campaigns used by multinational companies to promote their products, services and themselves. So far this approach has not achieved the expected increase in reputation and trust with respect to EU institutions and policies (Valentini, 2006a, b).

The approach taken by EU commissioners to their communication activities and to their public relationships in general was a global one. It assumed that Europeans in different countries were a global public and that they would be willing to sacrifice some of their cultural and national identity in the name of Europeanization. Although there are as many similarities as differences among Europeans, the majority of citizens remain strongly nationalistic and culture-centred (Eurobarometer 65, 2006). They behave more according to their national and personal interests than as pan-Europeans. The governing elite, which is the most supportive and active group, is not homogeneous and does not always subordinate its national interests to European interests. When the war in Iraq started in 2003, the EU was called to take a position on this matter, possibly a unified position. At the time, European publics and the governing group in each member state had such different opinions that neither shared common values nor a common decision on participation in the war. There was no European stance on the war, merely various national coalitions with differing and somewhat conflicting opinions and positions (The Associated Press, 2003). Recently the possibility of Turkey becoming a member state has created further divisions within these governing elites (The Associated Press, 2006). During sessions of the European Parliament it is still very common for debates to have a strong regional or national flavour. Each member state tends to safeguard its own economic, political and social interests rather than those of the EU. This nationalist behaviour sometimes paralyses decision-making processes. This elite group of MEPs does not share the same views and thus cannot be considered as one of the EU's global publics. Similarly, European citizens cannot be considered alike.

The EU approach to its publics has been a global approach in which communication targeted at different EU publics has not been tailored to the specific needs of those publics. The global approach has worked in only a few cases where involvement and interest in a specific issue were considered important by all countries. For example, in the case of terrorism, the majority of Europeans expect that the European Union will take a pro-active position on the prevention of terrorism and on security (European Union Committee, 2005). However, in general, the global approach has not increased either the level of involvement of the silent and passive publics in the EU, or their support. It would be more fruitful for EU officials to consider their member states as different publics and tailor their strategic communicative approaches accordingly.

Public relationship management in different national cultural contexts, like those within the European Union, should be culturally oriented and based on a two-way symmetrical flow of communication and on community-building relationships. The community-building aspect would demonstrate the reflective and societal role of European public relations. Applying this new approach to European institutions would greatly improve the relationship between the EU and its different publics.

Conclusions

This paper sought to demonstrate that public relations practitioners working in international and multi-cultural contexts plan their activities giving careful consideration to what their organisation wishes to achieve. If the organisation aims at building a strong sense of community among its different publics, then the cultural approach has proved to be the best tool for analysing and planning strategies in different national cultural contexts. If the organisation is more concerned with creating functional organisation-public relationships, that is, the organisation is not necessarily interested in establishing good relationships with all its publics, but only with the active ones, then the global approach could work.

The global public proposition posited by Lee is an attempt to simplify one of most complex variables in today's international world. It is possible for Lee to talk about a global public mainly because the globalisation process that has occurred in the economic and trading worlds has led to the globalisation of other societal components such as politics, education and culture. However, PR practitioners, ultimately concerned with building relationships and dialogue, need to be cautious in formulating generalisations about publics. Every individual engaged in relationship building will have his or her own guiding values and assumptions. These are culturally constituted (Bardhan, 2003, p. 246) and shaped by the individual's own experiences and position in society. As a consequence, public relations activity will vary according to the historical and cultural context in which it is practised (Molleda and Suarez, 2005; Sriramesh and Verčič, 2003; Zaharna, 2001). Researchers on international public relations are becoming increasingly conscious that standardised approaches and a lack of awareness and appreciation of the culturally prescribed rules and norms of communication behaviours peculiar to other cultures, impedes relationship building across cultural boundaries and can have a detrimental affect on the success of public relations activities (Hodge, 2006; Molleda and Suarez, 2005; Zaharna, 2001). Taking a cultural approach to public relationship management is the best way to handle different relationships in different countries. However, as Barna (1988) observed, there is still a tendency for people to believe that "people are people" and that "deep down we're all alike". To extend the analogy to public relations, there is a tendency "to see public relations as just public relations", which creates problems when public relations practice crosses national and cultural boundaries.

The case of the EU shows that the global approach to public relationship management does not work in a context where national cultural links are strong and where good levels of public involvement and support are extremely important. A cultural approach would have worked better in seeking to increase public support and involvement in EU issues. The case of the EU represents an example of a public organisation operating in a multi-national context whose aims are not only political/commercial but also social and ethical. For these types of organisations being responsible for their publics and caring about local communities is equivalent to having good relationships with these publics. Public relations practices need to place more value on public concerns, since publics and societal responsibilities are the key sources for legitimacy.

Notes

1. According to Svensson (2001) a glocal strategic approach in business, as opposed to a global strategic approach or multi-national approach, is a combination of different levels of strategic approaches from local to global, along with awareness of the significance of adaptation to local markets. It attempts to maintain an appropriate balance between global homogenization and local customization. The concept synthesizes the relationship between cultural homogenization and heterogenization, convergence and divergence, and universalism and particularism.
2. The cultural approach discussed in this paper is comparable to the cultural-specific approach presented by Zaharna (2001). As Zaharna pointed out, the origin of this approach can be traced back to the work of anthropologists such as Margret Mead, Gregory Bateson, and Clifford Geertz, who discussed beliefs and lifestyles in various cultures. In international public relations, the cultural approach is very much exemplified by so called “comparative public relations” studies (Culbertson, 1996), which seek to compare different studies on public relations in different countries and geographical regions. For other studies related to culture and public relations, see, among others, Hodge (2006); Ihator (2000); Vasquez and Taylor (1999); Verčič *et al.* (1996).
3. More information on WHO activities against female genital mutilation are available at: www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs241/en/

References

- Allio, R.J. (1989), “Formulating global strategy”, *Planning Review*, March/April, pp. 22-7.
- Anderson, P.J. (2004), “The greater non-communicator? The mass communication deficit of the European Parliament and its Press Directorate”, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 42 No. 5, pp. 897-917.
- (The) Associated Press (2003), “Iraq rift on show at EU summit”, *CNN World*, 22 March, available at: www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/europe/03/22/sprj.irq.eu.summit/index.html
- (The) Associated Press (2006), “EU nations divided over whether to slow Turkey membership talks”, *International Herald Tribune – Europe Edition*, 29 November, available at: www.iht.com/articles/ap/2006/11/30/europe/EU_GEN_EU_Turkey.php
- Banks, S.P. (1995), *Multicultural Public Relations: A Social-Interpretive Approach*, Sage, London.
- Bardhan, N. (2003), “Rupturing public relations metanarratives: the example of India”, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 225-48.
- Barker, C. (1999), *Television, Globalisation and Cultural Identities*, Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Barna, L. (1988), “Stumbling blocks in intercultural communication”, in Samovar, L. and Porter, R. (Eds), *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, Wadsworth, Belmont, CA, p. 322.
- Bridges, J.A. and Nelson, R.A. (2000), “Issues management: a relational approach”, in Ledingham, J.A. and Bruning, S.D. (Eds), *Public Relations As Relationship Management: A Relational Approach to the Study and Practice of Public Relations*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ, pp. 95-116.
- Broom, G.M., Casey, S. and Ritchey, J. (1997), “Toward a concept and theory of organisation-public relationships”, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, Vol. 9 No. 2, pp. 83-98.
- Brunner, B. (2000), “Measuring students’ perceptions of the University of Florida’s commitment to public relationships and diversity”, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Gainesville, FL.

- Coombs, W.T. (2000), "Crisis management: advantages of a relational perspective", in Ledingham, J.A. and Bruning, S.D. (Eds), *Public Relations as Relationship Management: A Relational Approach to the Study and Practice of Public Relations*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ, pp. 73-94.
- Culbertson, H.M. (1996), "Introduction", in Culbertson, H. and Chen, N. (Eds), *International Public Relations: A Comparative Analysis*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, p. 2.
- Denhardt, R.B. and Denhardt, J.V. (2000), "The new public service: serving rather than steering", *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 60 No. 6, pp. 549-59.
- de Vreese, C. (2003), "Communicating Europe", policy paper from New Generation Democracy project, available at: <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/89.pdf>
- Eurobarometer 65 (2006), "Public opinion in the European Union – Autumn 2006", European Commission, OPOCE, Luxembourg.
- European Union Committee (2005), "After Madrid: the EU response to terrorism", 5th Report of the Section 2004-05(the Authority of the House of Lords), The Stationery Office, London.
- Flash Eurobarometer 162 (2004), "Post European Election Survey – June 2004", European Parliament, EOS Gallup Europe, Brussels.
- Flash Eurobarometer 171 (2005), "The European Constitution – post referendum in The Netherlands", European Commission, EOS Gallup Europe, Brussels.
- Flash Eurobarometer 172 (2005), "The European Constitution – post referendum in France", European Commission, EOS Gallup Europe, Brussels.
- Gröber, K. and Riedel, S. (2005), "The EU new communication policy, after the failure of the Constitutional Treaty, now Plan D?", SWP Comments 53, Schiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin, December.
- Grunig, J.E. and Huang, Y.H. (2000), "From organisational effectiveness to relationship indicators: antecedents of relationships, public relations strategies, and relationship outcomes", in Ledingham, J.A. and Bruning, S.D. (Eds), *Public Relations as Relationship Management: A Relational Approach to the Study and Practice of Public Relations*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, pp. 23-54.
- Hays, S.W. and Kearney, R.C. (1997), "Riding the crest of a wave: the national performance review and public management reform", *International Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 11-40.
- Hedley, R.A. (1998), "Technological diffusion or cultural imperialism?", *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, Vol. 39 No. 2, pp. 198-212.
- Hedley, R.A. (1999), "The information age: Apartheid, cultural imperialism, or global village?", *Social Science Computer Review*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 78-87.
- Hodge, C. (2006), "PRP culture: a framework for exploring public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries", *Journal of Communication Management*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 80-93.
- Holmström, S. (2004), "Intermezzo: the reflective paradigm of public relations", in Van Ruler, B. and Verčič, D. (Eds), *Public Relations and Communication Management in Europe: A Nation-by-Nation Introduction to Public Relations Theory and Practice*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, pp. 121-33.
- Hon, L.C. and Grunig, J.E. (1999), *Measuring Relationships in Public Relations*, Institute for Public Relations, Gainesville, FL.
- Huang, Y.H. (1997), "Public relations strategies, relational outcomes, and conflict management strategies", unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, MD.

-
- Huang, Y.H. (2001), "OPRA: a cross-cultural, multiple-item scale for measuring organisation-public relationships", *Journal of Public Relations Research*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 61-90.
- Hung, C.J.F. (2000), "Organisation-public relationships, relationship maintenance strategies, and relationship outcomes", paper presented to Educator's Academy, Public Relations Society of America, Miami, FL, March.
- Hutton, J.G. (1999), "The definition, dimensions and domain of public relations", *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 199-214.
- Ihator, A. (2000), "Understanding the cultural patterns of the world- an imperative in implementing strategic international PR programs", *Public Relations Quarterly*, Vol. 45 No. 4, pp. 38-44.
- Jensen, I. (2000), "Legitimacy and strategy of different companies: a perspective of external and internal public relations", in Ross, D., MacManus, T. and Verčič, D. (Eds), *Perspectives on Relations Research: An International Perspective*, International Thomson Business Press, London.
- Jessop, B. (2000), "An entrepreneurial city in action: Hong Kong's emerging strategies in and for (Inter)Urban Competition", *Urban Studies*, Vol. 37 No. 12, pp. 2287-313.
- Kent, M.L. and Taylor, M. (1999), "When public relations becomes government relations", *Public Relations Quarterly*, Vol. 44 No. 3, pp. 18-22.
- Ledingham, J.A. (2003), "Explicating relationship management as a general theory of public relations", *Journal of Public Relations Research*, Vol. 15, pp. 181-98.
- Ledingham, J.A. and Bruning, S.D. (2000), *Public Relations as Relationship Management: A Relational Approach to the Study and Practice of Public Relations*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.
- Lee, S. (2005), "The emergence of global public and international public relations", *Public Relations Quarterly*, Vol. 50 No. 2, pp. 14-16.
- Lehtonen, J. (2003), "Globalization, national cultures and the paradox of intercultural competence", in Holm, N.G. and Quiroz-Schaumann, J. (Eds), *Intercultural Communication – Past and Future*, Åbo Akademi Fortbildningscentralen, Turku, pp. 140-56.
- Levitt, T. (1983), "The globalization of markets", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 61, pp. 92-102.
- Main, L. (2001), "The global information infrastructure: empowerment or imperialism?", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 22 No. 1.
- Maynard, M. (2003), "From global to glocal: how Gillette's SensorExcel accommodates to Japan", *Keio Communication Review*, Vol. 25 No. 57, p. 75.
- Maynard, M. and Tian, Y. (2004), "Between global and glocal: content analysis of the Chinese web sites of the 100 top global brands", *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 30, pp. 285-91.
- Molleda, J.C. and Suarez, A-M. (2005), "Challenges in Colombia for public relations professionals: a qualitative assessment of the economic and political environments", *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 31, pp. 21-9.
- Paik, Y. and Choi, D.C. (2005), "The shortcomings of a standardized global knowledge management system: the case study of Accenture", *Academy of Management Executive*, Vol. 19 No. 2, pp. 81-4.
- Peters, B.G. (1996), *The Future of Governing: Four Emerging Models*, University Press of Kansas, Kansas City, KS.

- Rézműves, I. (2005), "Mass mediated messages as means of creating a transnational European identity: organisational attempts of the European Union during the past 50 years", paper presented at the 1st European Communication Conference, Amsterdam, 24-26 November.
- Ronneberger, F. and Röhl, M. (1992), *Theorie der public relations, ein entwurf (Theory of Public Relations, a Project)*, Westdeutscher Verlag, Opladen.
- Smith, A. (1966), "Communication and culture", Holt, Rinehardt and Winston, New York, NY.
- Solomon, M.R. (1996), *Consumer Behavior*, 3rd ed., Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Sriramesh, K. and Verčič, D. (2003), *Global Public Relations Handbook: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ.
- Sriramesh, K. and White, J. (1992), "Societal culture and public relations", in Grunig, J.E. (Ed.), *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ, pp. 597-614.
- Svensson, G. (2001), "'Glocalization' of business activities: a 'glocal strategy' approach", *Management Decision*, Vol. 39 No. 1, pp. 6-18.
- Terry, L.D. (1998), "Administrative leadership, neo-managerialism, and the public management movement", *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 58 No. 3, pp. 194-200.
- Valentini, C. (2005), "The European Odyssey: communication of cultures vs. cultures of communication", paper presented at the First European Communication Conference "Fifty years of communication research in Europe: past and future", Amsterdam, 24-26 November.
- Valentini, C. and Manufacturing, E.U. (2006), "consensus: the reasons behind EU promotional campaigns", *Global Media Journal – Mediterranean Editions*, Vol. 1 Nos 2, Fall, pp. 80-96.
- Valentini, C. (2006b), "Constructing public support: EU communication challenges for the process of integration", presented at the International conference 2006 on "Public Spheres and their Boundaries" organized by Tampere Centre for Cultural Studies (TACS), University of Tampere, Tampere, 25-27 May.
- Van Ruler, B. and Verčič, D. (2002), *The Bled Manifesto on Public Relations*, Pristop, Ljubljana.
- Van Ruler, B., Verčič, D., Bütschi, G. and Flodin, B. (2000), "The European body of knowledge on public relations/communication management", report of the Delphi Research Project, European Association for Public Relations Education and Research, Ghent/Ljubljana.
- Vasquez, G. and Taylor, M. (1999), "What cultural values influence American public relations practitioners?", *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 25, pp. 433-49.
- Verčič, D. and Van Ruler, B. (2004), *Public Relations and Communication Management in Europe: A Nation-by-Nation Introduction to Public Relations Theory and Practice*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin.
- Verčič, D., Grunig, L. and Grunig, J.E. (1996), "Global and specific principles of public relations: evidence from Slovenia", in Culbertson, H. and Chen, N. (Eds), *International Public Relations: A Comparative Analysis*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ, pp. 31-65.
- Vigoda, E. (2002), "From responsiveness to collaboration: government, citizens, and the next generation of public administration", *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 62 No. 5, pp. 527-40.
- Wakefield, R.I. (2001), "Effective public relations in the multinational organisation", in Heath, R.L. (Ed.), *Handbook of Public Relations*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 639-47.
- Weikart, L.A. (2001), "The Giuliani administration and the new public management in New York City", *Urban Affairs Review*, Vol. 36 No. 3, pp. 359-81.

- Wilcox, D., Ault, P. and Agee, W. (1989), *Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics*, Harper and Row, Philadelphia, PA.
- Wilson, L. (2000), "Building employee and community relationships through volunteerism: a case study", in Ledingham, J.A. and Bruning, S.D. (Eds), *Public Relations as Relationship Management: A Relational Approach to the Study and Practice of Public Relations*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ, pp. 137-44.
- Yip, G.S. (1989), "Global strategy: in a world of nations?", *Sloan Management Review*, Fall, pp. 29-41.
- Zaharna, R.S. (2000), "Intercultural communication and international public relations: exploring parallels", *Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 48 No. 1, pp. 85-100.
- Zaharna, R.S. (2001), "'In-Awareness' approach to international public relations", *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 27, pp. 135-48.

Further reading

- Muzi Falconi, T. and Ventruruzzo, F. (2005), "Integrating real and virtual environments in stakeholder relationship management", paper presented at 11th International Public Relations Research Symposium Bledcom, "New Concepts and Technologies for Public Relations, Public Affairs and Corporate Communication", Lake Bled, 2-4 July 2004.

About the author

Chiara Valentini is a Researcher and Doctoral candidate in Organizational Communication and Public Relations, Department of Communication, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. She can be contacted at: c.valentini@cc.jyu.fi