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APPLICABILITY OF GLOBAL APPROACH FOR RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

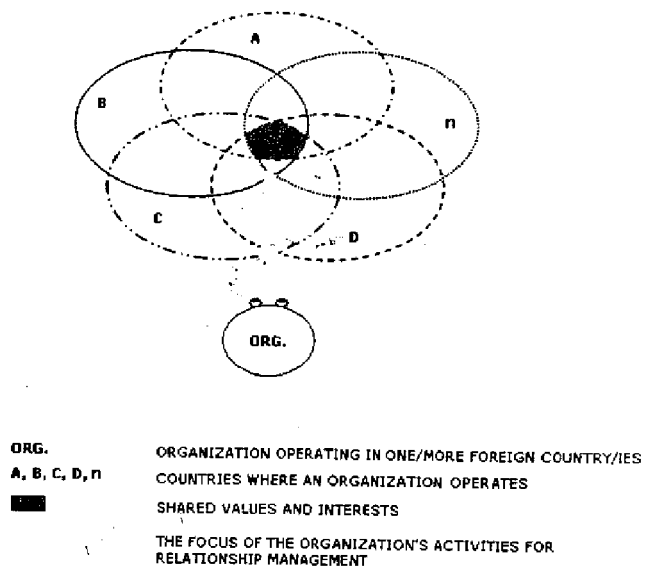
The aim of this paper is to test the validity of global approach for relationship management as successful approach applicable in all multi-national contexts by considering the case of the European Union as example of public institutions operating in different national cultural contexts. Specifically it is discussed whether it is possible or not to define and threat international publics as a global public for relationship management in different national cultural contexts and whether this approach to a global public is effective or not in such contexts.

Different studies (Sriramesh and Vercic 2003; Mattson and Stage 2001; Barkema et al. 1997) have shown the increasing need for public relations professionals to be able to communicate with international stakeholders either when they are working for small or large organizations, including public and non-profit organizations. For public relations operating in international contexts the fundamental question is whether to stick to the procedures tested in the home country, adopt some formulae that are supposed to represent the international standard or to act in a way which is typical of the target country. Scholars as Lee (2005) and Stohl (2001), along the lines of McLuhan's idea of "global village" (1962), believe that the process of globalization makes societies more similar to each others. If societies become similar then stakeholders' needs and values in international contexts should be alike too. Along with this idea it is possible to talk about global publics and it is necessary to delineate a global approach to definitions, dimensions, and domains of public relations (Verčič et al. 2001). Hung's studies on relationship management practices in China (2004) show completely different results. Her findings underline that standardized public relations practices in relationship management do not always work, especially when target cultures and contexts are very different from the company's country of origin. Lehtonen and Petkova (2005) studied this phenomenon comparing Finnish and Bulgarian identities, the perceptions that those cultures have on their neighbouring countries and the effects on business communication. They indeed confirmed the predominance of the local approaches upon the global for effective communication management, but they did not deal with relationship management specific issues. Some other scholars (Svensson, 2001; Jessop, 2000) believe that a glocal approach could solve cultural and proximity pro-

blems of communicating in different countries. A glocal strategy has been applied to advertising, management and marketing, effectively modifying a product to suit the tastes of the host culture (ibid, 2000). Globalisation can thus be considered an attempt to combine a global management approach to local needs. However as Wakefield (2001) asserted the philosophy "think global, act local" does not necessarily work. The best option for public relations should be to "think global and local, act global and local". Wakefield's approach utters the idea that international public relations are so complex and structured and it is simplistic to think that generic principles and local practices can effectively work in all international contexts.

The aim of this study is to test the validity of a global approach for relationship management as successful approach applicable in all multi-national contexts by considering the case of EU as an example of public institutions operating in different national cultural contexts. According to Lee's definition of global public, a group of people of different nations are willing to sacrifice their national interests and values in the name of the well-being of an organization. This postulation assumes two pre-requisites: first, a group of people have to share common goals and interests in relations to that organization, and second they are active, highly involved and participative to the organization's activities (Fig. 1).

FIG. 1. GLOBAL APPROACH TO RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT



Looking at the case of EU, as a combination of supranational organizations, and its publics, which represent media-publics, stakeholder-publics, citizen-publics, customer-publics, etc. of 25 different countries, the two pre-requisites of a global public fail to be true. First, not all EU publics are active, highly involved and participative to the European project. Second, the majority of EU publics do not share common interests and goals in relations to the European Union's future developments. In reality the majority of Europeans continue to feel strongly nationalistic and cultured-centred in many ways (Valentini, 2006).

They behave according to their national and personal interests more than to a European view. Also the governing elite, which is the most supporting and active group, is not homogenous and it does not always compromise its national interests for European interests. Hence, we cannot treat EU publics according to a global approach. Furthermore, an attentive analysis of past EU activities aiming at communicating and involving Europeans, show how EU approach with its different publics has been a global approach. Specifically the past EU campaigns, such as the introduction of the euro, the enlargement and the constitutional treaty campaigns have been organized and developed according to marketing concepts and practices, which remind generally the marketing campaigns used by multinational companies to promote their products, services and companies (Rézmúves, 2005; Tumber, 1995). Eurobarometer surveys show that these communicational activities did not change so much the percentage of involvement and participation nor of support upon EU institutions and policies (European Commission, 2005).

The case of EU is an example of public institutions operating in different national context with a wide range of publics and above all with an interest in developing good and mutual beneficial relationships with all possible publics including those who are not active, supportive and with low involvement. For this type of organization, where publics do not share necessarily common values and interests, a cultural approach would work better. The global approach is instead useful in situations where organizations aim at establishing good relationships only with a certain group of publics who share similar interests and values. A normative/global approach for relationship management is thus not feasible in all cases. Hence PR professionals working in different national cultural contexts should ponder and plan carefully their activities by establishing what are the primary goals of the organization they work for before deciding which approach to use. Finally public relations practitioners should be very cautious in constructing generalisations in what is a complex occupation ultimately concerned with building relationships and dialogues, since culture has an important influence on perception and provides clues on how messages are structured and interpreted by the people with whom they communicate with, to and for.

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