Women in PR. A Romanian Perspective

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Abstract

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Recent years have marked an influx of women into the practice of public relations, which generated a number of studies on the role of women in this field. Fitch & Third (2010: 2) noticed that the dominance of women in public relations defines the coding of public relations as "feminine". The aim of the research is two-fold: to analyse the field of public relations and its defining dimensions, the perspective of women in the PR sector, respectively to identify what means the public relations for women working in this sector. The case study explores the correlation between the basic concept of public relations and the practice of public relations, the basic qualities for a successful career in public relations, trends, challenges and perspectives for the PR sector. As the research method, we have applied the questionnaire-based inquiry in some institutions, organizations and PR agencies from the county of Bacău, Romania. In Romania, we may notice an increasing preference of the female audience for the PR sector. The practice of public relations is an feminine activity because PR is an inciting domain that offers multiple challenges, such as building strategic relationships and spirit of initiative. Maintaining and consolidating relationships with publics should be a priority for public relations practitioners. Responsibility and professionalism should constitute priority lines in (re)configuring public relations.

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1. Introduction

Some authors believe that the practice of public relations is a women's activity because "approximately 70% of PR practitioners in most western nations are women" (Edwards, 2009, p. 161). In turn, Fitch & Third (2010, p. 2) emphasise the fact that the dominance of women in public relations defines the coding of public relations as "feminine". The labelling of the public relations sector as "feminine" creates, at the moment, a dichotomy between men and women and develops a number of themes regarding the feminization of the public relations sector, the impact of their professional activities, the gender inequalities in the field, the challenges for women as PR practitioners.

Based on how women affect public relations, the literature investigates the feminization of the field, highlighting, for the first time, a major concern: "if women become a majority in public relations, the practice will be typecast as women's work; it will lose what clout it now has as a management function and become a second-class occupation" (Bates, 1983, p. 6). The study *How European public relations men and women perceive the impact of their professional activities* (Verhoeven and Aarts, 2010, p. 7) outlines the fact that "male public relations professionals perceive themselves as being taken more seriously by senior management in their organization than female professionals do. On a 7-point scale, men scored an average of 5.36 ... while women scored a 4.97". The surveys revealed that gender inequalities exist in the public relations sector because while fulfilling roles assigned to them, women get caught in a "cycle of powerlessness" (Grunig, Toth and Hon, 2001, p. 102).

The literature on the roles of women in the public relations sector emphasises that "the glass ceiling persists for women in public relations and communications management, despite increasing feminization of these fields" (Wrigley, 2002, p. 27). Wrigley's study (2002, p. 27), entitled *Glass Ceiling? What Glass Ceiling? A Qualitative Study of How Women View The Glass Ceiling in Public Relations and Communications Management*, shows that although public relations are now dominated by female employees and practitioners, the attitude towards women in the workplace has not changed, which accounts for the gender inequalities visible in this field, as a result of the fact that "corporate cultures can be more limiting for women who want to advance".

In Romania, we may notice an increasing preference of the female audience for the PR sector. In recent years, professional training and development in public relations area have recorded enhanced participation of the audience, particularly for the profile specializations existing at the university level. These views coincide with those provided by the some scholars that mention the fact that "the Romanian domain of public relations is undergoing constant development and diversification", and it shows an increasing interest in this professional option (Miculescu, 2006, p. 91). The future of public relations "promises" to become even more feminine if we consider the number of women choosing to work in this field. This paper analyses the public relations, the correlation between the basic concept of public relations and the practice, "the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats", challenges and perspectives for the PR sector.

2. Literature review

One of the main definitions presented by the literature mentions that public relations is the "distinct managerial function which supports the establishing and maintenance of mutual communication limits, mutual acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its audience. Public relations involve problem management, supporting managers in being well-informed regarding public opinion and respond to the demands of public opinion, define and accentuate the managerial obligations of anticipating the tendencies of the environment and use research and communication based on ethical principles as main working tools" (Harlow, 1976, p. 36). According to Cutlip, Center & Broom (2009, p. 7), "public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends". In turn, Long and Hazelton (1987, pp. 3-13) describe public relations as "a communication function of management through which the organizations adapt to, alter, or maintain their environment for the purpose of achieving organizational goals". The same view is accredited by Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 7-8) who argue that public relations is the "management of communication between an organization and its publics".

As can be observed, these definitions highlight the managerial function of public relations, within which the process of communication becomes a reference point. The focus lies particularly on the efficient communication between an organization and its audience, the mutually advantageous relations established between the two partners that reach a certain level of cooperation, mutual trust and respect. The main role belongs to public relations as "the function responsible for establishing and maintaining relationships with the public" (Grunig, Toth and Hon, 2001). Public relations is a connection bridge between the organization and the public that enables the success of this partnership by means of a two-way communication. Public relations support the "crystallization of the public opinion about a certain organization in a certain direction" (Bernays, 2003, p. 26). In this case, the public relations practitioner assumes double responsibility, both in relation to the organization and the audiences, by building and maintaining efficient relationships that may generate good collaboration and mutual respect. The system of public relations has the role of establishing durable connections based on truth and mutual trust, both inside as well as outside the system, with the public opinion (Petrovici, 2011a, p. 35). Therefore, this system implies developing two subsystems, one responsible with building connections inside the organization with a view to ensuring a beneficial internal climate, the other one responsible with building durable connections with the external environment, which includes all the other institutions or organizations, as well as public opinion (Rus, 2002, p. 58). Within this process, the practice of public relations appears as the art and social science of analysing trends, anticipating consequences, counselling the leaders of the organization and implementing the designed action programmes that will serve both the interests of the organization and those of the public (Gordon, 1997, p. 59). The practice of public relations focuses particularly on reputation, aiming at gaining the public's trust and support and at influencing the latter's opinion and behaviour (Newsom, VanSlyke Turk, Kruckeberg, 2003, p. 18). In this context, public relations is a strategic form of communication that aims at gaining the public's understanding and acceptance, building beneficial relationships

between the organization and the public, "particularly in terms of shaping reputation and information communication" (Curtin and Gaither, 2008, p. 19). In this case, reputation turns into a key concept.

The modern definition of public relations (2012) for today's practice is provided by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) which emphasizes that "public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics". According to the PRSA (www.prsa.org), "this definition focuses on the basic concept of public relations – as a communication process, one that is strategic in nature and emphasizing mutually beneficial relationships. *Process* is preferable to management function, which can evoke ideas of control and top-down, one-way communications. *Relationships* relates to public relations' role in helping to bring together organizations and individuals with their key stakeholders. *Publics* is preferable to *stakeholders*, as the former relates to the very public nature of public relations, whereas stakeholders has connotations of publicly-traded companies". As can be seen, public relations rely on the reference terms of organization and audiences, between which there is a two-way communication process. This process implies building mutually advantageous relationships based on trust and respect, respectively maintaining sustainable connections between an organization and its audiences that are a real challenge for public relations practitioners. Adopting a professional conduct becomes, in this case, a reference point that involves compliance with the professional ethics code, honesty and transparency in PR practices, not the "public's" interest.

Another dimension of professionalism is represented by "considering professional standards before the financial rewards promised by an employer or client; public relations practitioners are often only the paid *voice* of an organization or client and *mercenaries* who do not seem to hold any personal standard or belief" (Wilcox, cited in Miculescu, 2006, p. 203). Such situations result in low appreciation from the public and a status of public relations that is not honourable. The challenges for public relations practitioners are "to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in relationships, for example, respect, transparency, honesty, open lines of communication; nurturing of shared values and other basic principles are key to communication that builds strong organization-publics relationships" (Hutton, 2007, p. 56)

3. Material & Methods

The aim of this study is to examine the correlation between the basic concept of public relations and the practice of public relations, the basic qualities for a successful career in public relations, challenges and perspectives for the PR sector by identifying the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the relationship between the concept of public relations and the practice of public relations?

RQ2: What are the basic qualities for a successful career in public relations?

RQ3: What are the trends, challenges and perspectives for the PR sector?

As a research method, we have applied a survey questionnaire **in** some institutions and organizations from Bacău, Romania, respectively PR agencies. The survey was conducted through a web-based questionnaire during February-April 2016**.** An email soliciting participation in the online survey was sent to public relations practitioners, women working in the public sector, in communication and public

relations departments as well as in the private sector, in PR agencies. After excluding incomplete questionnaires, there were 80 usable responses: 75 from public sector organizations, and 5 from private PR agencies. Also, most of the respondents have ages around 35 and have less than 10 years of experience in the domain. Despite our best attempts, we could not obtain a higher number of responses. However, we hope that the results obtained may constitute new directions of action for future research.

4. Women in PR. A Romanian perspective

In order to identify the thought particularities existing at the level of a feminine public, we have applied a questionnaire to a representative group of 80 persons – women working in the PR sector, who were kind enough to respond to our request. The questionnaire comprises a set of 16 questions on the domain of public relations and its defining dimensions. The purpose of applying this questionnaire was not to conduct a rigorous sociological inquiry with statistically valid results, but to analyse the way in which public relations are perceived and practiced, the basic qualities for a successful career in public relations, trends and perspectives for the PR sector. When asked what public relations are in their personal opinion, most of the respondents (62%) answered that PR represent an inciting domain, under constant development, whereas 38% of them believe that public relations are a professional challenge requiring constant support and team spirit. The orientation of the feminine public towards the PR sector is a consequence of the rising trend of public relations in recent years that continues to show at the top of rankings. The arguments supporting the choice of this sector of activity highlight the fact that public relations are regarded, by 50% of the respondents, as a motivating profession, whereas 40% of the respondents claim to have opted for this domain out of passion and only 10% out of curiosity. According to the respondents, the basic "ingredients" for developing this domain imply a generous dose of creativity (34%), intelligence (34%) and emotion (32%).

The basic qualities required to practice public relations are, first and foremost, communication and relating skills (34%), good professional training and constant improvement (28%), professional standards (20%), creative potential (18%). In order to be successful, public relations practitioners should demonstrate corresponding training in the field (34%), communication competences (33%) and, last but not least, adopt ethical conduct in their activity (33%). The secret of personal success lies in knowledge of communication techniques (50%), thorough professional training (30%) and strategic thought (20%). When asked about the "weak points" of the PR sector, most of the respondents (85%) mentioned the gap between the basic concept and the way public relations are practiced nowadays, compared to 15% who gave no answer to this question. The arguments brought in this respect are related to how public relations activities are organized (60%), non-compliance with ethical standards (25%), principles and values assumed (15%). The greatest difficulties they have come across in this sector was poor communication and lack of understanding at the management level (56%), "lack of great ideas" (34%), the small budget allotted to events organization (10%). Regarding opportunities, 54% of the respondents mentioned the building and maintaining of the relation with the related audiences, whereas 46% of these pointed to initiative spirit. According to the respondents, the greatest risks related to public relations are incorrect practices (48%), lack of efficient communication strategies (30%), incoherent politics (22%).

The greatest challenges in the PR sector are enhancing reputation and credibility (40%), crisis communication (40%) and management of the relations with the press (20%). Regarding the evolution of public relations for the coming years, most of the answers assign a relevant role to responsibility and professionalism in (re)configuring them. Most of the respondents (60%) believe that the social responsibility of the organization towards its audiences should represent a reference point in the PR policy, whereas 40% of them plead for adopting professional behaviour. According to the statistical data recorded, most persons (75%) have ages around 35, whereas 25% are over 50. In terms of the educational level, 90% of these mentioned university studies, whereas 15% of them mentioned post-university studies.

5. Results and Discussions

Public relations is an inciting domain, undergoing constant development, a professional challenge reclaiming sustained efforts and team spirit. The orientation of the feminine public towards the PR sector is a consequence of the rising trend of public relations in recent years that continues to show on top of rankings. In 2013, Money Magazine/CNN ranked public relations "as one of the top 50 jobs because of the field's relatively high pay, personal satisfaction, benefit to society and flexibility". In 2014, U.S. News & World Report ranked public relations "as the best creative job and one of the top 100 careers in America". For the PR industry, U.S. Department of Labour has projected a 12 percent growth rate between 2012 and 2022. In the USA, studies on the "feminization of PR" have shown that the growing percentage of women in this sector of activity reveals that gender inequalities exist in the public relations sector, which leads to lower wages as well as the depreciation of the professional status as a result of men withdrawing from this sphere of activity (Mogel, 2002; Verhoeven and Aarts, 2010; Choi and Hon, 2002; Daymon and Demetrious, 2013; Rotman, 2001). In Romania, the PR sector records similar tendencies regarding the growing participation rate of women in this domain. However, the increasing percentage of women in the PR industry does not lead, in any case, to the devaluation of the profession but, on the contrary: "numerous companies have high demands regarding the quality of their PR female employees, and within PR agencies, women asserted themselves, long ago, as consultants for most demanding clients" (Achelis, 2009).

The major argument supporting this choice is a motivating job that is based on the "ingredients" of creativity, intelligence and emotion. In fact, recent research highlights the fact that creativity, intelligence and emotion form a triad, whose elements grow in time, interact and interconnect (Ries & Ries, 2005; Averill, 2011; Mencarelli, 1976). The standards that public relations practitioners have to constantly meet exercise a certain pressure upon them, meaning that these have to improve their communication and relating skills, and professional training on a regular basis. Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, Agee (2003, p. 84-86) believe that public relations practitioners should own several basic personal attributes, for example the ability to communicate efficiently, solve problems, creativity, identifying new and efficient solutions for each problem. Successful practitioners need basic qualities, such as "response to tension, individual initiative, curiosity and learning, energy, drive and ambition, objective thinking, flexible attitude, service to others, friendliness, versatility, lack of self-consciousness" (Cantor, cited in Lordan, 2003, p. 24).

One of the "weaknesses" of the PR sector is the gap between the basic concept and how public relations are practiced nowadays. Unfortunately, the current tendencies reveal a "devaluation" of public relations, practising them only for providing the public with information or draw the attention of the press to the organization, and not as a function of management. The quality of public relations is often evaluated quantitatively, in relation to the number of press communications, brochures or press articles and less in terms of problem solving skills (Miculescu, 2006, p. 189-190). Such skills only highlight the absence of a strategic approach to public relations, which reveals a disconnection between perception and reality. Building, maintaining and consolidating relationships with publics should be a priority for public relations practitioners. Public relations practitioners should be highly aware of the (micro) demographic features of the audience in order to adjust their message to the particularities of each category of audience. Michael Bland (cited in Green, 2006, p. 6-7) believes that "the most startling flops in public relations stem from a failure to recognize that other people will inevitably see the world differently from you; from major companies failing to understand the mentality of activists opposing them, or managers in a middle of a crisis not taking into account what people really want to hear rather than what just suits them. These all originate in an insularity of thinking, and operating within just one world view".

Credibility and reputation are the most important assets of an organization. *What you do, say and what others say about you* become reference points. For Stancu Şerb (1997, p. 7), public relations may be described like a set of means used by companies and institutions to create and maintain a climate of confidence and sympathy among the publics. For any organization, reputation management should be a priority of agenda settings (Chiciudean, David, 2011; Dowling, 2002; Dospinescu, 2011; Cismaru, 2012; Waddington and Earl, 2012). In managing reputation, it is important to cultivate and maintain different reputations in different groups, planning the communication process, as part of corporate communication (Carroll, van Riel, 1995; Varey, 1998; van Riel and Fombrum, 2007). As Cornelissen (2008) outlines "corporate communication is a management function that offers a framework for the effective coordination of all internal and external communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favourable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent". In fact, reference studies have revealed a close connection between corporate reputation and CEO reputation. The Burson-Marsteller Report, entitled "CEO Reputation Study" (2003), suggests that "CEO reputation is a major factor in determining company reputation"; 58% of the sample said that "the CEO's reputation" influences the organization's reputation to a great extent, 48% of the overall reputation of a company being attributable to the reputation of its CEO.

A significant challenge is crisis communication (Libaert, 2008; Fearn-Banks, 1996; Coman, 2009; McLoughlin, 1996). A crisis enhances the interest of the press and public, drawing attention to the organization. Optimists believe that a crisis may be controlled, pessimists believe that once the crisis installed, the organization has already lost control and the consequences are negative. To prevent such a situation, public relations practitioners should be responsive to problems that may, at one point, evolve into a crisis situation. Crisis management relies on two basic principles: the early identification of possible risks and organized reaction to manage the crisis situation efficiently (Petrovici, 2011b, p. 100). In fact, the research conducted in this sense highlights the relevance of the concept of crisis

management that, according to specialists, should represent the constant concern of an organization for identifying the most efficient strategies (Jaques, 2007; Iacob, Cismaru, 2005; Regester and Larkin, 2003; Coombs, 2001; Booth, 1993). The successful management of a crisis situation implies equal shares of honesty and transparency in the relation with the press, mutual trust and respect. Responsibility and professionalism should constitute priority lines in (re)configuring public relations. The responsibilities of practitioners within organizations are to develop, communicate and integrate the knowledge and professionalism into public relations practice (Wright & VanSlyke Tirk, 2007, p. 571).

6. Conclusions

In this article, we have analysed the domain of public relations, its defining dimensions, the basic qualities required by a successful career in public relations, challenges and perspectives for the PR sector, starting a feminist standpoint – women working in the PR sector. In Romania, we may notice an increasing preference of the female audience for the PR sector; the future of public relations "promises" to become even more feminine if we consider the number of women choosing to work in this field. The practice of public relations is an feminine activity because PR is an inciting domain that offers multiple challenges, such as building strategic relationships and spirit of initiative. In this field, the women have a head start: good instincts, intelligence, empathy and creativity. The same view is supported by Donato (1990, p. 129) who believes that „women are attracted to public relations because the field offers good opportunities". The study underlines that "women have better instincts and a different sensitivity to the communication needs of people and institutions and are therefore better suited for the practice" (Bates, 1983, p. 31), and "one reason for this ready acceptance of women is that public relations is a highly intuitive business which is a talent inborn in little girls" (Smith, 1968, p. 28).

One of the "weaknesses" of the PR sector is the gap between the basic concept and how public relations are practiced nowadays. Current trends indicate the fact that, in most cases, public relations are practiced only for informing the public, draw the attention of the press to the organization, and not as a management function that requires building problem solving skills. This aspect highlights the absence of a strategic approach to public relations particularly in the management of crisis communication, unfortunately, reflected by numerous cases of inefficient management of crisis situations.

The basic qualities for a successful career in public relations imply skills in communication and problem solving, creativity, the identification of efficient solutions to problems. For today's practice, the public relations practitioner must be "*analytical*, capable of identifying and dissecting issues. Part of the challenge of being a successful practitioner is to recognize problems before they happen and once they happen. Recognizing a problem is the first step. Being able to think strategically and tactically is the second" (Heath and Coombs, 2006, p. 166).

Responsibility and professionalism should constitute priority lines in (re)configuring public relations. Public relations involve a two-fold responsibility: responsibility towards the public, adapting behaviours with the expectances of public, respectively responsibility towards organizations, the correct presentation of the values assumed, transparency on policies. Professionalism derives from the

increasingly higher transparency we should apply to what we do, the responsibility we should take for our actions (Bernays, 1947, Miculescu, 2006).

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