Examining Perceptions about Public Relations: A Study among Communication Scholars and Public Relations Practitioners in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Public relations is the art and science of establishing relationships, monitoring and assessing public attitudes, and maintaining mutual relations and understanding between an organization and its stakeholders. It is particularly important in the area of public affairs, community relations, issues management, crisis management and media relations. However, widespread negative attitudes create misunderstanding about this profession, which ultimately degrade the status of this job. This paper aims to deconstruct the negative perceptions of public relations through examining the views of communication scholars and public relations practitioners of Bangladesh. The authors have also discussed theoretical and ethical perspectives of this profession.

Keywords: Bangladesh, ethics, negative perceptions, professional, public relation.

Introduction

It was a day when we were trying to discuss with an elder fellow of the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism about a career guideline on communication related sectors in Bangladesh. Upon spending more than a few years as a public relations professional and as a teacher in Mass Communication and Journalism in a university, it was unusual for us to believe his opinion: “Why people spend their valuable career choice on public relations?” The intent of his position indicated that public relations is seen by many as neither ethical nor an honourable profession in Bangladeshi society – it is a verbal construction of course, because there is no research and scholarly evidence that can support such argument in Bangladesh. In regional and international literatures, it is seen that people try to label this profession with various meanings that have shaped its discourse in a negative way (see for example: Bahl, 1995, p.2; Coombs and Holladay, 2007, p.13; Stern, 2010, pp.4-5). So, we asked, if this is the case then why does such a profession exist worldwide? If it did not exist, how would a journalist get information about an event or organisation? How do people know about the services of various institutions related to education, health, environment and social justice? And how is the gap between communities, people and stakeholders resolved in a pluralistic society? Such questions about how to resolve misconceptions or deconstruct the social constructions over this profession are endless. The importance of public relations (PR) is discussed among Bangladeshi communication and media scholars at the time of establishing a course for students in tertiary studies, of selecting career in a competitive job market and of establishing this profession as an ethical occupation like other professions in society.

Public relations has taken an essential and challenging shape in modern society characterized by the growth of industrialization, competitive business corporations (Barua, 2002, p.237) and non-government organisations (Lee, 2010, P.3). The importance of public relations is based on the need to convey the messages of an institution or organisation to a wide variety of people inside and outside it in order to establish and sustain its position in society by managing the relationship with stakeholders. This profession has the responsibility to act as the spokesperson and mediator, to reach target people and to manage the public perception of organisational crises through appropriate communication. This requires...
an art of communicating messages through proper channels with integrity and ethical values to maintain a cordial relationship with stakeholders. The final shape of any kind of project or strategy depends, in part, on the role of a public relations professional.

In the developed world, the public relations profession has received greater importance (Commission on Public Relations, 2009), and therefore, universities, colleges and other higher educational institutions offer higher degree or core courses in public relations, defining its scope and nature from mass communication and managerial points of view. People engaged in this profession have a defined goal to advance his or her organisation in an ethical way. Like other professions, public relations has received acknowledgment in different types of organisation for its multi-dimensional roles. However, negative attitudes persist and create misunderstandings about the role of public relations which ultimately (Nuruddin, 2002, p.258), degrade the status of this job in the eyes of employers and other professionals.

The negative attitudes towards the role of public relations have developed from the general perceptions and nomenclatures such as spin-doctoring, stone-walling or paid-lying (Sterne, 2010, pp.5 & 12). The media relations is a small part of public relations job – the public relations practitioners and allied professionals work through the media to spread information and opinions to persuade the public on behalf of their clients (Larsson, 2009, p. 131). Criticisms of public relations label the goal of the job as being to gain more and more publicity in the media through networking, relations-building, and attempting to influence media portrayals of their organisation or client. Critiques argue that it is synonymous with propaganda, citing a constant stream of abuses of public trusts by corporate communicators or public relations practitioners (Fawkes, 2007, p. 313). According to Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001), often such criticism results from either a misunderstanding of or lack of appreciation for the functions of public relations (p.195). The pessimistic labelling on public relations derived from the general discussions - as we see by scholars, journalists and related professionals - has triggered a debate on the actual role of public relations, creating an image crisis for the profession. However, the changing role of public relations includes a more ethical and societal approach. This paper aims to deconstruct the negative perceptions on public relations through examining the views of scholars of mass communication and public relations practitioners of Bangladesh in light of the theoretical point of views of public relations and code of ethics of leading public relations associations worldwide.

Public Relations from Theoretical Points of View

Public relations has been defined as the art and science of establishing relationships, monitoring and assessing public attitudes, and maintaining mutual relations and understanding between an organisation and its stakeholders. The mass media is a tool of establishing and managing the relationship with the public. In modern terms, public relations has become an indispensable part of the mass communication processes. In this process a public relations practitioner professional needs an understanding of media techniques, of communication processes and of public opinion, which can be seen as a combination of feelings, reason, consciousness and temporal experiences (Barbu, Bucur, Parvu, 2009, p. 803). In the age of globalization and influential media, an organisation does not operate in a vacuum: it depends and is affected by external influences to varying degrees (Sriramesh, 2009, p.6). A public relations practitioner bridges the gap between an organisation and its stakeholders, while scanning the horizon and formulating appropriate policies. These days it is interesting to note that the role of a public relations professional has shifted far from media relations to crisis and risk management through to maintaining professional leadership, ethics and organisational policy (Bowen, 2007, Bowen, 2009, p. 430).
The recent scholarly emphasis on public relations has focused on the relationship management perspective that balances the interests of organisation and publics through the management of organisations-public relationships (Ledingham, 2003, p.181). From this perspective, public relations is seen as “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Broom, 2009, p.21). It includes public affairs, community relations, issues management, crisis management, and media relations (Ledingham, 2003, p.181). Later approaches to public relations have focused on strategic management. From this perspective, public relations is designed to build relationships with stakeholders, rather than being a set of messaging activities designed to buffer the organisation from them (Grunig, 2009, p.9). The strategic management paradigm emphasizes two-way communication to provide the publics with a voice in management decisions and to facilitate dialogue between management and the publics both before and after decisions are made.

The role of public relations has also been understood in relation to its contribution to national identity and rebuilding communities (Taylor and Kent, 2006, p.303). It focuses on how communication efforts are used to establish, maintain or change relationships between organisations and the publics. It relates to the theory of social communication on the ways in which socio-cultural groups cluster and how forms of cohesion affect institutions and socio-cultural interactions (Schlesinger, 1998, p.3). Public relations work through the communication facilities in modern society, bridging the gap among opinion leaders to form social unity and setting a link between people and development processes of a country. According to Sriramesh (2009), developing countries where the majority of the population of the world resides, have their own priorities such as nation-building and therefore use public relations as a tool for this purpose (p.6). An example is the use of development communication through local, community and dialogical tools of communication such as folk media, community radio, posters, and group discussion to enhance the development activities. The public relations techniques and tools are regarded as a series of strategic communication efforts aimed at improving the condition of a segment of society by increasing their level of awareness about their condition, producing changes in their cognitions and attitudes, and often influencing their behaviour (Martinez, 2006, p.6).

**Ethics in Public Relations**

Ethics is an important concept in people's lives. The term ‘ethics’ varies from person to person and from society to society due to the changeable nature of human mind, behaviours and the acceptance of these behaviours in society with recognition. It is a learned behaviour like defining accepted rules that indicate good or bad behaviour in a society. The word ethics comes from the Greek word ‘ethos’, meaning character or custom (Solomon, 1999, p.4). The American Heritage Dictionary offers that “ethics is the study of the general nature of morals and specific moral choices; moral philosophy; and the rules of standards governing the conduct of the members of a profession” (cited in Ferrell, Fraedrich & Ferrell, 2000, p.5). Parsons (2008) has described ethics in public relations as “the application of knowledge, understanding and reasoning to questions of right or wrong behaviour in the professional practice of public relations” (p.9). It includes values such as honesty, openness, loyalty, fair-mindedness, respect, integrity, and forthright communication (Bowen, 2007). These opinions seemingly include a defined area of ethical guidelines for the public relations profession with an adequate impression that the public relations ethics has gone far beyond the thought of generating persuasive message or spin-doctoring.

The profession of public relations in developed countries has codified ethics based on public relations related societies and associations. Public relations literature also demonstrates a history of ethical discourse surrounding public relations practices which has contributed to the emergence and evolution of
public relations codes and practices (Quinn-Allan, 2010, p.43). Membership in these associations is voluntary, meaning that one is not required to belong to such an association in order to practice public relations (Bowen, 2007). Members agree to abide by a code of ethics that is written for the entire group. Some codes of ethics are written in terms that forbid a list of certain activities; other codes of ethics espouse a set of ethical principles which should be followed. For example, The International Public Relations Association based on United States of America Code of Ethics adopted several Code of Conducts for the public relations professionals in 2010 (Consolidated “IPRA Code of Conduct”, 2010, pp.1-2). Endorsed in 2011, the IPRA Code of Conduct is an affirmation of professional and ethical conduct by members of the International Public Relations Association and recommended to public relations practitioners worldwide. Similarly, the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) and the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) require their members to adhere to the highest standards of ethical practice and professional competence (Individual code of ethics, 2010, Code of Ethics, 2011). These three organisations draw from similar principles in the discussion of ethical practices with some changes in phrasing the codes.

This study examines the negative perceptions about public relations that exist among the communications scholars and public relations related professionals. Thus, it is relevant to find the major points among these codes to fit within the context of Bangladesh. To serve the purpose of this paper, the relevant points from the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) code of ethics seem to be suitable for its nature to cover about all the prevailing discussed aspects of ethics in public relations (Code of Ethics, 2011). The major points include advising that a member shall practice public relations according to the highest professional standards. Their professional lives shall be conducted in a manner that does not conflict with the public interest and the dignity of the individual, with respect to the rights of the public. That means the public relations profession is based on respecting the betterment of the public and society generally. The second section in the code prioritizes the point of honesty: a member shall deal fairly and honestly with the communications media and the public. Members shall neither propose nor act to improperly influence the communications media, government bodies or the legislative process. Improper influence may include conferring gifts, privileges or benefits to influence decisions. Similarly, section three indicates that the public relations professional should maintain transparency and truthfulness in his or her work. It relates to the morals when the information is disseminated from his or her working stations: a member shall practise the highest standards of honesty, accuracy, integrity and truth, and shall not knowingly disseminate false or misleading information. The members shall not engage in professional or personal conduct that will bring discredit to themselves, the Society or the practice of public relations.

Privacy issues are emphasized within the code in section six, which states that a member shall protect the confidences of present, former and prospective employers or clients. Members shall not use or disclose confidential information obtained from past or present employers or clients without the expressed permission of the employers or clients or an order of a court of law. The importance to avoid conflict is underlined in the code in section seven: “a member shall not represent conflicting or competing interests without the expressed consent of those concerned, given after a full disclosure of the facts”. Members shall not permit personal or other professional interests to conflict with those of an employer or client without fully disclosing such interests to everyone involved. Finally, in the code in section nine, it is forbidden to personally accept fees, commissions, gifts or any other considerations for professional services from anyone except employers or clients for whom the services were specifically performed.
Method of this Study

This is a qualitative study, and the idea to do this study was developed in an intellectual interaction between the two authors. It has used interview technique with six major questions to understand what perceptions are held among interviewee about the roles, ethics and image of public relations in Bangladesh. The respondents were requested to complete the questionnaire with detailed reasoning in support of their arguments. To maintain ethical guidelines, their status and identities are not disclosed. The study is based on face to face, telephone and email interviews with 30 communication professionals that include ten university teachers, ten journalists and ten public relations professionals who are based in Dhaka, and other cities in Bangladesh. Among them, 20 are males and 10 are females. The university teachers were selected in terms on their teaching related to communication and public relations. The public relations professionals were selected on the basis of their professional attachment with public relations and communication sectors. And finally, the journalists were chosen from leading English language newspapers for their interactions with public relations and communication professionals regularly. It has utilized snowball sampling techniques to collect data from three groups of populations. The data gathered through interview has been presented below with our relevant discussion under major six questions that were asked in the interview in English language.

Results

1. Do you think that the public relations (PR) profession has flourished in Bangladesh?

Understanding of public relations among various quarters of society is still poor and vague - that was echoed by 23.3% respondents in this interview. According to their responses, the public relations profession has not yet flourished in Bangladesh properly in comparison with other neighbouring and developing nations. The reasons are ignorance of the organisations/institutions/companies about the importance of public relations, lack of trained people and incapacity of the respective institutions to develop human resources. Most organisations do not have specialized public relations professionals, but the work is done through other professionals who are not from related disciplines.

In contrast to the above response, 76.6% respondents thought that the public relations profession has been flourishing for two decades in Bangladesh. This is because the socio-economic and cultural processes of Bangladesh have been transformed following the change in the market system in the 1990s. Several dynamics such as return of democracy, increased connectivity with global economy, rise of the literacy rate, more penetration of all forms of mass media etc have contributed to this transformation cumulatively. People are now more in need of information. This has made the way for more empowerment and more awareness of their rights. This has also created a space where mass media and its mediated information affects and sometimes controls the central part of our society. In this space, where everything is settled and negotiated through mass media, it is political, corporate and social organisations that are striving to maintain trust and good relationships with the public. Public relations professionals can play a catalyst role between the organisations and publics/stakeholders. The most recent addition to this growth is the establishment of five pioneering public relations consultancy firms in Bangladesh – Masthead PR, Forethought PR, IMPACT PR, Concito PR, and Benchmark PR (Genilo, Akther & Chowdhury, 2011, p.192).

2. How do you find the importance of the public relations profession for Bangladeshi society and economy? Do you think that the public relations profession is an honourable profession in our labour market?
The most important finding in this study is all the respondents agreed that public relations has enormous importance in our society. The communication wing of various government and non-government offices utilize public relations techniques to achieve their goals, and encourage people to participate in different social activities including volunteer work, donations, campaigns and so on. Public relations helps to build up the reputation of the organisations, which accounts for a large portion of a company’s capitalization. Since public relations protects and advances the free flow of information and fosters informed decision making through open communication, it helps to strengthen the public’s trust in an organisation. In this way, it helps to improve the marketing of the products and services of a company and directly contributes to the economy. Most of the respondents also believed that public relations is an honourable profession. In 1982, the Government of Bangladesh issued a Demi Official (No.210/82 Secy/IF Dt./9/12/82) recognizing public relations as a “specialized” profession and honouring the public relations professionals as “specialists” as well as providing specific guidelines for public relations practice (Genilo, Akther & Chowdhury, 2011, p.191).

Some 13.3% respondents think that it bridges the gap between the public and the ruling class in Bangladesh. It can be used to build trust among the labourers and to resolve conflicts among them by letting them know the actual status of the company. The modern role of a public relations professional includes not only the job of disseminating information to the public through using the communications channels, but also the job of policy planning through strategic communication with stakeholders and through identifying threats and exploiting opportunities. They think that public relations somehow is used in sectors from social development to corporate and from grass-root to top level.

3. Do you have any idea about ethics in public relations? Is there anything like ethics in public relations in Bangladesh?

In public relations research, it is widely agreed that ethics must be central to professional practices (Pratt, 1993, p. 219). The field suffers from an image crisis due to credibility gaps between public relations practitioners and the public (Bovet, 1993, p.26). 73.3% respondents indicated that they had familiarity with the ethical side of the public relations profession. They are of the opinion that public relations practitioners should be honest in dealing with their stakeholders. They should protect and advance free flow of accurate and true information, and encourage feedback to the public (both internal and external) on decision making. Public relations professionals should keep secret important information of the organisations, while also working to achieve the public’s trust, because the final shape of any kind of assignment depends on the role of a successful public relations professional. In the context of Bangladesh, ethics is prevalent in public relations profession— as 73.3% respondents put their opinions positively. They agreed that the public relations professionals who come from the disciplines of Mass Communication, Journalism and Public Relations should maintain ethical guidelines of public relations set by Bangladesh Public Relations Association (Banglapedia, 2011).

4. Some people mix public relations with propaganda, saying that it is a deviated profession – how do you evaluate this fixation over this profession?

86.6% respondents totally disagreed with this argument, while the remainder did not respond. The majority argued that it is a misconception among the general mass and even among educated people that public relations and propaganda are similar. They think it is a misrepresentation. Respondents believe that the misconception is also present among the public relations practitioners and employers, because some
of them are unaware about the modern roles of public relations in various sectors of the economy and society. 40% respondents indicated that colleagues and media-related related professional also feel jealous over the status of a public relations professional, because it is a rewarding and challenging profession. They also added that misconceptions surrounding public relations stem from various professional and ideological conflicts following the public relations’ task of establishing relationships with media journalists who have different values in making the news and therefore dealing with the public relations professionals. However, a public relations professional bears an important role in disseminating information. For example, how will journalists get information about the current development of the strike in a sea port in an easily understood manner unless the public relations men/women of this port provide the information? So, a public relations professional bridges the gap between organisations and media.

40 % respondents also feel that there are some people and scholars who want to label this profession as saying it is a tool of corporate organisations for only profit making and spreading propaganda, but they forget that public relations is also a tool for economic development and for non-profit organisations promoting their work. It bridges the gap between known and unknown in a social system where various ideologies, struggles and opinions try to survive in co-existence. It meets with the thought of an international scholar Jacqui L’ Etang (2009), who said that public relations operates on behalf of many different types of organisation both at the government and corporate level, to small and voluntary sectors (p.13). Public relations arises at points of societal change and resistance (Ibid).

5. Do you recommend that an individual degree course on public relations should be introduced in higher educational institutions in Bangladesh?

The consumption of information through various media is increasing, and therefore the need for public relations professionals to practise in an effective manner is essential. 73% respondents suggested that an individual degree course should be introduced in major educational organisations. Since public relations is a practical job, the course outlines should be developed from a multi-dimensional approach that should include mass communication, journalism, behavioural science, languages and desktop publishing. Some respondents also argued that a public relations professional will not only prepare a press release, rather he/she will work as the spokesperson of an organisation with confidence, trust and ethics. The training and education should be developed in such a way that can enhance the expertise of public relations practitioners. University of Dhaka, University of Rajshahi and University of Liberal Arts offer such individual and major courses on public relations as a component of a Mass Communication, Media Studies or Marketing degree while other organisations occasionally arrange some refresher courses for their relevant employees. To answer this question, 13.3% respondents added that the respective organisations should also organize some workshops for the public relations professionals to enhance their skills in terms of the change in technology and work-environment.

6. What is your suggestion on ethical need in the area of public relations in Bangladesh?

To develop professionalism in public relations, ethics is central. 76% respondents mentioned that a code of ethics should be followed by every public relations professional in their respective working area, because it will promote transparency and accountability in the profession and therefore stability with other professions in society. Some 16.6% respondents also supported the code of ethics set by the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) to follow as ethical guidelines for public relations work in Bangladesh. They were aware of these codes due to their intellectual attachment with public relations discipline. Since a public relations person holds the position of a spokesperson of an organisation, he or
she should be honest and truthful in dealing with stakeholders and in disseminating information. Otherwise, among the public and journalists, it will create confusion and distrust in turn about the organisation. A public relations professional needs to develop trust with the public, which is possible, in part, through the practice of honesty and truthfulness. The job of a public relations professional is to develop the image of an organisation. Once this image is tarnished by any kind of negative news or information, it is very difficult to salvage this.

Conclusion

The current investigation is based on the theoretical discussion about the modern role of public relations with ethical guidelines, and on the data collected in an interview with communications related professionals. It has found that public relations is an emerging profession in Bangladeshi society where it has received scant attention previously. Most of the respondents thought that the public relations profession has been flourishing for two decades in Bangladesh followed by the changes in socio-economic and cultural processes in the 1990s. However, it is very usual to find some quarters in this society have vague misconceptions about this profession because of their lack of awareness about the real concepts about it. It is supposed that at past people from other disciplines somehow served the job, and therefore the recognition went to them only. The present scenario has changed with the emergence of graduates from communication related disciplines that cover major practical courses on public relations. Advertisements from national and international organisations ask for the public relations professional with degrees from Mass communication and Journalism. In turn, human resource departments in various organisations also appraise the meaning of this profession to achieve better outcomes following their communicative and strategic goals.

The most important finding in this study is that the majority of respondents agreed that public relations is an ethical and honourable profession which has enormous importance in our society. The respondents think that it not only provides media relations, but also a managerial and spokesperson position that bridges the gap between the public and the ruling class. It facilitates dialogue in building trust among the labourers and to resolve conflicts among them by letting them know the actual situation of the company. Public relations covers a wide area of service that can be used to educate and make the public aware about disease, new things and about their rights as well. Since people are unaware about the multi-dimensional functions of public relations, sometimes they mix it with propaganda and advertising. The findings also show that it is a misconception among the general mass and even among educated people that public relations and propaganda are similar. In reality, it is an ethical profession guided by a set of codes of ethics. In this study, the majority of respondents also suggested that the public relations professional follows a code of ethics to promote transparency and accountability in order to make stable their profession. In the context of Bangladesh, it has been recommended by some respondents to follow the codes of ethics set by Canadian Public Relations Association (CPRA). Since the profession is at the growing stage in this society, it may be a usual phenomenon to listen to something negative about it from colleagues or any other person. However, it is the job of public relations professionals to uphold the image of the profession through using analytical, truthful and ethical behaviour so that the final impression about the organisation and a public relations professional himself is established positively.
References:


