Commentary

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Is Asia passing us by? The challenge to Australian public relations

As the global economy shifted from west to east, an increased interest in public relations in Asia emerged, albeit mostly from Europe and the US. One would imagine that given our proximity, or some would argue, belonging in the region, Australian businesses and public relations would not just follow but lead and embrace this opportunity. Unfortunately, we have not.

A recent PWC report highlighted how Australian businesses are passing by the opportunities in Asia. The study of 1013 survey respondents and 70 in-depth interviews revealed only 9 per cent of Australian business are currently operating in Asia, and 65 per cent have no intention of doing so in the next two to three years. While they are trading with Asia, they are not investing there. When asked what was holding businesses back, the responses revealed a lack of knowledge about culture, language and traditions, a perception that there were too many barriers such as corruption, legal and trade barriers, and an unwillingness to change the status quo.

The recent PRIA conference reflected this phenomenon. Despite its theme of ‘huge transformations’, the program and speaker lists have not changed much since I became a member in 1993. The speaker list was still predominantly

Caucasian and the topics remained focused on Australian practice. Fortunately the academic stream focused on public relations in the Asia Pacific, but it generated little interest among academics and almost nil from practitioners. So why is this case? Does ‘public relations expertise’ reside only among an elite Caucasian, Anglo-speaking group? Or do we simply have a limited knowledge of the expertise in the region?

I would like to think it is the latter. The lack of Asian literacy in Australia businesses has been previously identified in the Australia in the White Century paper . The same paper also acknowledged that businesses have not fully leveraged the talent pool in our Asian Australian communities. It seems the Australian public relations industry is no exception despite our claims to being a multicultural society. In Australia, 26% of the population are born overseas and this diversity is often reflected in their domestic student cohorts who are either first or second generation migrants. While Europeans still represented 40% of its migrant population, Asian migrants numbers increased from 24% in 2001 to 33% in 2011 . Similarly Asian migrants account for about 46% of academic staff in Australian universities (Hugo 2004). And yet the public relations industry is still predominantly Caucasian (Wolf 2015).

I recall a conversation with a former student in the late 1990s who queried why we had a topic ‘gender and multiculturalism’ in my public relations class. I asked her why she asked the question. She said, “Marianne, for my generation, it is a non-issue. Most of my classmates in school come from a different ethnic background.” But I said to her “Well, look at your (university public relations) class now and tell me what you see.” There was one girl from Asia and the rest were Anglo-Saxon students from the Eastern suburbs. The demographic has slightly changed with the influx of international students to Australian universities in recent years. To my knowledge, Australian public relations educators with Asian backgrounds jumped by 300 percent—from one to three (myself included).

Many of us, educators and practitioners, engage with Asia, particularly Southeast Asia but the engagement seems to be predominantly one way—contrary to what we espouse. To further exacerbate the situation, we export ‘western educational programs’ and reap the economic benefits from Asia, making international education the fourth largest export of the country. We even deliver these programs in Asia with very minimal adjustments, if at all, to the local context.

The discourse of international education has focused on Asia as a ‘revenue’ source and a ‘market’ for educational programs, instead of a learning partner. Sometimes we refer to ‘capacity building’ as the purpose of our engagement but even this term is underpinned by power dimensions. It assumes a deficit in someone’s capacity that needs to be developed with the intervention of someone...
with a higher capacity. But we need to ask, whose capacity is being built? As the PWC report and the previous government’s Australia in the Asian Century paper indicated, it is Australia’s capacity in Asian literacy that needs to be built.

There is no dearth of public relations texts and articles on Asia (see Deveraux and Pierson-Smith 2011; Sriramesh 2002, 2004; Watson 2014). A review I undertook in 2013 of the 27 PRIA-accredited undergraduate public relations programs revealed only three courses explicitly mentioned the Asia Pacific region, and within a market context (Sison 2013). While this small number may reflect the limitations of online course information rather than actual class content, educators need to continually push for increasing their students’ Asian literacy. For example, our public relations students prefer to go on semester exchange or enroll in study tours to Europe or the US, unlike our journalism students who enthusiastically sign up for internship opportunities in Indonesia, Cambodia and Korea. The Australian Government practically has to ‘bribe’ Australian students with generous New Colombo Plan scholarships to study in Asia. And yet very few take up the offer.

Moreover despite our international students’ investment in Australian education, we have not reciprocated their trust. How many Australian companies have provided PR internships for them? As with our local students, our international students need to balance their classroom education with practical work experience. But the opportunities are extremely limited for international students even after graduating from our accredited programs. So why are PR employers hesitant to offer internships to our international, particularly Asian, students when they would have been in country for at least three years? It would easily be a great opportunity to increase the company’s Asian literacy while offering what could be a career-defining break for a future global practitioner. It could also be a mutually transformative experience.

In the past year, I have been meeting with public relations practitioners, academics and students in Southeast Asia as part of my research project on corporate social responsibility, public relations and community development in the region. During my visits to Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines, there is so much I am learning about the nuances of public relations practice in each of these countries. However their curricula are still predominantly western-oriented because most of the textbooks are US- and UK publications. As former World Bank president James Wolfensohn lamented, "In the past decade we have allowed our Asian friends to learn about us, from us, but we have learnt very little from Asia and that is a tragedy."5

So where do we go from here? Based on the interest and topics reflected in

this journal, we academics have the opportunity to lead and assist the industry increase its Asia literacy. I call on my colleagues to continue pushing our boundaries of knowledge in public relations. Before we challenge our students to experience the unfamiliar and learn away from our comfort zones, we need to start with ourselves. If we want to encourage mutual understanding, we need to practise what we preach. Asian neighbours are interested to engage with us. Let us learn together in partnership with our Asian colleagues. Let us learn with Asia. We cannot afford to let Asia pass us by.

References


