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Public relations and the new golden age of Spain: a confluence of democracy, economic development and the media

Donn James Tilson^{a,*}, Pilar Saura Pérez^b

^a *School of Communication, University of Miami, Frances L. Wolfson Building,
5150 Brunson Drive, Coral Gables, FL 33146, USA*

^b *School of Information Science, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1561 Salvatierra Drive,
Coral Gables, FL 33134, USA*

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Abstract

This article presents a review of the public relations profession, including institutions of higher education, in post-Franco Spain within the context of changes in the nation's political, economic and media landscape. Based on field research with practitioners and educators and recent findings of various professional association surveys, the article suggests that a healthy democracy with political stability, economic development, and a dynamic media have provided both the foundation and the impetus for a flourishing public relations sector.

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Cervantes. Velázquez. El Greco. They perhaps best represent Spain's Golden Age, when the nation's borders stretched from Belgium to the Philippines (named after Philip II), and its economy and arts flourished. Today, more than 500 years after Columbus' voyages to the New World, Spain is resurgent once again, and a different form of communication—public relations—symbolizes its rebirth.

Spain and Europe, in general, have attracted a good deal of attention recently. On January 1, 2001, 12 of the 15 members of the European Union adopted a common currency, the euro, in yet another step toward establishing a “United States of Europe” (Denmark, Sweden and the United Kingdom opted to keep their national currencies). The move represented the largest monetary

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-305-284-2265; fax: +1-305-284-3648.

E-mail address: donntilson@aol.com (D.J. Tilson).

conversion in history, putting some US\$600 billion worth of euros, about 15 billion notes and 52 billion coins, into circulation.¹ The transnational currency will be instrumental in facilitating greater economic integration even as the EU has enhanced political cohesion through a common legal code, bill of rights, court system, flag, anthem, parliament, central bank, and army.

More important, however, putting euros in the pockets of some 302 million Europeans sends an important political message to the rest of the world. As European Central Bank President William Duisenberg noted, “The euro is much more than a currency . . . It will be a daily symbol of the integration of Europe.”² Indeed, the Central Bank spent US\$70 million on a trans-national campaign to promote greater awareness of the euro; in Spain, the government sponsored a public education campaign even as banks gave away free calculators to help the mathematically-challenged.³

A member of the EU since 1986, Spain often has been in the forefront of continental attention. Seville hosted the 1992 Universal Exposition, a major international business and cultural forum, incorporating the quincentennial of Columbus’s first trans-Atlantic voyage to the Americas in the programming. That same year Madrid organized a series of cultural events as one of Europe’s designated Capitals of Culture, an annual EU-sponsored program; Santiago de Compostela (2000) and Seville (2002) also have been Capitals of Culture.

Spanish President José Maria Aznar currently chaired the rotating EU presidency and, at one point, the chairman of the European Parliament and the EU’s commissioner for Latin America affairs also were Spaniards as was the Secretary General of NATO,⁴ not to mention former International Olympic Committee President Juan Antonio Samaranch. In March 2002, Barcelona hosted an EU economic summit that paved the way for a general agreement to open the continent’s energy, transportation, and postal services sectors to competition by 2004. Those reforms, coupled with “boosting investment in education and research and development, and promoting high tech, are all part of the EU goal to become the world’s most ‘dynamic economy’ by 2010.”⁵ The next month, Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Pique led an EU-delegation to Jerusalem to broker a cease-fire agreement between warring Israeli and Palestinian forces.

1. Methodology

Several methodologies were used to obtain data on economic, political, and historical developments as well as on the media industry and public relations profession. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with corporate and media figures and public relations educators were conducted both in person and by e-mail to gather industry and higher education data. A textual analysis of institutional media provided additional insights as to key messages, strategy, tactics, and publics. On-site visits to consultancies, media, and universities provided further institutional collateral and other data.

2. Public relations and society

Many have argued that “economic expansion and promotion [i.e., advertising, public relations] are intertwined variables in a nation-state’s development in various capitalistic societies”

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