

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Public Relations Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pubrev

Full length article

Trends in education of communication professionals: The perspective of educators and employers in Croatia

Damir Jugo, Lana Ciboci*, Maro Alavanja

Edward Bernays College of Communication Management, Zagreb, Croatia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Public relations
 Formal education
 Academics
 Practitioners
 Employers
 Skills
 Knowledge

ABSTRACT

The extremely rapid development of technology raises the importance of leaders of higher education institutions, as well as educators teaching public relations, to monitor scientific developments of the profession, market trends, and in particular, the needs of employers who will in the future employ recently educated personnel. This element is even more pronounced during times of global crisis in the communications industry where the number of jobs is decreasing, and the increase in criticism of educational institutions, which can be summarized in the claim that educational programs are not adapted to market needs. Guided by this situation, in this paper, the authors analyze the interrelationship between the academic community and employers in the communications industry, and compare their views on the issue of knowledge, skills and competencies which communication professionals must possess in order to be successful in this profession. The main research question is to what extent the views on the quality of education of future PR professionals differ from the perspective of employers and the academic community.

1. Introduction

Public relations, as a profession, is without a doubt developing rapidly and constantly. The growing impact of technology and globalization on the PR practice consequently affects educational programs that are preparing future professionals for their work posts. Chung and Choi (2012) note that, along with its development, many scholars and practitioners in this field suggest that new approaches in education should be developed for the purpose of dealing with new challenges in public relations, in terms of professionalism in the modern global society (p. 375). Educators must respond to changes that technology is bringing to the communities they serve, otherwise the academy can face the prospect of becoming irrelevant by not providing students with the skills and knowledge required by the marketplace (Alexander, 2004, p. 1). As in any profession, the connection between educators and practitioners in the field of public relations is evident, since the former prepare future professionals for their careers in practice, while the later, taking the roles of their employers, are strongly interested in preparing them as best possible. The need for consensus among scholars, educators and practitioners about an ideal public relations curriculum has been a topic of numerous debates (Sriramesh and Hornaman, 2006, p. 158). The rapid growth of the public relations profession in the last decade has caused a growing demand for public relations/communication management specialists by a number of contemporary organizations, which has led to a small expansion of studies in public relations throughout Europe (Gonçalves, 2009, p. 37). According to L'Etang (2008), education plays a very important role in the professionalization of a field by providing both the knowledge base which underpins the specialist expertise sold in the market place and both credibility and qualifications which can be used for gatekeeping purposes to achieve social closure and limit who can and cannot practice (p. 40). It is then necessary to constantly analyze the interrelationship in attitudes of

* Corresponding authors at: Edward Bernays College of Communication Management, Ratkajev prolaz 8, Zagreb, Croatia.
 E-mail address: ana.ciboci@bernays.hr (L. Ciboci).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.06.002>

Received 14 October 2016; Received in revised form 7 April 2017; Accepted 4 June 2017
 0363-8111/ © 2017 Published by Elsevier Inc.

academics and employers in the communications industry, and compare their views on concepts of education in the communication field. The purpose of research conducted in this paper is to compare the attitudes of academics and practitioners working in the field of public relations in Croatia regarding the knowledge and skills necessary for students to be able to work independently in practice. The intention of the paper is to define the interrelationship and identify possible gaps and discrepancies in attitudes between the two groups that are essential in educating future public relations professionals and nurturing them into practice. This insight will provide useful guidelines for developing a better relationship between academic institutions and organizations operating in public relations practice. In order to provide better insight and to substantiate the discussion on the obtained data, presented is a brief synthesis about the educational programs design guidelines articulated by academics, practitioners and relevant institutions.

2. Literature review

There have been numerous debates regarding the ideal concept of public relations study programs on all levels of higher education. The main question has always been directed towards defining ideal competencies that students and future professionals should have in the moment when entering public relations practice. Most significant research that led to forming precise recommendations for educational programs in this field were carried out by several Commissions on Public Relations Education that have operated from the early 1970s. [Kruckeberg \(1998\)](#) states that these commissions have produced a number of reports that summarized recommendations for undergraduate study programs and master degree programs in public relations (p. 235). For the purpose of this paper, work and recommendations made by these commissions can be divided in two phases; (1) from 1970 to 1999 and (2) from 1999 to 2012.

The initial Commission was formed in the early 1970s, and its 1975 report was the first *Design for Public Relations Education*. Another Commission was established in the early 1980s; in April 1985, a Commission recommended a detailed curriculum for graduate education. The 1987 Commission on Undergraduate Public Relations Education, during its first meeting in 1984, reaffirmed the 1975 recommendations until its own report could be published. The sole focus of the 1987 Commission was on the undergraduate curriculum. The 1975 Commission named specific public relations courses while the 1987 Commission addressed course content which should be covered in a comprehensive public relations program ([Kruckeberg, 1998, p. 236](#)). [Auger and Cho \(2013\)](#) note that the main question raised in the recommendations during the first period were related to the number of public relations courses that were offered by an institute of higher learning's public relations program since many public relations programs were offered as part of journalism and mass communication majors (p. 52). Debating about the content of these reports, [Kruckeberg \(1998\)](#) concluded that public relations education cannot be relegated as a subset of journalism and mass communication any more than medicine can be a subset of biology. He added that public relations must continue to use the knowledge-and-skills base of journalism and mass communication, speech/communication, the social and behavioral sciences, business administration and the liberal arts; furthermore, its education will best remain proximate if not collegially allied to these areas (p. 239).

The Commission on Public Relations Education published a series of reports between 1999 and 2012. *A Port of Entry*, first of the reports published in 1999, provided a detailed description of 12 areas of competence and 20 specific skills that students completing undergraduate degrees should possess. The Commission also emphasized that the undergraduate public relations curriculum should be grounded in a strong traditional liberal arts and social science education ([Commission for Public Relations Education \(CPRE\), 1999, p. 2-3](#)). The second report, *The Professional Bond*, was published in 2006. Based on five "waves" of research, the Commission concluded that there is substantial agreement between educators and practitioners on what a public relations undergraduate student should learn, and therefore be able to perform at the practitioner entry level. The report defined that writing skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, "a good attitude", an ability to communicate publicly, and initiative were the skills needed in educational programs. There was also agreement that a public relations education should include an internship, practicum or some other work experience in the field ([CPRE, 2006, p. 5](#)). This report emphasized the need to include both ethics and diversity in public relations curricula, as well as the imperative for students to be able to understand and appreciate communication technology and the societal ramifications of its use ([CPRE, p. 6](#)). The third report, *Educating for Complexity*, was published in 2012 and it focused on master degree education in Public Relations. It outlined that practitioners and educators agreed that desirable knowledge categories tended to be grouped into "strategic management", "business", "theory" and "globalization". The most highly rated knowledge category was "ethics," and the highest-rated skill was "mastery of language in oral or written form." Completing a comprehensive project was rated highest as the culminating experience for a master's degree, while practitioners and educators were split on whether a master's degree is important in hiring ([CPRE, 2012, p. 8](#)). The report emphasized the need for a mastery of language in oral and written form and agreed that a master's degree curriculum needed to include the skills of strategic planning, ethical decision-making, persuasive writing, management of communication, issues management and research ([CPRE, p. 9](#)).

Besides the Commission of Public Relations Education, there was other research conducted on this topic. [Tench, Verhoeven, and Juma \(2015\)](#) highlighted writing skills and critical thinking as key skills that future practitioner should have. They cite the Corporate Communications Institute's (CCI) Corporate Communication Practices and Trends 2005 study, which listed 23 separate skills that form a "skill set necessary for success as a corporate communicator in a global business environment", as well as the work of [Goodman \(2006\)](#), [Oughton \(2004\)](#), [Brown & Fall \(2005\)](#), [McCleneghan \(2006\)](#), [Jeffrey & Brunton \(2011\)](#) and [Sha \(2011\)](#), all identifying these two skills and knowledge areas as very important qualities of communication practitioners (p. 97).

Skills necessary for future public relations professionals was one of the topics of the National Communication Association's 1998 summer conference. The recommendations of this conference were, among others, directed towards the importance of technology in public relations, and noted that students should understand new technology, be able to manage communication and information technologies, integrate technology into practice and keep up to date with emerging technology ([Taylor, 2001, p. 3](#)). Furthermore,

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