Implications of globalisation for the public relations practice

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Abstract

This discussion paper explores the concept of globalisation, the impact of globalisation on culture, and the implications for public relations practitioners. Globalisation, viewed from a narrow perspective, may lead to a certain amount of global 'sameness'. In other aspects, ethnic and cultural identities are getting stronger; the reverse of what subscribers to the notion of Western cultural imperialism expect. For public relations practitioners in the field of international public relations there are many implications that at first might not be recognized if the simplistic view that globalisation leads to a homogenized global culture is adhered to.

Keywords: globalization, culture, public relations

Globalisation

Historically, colonialism has brought a certain amount of cultural imperialism and domination. Missionaries were responsible for exporting Western cultural beliefs to the most 'remote' corners of the globe, often leading the way for colonialism (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997: 53). The world has been getting smaller with cultural links being forced and forged for hundreds of years. The only difference now is the speed with which the export and saturation of Western culture and products is happening. Albrow (1990: 9) defines globalisation as "all those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society, global society. " Pieterse (1995, pp 45-68) argues that since these processes are plural there are many different concepts of globalisation, and therefore is multidimensional in nature. Culture can be

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defined as "the way people understand reality of or world around them" (Limaye & Victor, 1995: 220).

Globalisation has been viewed as today's cultural imperialism. Western, especially American culture infiltrates others, subversively changing them. There is the fear that all peripheral cultures will eventually be subsumed into this global Western-based culture. As a result of the globalisation of business, there is the omnipresence of Western cultural goods; Levis, Nike, Shell and Coca-Cola products can be bought anywhere, music and films are distributed globally and so called export of "democratic" systems serve as excuse for international conflicts such as the war in Irak. In this sense there is homogeneity of global culture, although one could argue that this relates more to business, political and consumer sub-cultures. According to Limaye and Victor (1995: 218) "a host of major multinational corporations have more than half of their sales in foreign markets rather than their home base of operations. " The idea behind global mass culture being American-dominated by music, film, and advertising is based on the displacement of the weaker, peripheral cultures. Capitalism has allowed for centres of power and wealth to build up across the globe. Technological advancements, corporate developments, and foreign exchange markets are a result of capitalism. Globalisation is the next stage in the process.

Limaye and Victor (1995: 227) discuss the different positions held by universalists and relativist. Universalists maintain that globalisation is causing cultural homogeneity as far as the over-arching or macro issues are concerned. For instance, Coca-cola is available in over 150 countries. Cultures across the globe are united by their Coca-Cola consumption. Universalists also propose that organisational management is becoming more and more similar as "technology, market conditions, and organisational structures have a greater impact on management styles and process than cultural variations" (Limaye & Victor, 1995: 227). Relativists claim that organisation management has always been culturally specific and will remain so. As an example, relativists point out that human resources management has had to be based on local cultural values, or organisations wouldn't have any employees.

However, this notion that only Western culture infiltrates others is not completely correct. Pieterse (1995: 53) argues that there has been significant impact by non-Western cultures on the West. For example: foods, fashion, and children's games (such as Pokeman). Pieterse terms this phenomenon 'global melange', or hybridization: separate cultures merging to produce new hybrid cultures.

The impact of globalisation

Globalisation is a complex process of which Westernisation is a major factor. It can be argued that it is a result of the conglomeration of industry by a small group of players in each sector due to 'mergermania'. As the US and other Western core market become saturated, the conglomerates search for new, untapped markets such as China, India, Sout Africa and Nigeria, which continue to be of interest in 2005 and beyond. There

is thus a push since the nineties when globalisation became "fashionable" for globalisation by business interests. For example, media conglomerates such as Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, and News Corp have expanded on a global scale to maintain growth and increase profits meanwhile exporting Western cultural products. New technologies associated with the Internet before and after the millennium bubble busts continue to increase access to worldwide audiences, essentially competing for 'eyeballs' with the traditional media giants (Barnouw, *et al.*, 1997). New international markets provide good opportunities to gain business from advertisers. Markets such as China provide significant potential audiences, although the reverse may be more true as the recently reported (LaTimes, 2005, [online]) growing trade deficit of the USA with China of $162 billion demonstrates. With an increasing number worldwide of households owning televisions, opportunities for international/transnational companies are literally exponential. The media conglomerates have not yet made the anticipated large profits, resulting from the absence of the need to produce new programming for these international markets. Although they have discovered that news and children's programmes are accepted globally, they struggle with software piracy and copyright infringements which are difficult to legally pursue. However, both genres of entertainment require little cultural adaptation and the tendency is still towards expansion with limited costs. Cartoons are 'portable'. As Lieberman points out in *Conglomerates and the Media* (Barnouw, *et al.*, 1997: 42) "talking mice, rabbits, ducks, and dogs don't have a nationality – and their voices are easily overdubbed". While this is not necessarily cultural imperialism as the main export is material goods, it is perhaps media domination or imperialism.

However, there are many criticisms of the cultural imperialism view. Mainly, it does not explain why audiences are not passively absorbing US cultural values. The Active Audience model states that audiences are actually quite critical of the television programming they watch. Audiences bring their own lifestyles, culture, and personal experiences with them when they watch television. Global culture is therefore a mix of different cultures, a hybrid that exists between them. Multinational corporations and media conglomerates are aware of this hybridisation. For instance, MTV, a huge exporter of US culture, follows a localisation strategy which entails having 50% of music programming being culturally specific. The implications for public relations practitioners with this understanding of hybridisation and localisation are many.

Implications for public relations practitioners

To be successful in other cultures, public relations practitioners must have an understanding of the culture in the country they are operating within and countries they collaborate with. In the article *Five Essentials of Understanding International Public Relations* by Sharpe (1998: 23-27) knowledge of the social system is deemed crucial. "The governance structure and its management philosophy will determine the way organisations must operate in influencing the structure" (Sharpe, 1998: 24). Without

an understanding of how the government operates, what the business philosophy is, what communication tools exist, social attitudes, public opinion, and the economic system employed the public relations practitioner will not achieve positive results. International public relations agencies, professional bodies, witness the diversity theme of the 2005 World Public Relations Festival are aware of the necessity to include host country and cultural inputs into public relations activities and campaigns. It is simply not enough to translate the message. In the past, overseas campaigns were mostly conducted from the home country. The centralization of public relations activities being conducted from the home country caused slow responses and quite often missed their mark as they were inappropriate for the culture of the country being targeted. It's surprising that this still is often ignored in current practice in 2005. Botan (1992: 150) describes this method as the ethnocentric model. Botan also describes the polycentric model, which entails allowing public relations practitioners in the host country to tailor and execute campaigns that reflect the multinational corporation's strategy. Criticisms of the polycentric model mostly reflect concern for a lack of international coordination and that also key messages become diluted or completely changed.

In the article *Public Relations in the Global Village: An American Perspective*, Epley (1992: 109-116) discusses four main factors for globalisation: communication technology, realignment of economic power, international common issues, and world peace, all of which are still valid more than 13 years after its publication. As a result of these four factors, public relations practitioners and agencies are experiencing both growth and change. Epley goes on to point out that while the world is shrinking, "it is still made up of many tiny segments, each with its own unique culture, language, politics, and idiosyncracies" (1992: 111). The recent developments (2005) in Europe related to the popular rejection by people through referenda in the Netherlands and France of the EU Constitution Treaty is a clear demonstration of preservation of these elements. After consulting with senior public relations practitioners, Epley found that most viewed that strategies should be developed centrally, but that the tactics used needed to be sensitive to local culture. Public relations practitioners that tried to use the same technique globally would be ineffective. However, this is too much of a generalisation and ignores important cultural, attitudinal, geographical and public sphere considerations that should ultimately help determine the best approach for the particular situations.

Public relations practitioners need to have programmes and strategies that are flexible and adaptable and based on continuing monitoring processes. They also need to be able to predict the trends of increasingly more complex audiences and the developments of organisation – public relationships and the ever increasing demands for more transparency. To accomplish this there is not only a need for environmental scanning as well as issues management, but more importantly a "deeper" way of thinking and specific advise. Practitioners will have to be able to think on a local level and go beyond simply translating and customizing material by actually understanding the culture and learning about what dimensions different stakeholder relationships have.

Practitioners will also have to be able to boundary cross between the local subsidiary and the multinational conglomerate.

The biggest challenge for public relations practitioners will be crossing language and cultural barriers. Often the subtleties of cultural differences are overlooked in the multinational's own home country. Epley (1992: 114) writes that both multinational corporations and international public relations agencies share the same outlook: "global reach, local touch". The local public relations activities must fit with the local community and still reflect the multinational's core essence. For example, Coca-Cola employs public relations practitioners in the 'field' who are responsible for coordinating local programmes that 'speak' to the heart of the local community. Coca-Cola has realized that they could not possibly reach different cultures and communities by a centralized communications and public relations strategy. Instead, they have decentralized their public relations and rely on their 'people' to have a solid grounding in the values and mission, and to also understand the nature and value of the brand Coca-cola. By having this base and awareness of the core messages the public relations practitioners are able to construct and execute public relations activities that are culturally appropriate, and thus make the product more relevant. They are also able to deal with local issues and media in an informed manner. Naturally this does not mean that the "local" public relations practitioners have total control. The headquarters will still be responsible for maintaining a unified image of the organisation and often will decide what activities will be allocated for local control. "The public relations agency headquarters may form the grand strategy for an internationally ambitious client, but local offices would adapt and interpret that strategy to local practices" (Hazleton & Kruckeberg, 1996: 372). By decentralizing most of the public relations activities, the multinational corporation is better able to create a bond with the different stakeholders.

Public relations communication techniques have been forced to change as a result of globalisation. In today's technological environment a news story with graphics can be transmitted around the world almost instantly. Response time is therefore crucial for an organisation, which is why having localized strategic communication plans is important. Delays in getting information to media sources can be costly to the organisation's reputation, which translates into financial losses and in worse case scenarios result in a companies demise or forced restructuring. If an organisation has local public relations practitioners that are monitoring and managing issues it will be in a better position to communicate at an early stage with the important stakeholders often defusing potential crisis. In the event that a crisis does occur the swift response from the organisation can stop the crisis from 'snowballing' and spreading across a geographic region. Technology has enabled an immediate response to a problem. Customers both demand and expect a response from the organisation immediately. The global nature of today's media will instantly feed a story around the world within minutes of a journalist filing the report.

Cross-cultural communication is getting more attention in recent years. Business organisations are realizing the importance of intercultural communication even

within the same national boundaries. Immigration and guest workers have altered the homogeneity of many countries and cultures. Countries like Canada, the US, UK and Australia have been sensitive to cultural differences in communications for some time. Often national campaigns are tailored to reach specific ethnic communities (Limaye & Victor, 1995: 219).

Other implications for public relations as a result of the globalisation process include a thorough understanding of political and legislative bodies, international media, technological advancements and the impact of the Internet and most recently web-lobs, and media savy activist groups. It is important for public relations practitioners to understand the local political and legislative bodies in the country and culture the multinational organisation is operating in, simply to have relevant knowledge of the legal process and the applications. It is also important to have an understanding and sensitivity of the political situation to avoid a crisis. For example, Disney got into trouble with China over the movie *Kundun,* which is sympathetic to the 'Free Tibet' movement and the Dalai Lama. If the Chinese government stopped Disney's other productions from being shown within China, huge financial losses would have resulted, not to mention the damage done to the business relationship. Another example is with Rupert Murdoch's New Corp, which pulled BBC news programming after the Chinese government raised objections about its critical coverage of Chinese policy.

Conclusion

There is probably quite a bit of truth in that multinational corporations would really like to see globalisation leading to an entirely regulated, homogenised global culture. It would be easier to control messaging, and to sell products whether they are news stories, or soft drinks. To some degree this has happened, but there has been a backlash effect associated with this, leading to cultural sensitivity. However, just because corporations are sensitive to cultural differences, doesn't mean that they aren't selling the same thing. It's just packaged differently. It now is just more likely to come wrapped in the ethnic language and cultural tradition of the region. As communication technologies become increasingly more complex, it is essential for effective communication to take place. Public relations practitioners must be proficient in using global communication channels as well as through the local avenues to meet the needs of organisations with international operations. The research related to globalisation has accelerated in the last 25 years but the public relations practice is still challenged to develop the required knowledge and skills if it wants to be recognised as providing value in these complex contexts.

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