



The role of public relations in foreign policy planning and execution

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to understand the role of public relations, conceptualized as a strategic management function, in foreign policy making, and implementation. This research study emphasizes the relational perspective and seeks to examine its applicability to the practice of public relations in foreign policy settings.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative research study was based on in-depth interviews with nine individuals who were in charge of public relations aspects of a particular foreign policy issue in Latvian government institutions. The examined foreign policy issue was development cooperation.

Findings – The research findings revealed that public relations contributed to the strategic management of the foreign policy process to a certain extent. Public relations built and cultivated relationships, researched and scanned environments, built communities around a foreign policy issue, facilitated dialogic encounters and socialized foreign policies. However, the public relations function was not involved in the entire strategic management process: analysis, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Although the relational perspective may be applicable to foreign policy settings and relationships that are cultivated by public relations practitioners in these settings bring outcomes on three different levels – national, organizational, and personal – this study found that public relations is not the only function that deals with relationships between an organization and its key publics.

Originality/value – This research study investigated two areas that are little explored in the public relations research literature: the strategic management role of public relations in government institutions and public relations contributions to policy, especially foreign, making.

Keywords Development, Strategic management, Public relations, Foreign policy, Government, Relationship management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper links two developments in the public relations discipline. The first pertains to ways that public relations can help governments reach their foreign policy goals. The public relations scholarship has identified similarities between public relations and international relations bodies of knowledge (e.g. Signitzer and Coombs, 1992; Signitzer and Wamser, 2006), provided theoretical suggestions about the role of public relations in foreign policy settings (e.g. Grunig, 1993; Signitzer and Wamser, 2006; Vujnovic and Kruckeberg, 2005), and empirically investigated the link between public relations and the management of foreign affairs by governments (Yun, 2006; Wang and Chang, 2004; Zhang and Benoit, 2004).

The second development that this paper addresses is the conceptualization of public relations as a strategic management function (Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Ledingham, 2006). According to the relational perspective, public relations adds value to an organization when this function strategically manages mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its key constituencies.



In this paper the two above-described developments are bridged. The goal of this research study is to understand how, if at all, public relations, which has been conceptualized as a strategic management function, makes contributions to foreign policy planning and implementation at government institutions. This research study emphasizes the relational perspective by investigating its applicability to the practice of public relations in foreign policy settings.

Conceptualization

Public relations and foreign policy goals

The public relations scholarship has acknowledged that the function of public relations can help governments reach their foreign policy goals (e.g. Grunig, 1993; L'Etang, 1996, 2006; Signitzer and Coombs, 1992; Signitzer and Wamser, 2006). Similarities between public relations and foreign affairs have been discussed. For example, Signitzer and Coombs (1992) compared the four models of public relations (Grunig and Hunt, 1984) to the goals of cultural diplomacy (Peisert, 1978). Parallel levels of analysis in public relations and international relations were identified by Signitzer and Wamser (2006). L'Etang (1996, 2006) suggested that public relations practitioners and diplomats perform similar functions: representation of their organizations/governments, negotiation and peacemaking on behalf of their organizations/governments, counseling of the senior management/government officials, and intelligence gathering and environmental scanning in contexts that their organizations/governments operate.

The public relations literature has provided conceptual insights into ways that public relations can help governments reach their foreign policy goals. Grunig (1993) proposed that governments should practice public relations in a symmetrical manner. Governments, like their organizational counterparts, can reach their goals through "dialogue, collaboration and compromise" (p. 150).

Grunig's (1997) and Signitzer and Wamser (2006), believed that governments must practice international public relations as a strategic management function that is an integral part of the overall governmental processes. They suggested that Grunig's (1997) situational theory of publics is used to learn about a country's strategic constituencies abroad. Signitzer and Wamser (2006) acknowledged that governments can employ public relations as a boundary-spanning function in order to understand their international environments. The two scholars believed that the public relations discipline can also provide governments with knowledge about the most effective channels of communication and ways that relationships can be built with publics of different nations.

Vujnovic and Kruckeberg (2005) singled out the public relations knowledge about community building. They offered a model, labeled as the Arab model of public relations, which can foster relationships, including diplomatic, between the western and the Arab worlds. According to this model, the focus of the public relations function should exceed the publics who have direct consequences on the organization or government, and include society at large.

A few empirical investigations into the link between public relations and foreign policy settings have been conducted. A research study (Yun, 2006) of foreign embassies in Washington, DC applied the excellence principles (Grunig *et al.*, 2002) to policy advocacy function. This study found that excellent policy advocacy is characterized by two-way communication, formative and evaluative research, symmetrical internal information exchanges, ethical communication, and involvement in a government's strategic management of foreign affairs.

A significant portion of empirical studies (e.g. Zhang and Benoit, 2004; Zhang and Cameron, 2003; Wang and Chang, 2004) have explored the media coverage of various foreign governments' publicity campaigns. The findings of these studies suggested that the mass media influences and mobilizes foreign public opinion. Zhang and Cameron (2003) conducted a content analysis of several US national print media sources to measure the success of the Chinese government's image campaign in the USA. Wang and Chang (2004) conducted a similar study to explore the local and national coverage of a Chinese head of state's visits to the USA. Zhang and Benoit (2004) explored the Saudi Government's image campaign and its effects on the US media after September 11. Zhang (2006), who studied the US media after the 2005 tsunami in Southeast Asia, suggested that countries around the world used international relief aid as a symbol that helped them "to cultivate and maintain national identity and to facilitate state policy agendas" (p. 26).

The above discussed empirical work on public relations contributions to the attainment of foreign policy goals has mostly approached public relations as a publicity function whose goal is to ensure media coverage abroad. These empirical studies differ from the conceptual scholarship that views public relations as a strategic management function that helps governments manage international affairs by facilitating dialogue and collaboration, scanning environments and spanning boundaries, identifying international publics, and building communities (e.g. Grunig, 1993; L'Etang, 1996, 2006; Signitzer and Coombs, 1992; Signitzer and Wamser, 2006; Vujnovic and Kruckeberg, 2005).

Relationship cultivation: public relations contributions to strategic management

Public relations has been viewed as a strategic management function that contributes to the overall effectiveness of an organization (e.g. Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Ledingham, 2006). The early definition of public relations characterizes it as the "management of communication between an organization and its publics" (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 6).

Over the years the public relations scholarship has re-shifted the focus from public relations as "communication management" to public relations as "relationship management" (Ledingham and Bruning, 2000, p. 56). Communication is perceived as the "strategic tool" that helps public relations practitioners reach relational goals (Ledingham, 2006, p. 468). According to Cutlip *et al.* (1994), public relations is "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the public on whom [organizational] success or failure depends" (p. 2). Grunig (2006) suggested that public relations adds to the strategic management of the organization when this function helps the organization understand and interact with its environment. The role of public relations is to scan the environment, span boundaries, engage in issues management, and identify strategic publics in order to build long-term relationships with these publics.

The relational perspective places the organization-public relationship (OPR) in the center of analysis. The most frequently cited OPR definitions are Broom *et al.* (2000) that views OPR as "transactions that involve the exchange of resources between organizations [...] and lead to mutual benefit, as well as mutual achievement" (p. 91); and Ledingham and Bruning's (1998) that describes OPR as a "state which exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural and/or political well-being of the other" (p. 62).

In a textbook chapter on relationship management Ledingham (2006) concluded that the relational perspective establishes public relations as a management

function that is described by such management concepts as “goal setting, strategic planning, and evaluation” (p. 467). The relational perspective also “provides a framework for conducting programs and campaigns within the four-step [management] process of analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation, and offers a systematic means for determining return on investment from public relations initiatives” (pp. 465-466).

Several models that describe the process of relationship management have been proposed. For example, Broom *et al.* (1997, 2000) distinguished among three stages in the relationship management process: causes of relationships, relationship properties, and relationship consequences. This model was further elaborated by Grunig and Huang (2000) who described: the formation of relationships with strategic publics or the so-called antecedent stage of relationships; strategies for relationship maintenance on the dimension from asymmetrical to symmetrical with the latter leading to mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics; and relationship outcomes: goal achievement, control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment. The model also identifies instruments for measuring the quality of relationships at each stage.

Empirical studies have further investigated the relationship management process. To learn about the antecedent stage and how different relationships relate to relationship maintenance strategies, Hung (2005) studied types of OPR. Relationship types have been also explored by others (e.g. Hon and Grunig, 1999; Reber *et al.*, 2010). A group of scholars has explored the relationship outcome stage (e.g. Hallahan, 2008; Yang and Gunig, 2005).

In addition to the two above listed models, other frameworks that delineate the relationship management process have been proposed (Ledingham, 2006): the interpersonal influence model (Toth, 2000), the physician-patient relationship framework (Dimmick *et al.*, 2000), and the SMART PR process model (Bruning and Ledingham, 1999). The relational perspective has been applied to various areas of public relations, including issues management (Bridges and Nelson, 2000), crisis management (Coombs, 2000), community relations (Ledingham, 2003; Smith, 2003), fundraising (Waters, 2008); employee relations (Ni, 2007), intercultural public relations (Hung, 2004), and so forth.

In acknowledgment of the value that the public relations discipline has placed on relationship management, this paper links foreign policy settings and the relational perspective. An empirical study, described in the next section, investigates whether and how public relations could serve as a strategic management function that helps organizations, involved in foreign policy planning and implementation, develop and cultivate mutually beneficial relationships with their strategic publics at home and abroad. This paper seeks to answer three research questions:

- RQ1. How, if at all, is the function of public relations involved in foreign policy planning and execution?
- RQ2. What value, if any, do public relations practitioners, who are involved in foreign policy planning and execution, attribute to relationships between their organizations and strategic publics?
- RQ3. How, if at all, does the relational perspective describe the public relations role in foreign policy settings?

Methodology

The contribution of public relations to foreign policy settings is a little explored phenomenon. Therefore, qualitative research methodology that allows “inductive development of theory from intimate knowledge of situated practice” was chosen for this study (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p. 28). Data were obtained through qualitative interviews because this method permits an in-depth study of “people’s [...] thoughts and experiences” (p. 2). According to McCracken (1988), interviewing is applicable in situations “when total immersion in the studied scene is impractical and impossible” (p. 5).

The focus of this research study is development cooperation (DC) policies made and executed by the Latvian government. Although the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is in charge of the overall DC policy-making and implementation process, other government ministries and agencies are actively engaged in it. The government also seeks advice about DC policies and assistance in their implementation from non-governmental development actors: NGOs and businesses. In this paper, these actors are labeled as “domestic partners.”

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia (n.d.) defines DC as a process whose goal is “to provide assistance to poor and less developed countries by promoting their long-term social and economic human development, ensuring peace and security in the world” (¶2). The term “development” refers to assistance that one nation provides to another, whereas “cooperation” emphasizes the collaborative efforts of donors and beneficiaries aimed at identifying development goals and ways to reach these goals.

The Latvian government has been involved in DC since 2004 when Latvia joined the European Union. Its DC efforts have been centered on the neighboring region which encompasses countries such as Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

Participants for this research study included nine individuals responsible for the public relations aspects of DC programs at Latvian government institutions directly engaged in DC policy making and implementation. Most research participants represented government institutions in specific policy areas: foreign affairs, justice, defense, economy, and environment. Some participants, although not directly engaged with a specific policy area, worked on behalf of legislative and executive bodies.

The participants were selected using purposive, snowball, and maximum variation sampling strategies. During the selection process the individual in charge of public relations aspects for each government institution’s DC initiatives was sought. Although some participants held the most senior public relations position in their institutions’ public relations units, some others were not part of these formal public relations structures. These individuals were involved with various aspects of DC, including public relations, at their organizations. Two participants were recruited from a public relations agency by a government institution to help this institution address public relations issues pertaining to DC.

The sample size of nine research participants was determined by the number of government institutions involved in DC. Furthermore, McCracken (1988) believed the sample size of eight to be sufficient for qualitative interviewing because this sample size allows a careful and in-depth study of a few experienced individuals rather than a superficial review of many.

Participation in this study was confidential. In order to encourage critical reflections upon public relations and its role in DC, the researcher promised to protect the participants’ identities. Because Latvia is a very small nation with relatively few

government institutions that are involved in DC, the issue of confidentiality was given the utmost importance in order to avoid socially desirable answers that might taint the results of the study.

Ninety-minute, confidential, personal interviews were conducted between December, 2007 and March, 2008 in Latvia. An interview protocol, guided by the previously reviewed literature, was used to seek answers to the research questions. The protocol addressed the following issues: strategic publics, public relations activities, public relations challenges, value of public relations, relationship cultivation, and so forth. During the interviewing process the research participants were encouraged to address other issues that they found to be important. Interviews were audio-taped for accuracy and later transcribed.

Data were analyzed according to the analytical induction approach that allows “theories to emerge from the interviews, not as mere extensions of academic literature [...] [which may] operate as blinkers, limiting [the researcher’s] vision” (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 64). The analysis was conducted according to a three-step process suggested by Rubin and Rubin (1995). The first step involved a search for emerging concepts and ideas within data. During the second step Spradley’s (1979, as cited in Rubin and Rubin, 1995) “domain analysis” was conducted; it involved relating main concepts and ideas to each other in order to identify major coding categories. The third step included Strauss’ (1987, as cited in Rubin and Rubin, 1995) axial coding which linked these major coding categories to each other. An analysis of each individual interview was followed by comparisons of codes among the interviews.

Findings revealed during the inductive analysis were “compare[d] to the literature and locate[d] [...] with respect to other people’s writing” (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 64). As suggested by public relations scholars Hon and Brunner (2000), “[qualitative] data analysis ends when you have found overreaching themes and put them into the context of broader theory and answered the question ‘So what?’” (p. 256).

The quality of this study was ensured in three ways. First, the within method triangulation or internal validity (Potter, 1996) was achieved by gathering data from different sources. Participants from various government institutions were interviewed. Second, this study strove for communicability through “faithful accounts of people’s own words” (Potter, 1996, p. 199). The study’s findings were supported with direct quotes from the interviews with the research participants. Third, data were gathered until this study reached the point of saturation in which additional sources did not add any new themes or ideas (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, as cited in Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

This is a qualitative study, therefore, its findings, like those of any other qualitative research, cannot be generalized. However, it is hoped that this study provides insights in ways that public relations can contribute to such applied settings as policy-making and implementation that are very little studied in the public relations discipline.

Results

Public relations involvement in DC policy planning and execution

The first research questions inquired how, if at all, the function of public relations is involved in foreign policy planning and execution. This study revealed that the Latvian government institutions involved public relations in their foreign policy planning and execution both on the national and international levels.

Public relations work at home. The Latvian public. On the national-level public relations sought the Latvian public’s support for DC policies. This support was

necessary because governmental DC initiatives were funded by taxpayers. A research participant summarized:

Public relations is very important. Money does not fall from the sky. Our spending must be transparent. We must be accountable for our activities. Public relations plays a great role here. Through public relations we demonstrate how much and in what ways we invest in DC. Through public relations we encourage the public to express its opinion. The public opinion then tells us if we may increase the funding [for DC]. It is the public's money that we spend.

To reach the goal of the public's support for DC policies, public relations practitioners produced press releases, videos and photos about developing countries for reporters; organized press conferences; commissioned programs for public television channels; sponsored trips for Latvian reporters to developing countries; assisted DC officers in writing op-ed pieces for Latvian newspapers and magazines; and created and updated information about DC policies and projects for governmental web sites. Two participants conducted public opinion polls to learn about the Latvian public's attitudes toward DC.

Public relations was involved in building ties with domestic DC partners who helped government institutions reach the Latvian public. A participant explained the importance of partner NGOs:

Money comes from our taxpayers. If we spend this money on DC we must explain it to our citizens. We cannot do it alone. We need NGOs. They connect and involve people on the grassroots level. They know how to inform and educate the Latvian public.

The work of public relations practitioners was complicated by the Latvian public's resistance to DC policies. Participants suggested that part of the public believed that domestic socioeconomic issues rather than international problems required the Latvian government's immediate attention. Government organizations involved the public relations function to overcome this resistance. According to a practitioner at a government ministry:

The most difficult part is explaining to the Latvian public why DC is necessary in a situation when we have so many domestic needs. It is an important question. And it is not easy to provide answers. Our approach is to explain that we are working on domestic problems [...] improving the situation, but problems in [country name] cannot wait any longer.

Domestic partners. The public relations function at government institutions ensured ties between these government institutions and their domestic partners: NGOs and businesses. Public relations practitioners organized policy forums in which representatives from government institutions and partner organizations debated DC policies.

Public relations was also employed to inform domestic partners about DC opportunities, mostly governmental grants and tenders. This information was delivered through educational seminars, institutional web sites, brochures and other materials, and press releases sent to the media. Public relations practitioners also helped domestic partners connect with international DC agencies that were interested in the domestic partners' DC expertise. The public relations function organized meetings during which domestic partners and international DC actors were introduced to each other.

Public relations work on the international level. The public relations involvement on the international level was less present. One reason for this limited involvement pertained to the perception of public relations as a symbolic communication activity that is not related to the overall DC policy goal, i.e. development. According to

a research participant, “Real work rather than communication matters. Specific results are what counts.”

Public relations practitioners also acknowledged that they lacked knowledge about foreign contexts. They could not facilitate policy goals in unknown surroundings. A research participant believed that Latvian embassies were better suited to provide the necessary information for the DC policy planning.

Despite the perception of public relations as a symbolic communication function and the practitioners’ lack of knowledge about foreign contexts, in some institutions public relations helped plan and/or execute DC policies. A government ministry engaged its public relations function in the scanning of environments in aid recipient countries. The public relations director at this institution explained, “We talk to local leaders. [...] [O]ne of our people meets with them. He arrives at the town hall [...] drinks tea and discusses issues. [...] We must find local leaders and speak with them.”

The public relations function informed various groups in aid recipient countries about the Latvian DC programs that resulted from the DC policies. A government institution organized receptions for civil servants, civil society organizations, academia and media in a country, where its DC initiatives were implemented, to recognize a start of a new DC program. Another participant organized visits by journalists from developing countries to Latvia in order to increase their knowledge about Latvia and his institution.

Public relations practitioners assisted their organizations in establishing partnerships with international donor organizations that could provide funding for Latvian DC projects. To reach this goal, the public relations function prepared governmental organizations for participation in international donor forums by producing short films, creating brochures about Latvia’s DC work, and arranging exhibit booths at international events.

Value attributed to relationships with strategic publics

The second research question asked about the value, if any, that public relations practitioners involved in foreign policy planning and execution attributed to relationships between their organizations and strategic publics. During the interviews the research participants acknowledged the value of strong relationships that they formed with key constituencies.

Relationships with domestic partners. Asked to describe the value that relationships with domestic partners added to effective policy making, participants emphasized their bridge-building nature. Through relationships with domestic partners government institutions connected with various civil society constituencies at home and abroad. Latvian NGOs helped government institutions overcome the Latvian public’s resistance to DC because NGOs connected with the public on a grassroots level that was not accessible to the government. Domestic partners were expected to link government institutions with aid recipients from the civil society in developing countries. One participant suggested that domestic partners have “their own international networks of NGOs,” whereas another one found that “non-state structures [...] acted as Latvia’s ambassadors” who created supporting environments for Latvia in developing countries.

Relationships with domestic partners also assisted government institutions in building ties with non-governmental development experts. A participant hoped that existing domestic partners help her institution identify prospective domestic partners and create a “network of experts.”

Through relationships with domestic partners government institutions acquired new resources in the form of knowledge, expertise, and connections. Participants

believed that they reciprocated by providing domestic partners with grants and tenders, as well as information and expertise about DC.

Relationships with domestic partners, particularly NGOs, prepared Latvian government institutions for international meetings and forums during which European or global development policies were discussed. Domestic partners added the non-governmental perspective on DC and provided government officials with ideas on ways that global development policies can be strengthened.

Relationships with international publics. Relationships that participants cultivated with aid recipients assisted them in reaching the Latvian security, economic, and political goals. The following excerpt from an interview demonstrates the value that good relationships add to the Latvian economy:

Through these relationships [with aid recipients] we create a good environment for our entrepreneurs in each country where we have successfully implemented a development project. They say, "Latvians are innovative and capable." They want us. It creates a supportive environment for our businesses. And these new business opportunities have a positive effect on Latvia's economy. We get a good return.

Relationships that government institutions cultivated with their international partners, i.e. European and global development agencies, led to institutional and professional opportunities for growth and development. Latvian organizations learned about DC from more experienced international partners. A participant described how her ministry worked with international donors to improve, what she called, our capacities, "We try to involve third country donors [...] those with more experience. It is important to engage older donors. They can always advise us." Another participant focussed on personal rather than institutional learning and growth opportunities that relationships with international partners provided:

We work with experts from Old Europe. It is an interesting professional growth opportunity. These mutual projects have an added value. We work together with the Finns, British, and Italians. Once you have been involved in an international project, you can send an e-mail to another person and ask him [her] for advice at any time. This is how professional relationships develop.

The relational perspective of public relations and foreign policy settings

The final research questions inquired how, if at all, the relational perspective of public relations describes the public relations role in foreign policy settings. Public relations was involved in relationship cultivation in foreign policy settings, but it was not the only function responsible for relationships. Public relations frequently supported the relationship cultivation efforts of development officers.

Excerpts from interviews with development officers, reported in another research study, showed that they also used a relationship-centered language that was similar to that found in the public relations literature. For example, the development officers established "relationships with structures that share [...] a common long-term vision," developed "personal relationships" with domestic partners, maintained "ongoing dialogue," showed that their institutions were "responsible member[s] of the international community," and "extended contact bases with other similar institutions."

The organization of the relationship cultivation work differed in the research participants' institutions. First, in some institutions the public relations function worked parallel to the DC function ensuring the maintenance of relationships. Second,

in some government organizations the public relations function played a subordinate role performing only those tasks, mostly preparation of communication materials and organization of special events, that were requested by the development officers. Third, in one government ministry the development officer was in charge of all DC work. In this institution the public relations function was not involved in relationship cultivation pertaining to DC because the development officer believed that “we do not like to create publicity for ourselves when we help others”.

The public relations function’s involvement in relationship management was much more predominant at home than abroad. Organizations, through public relations, build ties with the Latvian public, and facilitated relationships between Latvian DC partners.

Only a few organizations used the public relations function to strengthen their relationships with international publics. Participants found that they lacked awareness about local contexts abroad. They did “not know what is acceptable [in other countries],” “did not know the specifics in [other] countries,” and “were not authoritative sources.” Another reason why public relations was little involved in international efforts was a perception that this function was publicity that did not have a direct impact on DC. A research participant emphasized that in the DC context “real work rather than communication matter[ed].”

Discussion

Public relations and strategic management for DC policy planning and execution purposes

This study revealed that public relations contributed to strategic management of the DC policy process to some extent. Several elements derived from the public relations literature testified to the strategic management nature of public relations. First, public relations was involved in relationship building and cultivation (e.g. Ledingham, 2006; Ledingham and Bruning, 1998, 2000). The public relations function formed ties with domestic partners in order to reach the Latvian public and execute the DC policies abroad. Public relations practitioners were engaged in relationship cultivation when they established partnerships between Latvian government organizations and international donors, connected domestic partners with international donor agencies, and formed ties with Latvian embassies abroad in order to obtain information about aid recipient countries.

Second, according to the public relations literature, public relations contributes to strategic management when it engages in research and environmental scanning (e.g. Grunig, 2006; Grunig *et al.*, 2002). On the domestic-level public relations practitioners conducted opinion polls to learn about the Latvian public’s attitudes toward DC. The public relations function identified the public’s resistance to DC resulting from domestic socioeconomic problems. The public relations function also conducted environmental scanning when it organized discussions with domestic partners to learn about their understanding of the DC policies and issues. On the international level the public relations function was involved in monitoring of aid recipient country environments.

Third, public relations was concerned with DC community building (e.g. Signitzer and Wamser, 2006; Vujnovic and Kruckeberg, 2005). Activities aimed at maintaining ties with existing partners, attracting new non-governmental partners, and connecting domestic partners with international development agencies may suggest that public relations was involved in building networks around common issues, i.e. DC in the context of this research study.

Fourth, the public relations function approached the settings pertaining to DC policy planning and execution with a dialogic or symmetrical worldview (e.g. Grunig, 1993). Public relations practitioners were concerned with gaining support from the Latvian taxpayers, involving domestic partners in policy debates, and scanning environments in aid recipient countries.

A considerable part of public relations work was devoted to gaining the Latvian public's support for the governmental involvement in DC. This goal of the public relations function may be similar to what Melissen (2005) called "socialization of diplomacy," i.e. the facilitation of domestic civil society's involvement in foreign policy decision making. According to Melissen, the development of international communication technologies has erased the line between domestic and international affairs. Therefore, any foreign policy initiative must involve the domestic public. It is possible that this study adds another strategic management role to the public relations function, i.e. socialization of foreign policies.

Despite the above listed public relations contributions to the strategic management of the DC policy making and execution process, it is important to note that little public relations work occurred on the international level. This failure of international engagement was attributed to a perception of public relations as a symbolic communication activity that does not bring outcomes on the behavioral level, and the public relations practitioners' lack of knowledge about international contexts. These findings may point to a limited capacity of public relations to fully contribute to strategic management of the organization and/or foreign policy-making process.

The findings of this study may also suggest that public relations was not an integral part of the entire four-step management process: analysis, planning, implementation, and evaluation (Ledingham, 2006). Isolated public relations activities can be attributed to each management stage, but there is no evidence that the public relations function in any government institution was involved in the complete management process from its start to its end. Furthermore, the research participants did not discuss any "systematic means for determining return on investment from public relations initiatives" (Ledingham, 2006, p. 466). Public relations contributions to the organization were not measured.

The relational perspective and its link to public relations

This research study also sought to understand whether the relationship perspective is applicable to foreign policy settings. As the previous section showed, relationship building and community cultivation was part of the public relations work. The participants acknowledged that the relationships that they built helped their organizations in the planning and execution of the DC policies. The relationship value was revealed on three different levels.

On the national-level relationships that were built with aid recipients helped the Latvian government achieve its security, economic, and political goals.

Most relational contributions were made on the organizational level. Through relationships with domestic partners the participants' organizations were able to bridge constituencies from non-governmental sectors at home (i.e. Latvian taxpayers, Latvian non-governmental development experts), and abroad (i.e. aid recipients from the civil society). Ties with domestic partners and international development agencies allowed government institutions to acquire new resources in the form of knowledge and expertise, connections, and foreign funding. Domestic partners helped government institutions prepare for international meetings and forums by educating governmental

representatives about the grassroots DC experiences, and providing the government with ideas about ways that global development policies and initiatives can be improved.

The participants also believed that relationships with international donors added value on the personal level. An interviewee experienced professional growth on an individual level by working with more experienced western development agencies.

Although public relations practitioners were involved in relationship cultivation, the development function also dealt with relationships that were formed with external publics. This finding viewed in conjunction with another study, which revealed the use of a relationship-centered language by development officers, may suggest that relationships are not the sole responsibility of public relations practitioners. This conclusion may be further supported by the organization of public relations work at Latvian government institutions. On some occasions the function of public relations cultivated relationships parallel to the development function, but on others relationship cultivation activities performed by the public relations function were subordinated to the development function.

In sum, this research study revealed that public relations can contribute to strategic management of foreign policy decisions and actions by building and cultivating relationships, researching and scanning environments, creating DC communities, engaging stakeholders in dialogic and symmetrical encounters, and socializing foreign policies. However, the public relations function is not an integral part of the entire strategic management process. The public relations function may also not be able to reach its full strategic management potential when it fails to engage in international work due to the perception of public relations as publicity without behavioral-level outcomes and public relations practitioners' lack of knowledge about international contexts.

The relational perspective may be applicable to foreign policy settings. Although relationships built by public relations practitioners add value to their organizations on three different levels – national, organizational and personal, public relations is not the only organizational function in charge of relationship cultivation.

Suggestions for future research

This study investigated DC, one kind of foreign policy issue. To gain an in-depth understanding about the link between public relations and foreign policy settings, it would be interesting to explore the role of public relations in other matters pertaining to foreign affairs. The Latvian involvement in DC is recent. An investigation of a government with broader DC expertise and history may reveal additional aspects about public relations contributions to the strategic management of the DC policy making and execution process.

This study found that a significant part of the public relations work occurred on the domestic level, in particular regarding to the socialization of the DC policies. A more detailed understanding about the role that public relations plays in this area is necessary.

Public relations practitioners believed that they lacked understanding about international contexts. Another path of investigation could seek to understand why public relations practitioners lack intercultural knowledge and how their intercultural competencies could be increased.

This study allowed dividing relational contributions on three different levels. An exploration whether, in addition to the organizational level, relationships formed

by public relations practitioners add value on the national and personal levels could be the focus of another study.

Finally, relationship cultivation was not the sole responsibility of the public relations function. Future research could try to identify those relationship cultivation aspects that fall under the responsibility of public relations and those that are of concern to other organizational functions.

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Further reading

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