

THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS IN DEFINING THE PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSION. THE ROMANIAN CASE

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Abstract: Public relations professional associations around the world seek to enhance the professionalism of the field and to support the development of the profession and practitioners. They are aiming to promote professional standards and ethical principles, to provide a framework for discussing and finding a universally accepted definition and to increase the credibility of the profession. The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent of which the objectives of professional public relations organizations in Romania are similar to those of associations in other countries and in what way, and if they contribute to the professionalization of the PR industry.

Key words: public relations, professional associations, profession, professionalism

1. Introduction

The constant development of public relations is a phenomenon already well known. In recent years the study opportunities offered by the faculties of communication are among the most coveted and occupy leading positions among the top choices for future students. One of the leading newspapers in Romania lists Journalism and Communication Sciences in the fifth place in a top made for most sought after faculties and specializations (România liberă, 2011). The graphic presented in the newspaper points out that 6,57 students compete for each place in these faculties.

Furthermore, in recent years, the number of those working in the field has greatly increased. However, there are still controversial issues related to public relations. One of these issues, on which there is still no consensus among researchers and specialists, is related to the status of the public relations profession. Opinions are divided between those who argue that public relations is in the process of professionalization (Goldsworthy, Morris, 2008; Dilenschneider, 1987), but have not yet met all the requirements in order to be considered a true profession, and those who already consider PR a profession (El-Astal, 2010; Dagenais, 2002). This paper aims to examine the role of professional associations in defining the profession of public relations in Romania.

For Remus Pricopie (2004: 207) the professionalization is “the process of transforming an occupation into a profession”, evolutionary process that includes five steps:

- a) Emergence of an occupation;
- b) Establishment of schools for training in the domain to which the respective occupation belongs to;

- c) Establishment of professional associations;
- d) Launching arrangements for legal recognition of that industry;
- e) Adoption of a formal code of professional conduct.

Undergoing this process of professionalization has beneficial effects not only on that profession, but also on the society as a whole, because professional organizations are stable elements, benchmarks of contemporary society which generate patterns of thought and action, both within the accepted professional communities and outside them (Pricopie, 2004: 207).

Analyzing the five stages of professionalization, we noticed that in Romania, public relations is in an advanced stage of professionalization. The occupation appeared immediately after the Revolution (1991) and, since 1993, the Department of Communication and Public Relations of the Faculty of Letters, Bucharest University, offers academic courses of public relations (BA, MA). Public relations education has developed in a fairly organized manner, after Western models widely recognized and accepted. A key role in this process was the creation, in 1993, of the National Council for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEAA) - whose work was continued, since 2006, by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) (Coman, 2008: 90).

The following three stages in the process of professionalization - the foundation of professional associations, triggering steps for legal recognition of the industry, the adopting of a formal code of professional conduct – are interrelated and, therefore, considerably influenced by the activity of national and international public relations associations.

2. The role of professional associations

Professional associations play a key role in developing, promoting and strengthening a profession. In the case of public relations, the professional associations are actively involved in establishing and implementing codes of ethics and professional standards, in creating conditions for the development of professionals and in defining, regulating and establishing the status of the profession.

Further on we are going to present the professional associations established in Romania, which have had an active role in defining, developing and promoting the public relations profession in this country.

2.1. The Romanian Association of Public Relations Professionals (ARRP)

The first and largest association of public relations in Romania appeared in 1995. Since its foundation, ARRP has been the main forum for discussing specific problems of the public relations profession in Romania. Moreover, the association has been a platform for experience exchange and for the representation of Romanian communicators in international organizations, to which ARRP is affiliated.

As a non-profit association, ARRP aims to promote public relations activity in Romania and to promote and protect the professional status and interests of members of the association in accordance with international standards. Below, we present the objectives set by ARRP in order to meet its goals, as they are posted on the organization's website (arrp.ro): the promotion of professional public relations in Romania; defining the status of the profession of public relations specialists, in accordance with internationally recognized standards and recommendations by international professional organizations; developing of professional standards for the activity of public relations in Romania; encouraging and improving social communication within the Romanian society; gathering and organizing the public relations professionals in our country within a legal framework, which is to govern their rights and obligations, as well as their cooperation with professionals from other countries; strengthening of the confidence of various segments of public in the public relations activity, in the professionals and in those seeking assistance from specialists; promotion of ethical principles enshrined in the Code of Athens (international code of ethics for public relations) and update of these principles in compliance with the Protocol of Ethics Universal Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, so that the specialists respect the rights of the individual and the public freedoms, as set in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and serve the public good; the cultivation of proper peer relationships, loyalty to the public and to beneficiaries of public relations activities; creating conditions for the improvement of public relations specialists, also by ensuring proper professional authorities - both at home and abroad; establishing contacts with all institutions and organizations - public and private, domestic and abroad - which can contribute to the recognition, in Romania, of the public relations activity and professionals; subscribing the association in the professional circuit of international communication.

In order to achieve the above mentioned objectives, the Romanian Association of Public Relations Professionals has been undertaking activities aimed at various and dynamic audiences (practitioners, educators, legislators, journalists, researchers etc.). One major achievement of the association consists in introducing the "public relations specialist" profession in the Classification of Occupations in Romania (COR) since 1997 (Gavrilă, 2007). Today, for the public relations category (basis group 2447) the Classification of Occupations in Romania (COR) posted on the website of the Ministry of Labor includes the following occupations (2011: 136): public relations specialist (244 701), mediator (244 702) marketing specialist referent (244 703), protocol and ceremonial specialist (244 704); chamber consultant (244 705), spokesperson (244 706), brand manager (244 707). "Another achievement is the international recognition of the association and, in doing so, the fact that in Romania PR is practiced in a professional manner. Since 1997 we are members of the European Public Relations Confederation (CERP). ARRP can say that it is one of the most active CERP members, being also represented in its board. ARRP is also affiliated to the Global Alliance on Public Relations and Communication Management." (Gavrilă, 2007). As highlighted by the former president of the association – professor Dumitru Borțun – one

of ARRPP's most successful undertakings was the affiliation to prestigious international organizations aimed at globally strengthening the status of public relations.

Particularly important to the development and recognition of a profession is the adoption, promotion and implementation of a code of ethics. The Romanian Association of Public Relations Professionals "endorses the Code of Athens and the normative documents of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA)" (arrp.ro). Compliance with the Code of Ethics is mandatory for members of the association, but it also represents a pattern of conduct for other practitioners.

The endorsement of ARRPP in publicizing the 2009 EUPRERA (European Public Relations Education and Research Association) Congress held in Bucharest and the presence of Rares Petrisor – the current president of the Romanian Association of Public Relations Professionals – at this event (Euprera Congress, 2009) were in accordance with the objectives listed above, that is to support the professionalization of the industry and of the specialists.

2.2. The Public Relations Companies' Club (PRCC)

The Public Relations Companies' Club was created in 2003. The organization unifies the most important public relations companies in Romania. These include both local and international companies: 2activePR, DC Communication, Free Communication, Image Promotion, Millennium Communications, Ogilvy PR Worldwide, Perfect Ltd, PRAIS Corporate Communication, Premium Communication and The Practice (iquads.ro, 2010).

The club aims at harmonizing the standard within the communications industry, as well as making available to member companies a common area of expertise and mutual understanding. The club provides a space for debate on issues of communication, by supporting and promoting professional dialogue and the quality of professional communication activities (PRCC, 2011). On a relatively young market, such as the Romanian one, PRCC helps define ethical and professional standards of conduct so that public relations companies and their clients can appreciate the role and results of public relations.

To achieve its aims stated on its foundation, PRCC has carried out, in collaboration with Daedalus Consulting, in 2006, the first study on how the public relations services are perceived and used by companies in Romania. Out of the 200 institutions and companies surveyed, 92.4% confirmed that they use public relations, and 7.6% said they plan to conduct such activities (iquads.ro, 2007). In 2010, the Public Relations Companies' Club conducted a second study on the image and use of public relations in Romania. The study sought to identify significant changes occurring on the public relations market in recent years, following strong growth of the online environment and amid the new economic situation, thus reviving a lot of questions included in the first edition, in 2006.

The results of the study revealed that the structure of the public relations market, concerning potential customers for the PR agencies, has changed in recent

years; the share of small companies requiring these services increased greatly since 2006 – from 12.2% to 25.0% in 2010. Under the impact of the current economic situation, companies have requested from the PR agencies marketing communication services, as well as communication with business partners and internal communication (iquads.ro, 2010). Unlike small companies, corporations have continued to focus on corporate communication and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility).

In addition to the objectives concerned with building a positive image among target audiences, maintaining a good reputation and support products and services through information, companies have started to use the services of PR agencies also to motivate and inform employees.

We believe that the results of the study conducted by the Public Relations Companies' Club captures the image of a domain that enjoys growing recognition by all actors involved directly in collaboration with public relations specialists. The fact that both large and small firms turn to a wide range of public relations services is a consequence of the professionalization of PR in Romania.

2.3. Forum for International Communications

The Forum for International Communications is a non-governmental association which cultivates, within the professional communicators' environment, ethical and performance standards for the public relations profession. The Forum organizes the Romanian PR Award competition since 2003 and also the Romanian PR Week event, imposed as the most important events for the recognition of excellence in business communication in Romania (praward.ro). Supported by the U.S. Institute for Public Relations, the Forum has implemented a national research in 2009 "Media Transparency and Media Practices in Romania".

Furthermore, it now runs a range of educational programs, lectures and public debates, courses and training sessions and a series of informal meetings between professionals in the field. In March 2006, the Forum initiated the CSR Romania program in order to promote best practices in corporate social responsibility, program recently affiliated to the European network CSR Europe. Another achievement was the launch, in April 2009, of the resources portal PR Romania (praward.ro), which enhances access to state-of-the-art information for practitioners and all readers interested in learning about Romanian PR.

2.4. The Romanian Association of Trainers in Journalism and Communication - AFCOM

The Romanian Association of Trainers in Journalism and Communication is an association predominantly made up of educators from the communication domain and therefore contributes through its activities to the development of public relations professionals and trainers. Currently the members of AFCOM meet the following categories (Statutul AFCOM, 2007: Art.7):

- teachers in academic and pre-academic education which undertake training and research activities in the fields of journalism, communication, public relations and advertising;
- journalists, public relations and advertising professionals, other employees engaged in institutional communication which undertake training and research activities in the fields of journalism, communication, public relations and advertising;
- researchers conducting training and research activities in the fields of journalism, communication, public relations and advertising.

By accessing AFCOM's website we may read in the 15th article of the Association's Statute (Statutul AFCOM, 2007: Art.15) that the association operates with the purpose to protect the members' professional rights and interests, their social and cultural needs, as well as to promote and protect their professional status, in accordance with national and international standards of the domain. To fulfill its purpose, the Association has set itself several objectives among which we find:

- improving the quality of the training process for professionals in journalism and communication;
- creating a permanent and amicable dialogue between the educational environment, the professional environment, the research environment and the civil society;
- promoting academic, research, professional excellence of teachers and students, both nationally and internationally.

We find that the interest shown in promoting the dialogue between all parties involved in the communication domain is key to professionalization of all those involved, because collaboration and cooperation lead to progress in the respective field. Another highlighted aspect is the alignment to international standards, which enhances qualitative professional processes and facilitates academic and research excellence.

The objectives listed in the Association's Statute are also served by the scientific journal published by AFCOM. The Romanian Journal of Journalism and Communication (R.R.J.C., 2007) allows and encourages dialogue between academics, researchers and professionals in journalism, communication, public relations and advertising, from all over the world.

3. Conclusions

Based on our analysis we noticed that the objectives set by the Romanian professional associations mentioned above cover a variety of aspects concerning the public relations activity. They do not assume solely a role of regulation, restriction or sanction by imposing professional conduct standards, but they actively support and encourage the training and development of specialists. These organizations have channeled the efforts of agencies, companies and professionals who aimed at

improving and developing the industry. The affiliation to key international public relations associations is a proof of the international recognition of Romanian PR as well as a constant connection to the changes and developments abroad.

The access to information, which is strongly supported and facilitated by all professional organizations analyzed, is paramount in helping practitioners develop and sustain their professional expertise. Moreover, the information posted on their websites is accessible to everyone who wants to understand phenomena belonging to the communication domain and thus the organizations become crucial in disseminating knowledge about PR.

We consider that, through the activities undertaken, the professional associations in Romania have contributed to defining and developing the public relations profession, have raised awareness about the domain, have supported the professionalization of practitioners and have helped Romanian PR gain the recognition of relevant official and governmental forums. Of significant relevance is also the contribution they have had in educating the public about PR, which has been achieved through transparency and dialogue.

We believe that these achievements prove that the steps to professionalize PR have been taken and that they constitute arguments in support of the claim that public relations in Romania can be considered a profession.

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