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► **To cite this version:**

Alexander Frame. PR and Global Interculturation.: Methodological Challenges for (Cross)Cultural PR Research. Adeymir Okay, Valérie Carayol & Ralph Tench. Researching the Changing Profession of Public Relations, Peter Lang, pp.143-156, 2013. hal-00866091

HAL Id: hal-00866091

<https://hal.science/hal-00866091>

Submitted on 27 Dec 2020

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PR AND GLOBAL INTERCULTURATION: METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES FOR (CROSS-)CULTURAL PR RESEARCH

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KEYWORDS:

PR, cultural approach, cultural turn, culture, research methodology, interculturality, cross-cultural research, cultural mediation, gatekeepers, stereotypes.

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the links between PR and culture, in order to look more closely at the “cultural turn” in PR, and what this implies for practitioners and researchers alike. It builds on existing conceptual models of culture to illustrate how PR can influence cultural evolutions, and highlights ethical issues faced by PR professionals, linked to their role as “gatekeepers” in this process. Finally, it outlines protocols used by researchers to study cultures, showing how these can be applied in cultural approaches to PR, as well as discussing the way in which cross-cultural methodology can also support such approaches, either within a single national context or transnationally.

INTRODUCTION

As Caroline Hodges (2012) points out, *doing* Public Relations is an inherently *cultural* activity. This statement can be applied on several levels. Firstly, in order to communicate effectively on behalf of their clients or employers, PR professionals rely on culturally-influenced representations. To be successful, they need to develop not only a solid PR culture, but a feeling for dominant trends, to subconsciously fine-tune to the cutting-edge concerns, aspirations and values of the societies in which they work. Secondly, through the work it does and as a profession, PR holds up a mirror to society, helping shape these same concerns, aspirations and values, through the mass media, and also through the interpersonal relations it both portrays and inspires (L’Etang, 2007: 218). In this context, PR appears potentially as influential as other mass-media contents regarding the transmission and reinforcement of social representations and stereotypes. Lastly, since public relations appears fundamentally concerned with creating meaning (Daymon and Hodges, 2009), PR professionals all around

the world can be seen as cultural *mediators*, gatekeepers selecting and trading in signs, symbols and stereotypes, seeking to bridge (or exploit) cultural divides when adapting their communication to culturally-diverse target audiences (Sison, 2009).

This paper takes a closer look at the dialectical relationship between Public Relations and the various cultural contexts within which its professionals operate. It seeks to better identify the impact of PR on the process of “interculturalisation” (Demorgan, 2000), defined as the multiple influences between cultures (majority and minority, organisational and other cultures), both within the framework of a national society, and transnationally. In a first section, the paper seeks to clarify the extent to which PR can be seen as a force for cultural evolution or modernization in a global context, by situating it in relation to established theories of culture and existing models of cultural evolution (Frame, 2012a; Spencer-Oatey, 2000; Wolton, 2003). This raises the further question of best practices and the ethical responsibility of PR professionals (Toth, 2009). A better understanding of the relationships between PR and the (evolving) social representations of different (target) groups, can shed new light on the debate about the use of (negative) stereotypes in PR, and the extent to which the PR industry might strive to reduce this, notably in accordance with European Parliamentary resolutions¹ or other legislation relating to advertising materials. Finally, the paper considers the ways in which the processes identified can be investigated empirically. In the ‘cultural approach’ to Public Relations, PR materials and practices can be perceived as cultural artefacts and, as such, a reflection of underlying cultures and representations (Daymon and Hodges, 2009). However, cultures have very little material existence outside artefacts, observed practices, etc., existing rather in the form of (largely unconscious) knowledge and representations in people’s minds. This ‘data’ can only be accessed partially, in both senses of the term, with the help of informants, but the view of culture obtained is both subjective and necessarily incomplete (Martin, 1992). Moreover, cultures are neither consensual in the sense that different individuals do not agree on a set of traits universally attributed to a particular culture, nor are they fixed entities which can easily be ‘tied down’ for study purposes. All of this makes cultures particularly challenging objects of study, all the more so when addressing questions of reciprocal influence relating to PR.

PR AS A FACTOR OF CULTURAL EVOLUTION

¹ 2008/2038(INI) - 03/09/2008: “How marketing and advertising affect equality between women and men”. Text adopted by the European Parliament.

PR and advertising professionals have often been accused of encouraging some of the ‘worst excesses’ of cultural imperialism in the global context, notably by promoting famous (often North American) brands, and by generally contributing to the ‘McDonaldisation’ of many societies around the world. Yet many of these accusations seem based on fairly simplistic, tubular conceptions of cultural hegemony, whereby exposure to foreign cultural products is seen to lead directly to adoption of practises and values. Scholars have been swift to show the limits of such models, presenting, in turn, more complex visions of the different reciprocal influences cultures may have on one another (Featherstone, 1995; Lie, 2003; Yu, 2004). In this light, it can be interesting to take a closer look at the processes involved in cultural change, to examine just how PR may indeed influence culture.

One of the most popular models of culture is the “Onion Model”, developed by Geert Hofstede (1991), and enhanced by Fons Trompenaars (1993) and Helen Spencer-Oatey (2000). This last version is presented here:

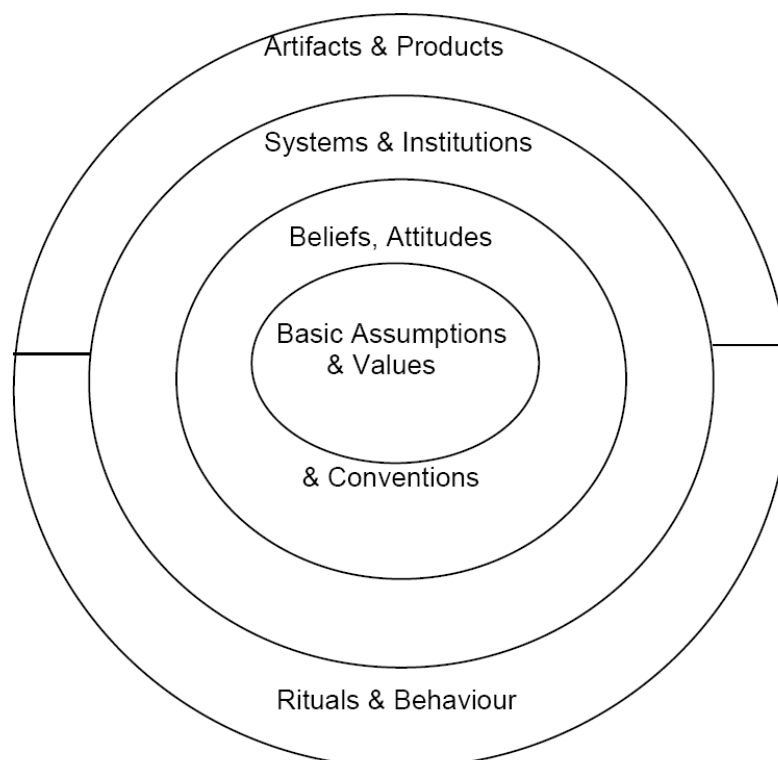


Figure 1 : The Onion Model of Culture (Spencer-Oatey, 2000)

The onion metaphor is based on the idea that culture is made up of several layers, from the deepest, innermost core values to the more visible and immediately apparent outer layers (rituals and behaviour, artefacts and products). Whereas it is relatively easy to identify and

adapt to these ‘outer’ elements, the underlying beliefs, conventions and value-assumptions are much harder to expose. Indeed, the inner elements are more deeply ingrained in the individual psyche, according to the model. They are taken for granted and often unconsciously seen as universals by members of the culture in question (ethnocentricity).

Not only does this model lead us towards a more complex understanding of the nature of cultural differences and their possible impact on interactions, but it also contains two important insights for PR practitioners. The first of these concerns the reception of foreign artefacts (products, advertising materials...). Since, structurally, each layer is influenced by the underlying layer(s), it follows that the artefacts produced within a culture, but also consumer practises, reflect underlying systems and institutions, themselves structured by dominant cultural beliefs, attitudes and conventions, and so on. This means that foreign artefacts are not simply adopted or transmitted from one culture to another, but people try to integrate them into an existing system of representations, often adapting and reinterpreting them, to give them a meaning in the target culture. To take the common metaphor of “McDonaldisation”, not only has this multinational been particularly successful in tailoring its products to a huge number of local markets around the world, but the very essence of what it means to eat at a McDonalds restaurant also varies greatly from one country to another. In France, for example, where the company’s logo is dark green and yellow, and one can purchase “*Le Croque McDo*”,² as well as “*Le Hamburger*” or “*Le Filet-O-Fish*”, the company has been very successful in penetrating the fast-food market. However, in a country where food is taken very seriously, dining at McDonalds is seen, by a large part of the population, as a morally reprehensible betrayal of the national gastronomic tradition, and part of the inexorable rise of “*la malbouffe*”.³ French cultural representations of McDonalds are strongly influenced by its American origins, and it has come to epitomise, for many, the very opposite of “*le repas gastronomique des Français*”.⁴ In this context choosing to eat at “*McDo*” can be a highly symbolic act, an act of rebellion for some, because of the place it has come to occupy in the national consciousness.

The second insight which can interest global PR practitioners, from the perspective adopted here, is related to the way cultures evolve. Cultural innovations, including borrowings from

² McDonalds’ own version of the popular French “*Croque-Monsieur*”.

³ Literally “bad eating”: a social trend against which groups of French “resistance fighters” rebel, by attacking and ransacking McDonalds and other fast food restaurants. Such extreme positions are (luckily) shared only by a tiny minority, but the anti-American, anti-fast food sentiment is much more widespread.

⁴ “The gastronomic meal of the French”, which was recently included by UNESCO in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (<<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/fr/RL/00437>>).

other cultures, affect the outer layers of the “onion”. The outer layer is thus less stable than the inner ones, which take progressively longer and longer to evolve, up to the core assumptions and values, which change relatively slowly. Since the different layers are related to one another, cultural innovations may lead to tensions between adopted practises or artefacts and underlying social conventions, beliefs or values. Such tensions are often reflected in (unfavourable) social reactions to media portrayals of “unconventional” social relationships or practises, for example, notably among more conservative groups and members of the population. Modern-day western media portrayals of (homo)sexuality, of inter-ethnic relations, recreational drug (ab)use can ‘raise eyebrows’ in the same way mini-skirts did in many societies in the 1960s. Yet this ‘outer layer’ of cultural artefacts also contributes to the gradual evolution of underlying values, as attitudes slowly evolve, in part because of such media portrayals slowly coming to be considered as more ‘norm’al. This gradual shift can be highlighted by looking back at the way some mainstream 1960s’ adverts or television series from the US portray gender relations: in terms which would be considered particularly sexist and provoke considerable scandal, fifty years later. Cultural attitudes evolve, and PR and media practises both anticipate and reflect this.

PR PROFESSIONALS AS CULTURAL GATEKEEPERS

PR appears particularly influential in terms of its potential impact on this type of cultural evolution, not least when it is channelled through the “mass media”.⁵ This can be explained by the desire of professionals to create a stir, to encourage people to take up and talk about their message, often by casting it in a sensationalist or avant-garde form. This is all-the-more true in an increasingly overcrowded media landscape, which may push even fairly traditional, institutional bodies to adopt a more provocative communication style. In this way, the PR/advertising industry itself may be considered to be a force of cultural innovation, as actors compete with one another to make a stir, often by playing on or calling into question dominant social representations. Such an approach is recurrently used by Benetton, most recently with the 2011 “Unhate” campaign. To echo once again Caroline Hodges’ (2012) position, “doing PR” may (at times) be equated with “making culture”.

Yet PR professionals also rely very heavily on existing social representations as a source of prefigured meanings, without necessarily seeking to call them into question. Both internally

⁵ The use of mass media here refers to the five traditional forms of mass media (press, radio, cinema, TV and display), plus any web-based forms which are sufficiently generalised to qualify for this term, associated with broadcast, one-to-many communication.

and externally, the meaning a message takes on is linked to a specific (cultural, corporate...) context and to pre-existing cultural codes. Indeed, by no means all campaigns are subversive in nature, and in a large majority of cases, good professional practise can consist rather in seeking to make messages coherent with existing pre-conceptions, so as to help the target to identify and find credible the ideas being put across.

Using stereotypes⁶ is a classic solution to provide a familiar backdrop against which a (less familiar) message can be elaborated. This is true of PR and of mass media communications in general. Whether it is pastoral scenes being used to sell cheeses, glaciers and polar bears to warn of global warming, or pictures of the homeless to trigger charity donations or denounce governmental housing policies, the emblematic stereotype is the building block of much media communication. Foreign stereotypes are no exception. They can be used to suggest certain claimed qualities (e.g. German car adverts), exoticism or abnormality. The use of stereotypes places the reader/viewer/listener in a familiar, socially-recognisable semiosphere (Lotman, 2000), a semiotic backdrop which predisposes him/her to interpret particular messages in a certain way, linked to the representations invoked. It seems reasonable to suppose that the fact that messages are thus associated with already taken-for-granted representations may, in many cases, make them seem all the more convincing. From this point of view, stereotypes can be seen to contribute to the overall effectiveness of PR.⁷

However, PR has repeatedly been criticised for its role in reproducing and reinforcing society's stereotypes, notably concerning the imposed norms of physical beauty, portrayals of violence, smoking, gender roles, etc. (Baran, 2007). A 2008 EU resolution insists that PR professionals should be sensitive to gender stereotypes portrayed in the media, and calls for more research to help elucidate links "*between gender stereotyping in advertising and gender inequality*" (Svensson, 2008). This raises a certain number of ethical questions, as to the "gatekeeping"⁸ role of PR professionals. In a similar way to journalists, whose role it is to present new information in an understandable, contextualised way, based on their target's

⁶ Stereotypes are defined here as relatively stable and rigidified social representations concerning objects or groups, in which it is the stereotype itself, rather than the object, which occupies the role of stimulus for the representation (Frame, 2007). The current British stereotype of the Frenchman in beret and stripy sailor's shirt, with moustache, string of onions round his neck and baguette under his arm, owes very little to modern French fashions, but is maintained in a closed circuit of media representations (as a search for images on any search engine will confirm).

⁷ Such a hypothesis evidently needs testing, and would only hold true as long as the stereotypes are not identified as such and called into question by the audience. In this case, they might, on the contrary, undermine the efficiency of the particular PR action.

⁸ This term is generally associated with journalists, and refers to their pivotal role in deciding which stories to relay through the media and to make "news".

existing representations, PR practitioners must present new ideas and practises in a way which is acceptable and understandable to public opinion, again based on existing representations, so as to encourage their adoption within the target group's culture. This is true of public health campaigns, launches of new products or services, or even campaigns designed to accompany the implementation of new procedures in the workplace. To do this, they need to reflect the views of target audiences, even if it means playing on stereotypes. To what extent should PR professionals be held responsible for this? Must they reject some stereotypes yet conserve others? How could they decide which stereotypes are "degrading"? Is PR without stereotypes possible? These questions seem lead to the grey zone of professional ethics, where each professional must make conscious choices, running the gauntlet of political correctness, trying to appeal to dominant social representations, while avoiding the stereotypes which appear socially undesirable... or potentially harmful for the client's image.

Indeed, this discussion brings to light the dichotomy between PR materials which contribute to reinforcing stereotypes, on the one hand, and the role of the profession in producing subversive or provocative cultural innovations, on the other. If the ability to conjure up and exploit existing social representations may be a key to the success of an ad campaign, the successful PR professional might be perceived as a cultural visionary, riding the crest of the wave of dominant social representations, capable of innovating to produce cutting-edge materials which reflect emerging trends and crystallise new meanings, without simply reproducing dominant stereotypes. In order to do this, he/she needs to navigate inside the cultural semiosphere, drawing on references from 'high' and 'mass' forms of culture, playing with the postmodern palimpsest of signs (Featherstone, 1995), in order to make sense to a particular audience.

Yet in an increasingly globalised and connected world, where audiences are fragmented and identities multiple and complex, structured in "scapes" (Appadurai, 2001), PR solutions need to be carefully tailored to different cultural groups. In this context, professionals must remain sensitive to majority-minority relations, to cultural differences in general, questioning the validity of social representations and stereotypes among different target groups, notably those of which they are not themselves members. In this respect, the "cultural turn" in PR (Hodges, 2012) is a positive development, which should lead to the adoption of better-adapted solutions and increased efficiency in the way messages are put together. It also implies that research into cultures can help optimise PR actions, both on the level of individual groups and cultural

contexts, and more generally, by helping professionals become more aware of cultural differences.

CULTURAL RESEARCH FOR PR

Much recent work, placing the emphasis on the cultural dimension of PR, highlights the potential of qualitative, ethnographic approaches and ‘thick descriptions’ to reveal the complexity of reception processes and contexts (Carayol, 2012; Hodges, 2012; Rittenhofer, 2012). According to these authors, earlier statistical or questionnaire-based methods seem less able to capture the complexity associated with the cultural approach, since it is much harder for them to establish a relationship with the context in which messages are received and interpreted. Other researchers attempt to reconcile qualitative and quantitative methodology (Nastasia, 2012).

One of the objectives of research into PR reception can be to study cultures themselves, in order to identify dominant social representations. It should, however, be borne in mind that cultures are processes rather than fixed entities, and evolve continuously through social interactions (Frame, 2012a). When we talk about a culture, we are in fact referring to a sum of representations and significations, associated, at a given time, with the membership of a certain group, spread through a broad population of members and non-members of that group, who do not all agree completely on the attributes of the said culture. Despite the fact that a culture may be reflected in an artefact or product, culture itself has no material existence, and as such it is particularly challenging to study. It follows that any account of a culture is necessarily incomplete, subjective, but also outdated, since, at best, it is only a synchronic snapshot of a diachronic process. These limits need to be understood when working on culture.

When studying national cultures, a certain amount of literature exists, notably in the field of cross-cultural communication. However, for the purposes of PR and especially internal communications, the aim is often to study cultures at other levels, and typically on the level of the profession (Daymon and Hodges, 2009) or the organisation (Martin, 1992). In this respect, the work done in organisational science on corporate or organisational culture, much of it dating back to the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Schein, 1985), provides a useful set of tools and methods for studying cultures (Frame, 2008: 341–350). Approaches generally involve participant observation in contact with the group studied, using tools such as the “matrix framework” proposed by Joanne Martin (1992), to then analyse and try to make sense of the

behaviours observed. Next, the researcher recruits informants, members of the culture itself, to discuss the observations and explanations suggested, confronting them with their own experiences and (subconscious) representations of the culture being studied. By confronting explanations with several informants, and using their insights to refine his/her analyses, the researcher gradually builds up an image of the culture, most often with its own inconsistencies and partial logic⁹. As Edgar Schein (1985: 113) reflects:

“The nature of this work can be likened to trying to bring to the surface something that is hidden but not concealed deliberately. It is so taken for granted that it escapes notice, but it is perfectly visible once it has surfaced into consciousness”.

However, Martin points out that many different cultures co-exist within organisations, alongside the organisational culture itself. These “feeder cultures” (1992: 113–114) include professional cultures, ethnic cultures, regional cultures, national cultures and so on, each of which may have an impact on the activity within the organisation, to a greater or lesser extent than its ‘own’ culture. The implication for PR professionals is that it is important not just to focus on the organisational identity and culture, even if these are seen as a potential source of common belonging and consensus, but rather to remain sensitive to all of the salient identities within an organisation. They should notably avoid the temptation to seek to marginalise or exclude identities they see as threatening for corporate unity, since members of the groups in question may react negatively to perceived corporate hegemony (Hogg and Terry, 2000).¹⁰

Other cultural research methods may also be of interest to PR professionals, who indeed most probably already use them in their everyday work, without identifying them as such. Depending on the information sought, methods such as focus groups, image studies, or benchmarking can be used to study cultural preferences among different target groups, in order to prepare or test a campaign. For a more in-depth analysis of a particular campaign or action, semiotics and reception studies can provide useful insights into the reasons why some

⁹ The degree to which the culture is considered as coherent whole, or rather the allowances made for ambiguity and inconsistency are very much a question of the posture adopted by the observer, as Joanne Martin (1992: 13) clearly points out. She differentiates between the “integration”, “differentiation” and “fragmentation” perspectives, insisting that only by adopting all three can the researcher hope to build up a comprehensive picture of the culture being studied.

¹⁰ “To secure harmonious and cooperative relations among departments or divisions within a large organization, it may be best to balance loyalty to and identification with the subunit with loyalty to and identification with the superordinate organization, and not overemphasize either one to the detriment of the other.” (Hogg and Terry, 2000: 131).

ads work for some groups and not so well for others. Insisting on the cultural dimension of all of these methods encourages practitioners to look more closely at the “representative user group” and analyse it in terms not of CSP or ethnic belonging, but of (cultural) sense-making logics.

Among other things, cultural approaches to PR should strive to develop practitioners’ awareness of cultural differences. This obviously includes the fact that the same referents may be understood differently in different cultural contexts, but must not be limited to oversimplified, Hofstede-style comparisons of value dimensions (Frame, 2012b). Rather, grounded qualitative approaches should be used to build up a more complete, nuanced and in-depth picture of the way individuals and groups react to given messages. It is also necessary to take into account the fact that PR is not practised in the same way all around the world, as Sorin Nastasia (2012) and Graeme Sterne (2012) have pointed out (*infra*). Finally, cultural studies and identity politics have shown just how important it is to be aware of where one is writing/communicating from. National, institutional or majority group identities may increase perceived legitimacy for some audiences, but they can provoke suspicion or outright rejection from others. Knowledge of such issues can help practitioners to better anticipate the meanings likely to be attributed to their messages by different publics.

CROSS-CULTURAL PR

So where does all this leave cross-cultural approaches to PR and PR research? Seeing PR as ‘culture in the making’, may lead us to query the possibility of effective cross-cultural or transcultural communication campaigns. If each message needs to be optimised for a particular audience, and if we consider that each audience is made up of people with multiple identities and differing cultural profiles, then it becomes very complicated to target even one particular national group, let alone several. At the same time, campaigns aimed at transnational groups, such as diasporas, may seek to build on a common identity and appeal to shared cultural traits, while remaining more neutral in relation to the different underlying national cultures. Similar approaches may be adopted in internal communications within a multinational corporation. Cross-cultural PR thus remains of vital importance, if we are to appreciate and avoid potential downfalls and misunderstandings linked to national and other cultural differences as to the way messages are likely to be interpreted, but also differing attitudes to PR itself.

Indeed, several studies in cross-cultural PR highlight differences in PR traditions. If the profession itself is often seen as having originated in the USA, many authors have written about the specifics of PR in different countries.¹¹ In a comparative study of conceptions of PR in the USA, in France and in Romania, Sorin Nastasia (2012) points to differing norms concerning what PR is considered to involve. While professionals see it predominantly as one-to-many communication in the US functionalist model, in France, it is more often conceptualised as two-way symmetrical communication. The author concludes his article by suggesting that:

“the more grounded in local models and in critical reflection on models public relations is in a specific country, the better chances public relations has to be pursued successfully, grounded in the concerns and the issues of businesses as well as of communities that businesses are part of.”

Likewise, Graeme Sterne (2012) argues that, for the Maori population of New Zealand, the oral tradition is very important, and legitimacy is based both on seniority and on relationships between people. In this context, PR cannot be reduced to mass-media communications. For researchers in cross-cultural PR, such local variations are challenging in methodological terms, since it is important, when comparing traditions, to make sure one is studying essentially the same thing, across cultural contexts.

Finally, the “cultural turn” can also be seen to increase the importance of cross-cultural approaches to PR, by leading us to focus on the plurality of cultures which coexist within one society. Comparative research methods, used to examine campaigns across frontiers or the differences in PR practises from one society to another, can thus be transposed to studies focusing on different groups within one national context. Audience studies can be conceived in terms of individuals who share a common national culture, but who also represent other social groups whose identities may also be made salient in a given context or when faced with a particular message, in a way that it is important for the PR professional to take into account. Possible solutions may include increased segmentation of publics, use of new communication channels or styles, or adaptation of contents to make them more universally acceptable and effective. However, it is necessary to adopt a sensitive, cross-cultural approach, in order to identify successfully such potential problems, and to find the most adapted solutions.

¹¹ Graeme Sterne (2012) provides a comprehensive list.

CONCLUSION

As this paper has sought to point out, the “cultural turn” in PR emphasises the complexity of societies and sense-making in our globalised world, whether we approach it on an international, national, or local scale. A term which has appeared recurrently is that of “identity”, for cultures are associated with belonging to and identification with social groups. One of the major stakes for PR professionals, in this context, is to manage group identifications and resulting tensions.

Seeing PR as an inherently cultural activity also raises the question of its role in the processes of globalisation itself. If these processes are driven in part by market forces and technological progress (Appadurai, 2001), PR seems to play a role in contributing to their acceptance. It cultivates consumer demand and helps people make sense of foreign products and practises, by adapting them to their existing systems of representations. PR professionals, acting as gatekeepers or cultural mediators, occupy a privileged position in relation to this process of interculturalisation. When they are at the interface of national cultures, their actions may accompany the adoption of new directives from a foreign parent company, for example or, on the other hand, give voice to the opponents of a new European institutional reform. The choice of words and images is of vital importance, since, by seeking to crystallise or dispel tensions between identities, they facilitate or obstruct the adoption of new practises and representations on the outer layer of the cultural “onion”, which constitutes the first stage of cultural change. Nor is this solely the case of PR with an international dimension. As this paper has repeatedly argued, the same thing is true of cultures on other levels of society. Questions of local governance, takeovers or mergers between SMEs, or trying to convince consumers to adopt a new means of electronic payment: all such actions have a potential impact on the (local, organisational...) cultures of different groups within society. For PR professionals, attentive to conflicting identities and group rivalries, ‘PR as culture’ approaches thus offer new ways to analyse and deal with diversity in today’s multicultural societies. For researchers, such approaches can help improve our understanding both of PR as an activity, and of the way cultures are related to one another and evolve together in our globalised world.

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