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France

Bruno Chaudet, Valérie Carayol and Alex Frame

Abstract

This chapter deals with the development of public relations (PR) as a professional field in France, from 1945 to the late 1980s. Not initially considered as a strategic management function, French PR sought to gain legitimacy in its early years, implicitly differentiating itself from the model of North-American PR by which it was inspired, through a focus on the ethical dimension of the profession and its distinction from the related professions of journalism and advertising. Professional associations reflected these concerns and played a key role in helping the profession construct its identity. Social evolutions, especially the civil unrest associated with May 1968, can also be seen to have influenced the development of PR, underlining deeper social trends and the growing need for social dialogue both within organisations and externally. Successive governments and the public sector in general also played an important role in legislating and then legitimising the profession on several occasions. By the late 1980s, the strategic dimension of the PR / communications function had become accepted in many major organisations.

Keywords : AFREP; France ; PR ; relations publiques

The term '*relations publiques*', as used in France, is generally associated with a relatively narrow range of communications practices, at the centre of which are press relations and events coordination. As the professional field of communication practices gradually widened and diversified, it came to be labelled as 'corporate', 'institutional', 'organisational' or 'strategic communications', rather than as 'PR'. The latter term now has a somewhat old-

fashioned ring in French, reminiscent of a normative set of professional practices which were common until the 1980s, but which seem out of date today (D'Almeida and Carayol, 2014). However, in the course of its history, the term was used extensively by a community of French communications professionals, as the profession developed, along with corresponding specialised higher education courses and research. Today virtually no French university course may be found in '*relations publiques*', though would-be professionals are trained in 'organisational' or 'strategic communications', and much research has been conducted into this professional field since the 1980s.

The way the field has evolved historically has been studied in French-speaking Canada (Dumas, 2010) (Maisonneuve, 2004) and in Belgium (Gryspeerd, 2004), much more than in France, as several scholars have pointed out (Walter, 1995; Carayol, 2004, 2010). The growing interest for historical research over the last ten years or so, in Europe, encourages us to examine how PR evolved in France, and to identify new sources for this.

This chapter underlines a few important aspects of the way the PR profession appeared and developed in France, but is by no means an exhaustive approach. Rather, it seeks to raise key questions and thus pave the way for future research. It is based on interviews conducted between April and September 2014 with key figures who witnessed or played a part in the way the profession evolved, as well as archive material from the *Association française des relations publiques* (AFREP, French Public Relations Association) and professional and scientific documents relating to the profession's history. It focuses on the way the profession gradually constructed its legitimacy, from the pioneers in the first half of the 20th Century up to the 1980s, when communication became more widely recognised as a strategic function within the organisation.

The Beginning: When PR became *relations publiques*

The origins of French PR and the beginning of its development as a professional field are closely linked to the Marshall Plan at the end of the Second World War. The ensuing contacts between French and American businesses led many French companies to borrow and adopt American management techniques, including PR as an integrated management function. Obviously companies had already been confronted with the question of communications prior to the World War II (Malaval, 1996), long before such considerations were recognised as 'PR'. As French PR consultant Jean-Pierre Beaudoin, founder and past director of the industry body *Syntec Relations Publiques*, points out, Michelin was probably one of the first major organisations to develop a 'PR practices' in France. The company began supplying tyres for cyclists in 1898. In 1900, it published the first Michelin Guide for professional drivers. In 1910 it created the first road signs displaying the names of the towns into which people were driving, and then in 1918 it produced signposts indicating directions and distances. Through this pioneering PR work, Michelin sought to identify the interests of its publics and to build relations with them by making their lives easier.

Michelin is a company which understood, virtually from its creation, that by producing communication tools useful to the people who were going to buy its tyres, it would be able to establish its brand on its territory. So they made maps, guides, signposts [...] and they occupied a brand territory with communication tools (J.-P. Beaudoin, personal communication, 26 May 2014).

Notwithstanding such early exceptions, most commentators record the beginning of the profession in France as 1947, the year when François Lulé-Dejardin (Shell, France), Lucien Matrat (Caltex) and Jean Choppin de Janvry (Esso) went to the US on a 'productivity mission', and discovered PR. 'When they returned to France, they were seen as pioneers, setting up PR departments in their respective companies' (Viale, 1997, p. 39, our translation). Following the example of the oil companies, many others sent their employees to learn

American management techniques, and among them this method for what Bernays termed ‘engineering consent’ or which Ivy Lee described less controversially as a way for companies to explain to their publics what their roles were and why they were so important for the local, regional and national communities. Public relations professionals thus sought to ‘modify the public’s representation of the oil industry by providing ‘objective’ explanations to ‘opinion leaders’” (Viale, 1997, p. 59). Esso organised public meetings, published the magazine *Pétrole et Progrès* and produced educational materials for teachers.

The companies who imported PR into France thus adopted it in a similar spirit to that of the practices Michelin had developed: building relationships with certain categories of publics, which were not limited to clients. ‘The market is seen as a part of society as a whole, and the needs of relevant publics are taken into account in their social dimension and not merely in terms of the market’ (Viale, 1997, p. 59). If the oil companies were the first to develop teaching materials, comments Jean-Pierre Beaudoin, it was as a result of public opinion in France following the Suez Crisis in 1956 and the unpopularity of the American Oil Conglomerates who were seen to be making huge profits by exploiting oil wells situated in the Middle East.

This reductionist vision of the oil industry led companies in this sector to develop educational materials to explain what petroleum was. They explained the process from initial exploration to the finished product, showing all the different professions involved, the investments, the transformations, and all the benefits of oil derivatives, including plastic. These were the first teaching materials produced by companies (J.-P. Beaudoin, personal communication, 26 May 2014).

Though the first PR departments were to be found in private corporations, it did not take long for public sector organisations to adopt the function too. Among these were the French railways (SNCF), whose image had deteriorated during the Second World War, and the ‘Post

and Telecommunications' Ministry, which set up a large PR service in 1952, employing between 150 and 200 people. Other ministries also developed the function from 1958 onwards.

The Quest for Legitimacy

The field started to organise itself as a sector of professional activity in the 1950s or early 1960s, as the first PR agencies were set up: *Relations* by Henri Pineau and Géo-Charles V éran, the *Office Français des Relations Publiques* by Georges Serrel, *Information and Entreprise* by Jacques Coup de Fréjac. In 1950, the first professional association for PR, founded by a group of pioneering figures around Jean Choppin de Janvry and Lucien Matrat, sought to develop practices and a theory of PR in France. It was named *Club de la maison de verre* (The Glass House Club) in reference to Ivy Lee's *Declaration of Principles* and notably the principles of transparency and telling the whole truth. The Club translated the American term 'public relations' (PR) into French and named their activity '*relations publiques*'. However, this translation has since been criticised as being at the root of a subsequent widespread misunderstanding, in France (though not in Belgium or French-speaking Canada, where the same term is used) of what PR means. Indeed, in French, the term is more readily understood as 'relationships which are public', and, for many, '*relations publiques*' has come to be taken as events and press relations, putting very little emphasis on the strategic function of PR. Although this interpretation is itself open to discussion, it should be noted that Syntec RP – the main professional body today – recently replaced the adjective '*publiques*' in its name with the noun '*publics*', thus clarifying and underlining the idea of 'relationships with publics'.

Independently of such semantic considerations, practitioners in the early days worked to establish their profession's legitimacy. They wanted to distinguish it from journalism and commercial advertising, and notably from the notion of propaganda. This notion was present

in early American PR, with the Creel Committee (CPI) and the work of Edward Bernays. Some of the French PR pioneers, such as Jacques Coup de Fréjac, had themselves worked in military information during the Second World War, yet they sought to distance themselves from what was perceived as the US model of propaganda.

From early on, the profession also had to cope with a negative image surrounding PR, that Anne-Marie Cotton, Belgian PR academic and long-time member of the European Confederation of Public Relations (CERP) suggests was seen as ‘a network of young men and young ladies from good families’ (personal communication, 30 May 2014). Denis Huisman, director of the Ecole Française d’Attachés de Presse (EFAP) puts it more bluntly: PR professionals were seen as ‘charming incompetents’, he remembers (personal communication, 8 May 2014) confiding that the EFAP, which he founded in 1961, had even been given the unfortunate nickname ‘Ecole des Filles A Papa’ (School for Daddy’s Girls). Another professional body, *l’Association des professionnels des relations publiques* (APROREP, Association of Public Relations Professionals) was set up in 1952 by several members of the ‘Glass House Club’, who wanted to lay down ethical principles defining good PR practice. In 1954, they created a ‘Professional Code for PR’, listing certain guidelines and objectives for PR practitioners. It stated that:

The specialisation of functions and activities imposed by technical progress has constructed barriers between the different groups making up society, and between the individuals forming these groups. The result is insufficient communication and a lack of mutual knowledge which can lead to a total breakdown of relations [...] What we call Public Relations are the activities carried out by a group in order to establish and maintain good relations between the members of the group, and between the group and different sectors of public opinion (Cited in Walter, 1995, p. 35, our translation).

Early French PR thus incorporated a critical vision of industrialised society, along with the idea that PR could solve the problems and social antagonisms associated with it. This involved developing relations with the social environment in a broad sense: ‘Staff, shareholders, distributors, clients and suppliers, teachers, the press, trade unions, public administrations, legal and executive bodies, etc.’ (ibid). The APROPEP code was replaced in 1965 by the International Code of Ethics (Code of Athens) which was written by Lucien Matrat for the International Public Relations Association (Watson, 2014). However this global dimension of PR was not understood immediately by business leaders, who only began to take into account the global environment and their relationships with their publics after the social conflicts in the late 1960s.

The mid to late 1950s were a time when many new professional bodies were created, illustrating both the desire to find a consensual definition of PR and the difficulty of doing so. The APROPEP and the ‘Glass House Club’ joined forces in 1955 to become the AFREP (French Public Relations Association). In the same year, Géo-Charles V éran founded the ‘National Syndicate of PR Agents’ (SNARP) while Jacques Coup de Fréjac and Georges Serell set up the ‘National Syndicate of PR Consultants’ (SNCRP). André Hurtrel created the ‘National Union of Press Agents’ (UNAP) in 1956, along with Philippe Boiry. In an interview carried out by Janine Aubouy Dutreix in 2013, Boiry explained that the UNAP recruited many members from outside the field of PR, in order to exist ‘both financially and in terms of numbers’ (Aubouy Dutreix, 2013). Indeed, as Denis Huisman remembers (personal communication, *supra*), it was a challenge for the industry to provide reliable figures for the number of practitioners in the 1950s. Many professionals were female, most of them declared their earnings along with their husbands’, and hence they did not appear in governmental statistics listing the occupation of each household’s highest-earning taxpayer.

The creation of professional bodies can thus also be associated with the need for the profession to gain visibility both numerically and statistically.

The work of professional bodies and their desire to draw up the boundaries of a professional field and to design ethical guidelines to distinguish PR from advertising and propaganda eventually bore fruit in the form of a law. In 1964, the 'Arrêté Peyrefitte' (Peyrefitte Law) named after the Information Minister at that time, Alain Peyrefitte, made a distinction between propaganda and PR, in its first article. Jean-Baptiste de Bellescize, founder of Porter Novelli France and past President of Syntec RP, points out (personal communication, 6th May 2014):

The Peyrefitte Law was very important since it structures the professional communications field around three incompatible functions: journalism, advertising and PR. These functions are structured in a similar way to the legal professions: it's impossible to be a defence lawyer, a prosecutor and a judge at the same time. We can't be journalists, advertisers and PR professionals at the same time.

In the second half of the 1960s, the different professional bodies started working more closely together, and eventually five major syndicates/unions came together, in 1971, to form the French Public Relations Federation (FFRP), a body which existed until 1996, and which drew up a common ethical code. The question of ethics was still a major concern in 1972, year of the Havas Conseil en Relations Publiques scandal, around the figure of its CEO, Roland Pozzo di Borgo. This was the man, says Denis Huisman (personal communication, *supra*), who had introduced Father's Day in France, as a way to sell more Flaminaire lighters. At the time, Pozzo di Borgo was at the head of the 350-strong Havas PR agency, which was somewhat of an exception in the French PR landscape. Not only had it been partly nationalised after the Second World War, but Havas was a very large agency by French

standards. Although North American agencies at the time could number over 1000 employees, only a handful of agencies in France had over 15. As Huisman remembers:

[The] company was in charge of a lot of radio programmes, like Intervilles [a game show featuring teams from different towns]. But to host Intervilles, the mayor of the town had to pay 50 million [old francs: approximately 7,500€] to Pozzo di Borgo. He took a commission and paid the rest to Havas. A French senator, named Diligent, took the half state-owned company to court and Georges Pompidou, French President at the time, had the PR branch of the company closed.

In the context of this scandal, the question of boundaries between professions was still ongoing. Once more pleading the case for distinguishing PR from commercial, financial and institutional forms of advertising, Jacques Coup de Fréjac wrote in the editorial of the AFREP newsletter in 1972:

During PR's formative years in France, certain executives in the public or private sector, or even certain professionals made honest mistakes as to where exactly the limits between PR, advertising and journalism lay. Those who continue to do so today are dishonest and their behaviour is yet more reprehensible since they are motivated by personal interests. Between neighbouring territories, we find natural or legislative boundaries. Sometimes there are zones of no man's land. This is where bandits operate. Our profession is no place for such surreptitious behaviour (Coup de Fréjac, 1972a, our translation).

PR after the 1968 Social Unrest

If the professional bodies played a role in helping the profession to develop internally during the 1950s and 1960s, it was not until the summer of social unrest and the General Strike in France, stemming from the student protests in 1968, that many business leaders started to take on board the importance of communication. Indeed, although PR had long been

underlining the importance of building relations with different publics, top management in the 1960s was generally averse to dialogue, either internally or externally. In Philippe Boiry's view, 'in France, the last people to understand the role of press officers were the company directors themselves' (Aubouy Dutreix, 2013).

This attitude to internal relations had been observed in 1950, during the debate surrounding the introduction of a minimum wage for workers in France, a move which the French Employers' Council (CNPF) had always opposed. When the State finally imposed this measure, as Henri Weber (1991) reports, the debate was particularly fierce during negotiations with the CNPF when trying to establish what a 'minimum subsistence salary' might be, as company owners argued about how few calories and how few clothes an employee needed to survive. In stark contrast to professional PR bodies' promotion of utopian discourse about employee relations, this was the period of triumphant Taylorism when internal PR had no place in the company.

Yet Taylorism was soon losing its halo and several reports over the next two decades underlined the importance of taking human relations into account within companies. Senior civil servant François-Bloch Lainé (1963) published an influential book encouraging employers to focus on developing relations within their companies. Similar ideas were to be found in the report, *Information in the Company*, published in 1972 by the 'Young Business Leaders' Organisation' (Floris, 1996, p. 119), and again in the report entitled 'Reforming Companies' submitted to President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1974 by Pierre Sudreau. As early as 1969, Jacques Baumel was made Secretary of State in Charge of PR, an office he held until 1972, under Prime Minister Chaban-Delmas. 'That did a lot to raise the profile of PR and press relations', comments Denis Huisman (personal communication, *supra*). 'It was a bit like when De Gaulle equipped all of the French Prefets with Citroën DS cars, which

contributed overnight to the popularity of a model which had not until then been a great commercial success.'

Indeed, after the shock of 1968, the early 1970s saw the creation of integrated 'Information - Communication' services not only in many large French companies, such as Saint-Gobain and Peugeot (1970), L'Oréal and Renault (1973), but even in the Employers' Council (CNPF) itself (1970). The latter set up a 'General Information Service' headed by Michel Frois, who had previously worked for the Armed Forces PR and Information Service (SIRPA). Weber (1991) interprets the emergence of these new services as a direct result of the general strike of 1968, in which several top managers had been taken hostage in their own factories, triggering the 'media turn' taken by business leaders. With a wider, more strategic scope, the new 'Information - Communication' services often encompassed both existing internal communication, which had been developed by human resources, and external communication, which had been the central activity of the PR department.

At its 1972 congress held under the banner of 'Growth, the Company, and People', CNPF held debates in front of 175 journalists from the written press, on the themes of 'Growth and Society' and 'People in Companies'. Communication was central to these debates, which centred on the 'communication spirit' and workers who were becoming more and more qualified and who needed to be informed about what the company was doing. At this congress, Antoine Riboud, CEO of Danone, gave a talk which has come to be known as 'The Marseille Speech'. In it, he analysed the recent evolutions in French society and called upon business leaders to set up information systems involving their staff. He urged them to look beyond the economic dimension and to embrace other aspects of the human condition, such as solidarity, responsibility, and personalisation. He pleaded for companies to take on responsibilities beyond the factory walls, in society at large (AFREP, 1972b).

Jacques Coup de Fréjac's editorial in the December 1972 issue of the 'Glass House Review', inspired by this speech, stated that, 'the CNPF had invited us – implicitly or explicitly – to move our services in this direction. If these things happen without us, we'll be the only ones to blame. If they are to happen with us, if we are to orchestrate them, then we have no choice but to assume the 'global' nature of the communication function' (AFREP, 1972b, our translation). In this way, the global communication function was seen to supersede that of public relations, making information, and hence both internal and external PR, more central to that function.

Five years later, while at the Finance Ministry, future President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing set up the 'General Service for Relations with Publics' (Delorme, 2000). This was another public sector reform which played an important role in generalising PR. As Jean-Pierre Beaudoin (personal communication, *supra*) remembers:

The massive arrival of PR in the public administration was down to Giscard. When he created the General Service for Relations with Publics, this was set up in 101 local government administrations. Suddenly, it was on another scale. At that time, the profession had more people working in the public sector than in the private sector.

The public sector acted as a catalyst.

Underlying trends in the public sphere

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the PR function became more widely established and accepted in France. From a sociological point of view, according to Beaudoin, this can be linked to three underlying trends. The first of these was demographic, as the school-leaving age increased and the baccalaureate became increasingly widespread.

It was a radical change: France became intelligent. Not that it had been unintelligent previously, but increasingly people's opinions were considered legitimate, they spoke out, and the media covered what they said. This led to a public sphere in which people

considered they had things to say, and in which the media published them. Jean-Pierre Beaudoin (personal communication, *supra*).

A second, accompanying factor was the growing number and popularity of press magazines catering for people's desire to understand the economy and workplace-related issues, from *L'Expansion* (1967) to *Le Nouvel Economiste* (1976).

When you have people reading magazines which talk about company-related issues, all of a sudden you're faced with people who not only consider themselves intelligent, but who also consider themselves informed and hence competent. Jean-Pierre Beaudoin (personal communication, *supra*).

The third factor was linked to changes in the law, triggered by the Sudreau Report (1975, *supra*) into employer-employee relations in the workplace. It was the first report to highlight the importance of internal communications in legitimising the decision-making process. The Sudreau Report recommended reforming industrial relations procedures so as to involve employee representatives in the internal decision-making processes of companies.

On the political level, François Mitterrand's presidential election in 1982 and his Prime Minister Michel Rocard's project to incorporate project management techniques in public sector administrations created further need for experts in public sector communication, alongside the growing need for experts in private-sector PR and communications strategy. The function of communications director or *DIRCOM* in French (Walter, 1995) thus arrived in France in the 1980s. In subsequent decades, it went on to become generalised in both public and private sectors, consolidating its strategic dimension, adapting to an ever-changing communications landscape, revolutionised by the advent of digital communications. Yet, with the benefit of hindsight, many of the questions raised today, for example by the merging of publics and content providers in the digital sphere or the concerns about fading distinctions online between the roles of journalists, advertisers and legitimate mouthpieces of the

organisation, can be seen to resonate with the age-old concerns which shaped the professional field of PR during its formative years in France.

Indeed, looking back, in conclusion, over this formative period of thirty years; from 1950 when the *Glass House Club* was founded, to the end of the 1970s when the role of communications director became established, this distinction between journalism, PR and advertising appears critical. To legitimise their profession, PR practitioners in France sought to distance themselves from practices associated with influence or propaganda, notably in the light of ongoing tensions around what PR could and should be, explicitly and implicitly, as illustrated by the continued preoccupation with ethical codes and guidelines. As Jean-Baptiste de Bellescize comments: “*Public Relations is all about trust, and French society is a society of mistrust*” (personal communication, *supra*). This alleged incompatibility with French cultural values, which might appear to condemn PR, can also be seen as the reason why it is essential to French businesses and organisations which are constantly seeking legitimacy. Although the number of professionals referring to “*relations publiques*” is today relatively low, the strategic function of *dircom* is as widespread in France as in other Western European countries. After the struggle to establish itself and become accepted as a critical strategic management function, the profession reached a level of maturity in France, in the 1980s, which allowed it to finally secure its seat in the boardroom.

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