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Netherlands and Belgium

Betteke van Ruler and Anne-Marie Cotton

Abstract: Although the Flemish part of Belgium was part of the Netherlands until 1830, the countries are quite different, and that is also the case in the two parts of Belgium itself. Therefore, a brief history of public relations in the Netherlands and Belgium intersects three different stories: a story of the development of public relations as public information in the Netherlands in the 19th century, a story of public relations as propaganda and press agency in the 20th century in the French speaking part of Belgium, and a story of public relations as public affairs and public information in the Flemish part of the country.

Keywords: consensus building; Enlightenment; media relations; public information; public affairs; soft-selling persuasion;

Although the Flemish part of Belgium was part of the Netherlands until 1830, the countries are quite different, and that is also the case in the two parts of Belgium itself. Therefore, a brief history of public relations (PR) in the Netherlands and Belgium intersects three different stories: a story of the development of PR as public information in the Netherlands in the 19th century, a story of PR as propaganda and press agency in the 20th century in the French speaking part of Belgium, and a story of PR as public affairs and public information in the Flemish part of the country.

In researching the history of PR in both countries, the perspective employed has been of the professional development and institutionalization of PR, bearing in mind Sloan's view that we

are no more than just mediators of the real past (Sloan, 1991). Periodization has also been applied to deduce historical themes that have shaped the evolution of this communication discipline in neighbouring countries, which are both similar and very different for linguistic, political and social reasons.

National characteristics

With, respectively, nearly 17 million and over 11 million inhabitants, the Netherlands and Belgium are among the smaller countries of Europe, but are known for their major cities: Brussels, the European Union capital, and the Dutch cities of Amsterdam and The Hague.

Netherlands

Ever since the 17th century, the Netherlands has been known for its high level of wealth. People in other continents also had contact with the Dutch because of the nation's entrepreneurial nature and because of its questionable history of colonisation. Over time, the Dutch built the reputation of pretending to know how people in other societies in the world should behave (Vossestein, 2001). The Oxford Dictionary defines a 'Dutch uncle' as one who whose manner in talking to people was 'lecturing them paternalistically' (Hofstede, 1987, p. 5). According to Vossestein, the basic values of the Dutch were always egalitarianism and a high work ethic. He claims that the Dutch have difficulty in dealing with hierarchy, always try to maintain a balance between being aware of the hierarchical aspects of a relationship and not wanting to make that awareness too obvious. Another characteristic of the Netherlands is the fragmentation of its politics. Many parties compete for electoral and parliamentary support but none of these is in a position to win a working majority on its own. This has led to a governmental system of coalitions and alliances (Kranenburg, 2001).

Belgium

Although parts of the present Belgian territory had been parts of larger entities, being among of

Europe's economic, political and cultural regions since the 15th century, Belgium's history goes no further than 1830. Federal Belgium is the result of a long, gradual process of territorialisation of the relations between the two language groups: Flemish in the north (60 per cent of the population), French in the south (40 per cent). As French was adopted as its single official language in 1830, this initiated the Flemish demand for 'cultural autonomy' resulting in the movement toward federalism. In the 1920s, three language areas were defined: Dutch-speaking, French-speaking, and the bilingual area of Brussels. Historically a predominantly Dutch-speaking city located north of the linguistic borderline, Brussels rapidly became predominantly francophone after it was chosen as the capital city of Belgium (Baeten, 2009). According to Deschouwer (2005, p.50), 'federalism in Belgium is thus the result not of a deliberate choice but of incremental conflict management'.

Roots of PR

PR as a profession has been evident in the Netherlands longer than in Belgium. It started in the Netherlands around 1850, in the French speaking part of Belgium at the end of the 19th century, and in the Flemish section around 1920.

Netherlands

In the eighteenth century, science and knowledge were no longer seen as being relevant only for the elite, but had to be disseminated. This is called 'the period of Enlightenment'. The Dutch term for this diffusion was *voorlichting*, which is a literal Dutch translation of 'enlightenment'. The idea of *voorlichting* is based on an expression of the German ethical philosopher Kant: *sapere aude* (literally, 'dare to know') and which was interpreted as 'all people must have the intention to be informed on what is going on and must be enlightened, so that they can take part in the ongoing debate about and development of society'. In the nineteenth century the concept of *voorlichting* developed into 'giving full information to all people to mature and emancipate'. The

administration as well as civil society organisations started to introduce *voorlichters*, specialists who travelled around to give information about health, good farming, housekeeping, education, politics, sexual behaviour, etc.

At the same time, the elite remained sceptical about the enlightening of ordinary people. That is why *voorlichting* was also used to show people how to conduct themselves as good citizens and to control them. The history of PR in the Netherlands can therefore be seen as a history of the battle between information and emancipation on the one hand, and education and persuasion on the other hand, but always under the ('Dutch uncle') dogma of 'knowing what is best'.

The characteristics of the practice of this *voorlichting* can still be seen in the daily practice of public relations departments and consultancies. The evolution of public relations in the Netherlands cannot therefore be captured in terms of 'publicity' or 'press agency' but all the more in terms of 'public information' and well-meant (but patronizing) soft-selling 'persuasion' and 'nudging' (Lagerwey et al., 1997). At the same time, dialogue, negotiation and consensus-building are natural exponents of Dutch culture, which for centuries has relied on the practice of consultation and the involvement of as many people as possible in decision-making (Hofstede 1987). Every issue bearing even the remotest risk of disagreement has a forum of its own in which all interested parties are represented, whether it be traffic issues, defence matters, or education affairs. Kranenburg (2001) showed that this culture has many repercussions in politics: 'The more the relevant bodies agree, the less freedom of movement remains for the politicians' (p. 38).

Belgium

Because of the new Belgian state's choice of French as its single official language in 1830, Dutch speakers were not a demographical but a political, sociological, and psychological minority. Thus information and communication activities in Dutch cannot be found before protection against

political marginalization through the new language policy was introduced-, first by recognizing Dutch as the second official language and, beginning in the 1920s, delimiting the geographical areas in which Dutch or French would be the only official language (The German-speaking community was not officially recognized until 1973. It represents 0.7 per cent of the population). Archives, such as those of Charles de Broqueville (1870-1940), indicate that these topics emerged from the end of the 19th century onwards: public discourse, propaganda, colonial affairs, press relations, linguistic issue management and activism. According to Jacquet (1992), the propagation of PR in the different parts of Belgium resulted from economic missions of the Belgian Office for Productivity (OBAP) that was initiated by the Marshall Plan (European Recovery Program) in 1948. By collecting information on the economic and social growth of the USA during visits to companies and meetings with American CEOs and decision makers, the participants noticed that organisations became active information and relationship agents with their environments (Ellul, 1963). They relayed in Belgium the importance for (large) organisations and (large) administrations to nurture their relations with their publics and to introduce a human dimension in their social and informational management via conferences. The first book on PR published in Belgium was *Précis de public-relations* [Handbook of public relations] written by the Swiss PR consultant Eric Cyprès (1952). It reported on the emergence of a new concept for applying publicity and information techniques, using strategies based on trust and understanding of the public's interests (Çamdereli, 2001). Its main tenets were applied by William Ugeux, director of Inforcongo (the governmental information and public relations office for Congo and Rwanda-Burundi), who aimed to positively enhance the colonial actions of Belgium in terms of health, education and infrastructures (1955-60) in the countries (Balteau, 1997; De Vidts, 2004; Debruyne, 2008; Dufour, 2008). After the independence of the Belgian Congo in 1960 Ugeux pursued the image building of Belgium by founding Inbel, the Belgian

Institute for information and documentation, in 1961 (Debruyne 2008). He was inspired by the Dutch experience before World War II and by an institute linked to the Belgian government in exile which was based in London during World War II. Ugeux stated: 'to govern is to make information' (Gryspeerd, 2007, p. 35). Inbel was integrated into the ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1962. It later became De Belgische Federale Voorlichtingsdienst (FVD)/Le Service Fédéral belge d'Information (SFI)/Der Belgische Föderale Informationsdienst (FID) in 1994. Parallel to the national developments, the foundation of the European Community in Brussels transformed the new 'capital of Europe' into the cornerstone of international relations and public diplomacy (Çamdereli, 2001).

Development of the practice

As the roots of PR are different in the Netherlands and Belgium, the development of the practice was, too. In the Netherlands it was influenced by the principles of the Enlightenment and the consensus orientation of society. In Belgium PR followed different paths via appropriation or reinterpretation of the North American perspective on PR by the Catholic Social movement, which considered there was an ideological link between the Christian concept of economy and society and the American humanistic ideology of PR, and by other business trends identifying management techniques related to marketing.

Netherlands

The origins of Dutch PR practice, as noted earlier, can be found as early as in the seventeenth century. At that time, consular civil servants had to report regularly on events in the country where they were stationed that might be important for shipping, trade and industry and informed government on how to cope with it. In the 18th century, civil associations hired specialised *voorlichters* to give information on, for example, better housekeeping, farming and sexual relations (Katus, 2001). After industrialisation manufacturers started to provide information on

their well-being to the press as well as the general public. The first press departments, e.g. Jaarbeurs and the Royal Dutch Airlines KLM, originated in the beginning of the 20th century, both following the Dutch (and German) 'voorlichting' approach. The government followed soon and founded departments to inform journalists. Dutch journalists, however, preferred to keep direct access to administrators and politicians. Thanks to the strong 'pillarisation' of society, with each pillar using its own media and therefore its own political contacts, their lobby was successful for a long time and the governmental PR departments were forced to aim their press releases to foreign journalists only.

Moreover, according to Kickert (1996), the Netherlands was seen as an almost perfect example of the modern non-state concept of what he calls 'neo-corporatism'. This European model emphasised the interests of a small, fixed number of well-organised interest groups that were recognised by the state which gave them privileged or even monopolised. Usually, the most important groups in a corporatist society are employers, employees and the state. However, in the Netherlands, all kinds of single-issue pressure groups were also involved in the system.

These characteristics have influenced PR practice. Civil society is seen as the basis of society-building in the Netherlands and pressure groups are a natural part of life. This was due to the consensus-building nature of the Dutch and so pillarisation and corporatism, therefore, never led to a strongly polarised society, even in the turbulent 1960s (see Kickert, 1996 for an overview). Moreover, pressure groups have been allowed great involvement in decision-making, in politics and nowadays also in the corporate arena, as long as they are not too violent in their approach.

That is why cooperation is an important strategy of Dutch pressure groups. Van Luijk, a professor in business ethics in the Netherlands, calls it 'democratisation of moral authority' (van Luijk and Schilder 1997, p. 3) and it has become normal part of life. As a result, aggressive persuasion is not an acceptable PR strategy. Although management styles are changing and 'Americanising',

so that competition is more common, dialogue is often used for soft-selling and patronizing reasons.

The Dutch have one of the oldest PR professional associations founded in 1947 (then called NGPR, Het Nederlands Genootschap Public Relations en Voorlichting [Dutch Association of Public Relations and Enlightenment, now called Logeion). It was soon followed by more specialised associations for governmental and hospital PR, public affairs and regional networks (Lagerwey et al, 1997).

Belgium

The roots of PR can be found in propaganda which was linked to the industries derived from the Belgian colonial activities and involving companies as well as the government (Stanard, 2012), public affairs (linguistic and political issues from the beginning of the 20th century) as well as media relations (relaying information). PR practitioners wanted to be considered by journalists as the preferred gatekeepers for relevant information (Van Bol and Ugeux, 1983). Therefore departments dedicated to the systematic dissemination of information were created in both public institutions and companies before these practices were introduced more widely from the US after World War II.

The first proper PR departments were, however, only established after the war at companies such as the Belgian branch of Esso (1946), the insurance firm Caisse Nationale Belge d'Assurance /Algemene Verzekeringen (1949) and the Société Générale de Belgique /Generale Bankmaatschappij, a bank (1950) (Pauwels and van Gorp, 2005).

The creation of the Belgian Center for Public Relations / Belgisch Center voor Public Relations (BCPR) / Centre Belge de Relations Publiques (CBRP) in 1953 by Victor Snutsel (Shell) president, Eric Cyprès (PR consultant), Jean de Broux (General Insurance), Pierre Janssen (Esso), Robert Maillard (Sabena), Jacques Overloop (IBM), Joe Cavillot (GM), Fernand Huybrechts

(Ford) and Robert Goeman (Philips), played an important role in the professionalisation and institutionalisation of PR in Belgium by bringing together in-house practitioners from private or public institutions with consultants (Çamdereli, 2001). It organized IPRA's first world congress on 25-27 June 1958 in Brussels with the motto of 'Public Relations in the Service of Mankind' with 237 delegates from 23 countries (Centre belge des Relations Publiques, 1958). Together with French, Italian and Dutch associations, BCPR established, the European Confederation of Public Relations (CERP), in 1959 in Orléans (France) but headquartered in Brussels (Çamdereli, 2001). The BCPR changed into 3C Corporate Communication Community, in 2007 endorsing the evolution of PR from relations with publics to organizational communication and 'supporting business development in different ways: from internal change management to attracting new employees, to reputation management' (3C, 2014)

The Belgian Public Relations Consultants Association (BPRCA), formed in 1990, represents 28 top Belgian consultancies, ranging from independent agencies to international network consultancies, and monitors its members' observance of a code of ethics. It conforms to the Stockholm Charter, which was adopted in 2003 and replaced the Rome Charter adopted by International Communication Consultants Organisation (ICCO) in 1986. Its members provide strategic advice to local and multinational organisations and institutions (BPRCA, 2014).

At national level, there are more associations: the Belgian Investor Relations Association (BIRA), the Belgian associations for internal communication (BViC and ABCi) and the association for public information (Kortom) since 2000. This fragmentation, on one hand, reflects the on-going professionalization of the field and, on the other, the complex identity problem that PR suffers from.

Development of education and research

Education and research are flourishing in both countries, with many research and applied universities courses and curricula.

Netherlands

The first courses in PR were offered as optional courses at a university level as early as in the late 1940s, always under the umbrella of 'mass communication' and 'journalism'. PR was presented as 'working for the public, with the public, and in public', and thus perceived as a function of the larger societal communication system (van Ruler and Verčič 2005). In this societal approach, PR serves the same kind of (democratic) function as journalism does, as both contribute to the free flow of information and its interpretations, and the development of the public sphere. For a long time education and research stayed closely related to that in journalism; not because the practitioners have to deal with journalists, but because of these overlapping functions in society (van der Meiden, 1978). This has changed (van Ruler, 1996). Both education and research are nowadays approached from a management perspective and, as a result, research changed direction to investigate effects of certain PR approaches to publics but not the unintended sociological (unintended) consequences of PR activities in society. PR research can be found at 13 research universities but in very different departments such as economics, business, mass communication, speech, agriculture, design, etc., but never under the heading 'public relations'. This is also the case in education: curricula are called 'communication' or 'corporate communication'.

Belgium

Because of its political scenario, Belgium offers a complex situation in its education systems. Historically, they reflected the linguistic battles and there is a strong differentiation between academic and professional programmes.

PR has been taught as a professional bachelor degree since 1970 at six institutes of higher education in Flanders (one per province) and at eight institutes of higher education in the French community. The French programmes adopt an operational approach with an emphasis on tactics, writing and presentation skills, and the dimension of citizenship, while the Dutch programmes also integrate the managerial dimension into their curriculum (van Ruler and Verčič 2004) and combine PR and *voorlichting*.

However, the first communication courses dedicated to the history of the press, press laws, ethics and techniques were offered at academic/university level in 1946 at the political and social sciences school of the Catholic University of Leuven/Louvain (UCL) and in 1948 at the Brussels University (ULB) (Lits, 1999). They resulted from discussions held in London during World War II by William Ugeux, Marc Delforge and Paul Lévy who developed a draft of a 'Institut des Techniques de Diffusion'. From 1945 onwards, the rector of UCL sought to introduce these courses (Balteau, 1997). Emerging from these 'techniques of diffusion' and media studies, a dedicated course in dissemination techniques and PR was created in 1957-58 at the UCL school of political sciences, together with the PR department of the university (which became Press and *Voorlichting* in 1966, and communication in 1995). After 1968 and the linguistic crisis in the country, the French scholars left Leuven and migrated to a brand new city, Louvain-la-Neuve in 1975; however both, Flemish (KUL) and French (UCL) kept PR in their curriculum (Gryspeerd, 2007). In 1990 UCL, together with the Université de Liège, created a research group bringing all French-speaking PR researchers together. UCL also initiated a research laboratory, Laboratoire d'Analyse des Systèmes de Communication des Organisations (LASCO), enlarging the PR education and research questions to the entire French speaking community, including France and Québec. The education landscape is facing new challenges as comprehensive reform has taken place with the *Décret Marcourt*, creating a single Académie d'Enseignement Supérieur et de

Recherche (ARES) bringing universities and *hautes écoles* together. PR is presently taught throughout a set of different theoretical approaches at the French-speaking universities with a strong accent on organisational communication.

In Flanders, PR is mentioned less in the academic curricula of its four universities, as the Dutch traditions are followed with emphasis on *voorlichting*, corporate communication and strategic communication, information and persuasion beside journalism and media studies. The link between the Netherlands and Flanders, forged by academic publications and books by Guido Fauconnier (Leuven) and Anne van der Meiden (Utrecht), has been institutionalized through the NVAO (Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie) [Netherlands-Flanders Accreditation Organisation] which has brought more uniformity in the education.

At European level, Belgium played an important role as CERP Education was initiated by Jos Willems (director of Hoger Instituut voor Bedrijfsopleidingen, HIBO, Ghent, the first institute of higher education offering a bachelor in public relations in Flanders) at the end of the 1980s.

CERP Education organized the first European seminar for PR teachers, researchers and practitioners. It was titled as ‘Public Relations in the future: from theory to practice’ and held in Bruges in 1990 (Willems, 1990). CERP became EUPRERA (European Public Relations Education and Research Association) in 2000. Willems also launched a Master in European Public Relations degree (MARPE) with university partners in several European countries, which continues (2014).

Current issues

Netherlands

Looking at the historical development and using a professional perspective (Sloan, 1991), we may conclude that the field of ‘communication’, as it is called in the Netherlands, is widely accepted and acts at a strategic level in most organisations. Almost all organisations have

‘communication employees’ or at least structural contacts with communication consultancies.

Managers see communication as an important or even as a critical factor for success. An official commission advised the prime minister on how to cope with communication in the new information age and follow up commissions are very well institutionalised.

Nowadays, the sector strives for more planning of communication activities and introduced SCRUM as a planning method (van Ruler 2014). Governmental communication professionals have introduced a ‘Silver Standard’ several years ago, which stipulates that all campaigns must be evaluated; there is growing attention in the profession for evaluation methods, especially for follow-up decision making in campaigning. The debate in the professional journals and at congresses however concentrates on strategic counselling and mentoring/coaching roles. These are seen as the new challenges of the profession. This goes hand in hand with a discussion on the identity of the profession and the need to research the profession from a more sociological historical perspective.

Belgium

As in The Netherlands and the rest of Europe, Belgium faces fundamental changes in the different spheres of human activities. To guarantee their development, organisations have to adapt to the knowledge revolution as well as to the public’s evolution towards the self-expression of their opinions in a public space becoming more virtual and interactive (Maisonneuve 2010). The globalization also enhances the adoption of similar communication systems, including tools as monitoring, score cards, etc. Belgian PR agencies definitively position themselves as strategic partners with similar aims as their Dutch homologues in terms of strategic advice and coaching. The challenges focus on evaluation and return on investment. And on transparency and ethics for the lobby industry in Brussels.

Historical development

Although historical developments are often difficult to relate to precise periods, a timeline of developments in the Netherlands and Belgium can be indicated, as follows.

Pre-period

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the first traces of PR can be found in the Netherlands in two different forms: first, by the ‘*voorlichters*’ who were employed by Dutch non-profit organizations to provide information on farming, health, housekeeping, budgeting, sexuality, and so on.

Second, by civil servants who were employed to inform government about developments in the moods and opinions of leaders in industry and trade sectors. Nevertheless, we cannot call this two-way PR, as these two streets were located at totally different levels and/or organizations.

Although ‘*voorlichting*’ can be seen as the basis of PR in later years, this was a ‘pre-period’, mainly focused on attempting to bring Enlightenment.

The Belgian situation was slightly different as its history only starts in 1830 with the separation from the Netherlands. Until World War I, French as the dominant language determined the publics involved in the dominant coalition: politicians, bankers and captains of industry. By the end of the 19th century, union movements, Flemish nationalist movements and the press (becoming the voice of the different political streams) joined the debates.

First period

In the 1920s the first Dutch press departments were established within industry and government, oriented at enlightening journalists by informing them about what was going on in the respective organizations. Here the beginning of understanding of the benefits and necessity of public

information is demonstrated. Yet, although ideology called for full information and ‘telling the truth’, practice showed that this was a bridge too far and was restricted to ‘telling the ideal story’. Press relations commenced in a similar way in Belgium. Beside information dissemination about organisations as an increasingly common practice, PR-like activity by linguistic lobby resulted in the recognition of Dutch as the second national language (1898), the principle of territoriality for both language communities (1921) and the language legislation (1932).

Second period

In 1946 the first association of professionals NGPR, Nederlands Genootschap voor Public Relations (Dutch Association of Public Relations; now called Logeion), was established. Soon it was followed by a still-existing network of directors in advertising and PR: Kring 48 (Society 48). This constituted the commencement of institutionalisation of the profession, which from then on was mainly called public relations and *voorlichting*, or public relations and *reclame* (advertising).

Belgium followed with the creation of the BCPR, Belgian Center for Public Relations, in 1953. As several international organisations chose Brussels for their headquarters (e.g. NATO, European Union), it also became a central location for the further development of European PR associations. Belgium is one of the first European countries to add communication into the academic curriculum with the launch of the first communication courses in 1946 at the political and social sciences school of the Catholic University of Leuven/Louvain (UCL) and in 1948 at the Brussels University (ULB).

Third period

The third period in the Netherlands was a period of professionalization. 1964 was the year of the first academic chair in Voorlichtingskunde (often translated as education science, but is more accurately expressed as enlightenment science). In 1976 Dr Anne van der Meiden became the

first professor in PR, appointed to a special NGPR-sponsored chair at the University of Utrecht. Soon after (1978) the first BA programme started at the Hogeschool Eindhoven applied university (now Fontys) to be followed by many courses elsewhere and at different levels. Based on a government report (Openbaarheid Openheid 1970), in 1980 the first Law on Public Information was established, stating that the government was obliged to be open and transparent in every detail unless security and privacy prohibited it.

According to Gritti (1999), World War II propaganda initiated concepts as ‘mass’ and ‘crowd’; opinion leaders and influencers were introduced to communication strategies using audio-visual supports to persuade publics. Lohisse (1999) describes the 1970s in Belgium as a key transition period for communication studies as two major shifts occurred: a) the shift of paradigm from ‘ideal status’ to ‘real acts’; and b) a shift to language analysis as a social activity, studying the integration of situational factors and communication processes: contextualized communication becomes a research topic, empirical research questions address individuals and organisations in their network and contextual complexity.

Fourth period

From the 1980s onwards, the profession showed rapid growth. The name of the profession changed from ‘public relations’ and *voorlichting* to ‘corporate communication’ or simply ‘communication’. By 2000 most Dutch organizations with over 50 employees had at least one or two ‘communication professionals’. There were three reasons: a) the introduction of the corporate communication concept by Cees van Riel, a Dutch PR scholar; b) the poor image of the PR profession caused by its non-transparency, specially scrutinized by journalists; c) changing ideas about the concept of *voorlichting*.

Communication became a societal challenge where the dominant merchandising of ‘communication goods’ and supremacy of private companies interests over governments were

increasingly present. Utopian critiques of the 1960s were gradually replaced by a 'professionalist communication ideology' which was also implemented in academic programmes (Proulx, 1999).

Fifth period

Also around 2000, governmental and business campaigning suffered from an identity crisis due to the arrival of digitalization and changed societal attitudes. In this period, image building came under pressure because of the (unforeseen) combination with a general decline of trust. The answer to this was the invention of and switch-over to new rules: responsiveness, transparency, identity and dialogue, and next to this the role of PR in journalistic concepts such as branded journalism and the like.

Here was a change in theory and practice: from instrumental orchestration of utterances in order to change knowledge, moods and behaviors of target groups into the concept of the reflective and adaptive practitioner who is there to coach others to communicate well.

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