

# The recent history of public relations in Spain

A história recente de relações públicas na Espanha

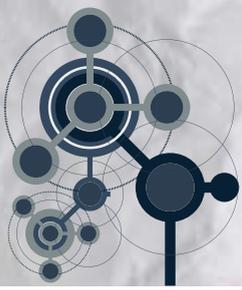
La historia reciente de relaciones públicas en España

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## Abstract

This article presents an exploratory study of the state of the art of public relations in Spain on the basis of indicators applied in the study *The global public relations handbook*(2009). That means a cultural approach to today's Spanish public relations. From this standpoint, we show that Spain is a country that has undergone radical change, from a dictatorship to one of the world's most democratic systems, substantially transforming its economic system, its culture and its society. This transformation has had critical consequences on the practice of public relations, because public relations deal with freedom of expression.

KEYWORDS: SPAIN • RECENT HISTORY • DEMOCRACY • PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE • MEDIA RELATIONS.

## Resumo

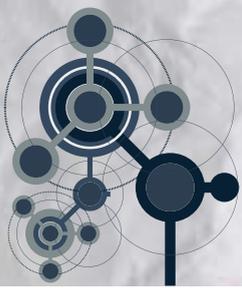
Este artigo apresenta um estudo exploratório sobre o estado da arte das relações públicas na Espanha, com base em indicadores utilizados no estudo conhecido como *The global public relations handbook*(2009). Isso significa uma abordagem cultural das relações públicas espanholas de hoje. Sob esse ponto de vista mostramos que a Espanha é um país que sofreu uma mudança radical, de uma ditadura para um dos sistemas mais democráticos do mundo, transformando substancialmente o seu sistema econômico, a sua cultura e sua sociedade. Esta transformação teve consequências fundamentais sobre a prática de relações públicas, porque as relações públicas tratam da liberdade de expressão.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ESPANHA • HISTÓRIA • DEMOCRACIA • PRÁTICA DE RELAÇÕES PÚBLICAS • RELAÇÕES MUDIÁTICAS.

## Resumen

En este artículo se presenta un estudio exploratorio del estado del arte de las relaciones públicas en España sobre la base de indicadores aplicados en el estudio *The global public relations handbook*(2009). Eso significa un enfoque cultural de las relaciones públicas españolas de hoy en día. Desde este punto de vista, mostramos que España es un país que ha sufrido un cambio radical, de una dictadura a uno de los sistemas más democráticos del mundo, transformando sustancialmente su sistema económico, su cultura y su sociedad. Esta transformación ha tenido consecuencias importantes en la práctica de las relaciones públicas, porque las relaciones públicas se ocupan de la libertad de expresión.

PALABRAS CLAVES: ESPAÑA • HISTORIA RECIENTE • DEMOCRACIA • PRÁCTICA DE LAS RELACIONES PÚBLICAS • RELACIONES MUDIÁTICAS.



In one of the most renowned historiography books of recent years, *The Mirror of Herodotus* (2009), François Hartog asks whether Herodotus is to be regarded as an ethnographer or a historian. In fact, to Herodotus – a Greek historian from the 5th century BC, and considered the first historian ever – a historian is not a compiler of old documents, but a researcher who travels to form an opinion and collects testimonies regarding the recent past (Hartog, 2009).

This stance on history was adopted by other historians from classical antiquity, such as Thucydides, who used oral surveys to collect data for his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and by historians from the Middle Age (Guenée, 1980) or the Enlightenment, like Voltaire (Soulet, 2012). Although it was Voltaire who said: “Over time, stories grow and the truth is lost” (quoted in Soulet, 2012, p. 14), from the nineteenth century onwards historiographical trends dealt more with the earliest times than the present.

Nevertheless, it was the great psychological impact of the Second World War that triggered the boom in research into “recent history”, a term coined by the French historian Jean-François Soulet (1994) to refer to the historiography of the present world.

Recent history arises through the dividing of contemporary history, inevitably expanded by the passage of time (Soulet, 1994). Through the use of words explicitly linked to the present and the immediate, historians insist on making the most recent events their object of study, meaning it is an object under permanent construction (Hobsbawm, 1996). Unlike journalism, which is also concerned with narrating current events, recent history applies the methodology of historical science (Soulet, 2012). The problem that can most easily affect the historian of recent history is a lack of objectivity; although objectivity is not fully achieved in the history of bygone eras, either.

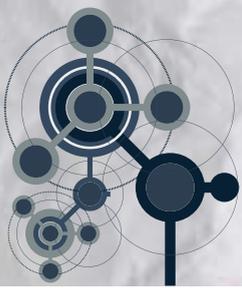
The other crucial factor in the development of recent history, however, was the mass media revolution, which affected sources of information, both through their sudden multiplication and the different media and channels via which information might appear. Compared with the shortage of sources suffered by the classical historian, the recent historian has them in abundance. And this thanks to audiovisual documents that involved similar innovations in using the sources themselves. Although fictional cinema is also considered a source of recent history (Soulet, 2012), documentary film is the most accurate, since “the present and the will to make it history place the protagonists’ own testimony at the service of the historian” (Capellán, 2001, p. 296). The result is therefore recent history, a historiographical project that seeks to provide a response to the technological revolution, the emergence of the mass media, and the new historical consciousness that arose in twentieth century societies.

This essay is a big picture of recent history of Spanish public relations.

## STRUCTURE OF THE INDUSTRY

As Tilson & Perez (2003) pointed out, new political, economic, social, and media realities in Spanish society have shaped the course of the public relations profession as it is currently practiced both within institutions and consultancies. “For example, given the dynamic media environment and growing consumerism in Spain, media relations and corporate identity have assumed greater importance as studies indicate” (Tilson & Pérez, 2003, p. 132).

According to the report by the practitioners’ association Adecec (2008), conducted by the market research firm Sigma Dos and based on interviews with 207 public relations practitioners – 102 with communications managers at the main Spanish organizations in all industries and 105 with managers and employees of public relations firms –, the activity is carried out by the majority of public relations firms is that of media relations (96.0%), followed by corporate communication (90.5%).



The companies further reported that corporate communication (91%) and internal communication (88%) were the most important functions of their communication departments, followed by media relations (86%) and public affairs (84%). Some 68% considered communication to be a strategic factor in their operations (87% conducted corporate communication programs), and 89% evaluated the results of these programs and their corporate image.

One of the most interesting results of the Adecec research (2008) is related to which activities internal communications departments delegate most to public relations firms: image and communication audits (32%) and graphics and fair attendance (31%). Although the first piece of data is a consequence of the cost to organizations of having expert research personnel – which is in fact a global trend in the industry (see, for the United States, Wilcox & Cameron, 2012) – , the delegation and outsourcing of technical tasks suggests that the high managerial and strategic level of the personnel in public relations departments are made by Spanish firms.

The Adecec (2008) reports provide additional insight. Public relations firms in Spain had a turnover of 4.3 billion euros in 2008, and 93% of these firms are controlled by foreign firms. Those firms are not controlled by foreign firms; they are among those with the highest turnover. Foreign investment is therefore no guarantee of turnover. The big firms – those with a turnover of over 250,000 euros annually – have on average 26 employees while the others have an average of 12 employees.

One of the factors that provide most evidence of the evolution of Spanish society, and its influence on the practice of public relations, is the gender distribution among public relations practitioners. Some of them, 68% of public relations practitioners are women versus a 32% for men. By contrast a 58% of executive positions are occupied by men meanwhile 42% are occupied by women. This situation is very similar to other countries such as the US (see Wilcox & Cameron, 2012). This is not an evidence of the americanization of the field but the fact that Spain has the same trends as other western societies.

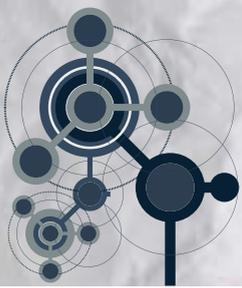
Although the research conducted by Adecec (2008) did not analyze the average age of professionals in Spanish public relations departments, it did analyze those of employees at public relations firms. The age average of employees at a firm is approximately of 35, with a range of antiquity to the firm of 3.3 years. It seems that these figures show how young the profession is, whereas the average number of professional has not grown up and lived in a democratic society. Moreover, the dynamism in the industry is shown by the rotation of professionals changing firm or creating their own.

The range of salary for a practitioner at a firm is 24,200 euros in the larger firms and 21,200 in a small or medium-sized. Regarding to education, 83% have a university qualification (70% undergraduate and 13% postgraduate).

## THE POLITICAL SYSTEM AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Parliamentary democracy was restored following the death of General Franco in 1975, who had ruled since the end of the civil war in 1939. The 1978 constitution established Spain as a parliamentary monarchy with the prime minister responsible for the bicameral courtes (Congress of Deputies and Senate) elected every four years. On February 23, 1981, rebel elements among the security forces seized the courtes and tried to impose a military-backed government. However, the great majority of the military forces remained loyal to King Juan Carlos, who used his personal authority to put down the bloodless coup attempt.

From a political perspective, Spain has been a country in a continually political, social and economical transition. In the political level, this condition has intensely affected public relations profession, particularly with the emergence of the profession of



political consultant which, with most of them trained at American universities, has become one of the most sought after professional areas given the high number of elections held in Spain: European, national, regional and local (Aira, 2009).

Regarding to a public relations campaign runned by public institutions it is mainly the private firms which are contracted seriously. The Spanish government does not have public employees specialized in public relations. Only the professionals working in public relations are chiefs or staff or general secretaries, and these tending were or worked as former journalists who have established a relationship with the government. This is one of the reasons why most of the public relations professionals work carried out by the Spanish public administration falls within media relations (Xifra, 2009). However, the role of spokesperson is conducted by politicians and high ranking public employees themselves.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

When the Spanish Civil War ended, in 1939, a period began which was characterized by the absence of democracy, isolationism from the rest of the world, very strong state control and an economy burdened by the inefficiencies of the public sector and corruption. This period lasted until 1959, when the first National Economic Stabilization Plan opened the country up to foreign markets and firms. Multinational firms began to move into Spain on a large scale and the economy experienced a significant growth. GDP began to grow at rates of around 7%.

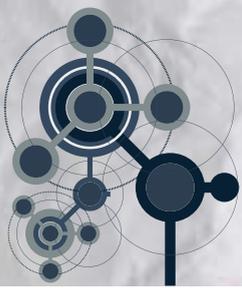
In 1973 the transition to democracy began and the dictatorship ended in 1975. This phase coincided with an important international economic crisis known as the "oil crisis". As a consequence, Spain experienced lower growth in its GDP, significant increases in inflation rates and considerable growth in unemployment.

From this perspective we agree with Gutiérrez and Rodríguez (2009) when they state that the political and economic context, at the end of the Franco dictatorship, helped firms to introduce themselves to an increasingly open society. The improved economic context with the economic stabilization plans (implemented with the help of the United States) also influenced and ensured the first company clients for the first public relations consultancies.

With the arrival of the democracy period another circumstance, common in other countries, explains why firms and institutions created their communicative structures: the progressive consolidation of a free market regime and therefore a society with more products and services and this made a necessary differentiation on offer and necessary differentiation between businesses (Sotelo, 2004).

Later, in 1986, Spain joined the European Economic Community, leading to increased competition and traumatic restructuring in many sectors of the economy. By way of contrast, structural funds from the EEC allowed the modernizing of infrastructures and the existing standard of education. Since 1990 until now, a strong movement to liberalize the economy has prevailed with the privatization of the national firms and this has regulate some industries such us electricity, gas and water. Many of these firms with others financial companies (the big banks then began to invest) invested in Latin America cities. With the arrival of the international economic crisis in 2008 the Spanish economy entered a serious recession.

These fluctuations in the economy had an effect on the practice of public relations profession, it lasts from the earlies 1980's that was a flourishing activity developing extraordinarily, until 1992 thanks to the holding of two events of worldwide



significance in Spain: the Barcelona Olympics and the Seville Expo. Media relations and events management were the main activities that occupied public relations firms which had doubled in number of professionals at the beginning of the 1990s in comparison to 1980 (Arceo, 2004). The crises of 1993 and 2008 were the adult age of public relations, although as we have seen with the structure of the practice, it is a consolidated profession. Nevertheless, it is actually the current rate of unemployment, close to 20% (2011 est.), that represents the main sword of Damocles hanging over the profession in Spain.

## ACTIVISM AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

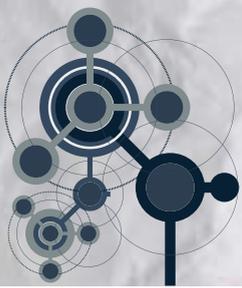
The arrival of democracy did not bring an end to political activism, although it was limited to the terrorism of the Basque independentist group ETA. However, during the early years, particularly between 1976 and 1978, that is, before the approval of the new democratic constitution at the end of 1978, some groups did demonstrate for an urgent recognition of civil rights (for example, the right to free abortion) or nationalist rights (for example, demonstrations to claim autonomy for historical regions such as Catalonia and the Basque Country). Another demand was that of amnesty for political prisoners of Francoism, which generated numerous grassroots mobilizations and public demonstrations.

Nowadays, despite a solid democratic system, activism centres around political activism aimed at obtaining greater recognition for political and financial autonomy for regions such as the Basque Country and Catalonia. Although the terrorist group ETA has not relinquished its arms (a ceasefire has been in place since September 2010), pacific independentist activism does exist and manifests itself regularly in the streets of cities such as Bilbao and San Sebastián. In Catalonia, the nationalist movement is represented by both the autonomous government and important groups in civil society.

In addition to this, 15 May 2011 witnessed a spontaneous demonstration in Madrid and Barcelona by the group now known as “15-M” (in reference to the date), better known as “the indignants.” This represented the largest demonstration of activism since the end of the 1970s. This group, which has no formal structure, unites people of any age and status who are indignant at the economic situation deriving from the 2008 crisis and the measures that the Spanish government has, or has not, taken to resolve it.

This appears to have brought to an end investigations demonstrating that the level of activism in Spain is lower than that in the other EU countries (e.g. Anduiza et al., 2010), even though the lack of clear organization among the *indignants* has proved damaging to their claims. One example of this is the lack of spokespeople when presenting their claims/decisions to journalists: a new member almost always appeared when it was time to deal with the media.

This implies that activism has not had much influence on the practice of public relations in Spain. As already mentioned, large-scale social movements have not had an effective communications strategy behind them, and neither have corporations had to invest time and effort in managing their relations with activists. As highlighted by the director of public relations for the country's largest energy corporation upon announcing a project to install a high-voltage line in Catalonia to transport energy from France to Spain, “more than with ecologists and activists, with whom we have not had any formal communication, our interest was to inform journalists about the need for this public installation”.



## THE MEDIA AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

### Media control

During the Francoism period the media were propaganda instruments in the service of the regime. The growth of new media groups during the transition, in both Madrid (*Prisa*, *Grupo 16*, *Recoletos*) and Barcelona (*Zeta*), had a serious effect on the ideological influence and economic benefits of the media established during Franco's regime, the latter unable to compete due to their obsolete media model, antiquated machinery, not having sufficient capital and an excessively large workforce, at times with little professional and technical training.

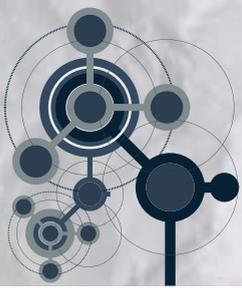
This process gradually caused a chain reaction provoking the dismantling of the old *Prensa del Movimiento* (the group founded by the Francoist regime in 1940), which was sold at public auction in 1984. The new actors in the media system staked their claim to inaugurate the private radio and television business (inexistent a decade later) in a first attempt to diversify their activities on the media market. However, their lobbying efforts on the Spanish government were not enough and other public actors appeared before them: *Euskal Irrati Telebista* (EITB, the Basque TV group) and *Corporació Catalana de Ràdio i Televisió* (CCRTV, the Catalan TV group).

With Spain's integration into the European Union, the country's legislation became more liberal, allowing the entry of European capital into practically all economic macro-sectors, including media and culture, something which accentuated the denationalization of the Spanish economy, with decisions being taken at increasingly more distance from the country itself (Jones, 2004). The eighties also witnessed the arrival of new radio stations in Spain (e. g. Antena 3 Radio and Radio 80) and, from 1990 onwards, three new television stations (Antena 3 Televisión, Gestevisión Telecinco and Sogecable [Canal Plus, Pay Per View]). The number of firms increased after 1997 due to two new digital satellite platforms (belonging to Sogecable and Telefónica), which eventually merged in 2003. The main shareholders in these new television channels were Catalan groups, such as Godó and Zeta, although both ended up transferring their shares to Madrid (*Prisa*, *Telefónica de Contenidos*), Basque-Madrid (*Vocento*) or foreign groups (*Mediaset*, *Vivendi Universal*, *Kirch*, *Bertelsmann*).

### Media access and media relations

The Spanish Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, which for some authors (e. g. Sanjurjo, 2010) includes the right to the media. This right is founded on article 20.3 of the constitution, which establishes that "the law will govern parliamentary organization and control of the social media dependant on the state or any public body and guarantee access to said media for important social and political groups".

The Supreme Court of Spain has stated that this article contains a mandate awarding important social and political groups the right to demand that nothing be done to impede said access. In accordance with this flexibility, the Spanish legislator has established different opportunities for accessing the mass media, especially for important social and political groups, who have the right to a percentage of broadcasting hours on both public and private television channels. What is more, cable operators, who are franchise owners, must reserve 40% of the time broadcast on their network for independent programmers. Finally, Spanish law awards political groups direct access to the public media via unpaid broadcasting time for electoral messages, while the private media are requested to respect pluralism.



We have already stated that media relations is one of the principal activities for Spanish public relations practitioners. In their analysis of media relations in Korea, Kim and Hon (1998) pointed out that Korean practitioners are practicing one-way models mainly focused on media relations because of the tradition of source–media collaboration under authoritative regimes in the country's developmental period. Despite the 40 years of the Franco dictatorship, the reasons that we have mentioned do not appear to affect Spanish practitioners who, as occurs in other countries, make characteristic errors of the one way practice of media relations (Xifra, 2009). Despite this, Spanish journalists did not perceive practitioners to lack professionalism and to be deficient in the quality of subsidies on a number of counts, particularly if we compare this information with similar studies conducted in other countries (e. g., Sallot & Jonson, 2006).

The results and opinions arising from the research conducted by Xifra (2009) offer a more dialogic dimension of media relations in Spain than in other countries and nations. The relevance of one way channels and the effectiveness of online press rooms demonstrate a tendency to foster dialogic and interactive channels which is part of the public (media) relations relational perspective. This mainstream is also observed in the journalist needs, all of which are based on a mutual and positive personal relationship between the public relations practitioner and the journalist.

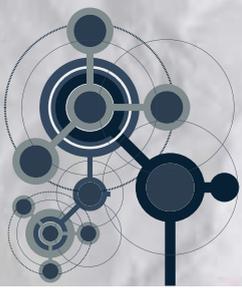
Some media relations studies have related personal relationships with the Hofstede's idea of power distance (Hofstede, 2001). As Taylor pointed out in her research on Croatian public relations, a "related factor that may influence the development of personal relationships in the nations of the former East Bloc is the development of strong, personal relationships" (Taylor, 2004, p. 157). From this standpoint, personal influence may best characterize this relational strategy. The personal influence model proposed by Sriramesh (1992, 1996) is an example. Personal influence is based on a cultural variable of power distance. According to Hofstede (2001), Spain displays high levels of power distance in its social systems. The mean score for 39 countries on power distance is 51 and the score for Spain is 62.

The results obtained by Xifra (2009) research suggest that journalists require a relational perspective of media relations. They demand media relations practiced through personal relationships and rich communication channels. These personal relationships may be based on long-standing friendships between journalists and public relations people or they may be cultivated over time through frequent and rich face-to-face communication and reciprocity. The data also show that organizations practice is a version of Sriramesh's personal influence model. Nevertheless, and this is also relevant, there is no significant evidence of any distrust existing between media relations parties. Journalists consider the main mistakes made in public relations subsidies to be errors and not attempts at manipulation: a success of how new Spanish democratic society has influenced the media relations practice.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Spanish political transformation has undergone over the last 30 years and has made it a country in transition; the transition from a capitalist dictatorship to a democratic state that is, after all, very similar to the transition from a communist dictatorship, as has happened in Poland (see Lawniczak et al., 2009), the main difference being an economic one. Apart from this, we have seen how the economic transformations due to the arrival of democracy in Spain have also been important.

Although the Franco regime's propaganda was very powerful in its time, the regime's influence seems to have disappeared almost entirely as a factor influencing the practice of public relations. The freedoms of expression and opinion safeguarded under the



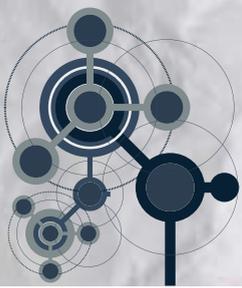
Spanish constitution have radically changed the scenario for communicative practices. From among these, public relations has emerged as a new profession establishing at the same time as a modern and democratic Spanish society that has itself become consolidated. This is an example of why public relations is not only a democratic function but is actually ontologically democratic.

To sum up, over recent decades Spain has undergone in a radical change: from a dictatorship to one of the world's most democratic countries, a transformation which has substantially affected its economic system, its culture and its society. Among these changes public relations has been transformed to a serious discipline and the accuracy of professionals all of them are now mature. However, Spain includes within its borders new regions with their own language and culture. This issue offers an opportunity for a future research: how these different cultures will affect the practice of public relations within Spain as a whole country.

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