

Constructing European public relations in transnational research

Dejan Verčič, Ph.D.
 Founder & Associate Professor
 Pristop & University of Ljubljana
 Trubarjeva cesta 79, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija
 Phone: +386 1 23 91 444
 dejan.vercic@pristop.si

Prof. Dr. Ansgar Zerfass
 Institute of Communication and Media Science
 Department Communication Management and Public Relations
 University of Leipzig
 Burgstr. 21, D-04109 Leipzig, Germany
 Phone: +49-341-97-35040
 zerfass@uni-leipzig.de

Abstract

European public relations is appearing on a world scene with its own identity that is emerging out of a decade long research endeavor in empirical transnational research in public relations. This started as a European Public Relations Body of Knowledge project in 1998 (van Ruler, Verčič, Buetschi, & Flodin, 2004; Verčič, van Ruler, Buetschi, & Flodin, 2001), and was supplemented by an annual survey starting in 2007 as a European Communication Monitor (ECM) (Zerfass, van Ruler, Rogojinaru, Verčič, & Hamrefors, 2007). The third ECM survey that was completed in May of 2009 and consisted of a questionnaire with 17 sections based on hypotheses and instruments derived from previous research and literature. Over 20,000 practitioners all over Europe were invited to participate in an on-line survey and 1,863 completed questionnaires from 34 European countries were received on time to be included in analysis (Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2009).

Although public relations in Europe exists at least as long as it does in the USA, its character and identity are still ill-defined and obscure. This is partly because public relations in Europe is embodied in practices of different European countries with different traditions, cultures and languages, but partly also because of insufficient research in commonalities and common differences from public relations traditions of other continents, like e.g. the Americas and Asia. The paper reviews what has been learned about European public relations in the past decade and presents the results of the 2009 ECM.

Introduction

On 10 December 2009, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management posted a notice on its website that *Centre Européen des Relations Publiques (CERP)*, that is in English the European Public Relations Confederation, an association of European national public relations associations, on its Extraordinary General Assembly on 12 November 2009 in Catania, Italy, dissolved itself and fully integrated its assets and resources into the Global Alliance (<http://www.globalalliancepr.org/content/1/434/centre-europeen-des-relations-publiques-cerp-dissolution/>). One could easily understand that message as an obituary for European public relations melted in a globalised practice. But following Mark Twain we should note that the report of European public relations' death was an exaggeration. As the 2009 European Communication Monitor, based on a sample of 1,850 professionals from 34 European countries, one of the most comprehensive transnational studies ever conducted in the field of public relations worldwide, shows: public relations is very well in Europe.

In this paper we report a decade long string of transnational research in European public relations. We review the European Public Relations Body of Knowledge (EBOK) project and its successor, the European Communication Monitor (ECM) project. We present the key results of the 2009 ECM, and conclude with limitations of the current projects and its future prospects. In the final section we will also give our views on why Europe is currently without a proper public relations practitioners association and where may the seeds for its rebirth germinate.

The European Public Relations Body of Knowledge project (EBOK), 1998-2004

The European Public Relations Body of Knowledge (EBOK) project ran from 1998 to 2004. It was the first large-scale transnational research project initiated by European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) which in 1998 split from CERP and re-named itself from CERP Education into EUPRERA. The EBOK project started with a Delphi study with participants from 29 European countries. This was conducted in 1999 and 2000 through three consultation rounds. The method and its results were reported in van Ruler and Verčič (2002, 2004a, 2005a and 2008), van Ruler, Verčič, Büetschi, & Flodin (2000 and 2004), and Verčič, van Ruler, Büetschi, & Flodin (2001). The EBOK project was the focus of the 2002 BledCom Symposium in Bled, Slovenia, that was simultaneously also annual congresses of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association and the European Association of Public Relations Students. With publication of *The Bled manifesto on Public Relations* (van Ruler & Verčič, 2002) it acquired a programmatic level. The project effectively culminated and ended with a publication of *Public Relations and Communication Management in Europe* (van Ruler & Verčič, 2004b), an edited book in which 27 experts from different European countries reported on the status of the profession, practice, research and teaching in their respective countries. The book also contains five conceptual *Intermezzos* between country chapters presenting key contributions of public relations theorizing in Europe: constructivism, reflexivity, a transitional approach to public relations, public sphere as a central concept of public relations, civil society and public relations, and consensus-oriented public relations.

Although both public relations academia and practice in Europe wholeheartedly accept and build on foundations laid down in the United, the EBOK project brought at light at least two distinctive features of public relations in Europe (as compared with the US practice): firstly,

public relations in Europe is conceived, practiced and studied not only on an organizational, but simultaneously also on a societal level. Van Ruler and Verčič (2008: 299) explained:

“In this societal approach, public relations serves the same kind of (democratic) function that journalism does, since they both contribute to a free flow of information and the interpretation of that information and to the development of the public sphere: in size (“How many people are involved in public life?”), in level (“What is the level at which we discuss public matters?”), and in quality (“What are the frames used in the debates?”). This echoes what James W. Carey called a cultural approach to communication. Theory building in public relations is closely related to journalism in many European countries, not because the practitioners must deal with journalists, but because of these overlapping functions in society.

For many European scholars, public relations produces social reality and, therefore, a certain type of society. That is why many European scholars look at public relations from a sociological perspective instead of economic, psychological, or organizational perspective. In this respect, the European use of public and public relations can mean something totally different than it normally does in the United States.”

Secondly, public relations is characterized not only with managerial and operational (technical) work, but also with reflective and educational. Reflexivity places public relations directly into the strategic apex of an organization: it is about the values, visions, missions and normative standards of operations that co-produce their licenses to operate – public relations core responsibility is to preserve legitimacy of organizational existence. Public relations is concerned with a public, outside-in view on organizations, and for organizations to be able to be communicatively competent, more and more managers and other employees need to achieve higher levels of communication competence. Growing and developing that competence is responsibility of public relations and more and more public relations practitioners, both in-house and in consultancies, are involved in training and cognitive educational activities (van Ruler & Verčič, 2005b).

Identification of distinctive features of European public relations has stimulated further research on identities of public relations in Afrika (Rensburg, 2002), Asia (Sriramesh, 2002 and 2004), Latin America (Ferrari, 2002) and around the world (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2003 and 2009).

The European Communication Monitor (ECM), since 2007

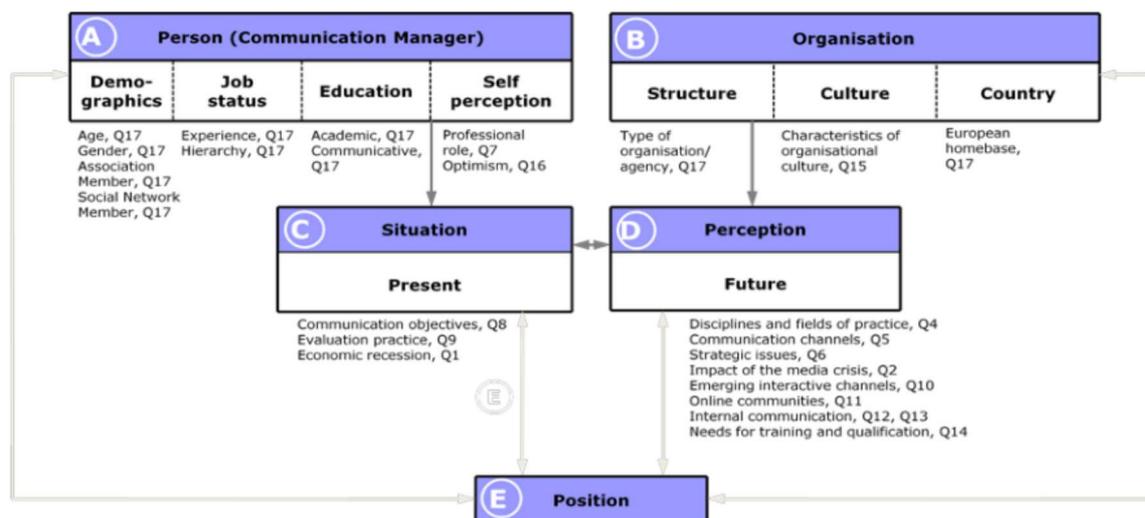
There is a great recognition in Europe that public relations is a quantitative concept that needs empirical research (Bentele, 2005; van Ruler, Tkalac Verčič, & Verčič 2008). The European Communication Monitor (ECM) had been stimulated by the existence of the US Public Relations Generally Accepted Practices (GAP) studies (Swerling, Gregory, Schuh, Goff, Gould, Gu, Palmer, & Mchargue, 2008). Methodologically, the EBOK was a qualitative study that enabled some comparative research, yet what European public relations badly needed was transnational quantitative research. However, it is important to recognize that Europe is a continent of 50 countries, 27 of them belonging to the European Union. Even the EU can't be conceived as the United States of Europe as it is not a federation, it is not a confederation, but a *sui generis* economic, social, and political organization in progress. In that sense there is no

European public relations in the same way as we can talk of the US public relations, where the mainstream paradigm can clearly be identified in the form of “Symmetry/Excellence approach” (Botan & Hazleton, 2006: 8-9; see also Dozier, L. Grunig & J. Grunig, 1995; Grunig, 1992; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2008; J. Grunig, L. Grunig & Dozier, 2006; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Public relations in Europe is divided by linguistic, cultural and administrative barriers (Verčič, 2000), and this affects both practice and research.

The European Communication Monitor (ECM) was initiated in 2007 to build on insights from the EBOK project. It shifted the focus from qualitative methodology used in the EBOK to quantitative methodology in the ECM. The ECM is a large survey based on multi-dimensional theoretical framework. It also shifted from comparative research that was at the core of the EBOK project studying emergencies, identities and differences in public relations between different European countries, to longitudinal trans-national research of European public relations as a phenomenon in itself. From its start in 2007 (Zerfass, van Ruler, Roginajiru, Verčič, & Hamrefors 2007), the ECM has so far been done annually in 2008 (Moreno, Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2009; Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič & Verhoeven, 2008; Zerfass & Verčič, 2008) and 2009 (Verhoeven, Tench & Zerfass 2009; Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2009; Moreno, A., Verhoeven, P., Tench, R., & Zerfass, A., 2010), and fieldwork for the fourth run has already been conducted in March 2010.

The ECM project is lead by Ansgar Zerfass at the University of Leipzig, Germany. The initial research team that started the project in 2007 included Betteke van Ruler (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands), Adeja Rogojinaru (University of Bucharest, Rumania), Dejan Verčič (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia), and Sven Hamrefors (Mälardalen University, Sweden). Since 2008, the research team is composed of Ansgar Zerfass (University of Leipzig, Germany) as the coordinator, Angeles Moreno (University Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid, Spain), Ralph Tench (Leeds Metropolitan University, United Kingdom), Dejan Verčič (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia) and Piet Verhoeven (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands). The University of Leipzig, Germany, provides statistical analysis and organizational support. The research team has support by an advisory board by Emanuele Invernizi (IULM University, Milano, Italy), Valerie Carayol (University of Bordeaux 3, France), Francesco Lurati (University of Lugano, Switzerland), Sven Hamrefors (Mälardalen University), Øyvind Ihlen (BI Norwegian School of Management, Oslo, Norway) and Ryszard Ławniczak (Poznan University of Economics, Poland). In the first three years the ECOM project directly involved thirteen researchers from twelve universities in twelve European countries. The ECM started as an EUPRERA project and is today supported also by The European Association of Communication Directors (EACD).

In 2008, the researchers developed a model that is the backbone of the survey, defining the framework and helping generate questions. It consists of five elements defining the state of public relations in Europe in a given moment. The questionnaire asks respondents questions about a) the person (demographics, job status, education and self-perception), about b) the organization in which he or she is employed (structure, culture, country), about c) the current situation in which one operates (the present), d) a perception about the future and e) the position of the practitioner has in his or her organization. The model is presented in Picture 1.



Picture 1: ECM research model – framework and questions

The ECM research team also works with the US GAP study team and some questions appear in both studies, allowing for US-European comparisons.

Each year, after pre-testing the questionnaire on more than fifty respondents in more than ten countries the survey is electronically sent via e-mail to over 20,000 public relations practitioners throughout Europe. The core package of addresses is provided by the European Association of Communication Directors and *Communication Director* magazine. Additional invitations to participate are distributed by national public relations associations and through researchers' own network. Nearly 2,000 fully completed questionnaires are returned from over thirty countries each year. Replies from non-practitioners (academics, students...), non-European countries and not fully completed questionnaires are not entered into analysis.

The ECM gives the most comprehensive overview of the public relations profession in Europe. It is an enormous enterprise, but it has its limitations. Firstly, the survey can't be treated as a representative survey as there is no clearly defined population to statistically sample. The exact number of public relations practitioners in Europe is unknown (indeed: the borders of the profession that would allow one to define its members are fuzzy) and there are no comprehensive lists of its members. Secondly, the survey is executed in English language though e-mail invitations and on the Internet, and it is thus restricted to English-speaking and Internet-literate members of the profession only. Although English is practically universally spoken and the Internet used among educated Europeans today, we conclude that the survey overrepresents higher, better educated, better positioned and better paid members of the profession in Europe. Thirdly, representation of different parts of Europe is uneven, with Western and Northern Europe overrepresented and Southern and Eastern Europe underrepresented; the ECM divides Europe according to United Nations Statistics Division (2008) classification. Notwithstanding this limits researchers have to take into account when interpreting data, the ECM is the best available and the most useful overview of the public relations profession in Europe.

The 2009 European Communication Monitor results

The 2009 European Communication Monitor survey was executed in May 2009. Over 20,000 practitioners from around Europe were invited to participate and 1,863 valid responses from 34 countries were received and entered into analysis. The average age of respondents was 42 years, 83 per cent of respondents were senior professionals working as heads of their departments, unit leaders or agency managing directors. 68 per cent of respondents held masters degree, MBA or a Ph.D. Nearly 60 per cent of respondents had more than ten years of experience in applied communication. Gender representation was balanced, but higher positions in hierarchy are still dominated by men (54.2 per cent of heads of communication or agency CEOs are men, while 45.8 per cent are women, compared with 41.9 per cent of team members or consultants being male, while 58.1 per cent female). Three quarters of respondents came from companies, government or non-governmental organizations, and a quarter from communication agencies. The largest geographical area represented is Western Europe (41%), followed by Northern Europe (31%), Southern Europe (19.0%), and Eastern Europe (8.5%).

Roles and contribution to organizational objectives

Communication specialists contribute to organizational objectives in two different ways: they can be involved in strategic decision-making, thus being co-responsible with other members of the dominant coalition for communicative aspects of organizational functioning, or they can be responsible for communication support to predefined organizational objectives and functions. In the 2009 ECM, 85 per cent of respondents reported to be involved in supportive communication activities, and 61 per cent in strategic decision-making. Five per cent saw themselves primarily as business councilors, 29 as operational supporters or technicians, while 56 per cent said that they practice both roles, strategic and operational (called 'strategic facilitators' in the study). It is interesting to note that ten per cent of respondents didn't see a clear link between their work and organizational objectives, thus being somehow isolated 'experts'.

There are two possibilities for interpretation here: one can say that with 61 per cent of respondents involved in strategic decision-making public relations really stands firmly at the center of organizational action; but then a question emerges about who does all the work. (As a kind of comparison: a hospital with 61 per cent of employees being physicians and only a minority in other medical and supportive functions would probably be seen as dysfunctional or badly managed.) But if we take into consideration our assumption of overrepresentation of the top layer of the public relations profession in Europe and with over 80 per cent of respondents claiming top communication position in their organization, we can also see the result as saying that a significant number of top communications still lack access to what really makes their work worth: organizational decision-making.

Public relations and management decisions

Although the 2009 ECM found a rising influence of communicators in European organizations compared to the previous year (2008 ECM), this was still significantly lower than in the US as reported in the GAP V (Swerling et al. 2008). On a 1 to 7 Likert-type scale,

advisory self-reported influence on senior management in Europe was 5.13 as compared to 5.67 in the US, and self-reported executive influence was 4.82 as compared to 5.33 in the US.

Statistical analysis revealed that the overall influence of practitioners in 2009 in Europe depended on the roles practitioners enact (strategic facilitators being more influential than others), their geographic location (practitioners in North being more influential than their colleagues in South), hierarchical position in an organization (being higher in hierarchy helped) and years of experience (more experienced are more influential).

This results clearly support theoretical findings and results of previous research on how can practitioners gain power in their organizations, e.g. in the Excellence project (Dozier, L. Grunig & J. Grunig, 1995; Grunig, 1992; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2008; J. Grunig, L. Grunig & Dozier, 2006; L. Grunig, J. Grunig & Dozier, 2002), a hypothesis on correlation between levels of economic development and the importance of public relations practices and profession (North and West of Europe being economically more developed than South and East; cf. Verčič & Grunig, 2000; Verčič, Razpet, Dekleva, & Šlenc, 2000).

Impact of the recession and media crisis

The recent economic crisis affected public relations profession in Europe: 47 per cent of respondents reported budgetary cuts (in Southern Europe, and in private companies and corporations much higher than in governmental and non-profit organizations) and 22 per cent also reductions in staff. Yet, 80 per cent of respondents were optimistic for the year to come.

Three quarters of respondents saw themselves as capable of adapting to new media and journalism realities, with 41.8 per cent believing that the mass media surviving the crisis will be more influential than ever and 18.7 believing that being reported in the media is becoming less important.

It seems that the majority of practitioners saw the current economic crisis as being a temporary phenomenon that is to pass this year; if this is to be so and if there are really going to be only negligent consequences for the profession as a result of it is something to be seen empirically this year and n years to come..

Development of disciplines and communication channels

For the first time in 2009, corporate communication overtook marketing/brand communication (being on the top spot in 2007 and 2008) as the most important public relations function or discipline. These were followed by crisis communication on the third spot, internal communication and change management in the fourth, and public affairs/lobbying in the fifth.

Respondents expressed their conviction that corporate communication will be still the most important public relations function in 2012, while marketing/brand communication will fall further to the third place, being replaced on the second by internal communication and change management. Crisis communication will leave the top five table and corporate social responsibility and sustainability will enter the table on the fourth position. Public affairs/lobbying will remain where it was.

Internal communication/change management and social responsibility/sustainability were expected to be the fastest growing practices within public relation in Europe at least until 2012. As this result was consistent with the findings in the previous two ECMs, notwithstanding short period of observation we can tentatively describe these to be trends. Also expected to grow were

personal coaching of management and other employees on communication skills and competencies.

Among communication channels, social media are on the rise. Respondents reported print media press relations still being in the lead, but expected them to lose that position to online communication by 2012. On the third place communicators saw face-to-face communication and they expect it to remain there until 2012.

These results support a finding from the EBOK phase of research in public relations in Europe that education and reflection are becoming core characteristics of the profession on the Old Continent.

Interactive communication: overall trends and online communities

Nearly all respondents (85 per cent) were members of social networks, with professionally preferring LinkedIn and privately Facebook. But only 32.8 per cent of respondents evaluated online communities (social networks) as being important for contemporary public relations practice. But they expect over one hundred per cent increase of the importance in one year. By the end of 2010 over two thirds of respondents predicted that social networks will become important for public relations practice (the same for online videos). Weblogs, RSS feeds, podcasts, microblogs (Twitter) wikis and virtual worlds are lagging well behind.

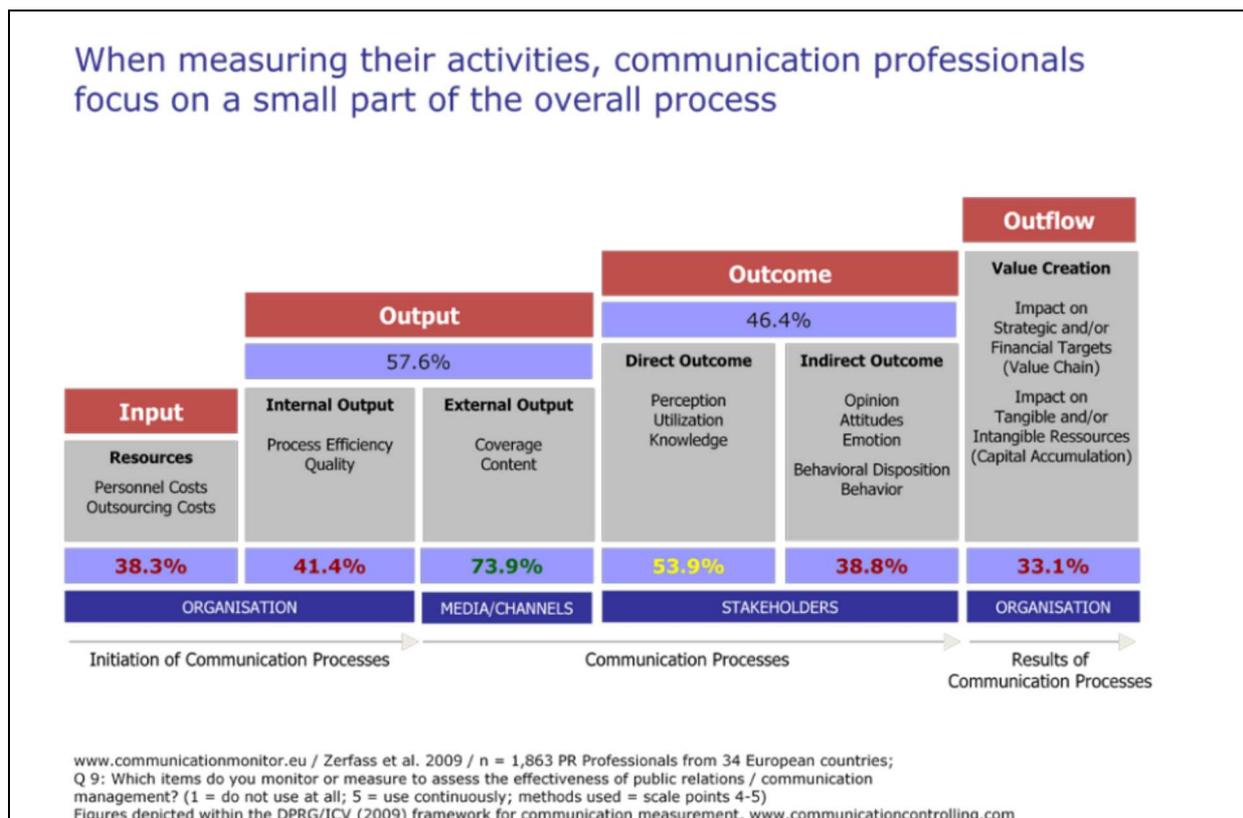
There was a gap between private behavior of public relations practitioners (being socially networked) and the way they saw this as relevant for the current practice – but they expected that to change very soon.

Strategic issues

The most important issues as seen by respondents in 2009 were: linking business strategy and communication (by 47.3 per cent), coping with the digital evolution and the social web (45.0 per cent), dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility (38.0 per cent), building and maintaining trust (34.6 per cent), and dealing with the demand of new transparency and active audiences (30.5 per cent).

Evaluation and communication performance

Practitioners in Europe reported opportunism in measurement and evaluation: 84 per cent measure their impact on media, which can be done easily based on wide offering of clipping and media monitoring services. But only one third of respondents track effects of their work on their employer organization. Situation is not much better on monitoring and evaluation of input costs: only 38.3 per cent of respondents see that as a necessary measure. Based on a framework presented in Zerfass (2010), this is a picture of public relations evaluation and measurement work as reported in the 2009 ECM:



Picture 2: How practitioners in Europe measure public relations performance

Internal communication trends

In internal communication, the major challenges were linking internal communication to corporate strategies (68.8 per cent), supporting organizational change and restructuring (66.1 per cent), and dealing with information overload (54.7 per cent). It is interesting to note what were seen as important future actions in internal communication: training managers to act as communicators is with 74.3 per cent at the top, followed by spreading authentic content instead of polished messages with 65.0 per cent and using online communities for internal dialogue with 53.8 per cent.

Salary and qualification needs

Salaries and remuneration widely differ across Europe. Western and Northern Europe are on the top side and Southern and Eastern Europe at the bottom. Women were underrepresented in the higher layers of income, and membership in international communication associations such as the EACD correlated positively with a basic salary of 100,000 Euros or more. Being in a position of a strategic facilitator also paid.

Conclusion and a look forward

Public relations is clearly a thriving practice in Europe today. The European Communication Monitor survey registers its evolution through the past three years (into the fourth this year). It gives an impressive transnational overview of the state of the profession, although imprecise. One needs to bear in mind that the survey is done electronically, in English language and on a purposive sample. It is therefore an elite survey that gives a qualified insight into where the profession in a given moment is and where the respondents think it is evolving. However, it is interesting to note that its findings are consistent with previous research and theoretical understanding of the field: for public relations to be of use for organizations, it needs to be involved in both strategizing and enactment of organizationally relevant activities, relations with both internal and external publics are gaining on importance and that communication competence is becoming equally important for organizational leaders as other core organization (business) competencies are.

This ECM research enterprise is even more impressive if we bear in mind that there is no trans-European public relations practitioner association and that the only association of the national organizations had recently been dissolved. The closest to an individual members pan-European association is at the moment the *European Association of Communication Directors* (<http://www.eacd-online.eu>), although from its statutes follows that its aim is to represent only persons employed as communication directors, press spokespeople or individuals in similar functions in multinationals with a seat in one of the member states of the European Union, in a European institution or intergovernmental body or a European association or in a public body in one of the member states involved in cross-border activities – its aim is thus far from being representative of the whole public relations profession or even the whole European continent. A genuine trans-European association is the *European Public Relations Education and Research Association*, primarily focused in university education and academic research (<http://www.euprera.org>). Students of public relations in Europe have their own association that appears and disappears under different names as generations replace one another. International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) has its IABC Europe/Middle East regional board and events (<http://europe.iabc.com>) and that is more or less it. Public relations professional organizations thrive as national public relations associations, with the British Chartered Institute of Public Relations having over 9,500 individual members (<http://www.cipr.co.uk/>) and the Swedish Public Relations Association having over 4,650 members (<http://www.sverigesinformationsforening.se/in-english.aspx>) being the two largest among them. But as the European Union grows and develops not only horizontally (in number of its members) but also vertically (in depth), so will public relations profession in Europe need to find a new forum that will replace the dissolved CERP as a representative body for the profession in Europe.

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