



The Power of Local Knowledge: An Exploratory Study of Public Relations Practice in Bangladesh (iCCCC)

Mohammed Rizwan Sharif, Charles Sturt University & Katharina Wolf, Curtin University

It has long been recognised that despite public relations being a truly global practice, the focus in industry literature and academic research has predominantly been limited to Western contexts; most notably in English speaking settings, in which the major communication agency networks are based. US and UK based authors in particular have shaped the extant body of knowledge. However, as Curtin and Gaither (2007) emphasise, just because public relations practice in some cultural contexts is less written about does not mean that it does not exist. Indeed, it could be argued that in order for public relations to move towards becoming a recognised discipline in its own right, there is an urgent need to capture the diversity of the practice across different cultures, in particular across those that expand and possibly challenge our current understanding of professional communication. Public relations scholars (e.g. Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Sriramesh, 2003; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003) have long emphasised the importance – as well as highlighted the lack of – cross-cultural awareness and international PR skills. This project sets out to respond to these calls for a more global, inclusive perspective by providing a firsthand insight into public relations practice in a previously less written about cultural context.

To date, only a small number of studies have been published on the PR industry in Bangladesh (Genilo, Akther, & Chowdhury, 2011; Habib & Sudhangshu, 2012; Haque, Shahnewaz, & Siddiquee, 2013). Furthermore, extant insights into the Bangladesh public relations industry are largely descriptive, lack contextualisation within the global context and fail to capture more recent industry developments and challenges, such as the

emergence of digital communication. Hence, this study sets out to provide a detailed snapshot of contemporary PR practice in Bangladesh through the eyes of its senior practitioners, situated within the context of global PR practice.

Given the limited nature of existing empirical insights into the Bangladesh PR industry, this study has adopted an exploratory research design, based on in depth, semi structured interviews with senior practitioners. Participants were invited to explore the status quo of the local PR industry and to reflect on their own career trajectory. The Bangladesh PR industry is relatively young, having only expanded to non-government and private sectors in the 1990 (Genilo et al., 2011). Bangladesh's political, cultural and social economic environments provide its practitioners with their own set of unique challenges, which are explored based on observations by its senior practitioners, who explicitly emphasise the need for cultural immersion and local knowledge.

The aim and impact of this paper is two-fold: first, it sets out to provide Bangladesh PR practitioners with a voice and an opportunity to reflect on their practice and the context of the PR industry within modern Bangladesh, taking into account the standing of the industry as well as associated (legal, cultural) challenges. Second, this study set out to provide PR scholars and practitioners with a more comprehensive understanding of public relations practice beyond the prevailing Western focus, thereby expanding and challenging our current understanding of public relations as a global practice. Insight from this study will provide the basis for future research, required to comprehensively capture the state of the public relations industry in Bangladesh to enable benchmarking against other cultural practice contexts, as well as to track the evolution of its industry over time.

Curtin, P. A., & Gaither, T. K. (2005). Privileging Identity, Difference, and Power: The Circuit of Culture As a Basis for Public Relations Theory. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17(2), 91-115. doi:10.1207/s1532754xjpr1702_3

Curtin, P. A., & Gaither, T. K. (2007). *International public relations: Negotiating culture, Identity and power*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publishing.

Genilo, J. W., Akther, M., & Chowdhury, I. A. (2011). A Survey of Public Relations Practice in Bangladesh. *Media Asia*, 38(4).

Habib, M. A., & Sudhangshu, S. R. (2012). Examining Perceptions about Public Relations: A Study among Communication Scholars and Public Relations Practitioners in Bangladesh. *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, 13(1), 45-55.

Haque, M. S., Shahnewaz, S. T., & Siddiquee, M. N. (2013). Ethical Implications of Public Relations in Bangladesh: Islamic Perspective. *Asian Business Review*, 2(1), 37-41.

Sriramesh, K. (2003). The dire need for multiculturalism in public relations education: An Asian perspective. *Journal of Communication Management*, 7(1), 54-70.

Sriramesh, K., & Vercic, D. (2003). *The Global Public Relations Handbook: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.