

Introduction

Tom Watson

Abstract: Latin American and Caribbean Perspectives on the Development of Public Relations: Other Voices is the fourth volume in this series of six books on national histories of public relations (PR). The nations that comprise the seven chapters range from Mexico at the northernmost, to Argentina at the southernmost and eastward to The Caribbean nations. In all, the histories of PR in 15 countries are examined.

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[p.2] Latin America is one of the few regions in this series that has a unifying factor of language and of a mostly common colonial heritage. The language is Spanish and the heritage arises from Spain. The obvious major dissenter to that claim is Brazil because its language is Portuguese and it draws its colonial antecedents from the Iberian neighbour in Portugal. However, five countries and regions covered in this book – Argentina, Central America (Panama, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama), Colombia, Peru and Mexico – are Spanish speaking and maintain strong links with the former colonizer. Historically, this common culture has aided the exchange of ideas on public relations practice and education in a manner that may only be found in the British Commonwealth.

Throughout the development stages of PR in Latin America, from the late 1950s onwards, there were conferences and the formation of organizations that brought practitioners and academics together. These events and professional bodies had to contend with conditions that are adverse to the development of public relations such as military regimes, long periods of state control over economies, censorship and corruption in the media. The theoretical and practice base of PR did not, however, come from the former colonial powers but from the United States which, according to its Monroe Doctrine, considers Latin America to be in its sphere of influence.

It is notable when the sheer geographical size of Latin America is considered, how all-pervasive US influence has been on the introduction of modern PR. The Argentina chapter highlights the impact of carmakers Ford and GM before World War II. In Brazil, it was industrial investors who made early moves to establish corporate communications. After World War II, the histories of several countries, including Brazil, Costa Rica and Peru note the role of individual PR lecturers who came to their

countries from the US and taught government administrators and others about the modern, democratic approaches. One individual, Eric Carlson, appeared first in Brazil in 1953 and then in Costa Rica the following year. Carlson is described in one chapter as a professor and another as a PR 'professional'. He was followed in the region by others including an academic from Princeton University, which was not renowned for its teaching of PR then (or now), and individual academics and Fulbright scholars. The story of how these PR experts were chosen and funded, and what type of PR they taught is an intriguing question and may be related to early public diplomacy activities by US authorities. It is a potentially interesting research topic.

[p.3] As decades passed, the narrative that appears is of Latin America beginning to evolve its own distinctive PR concepts, aided by the common elements of language and culture, and of the networks formed by conferences and organizations. This evolution was encouraged by reduced statism and economic planning that had nearly destroyed several economies, the decline of military regimes and caudillo presidencies, and the opening of economies to competition and investment. From the 1980s onwards (and there are different start dates), PR practice, professionalization and education began to thrive across the region. As one author states, there was a clear correlation between increased democracy and opened economies with PR's development.

With this maturation, came the formation of a new approach to PR which moved away from the corporatist, pragmatic approaches promoted from the US. Called the Latin American School of Public Relations, it was first reported and explained by Juan Carlos Molleda in 2000 (Molleda, 2000). It offered PR in a social role, where the practitioner is a 'change agent or the conscience of an organization' (p. 513), rather than an organizational promoter. Molleda explained that this school of thought 'reflects a more active society that is experiencing political and economic transformations in an era of privatization, deregulation, increased social inequities and market integration' (p. 513).

This development is unlike any other found in the history of PR. Previous books have noted, for example, that "there is no 'Asian model' of PR" although there were some similar cultural influences in two or three countries; Eastern Europe emerged from the Soviet bloc to mostly adopt Anglo-American models of practice; and the Middle East and Africa have three very different influences which come from British colonial influences, Islam, and Western-style publicity/promotion. Two chapters (Colombia and Mexico) mention the Latin America School of Public Relations but it is embedded in others without being mentioned.

In terms of historiographic approaches, most chapters have applied timelines as analytical processes while noting that there is little in the way of archives, writing on PR's history or oral records. Thus Latin America is at a 'discovery' stage with more research to follow. The chapter on Peru used a bibliographic approach in which a half century of books were analysed to build insight

into the national PR history, while Argentina considered industrialization as a metaphor for the development of PR over a century.

[p.4] Sitting outside Latin America is the Commonwealth Caribbean, which is made up of Barbados, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago. These English-speaking island economies were British colonies until a half century ago and have adopted generally British approaches to governmental and organizational communication. They are also in the ambit of US PR practices because of their geography and the rise of North American tourism and consumer products. They are a contrast to their neighbours in Latin America.

Reference

Molleda, J. C. (2001) 'International Paradigms: The Latin American School of Public Relations', *Journalism Studies*, 2(4), 513-530.