



## **Politics, Economy and Society: Opportunity and Challenge for Public Relations**

*By Roger Hayes  
Managing Director, APCO India*

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Public relations and public diplomacy occupy an increasingly converging space. As business takes on a broader role, combining policies and principles, our profession is likewise also broadened, embracing the context and complexity of economy, society and politics. Looking ahead, our profession will be asked to play even more of an ambassadorial, facilitator role, one that is closely linked with public affairs and public diplomacy.

While globalization has largely economic foundations, we have undoubtedly experienced political and cultural implications. In the age of the Internet, media, government and business are inextricably linked. Globalization has certainly made the world smaller by breaking down institutional barriers and borders with connectivity and convergence, leading largely to interdependence and collaboration.

As a result, we live in an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-lateral world. The growth of internet access, the spread and democratization of news, and the “sans frontieres” thinking of modern activism has created a new awareness, a more level playing field and closer cooperation in international crises, as we have seen in Haiti, Africa and elsewhere around the world.

Reputations can be gained and destroyed at the click of a mouse, with global brands being particularly vulnerable. The cost of failure is now much higher, as mistakes are exposed more quickly and punished more severely. PR pioneer Michael Morley argued recently that while it is difficult to measure the speed and impact of changes brought about by new media, it is certain that power relationships have changed, virtually eliminating traditional gatekeepers, even in countries that still try to limit freedom of access.

Fareed Zakaria has stated that “power is shifting away from nation states, up, down and sideways.” Balance-of-power politics has been replaced by transparency and pooled resources, as we see with ASEAN in its negotiations with the EU and governments, and with NGOs and corporations working in partnership on tackling disease and water shortage in Africa.

Ten years ago, James Grunig argued that collaboration should become public relations’ major idea and skill.

IPRA’s 2008 Gold Paper was all about collaboration, where corporations practise a form of corporate diplomacy, building relationships with a whole host of stakeholders well beyond their immediate customer and shareholder base.

As Indonesia’s president says, tolerance-building and confluence of civilizations is an urgent task.

Surely this call for collaboration presents an opportunity for our discipline, especially now that U.S. President Barack Obama is practising soft power, capitalism’s morality is being questioned in light of the financial contagion, and new media tends to foster conversations about complex issues.

Social media offers another tremendous opportunity for the profession, one that should prove positive so long as we master it practically and strategically. After all, our industry is already familiar with media and media channels, and with different forms of communicating.

However, just because PR is in demand all over the world does not mean that the quality and quantity of supply of services is of a consistently high standard. This is the constraint on our ability to become more globally professional as a result of globalization.

This new environment will require something of a competency shift. There is no globally comprehensive body of public relations knowledge. Neither is it supported by a pool of qualified educators with a global and multicultural mindset. Despite its size, the Asia region is still largely viewed through a Western prism and ethno-centric perspective. We earnestly need to widen the circle of knowledge and refrain from looking inward just to our own literature. Important as that is, we should also look outside to other disciplines from which we can learn and build on our existing theories and practical case studies. We need to undertake further research, particularly in emerging countries, and build bridges between PR and other disciplines, and also between the academy and the practice.

In a number of major unexpected crises, the institutions of power face a new, acute vulnerability of influence and effectiveness due to exponential changes in portable, digital technology that are redefining, broadening and fragmenting the nature of the media by way of a new breed of "information-doers." Tweeting and mobile-phone images on the streets of Iran speak volumes, so governments and corporations need to embrace transparency and engagement.

This presents an opportunity for public relations. Government and diplomats are increasingly aware of the need for PR skills, whether presentation, messaging, issue management, crisis management or stakeholder engagement.

If a country or company's policies, ideas and actions affect and are affected by economic, social, political and cultural events in other countries, where local, regional and global exist on a continuum, PR will come into its own.

*Roger Hayes can be reached at [rhayes@apcworldwide.com](mailto:rhayes@apcworldwide.com).*