15 YEARS AFTER: THE COLLECTIVE "GRILLING" OF JIM GRUNIG STILL DELIVERS VISIONARY INSIGHTS ON THE FUTURE OF PR

15 years ago, a group of PR scholars, practitioners, critics, and lecturers collectively challenged Jim Grunig to address some of the recurrent issues that emerged in the PR Conversations blog at that time.

Everything about this collective interview was innovative. From the multicultural background of the interviewers, the co-operative nature of the venture, to the generosity of Jim to step out of his academic canvas and engage in dialogue exposing his thoughts in the digital world. But looking at it with hindsight, the conversation also captures a very important transition moment for the profession and introduces some quite novel concepts for the time.

15 years have passed and while some aspects remain surprisingly at the forefront of our conversations of today, others seem to have vaped into the background and therefore taking a second to reflect on them is a valuable exercise. One that almost calls for an opportunity to go back to Jim, perhaps in a virtual fireside chat format, and examine how much real progress we have made.

Let's look at some of the main statements made by Jim during the 2008 interview and ask ourselves some questions:

> "I dislike the term "targeted" publics. This suggests that the organization should try to limit its publics to those it wants to reach because of its self interests. I believe we have to identify publics from their own perspectives."
>> o Powerful and meaningful statement on the fact that we need to see the reality (also or mostly) through the publics' eyes. But how much of our efforts are truly aimed at understanding the point of view and the interests of the publics vs. characterizing what we see from the viewpoint of the organization? How does that lead towards failures in how we design strategies to raising awareness, interest, engagement, action? Where are the differences between using communication to develop situational awareness in a group of people (without "changing the nature of the discussion") or trying to influence their communicative behaviour by focusing on how to "correct or enlarge the interpretation")?

> "I think organizations have always had to deal with multilateral communication, but they often didn't realize it. The interaction among publics on the Internet simply makes these multilateral relationships obvious"
>> o Researching on the information needs of the publics to then provide them with information is considered a two-way symmetrical exercise because it is different from dumping one-size-fits-all information. Against this backdrop, how do we cope with algorithm-led possibilities to feed people only information that matches their "needs"/ "interests" and create a partial representation of the world? How much would a new multi-lateral symmetrical governance require a more balanced ethical approach to communication that necessarily involves an identification of the grey areas or the unsettled aspects of an issue when communicating about it? What contribution can Artificial Intelligence provide in creating more opportunities to communicate from "the publics' point of view '' instead of pursuing asymmetric communication from the organization's viewpoint?

> The existence of "two competing approaches to public relations : the symbolic, interpretive, paradigm and the strategic management, behavioral, paradigm." Explaining that "interpretive paradigm emphasize messages, publicity, media relations, and media effects to put up a smoke screen around the organization " vs the "strategic management, paradigm focuses on the participation of public relations executives in strategic decision-making so that they can help manage the behavior of organization"
>   o In the organizational pendulum, at least in Europe, we've seen movements of centralization of the stakeholder relationship management functions (e.g. public affairs, community relations, lobbying, sustainability, among others) together with the communication functions (e.g. media relations, employee communications, digital communications, advertising and media planning, etc) under "bundled" Public Relations inspired organizations. But we've also witnessed movements of segregation and separation of these different worlds. How much have the benefits of separation (with functional specialization, deep professional skills development, optimization of procurement of services, complexity and depth of the projects undertaken etc) compensated for the loss of perspective on relationships? Have we managed to exert more influence on our organizations operating under one or the other models? Which of these models has performed better at underscoring the importance of the listening function upon which a large part of our strategic value is still anchored? What is being taught in MBA and executive education courses about the difference between brand, reputation, and the measurement of relationships with stakeholders?

> "Problems such as global warming and the current global financial crisis affect everyone in the world, and I think public relations people should work to get organizations to think about these broadly shared problems".
>   o What have we done in the last 15 years to connect our organizations with these global issues? As we cross more planetary boundaries, and now that at least the scientific consensus about man-made climate change has reached a vast part of the world, are we done with it? What would be the "global warming" and "global financial crisis" equivalent problem that PR should focus on until 2030, and from there to 2050?

> "The basic idea of symmetrical communication is that public relations professionals should be collaborative advocates—that is they should advocate the interests of the organization they represent while also understanding and advocating the interests of several publics, both to the organization and to the other publics."
>   o If we consider collaborative advocacy a valid approach, how does that differ from intentional misrepresentation of a reality to instrumentally shape the way publics think about a problem or an opportunity? In a world of extremisms, where bringing people together to have discussions is harder and harder, what platforms should we rely on to bridge gaps and promote mutual understanding? What can we learn from those professionals that work on the frontlines of dealing with extremist publics, who are working to reconcile people who have different perceptions of reality?

> PR as a way to "plan, and organize how we communicate (processes) in order to cultivate relationships (outcomes) with publics that are strategic to an organization (because the organization affects them, they affect the organization, or publics expect something from the organization)"
>   o The public acceptance that today hinders some of the transformations needed to make our planet more sustainable is often pointed out as one of the greatest bottlenecks for our collective future as a species on this planet. How much has this process contributed to/ prevented outcomes such as the adoption of more sustainable lifestyles, the acceptance of changes that translate in negative externalities in the short term but enclose tradeoffs for future benefits, the productive coexistence of generations that have profoundly different worldviews and expectations about the classic institutions in society such as work, family, spirituality, etc. Is there a "greater good" that we, as a profession, should aim to achieve as the ultimate outcome of our work? Is that even possible?

Just by looking at the depth and breadth of questions that arise from examining only a few fragments of the interview, we can conclude about its timely relevance. But in my view, there is yet another fundamentally interesting final observation regarding the exceptionally positive vision of the PR manager as an enlightened manager, to which I wholeheartedly agree. But we also need to note that Jim's vision outlined in this interview seems to envision a level of self-reflection, critical thinking, emotional intelligence for PR managers that technicians or professionals hardly exhibit in the early stages of their careers. Of course, we can relate to the classical roles of the PR profession and explore the differences from being a communication technician to relationship manager to system thinker and strategic planner....

However, returning to this content 15 years afterwards makes me think that it would be impossible for the younger me from 2008 to have practiced this craft in a way that resembles this ideal. Personally, my journey so far has been of experiencing bits and pieces of the full suite of skills/ competencies, but hardly ever simultaneously... What has been your experience?

JOÃO DUARTE

João Duarte is a multicultural manager and seasoned communications strategist and executor with more than 20 years of professional experience in public and private organizations in the finance, retail, professional associations, government, education, and energy sectors. He was listed by Provoke as one of the 25 most influential communications innovators in the EMEA region in 2021 and among the 20 Rising Stars 2020 of The Influence 100, PRovoke's annual report highlighting tomorrow's most influential global chief communications officers.

He is currently head of communications for Enel Grids, the Enel Group's business line, and previously served as deputy director of the Group's Centro Studi Foundation. Prior to joining Enel, João Duarte worked for the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management as Executive Officer, contributing to the growth of the network of professional associations in the field of public relations reaching a representation of about 160,000 public relations professionals.

In the field of research, João Duarte received his Master's degree in Social Sciences (MsC) in 2005 from the New University of Lisbon with a thesis on "Contributions to an Integrated Theory of 'Publics' in Public Relations." His work was considered the first thesis in Public Relations accepted by a Portuguese public university. His academic training has led him to teach numerous undergraduate and postgraduate courses at several European universities, mainly in Public Relations and Communication Theory.

October 2023