

# The Image of Public Relations in Indonesia 2001: Myth and Reality in Multicultural Approach

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## ABSTRACT

*In global environment, understanding and managing multiculturalism mean recognizing similarities and differences among various cultures and use this cultural diversity to achieve one's goal. Therefore, it is important to study the impact of cultural contrast upon some practical aspects such as: language; method of communication; cultural as well as management cultures. Culture influences the way in which people interact with one method and has direct impact upon communication patterns. If communication patterns are influenced by culture differences, it is important for public relations managers to be aware of individual behavior. The myth and reality of the Indonesian culture in its unique pluralistic characteristics known as "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" (Unity through Diversity) represent the Asian society. Dreaming upon the traditional Asian and uniquely Indonesian cultural values, the Indonesian managers of 2001 appear to be successfully working within the cultural boundaries of Asian and Western corporate values. This paper discusses the relationship between cultural and Public Relations practice in Indonesia embracing the trend of 2001—focused on image and possible cultural sensitivity building by means of blending the Asian and Western values to create a synergetic organizations in practicing Public Relations At 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.*

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## 1. Introduction: Concept of Image

In a sense, we may say that the concept of "image" begins in a very rudimentary form at this level. The thermostat presents an image of the outside world in the shape of the information regarding its temperature. It has also a value system in the sense of the ideal temperature at which it is set. Its behavior is directed toward the receipt on information which will bring both its image and its value system. When its outside world's image is "right", that is, conforms to its value system, it ceases to act. As long as the image, as confirmed by the messages received, does not conform to its value system it will act in order to bring the two together.

The image of public relations is also charac-

terized by a much greater degree of self-consciousness and of self-awareness than that of the lowers other thing. We're not only know, but also know that we know. The reflective character of the human image is unique—leads to philosophy. Due to the extended time image and the extended relationship images, public relations is capable to perform "rational behavior". In other words, its response is not directed toward an immediate stimulus but to an image of the future filtered through an elaborate value system (Boulding, 1961 : 22, 25,26).

### 1.1 The Concept of Public Relations

Public relations nowadays become the concern of any company or organization, particularly me-

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dium or large company. Not only the business organizations but also the government agencies and community or social associations used public relations as well.

One of the main reasons or causes, in my opinion, is the fact that modern life is becoming increasingly complex because of the tremendous progress achieved in the field of modern science and technology during the last two decades. On one hand, man is now able to handle various things at the same time due to the utilization of electronic devices. Many organizations expand their activities and operations without increasing the number of their employees. But on the other hand, people are getting so busy that they have close contact with each other only in terms of work and operations within the framework of organizational systems.

As the consequence, the tendency is that people are associating each other, intra-organizationally as well as extra-organizationally, not as cultural human beings but as “officials”, “office holders”, “job or position holders”, and the like. Communications are becoming technical, using technical terminology and in many cases using a special jargon understandable only to a very limited number of people. This situation is particularly true to social life in the big cities, the center of modern business throughout the world.

Due to above-mentioned situation, people in big cities tend to be impersonal, afraid of getting involved in some form of disagreement. They stick to people they know and confide in, remain within the group or organization where they feel safe and get the recognition and honor they need to lead a decent life. The world, the region, the country, the society, and the community are therefore getting more and more divided into groups, because of what is true to individuals is also true to nations, tribes, dynasties, families, and even to business organizations.

Because of this division into groups, communications are getting more and more difficult in terms of language, concepts and ideas. People are using the same words with different meanings, creating higher possibilities or dangers for misunder-

standing and conflicts. Well-intended phrases or advises are interpreted or received in the wrong way. These are all problems of communications.

Public relation is the way to solve certain kinds of communication problems, particularly the problems of two-way communication between organization and its “public”, its internal (staff and personnel) and external (customers and partners) public.

Now, that we have had a brief view over the communication problems in the world, the region, the country, and the city community which form the environment of any modern business organization. I would like to say that public relations is nowadays a very important part of modern management in any business organization. Public relations also played a key role on that field.

First of all, let us understand that a good two-way-communication between any organization and its public is a condition *qua non* for growth and progress. Sound employees morale is necessary for the effectiveness and strength of the organization while success in business comes from good relations with customers and business partners. Business success comes from outside the organization, but effectiveness or the efficiency of organization management comes from inside.

No business organization at present can do without good management, and one of the very important factors to achieve the company’s efficiency is the well functioning of the communication chain from top management downwards and from the rank and file upwards. But, recent research has revealed that in many medium or large companies the flow of communication is such that every sub-manager at every level can catch only 60-65% from what his immediate superior is trying to communicate to him orally, and so we can imagine what percentage of the original message the junior manager may understand if there are four or five levels of management. The results from written communication are even worse, for the understanding of a written message may be as low as 15 to 20% at each level. But, experiments have revealed that better results as a whole can be achieved when several different channels of communication are

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used together and tackling a problem or subject in a number of different ways using different techniques at the same time.

Communication namely, is not just the exchange of information or messages between people using certain means, but it is more or less an exchange of minds. Words are the most important elements of any message or information, but what are words when minds do not meet; the words will have no meaning. This is the main idea of public relations. However, all those different ways and techniques should be planned or programmed, and geared to the certain objectives which have to be clearly defined first. In other words : Every organization should have a public relations program.

## 1.2 The Concept of Culture

Culture influences the way in which people interact with one another. It has a direct impact upon a method or pattern of communication. Western cultures value a method of communication which shows directness, clarity and conciseness because it expresses honesty and integrity. In contrast, Eastern cultures tend to be resistant to directness and emphasize group harmony rather than individualism. Eastern people often says yes, which in fact they mean no, because they believe that refusal could mean embarrassment for the other person (Ananto, 1995).

Culture is learned, not inherited. It derived from one's social environment, not from one's genes (Hofstede, 1991). One's culture straits within the social environments, which one grew up and collected one's life experiences. The growing of culture straits within the family, continuously within the neighborhood, at school, in youth groups, at work place and in the living community. Culture operates in many levels. Just as unique cultures have evolved in most nations, the same is true for organizations operating in those countries. Research indicates that national culture has a greater impact on employees than does the organization's culture (Young, 1995). Studies have shown while organizational culture influences work behavior, national culture does so to a greater ex-

tent (Adler, 1986).

Culture is intangible, operates in subtle ways and is not easy to define (Gannon, 1994). Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and social scientists have developed varying definitions to explain culture and its components. "Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts : the essential core of culture consists of tradition (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture may, on the other hand be considered as products of auctioning elements for further action" (Kroeber and Kluchohn, 1952).

The key to understand the complexity of culture interaction lies in three variables: (1) values (underlying assessment of what is good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable); (2) attitudes (expression of values which predisposes a person to act and react in a certain way); (3) behavior (any form of human action) (Adler, 1986).

Culture is "behavioral norms that a group of people, at a certain time and place, have agreed upon to survive and co-exist" (Elashmawi, Harris, 1994). Elements of culture, according to Hofstede, consist of language, non verbal communication, space and time orientations; religions; belief systems; patterns of thinking, self-images, set of values, material culture and aesthetics. They also believe that those norms must change for that group to survive in the new environments.

## 2. The Relationship Between Culture and Public Relations

In practicing public relations, either on technical, managerial or professional/consultative level, we do not deal with organization. We deal with people. People who are involved in and concerned with the organization. They have different minds, motivations, culture but with the same problem as to achieve the common goal, yet with different ways according to their own perception. This diversity should be blended to create a synergy to

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achieve the final end.

How could public relations techniques be implemented if we do not understand the people, their backgrounds, their norms and values. How could we create mutual understanding and build the trust, be able to predict and influence future behavior if we come from different interpretations. Once we ignore the sense of flexibility and adaptability in setting up strategic planning and tactical action based on local culture, no matter how expert a public relations personnel might be, the result of the public relations program will be less effective.

The participation of public relations should be based on local or national culture, not be imported one. Thus, public relations practice is very much culturally dependent. In reality, many companies are facing a dilemma in employing an outside public relations consultant or creating in-house public relations department. Therefore, conducting a research is indispensable before public relations are planned and be programmed.

## **2.1 Multiculturalism in the Global Environment**

Let us view that culture is a process, not a static concepts. Culture is a way of life consisting of elements such as traditions, set of rules, beliefs including language, food and religion. In the era of globalization where many organizations expand their operations into new territories, the myth of culturally arrogant is bound to diminish. The growing of regional business communities and communication systems create many opportunities for cross-cultural exposure. Because of this trend, there is an ever increasing demand for today's professional working in international area to process not only relevant knowledge or academic qualifications and skills, but also the ability to operate smoothly and efficiently in any situation where people from different cultures are working together toward a common goal.

Currently, in global industries including public relations, communications, travel, transportation, hotels employ people outside their native

cultures. Whenever a merger, or a joint venture project is formed by two existing companies, two or more distinct organizational cultures must be combined. It tends to culture upon another. It must be more productive to seek a cultural synergy among the systems involved. The managers in such situations have to utilize multi cultures skills to create the best in various organizational cultures and management systems.

In reality, every time a project team is assembled, made up of different disciplines and fields of expertise, the project manager must exercise multi cultural management. Finance personnel think differently from public relations people, who in turn may differ in perspective from marketing or production people. Each profession has unique sub-cultures. When such combination of people enter international arena, the cultural challenges will be even greater. Those who have experiences in intercultural communication and negotiation are more likely to succeed. Only those companies that are able to become multicultural will survive and prosper in the Pacific Century (Hari Bedi, 1994).

Countries in South Pacific talk more than 1,000 languages, this region has the most variable of religions, traditions and cultures. Countries like Japan, East Asia as China, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand as well as Indonesia will play significant roles in this new era. Public relations personnel practicing in these countries will have to face greater cultural challenges than his counterparts in the USA, European countries and Australia where English serves as uniform in communication.

More and more public relations practitioners using high tech methods confronting to new obstacle that may have unfavorable impacts upon the success of global joint ventures. International business transactions, as well as the public relations practice often end in sad stories as a result of misunderstanding. Imported technology created in highly-developed countries may have brought a negative impact upon densely-populated countries when labor is abundant. Ethical or moral standard, as universally applied, yet it has several different dimensions in each country. When the imple-

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mentation of the public relations program is about to set up one must be willing to make effort to understand and work within these guidelines, thus the elements of tolerance is highly expected.

## **2.2 The Impact of Multicultural Diversity Upon Practical Values**

In global environment, understanding and managing multiculturalism means recognizing similarities and differences among various cultures and use this cultural diversity to achieve one's goal. For the purpose of presenting cultural diversity the writer reviews some literatures on the impact of cultural contracts upon some practical aspects such as language, methods of communication, cultural as well as management cultures.

A comparative study done among some 800 students from 15 leading universities in 5 big cities in Indonesia shows that the user of English have a greater tendency towards commercial, individual and pro-active characteristic. In contrast, the user of Bahasa Indonesia tend to be religious, social and passive (A. Pope, 1988). Language barrier seems to be a cultural challenge for practicing, public relations professions as it covers advertising, public relations and communication in a broader spectrum. And "no one can understand and communicate with Indonesians like other Indonesians" adopted as *Credo Matari*. (Soedarto)

Culture influences the way in which people interact with one another and a direct impact upon communication patterns. If communications patterns are influenced by difference in cultures, it is important that the public relations managers are aware of the effects of cultures have upon the behavior of individuals. Consider the situation of an expatriate manager who has come from a culture that values the effort of the individual. Having been sent on a foreign assignment, he now has to adjust to the rules of an operation that values that effort of teamwork and the overall success of the business. Because of the difference in perspective, misunderstandings often occur.

## **2.3 The Impact of National Culture on Organizations**

All organizations have their own corporate culture in which employees hold common perceptions and shared values on how the company operates and the way the members are supposed to behave. A manager working for foreign companies needs to understand the corporate as well as the national cultural characteristics of the parent company. Research indicates that national culture has a greater impact on employees than does the organization's culture. In many times, national differences are enhanced, rather than diminished by organizational culture (Adler, 1986).

In this discussion, the writer chooses Indonesian examples to represent multiculturalism society because of its strong elements of national indigenous culture. Indonesia is dealing with its own internal cultural diversity. Indonesia's national motto "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" which implies Unity through Diversity provides for the incorporations of opposites which has more than 200 ethnic groups holding 5 different religions, speak more than 500 local languages and dialects, why did it take so long for others to understand what Indonesia has long understood?

The country preserves country philosophy of PANCASILA to accommodate all this diversity. Within this cultural diversity, Indonesia primary objective is country unity. We are proud of our *Sumpah Pemuda* – satu nusa, satu bangsa, satu bahasa (one country, one nation and one language, that is Indonesia). This might be the greatest challenge for each country to preserve, as in the era of globalization the more universal we become, the more tribal we act (Naisbitt, 1994). As the world's trend coming towards political independence and the formation of economic alliances, in this new world we cannot choose either local or international—we have to choose both.

How multinational a company is, it has to possess experts possessing local, national, regional as well as international basic understanding in

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managing strategic, conceptual and practical business aspects. Should he acquire local-based understanding only, he will have greater obstacles in international competition. The management of human resource, is therefore significant, particularly in developing countries like Indonesia.

The impact of national culture on organizations is interesting to analyze. Certain characteristics of a unique Indonesian management style were found in Laurent's research done in 1983. Laurent analyzed managerial behaviors in nine Western European countries, the United States, and two the Asian countries (Indonesian and Japan). A large percentage of Indonesian respondents were most comfortable with a hierarchical structure in which lines of authority were clearly demarcated. Eighty-six percents of the Indonesian respondents believe that the main purpose of a hierarchical structure was to know has authority Americans surveyed agreed (Laurent, 1983).

Hofstede found that national cultures better explained the differences in work-related values and attitudes than a person's position within an organization, age, profession, race or gender (1980). Using a comparison among Indonesia, Japan and the United States, it can be seen that Indonesia displayed its own cultural patterns. In one of the management dimensions: individualism vs. collectivism, the USA image as an individualistic and self-centered society is reinforced, on the other hand, Indonesia is reflected as a tightly-knit and family-focused society where relationships are the key (Hofstede, 1980).

Historically, Indonesians have had a great tolerance for diversity and an ability to absorb outside influences and overlay them into existing culture. The elderly are highly regarded and asked for advice and direction. Indonesians are likely to avoid conflicts, and as the rest of Asian people, Indonesians share the view that linkages between personal and business are necessary, important and beneficial (Young, 1995).

Having understood some of these characteristics, public relations practice in Indonesia deserves greater care particularly when dealing with national issues such as democracy, religions, and

ethnic groups. It is more productive to develop a public relations strategy to manage the impacts of cultural diversity rather than the diversity it self. What Indonesian perceive as human right, equality should be seen and understood in the Indonesia's perspective values, which sometimes difficult to understand by them who do not know and do not want to know about our unique culture. Misunderstandings, misinterpretations often occur as a result of lack of tolerance. Yet, the Indonesian managers appear to be successfully working within the cultural boundaries of Asian and Western corporate values (Young, 1995).

The concepts and practice of multiculturalism are not new to Indonesian public relations professionals, since they have been long aware of this cultural diversity. The purpose of public relations is not to make the client look good, but to add value to the client's operations by furthering its core objectives (Collins, 1995). Public relations extend the client's objectives by reducing friction with targeted groups, enabling the client to operate more efficiency due to the naturalization of targeted groups in the client's operation (Ananto, 1995).

### **3. Building Images Through Cultural Sensitivity**


We live in a world that increasingly requires its institutions to build images in order to survive. Companies must create, maintain and enhance their own images as a business necessity. From the public relations' point of view, we need a new paradigm of thought, to reengineer the way we think our mission. We need to establish fundamental human value and trust. Should we have the same perceptions that practicing public relations in multicultural society requires high degree of tolerance, and the building of international relationship is more important than knowing the cultural diversity, we could create synergistic organizations. Synergistic organizations minimize potential problems by managing the impacts instead of minimizing the diversity. They trained their members to recognize cultural differences and used

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those differences to create advantages for the organization (Adler, 1986).

Should public relations personnel impose global understanding that the industry of public relations has not reached the same level of development in each country, he might work with an international team comprising experts in public relations, communication and advertising assisted by professional having strong ability in conducting lobbying with local client. What is more important is the building of trust among the public relations people. Professional commitment as the establishment of international network will promote the image of the public relations that finally contribute to the development of public relations industry all over the world.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has sought to emphasize the importance of understanding cultural differences as being crucial to practicing public relations in the multicultural global environment. As the practice of public relations has rooted in the building of trust and relationship, the public relations key concept of “mutual understanding” should underlie the public relations practice. 

#### Appendix:

##### Information and Communication Technology Convergence Nowadays Phenomena Until 2001

- System: The Four C's
  - computing
  - conduit
  - content
  - consumer
- Infrastructure for telecommunications
  - copper
  - fiber
  - wireless
  - satellite
- Multimedia content
  - text, graphics, voice, video, ...
  - publishing, broadcasting, advertising, ...

- Application
  - bussiness
  - government
  - social

##### The Internet

- Interconnected network of network
- Evolution
- Prototype global information highway
- Consent based user communities
- Exponential growth
- Globalization
- Information have and have-nots

##### The Global Networked Society

- Value enhancement through networked intelligence
  - machine
  - human intelligence
- Four ways ICT enhances value of information
  - efficient data processing
  - rapid information flow ; time and distance do not matter
  - information technology design, production and delivery tools leads to better products at less cost
  - “intelligent” products and services
- The knowledge society
  - economic value accrues from information / knowledge intensity
  - human intelligence and creativity become key differentiates
  - rise of information content in economic sectors, esp. services
  - democratization and empowerment
  - transparency
  - the learning society
- The digital economy
  - digitalization provides lingua franca
  - human interaction turns electronic
  - from physical to virtual
  - electronic transactions
  - disintermediation
- The borderless world
  - information flow through permeable borders
  - redefinition of national sovereignty
  - movement of information leads to movement of people and goods
  - capital flow
  - global civil society

##### Responses to ICT Advances

- Three categories of responses
  - do nothing

- follow the leader
- active self reliance
- Do nothing
  - confused and paralyzed into in action
  - poor education and learning capability
  - weak infrastructure
  - lack of financial resources
  - doomed to remain in low value added world?
- Follow the leader
  - aware but lacks vital resources
  - subject to leaders initiatives
  - development may not be sustainable
  - unpredictable environment
- Active self-reliance
  - advanced industrialized countries: OECD, G-7
  - need to remain competitive
  - some developing countries
  - leadership from two sources : industry and government
  - learning through doing

#### **Learning Through Doing**

- Why category one and two countries may not succeed
  - definition of success; enhancing quality of life under new social, economic and political order
  - power shift from government to large corporations
  - corporations driven by need to be competitive; to innovative; to increase profits
  - global power balance maybe jeopardized
  - lack of global governance system to stabilize changes
  - no one has the complete answer
- Efficacy of learning through doing
  - need to learn
  - uncertainties
  - charting own destiny
  - level playing field
  - finding new niches
- Indonesia's Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) as learning through doing
  - start small; grow big
  - balance human skills and infrastructure
  - address multimedia content value chain
  - learning to learn
  - learning by making mistakes

#### **Seven Challenges to Human Values**

- Philosophical and epistemological
  - S & T (Science and Technology) seen as value neutral, secular
  - The-isms: determinism, positivism, technocentrism, materialism, dualism, ...
  - “divide and conquer”, compartmentalization
  - structure and methodology of knowledge: authentication and validation
  - Hierarchy and transcendent
- Social and cultural
  - desired form of knowledge society in the multicultural world
  - how do countries plan and manage growth?
  - Narrowing gap between have and have not
  - Gaining efficiency through information explosion
  - Maintaining indigenous cultures in the borderless world
- Infrastructure
  - high cost: who pays?
  - Foreign investment: will it lead to recolonization?
  - Rural/urban imbalance
  - Limited role of government
- Economic
  - information economy may lead to mass unemployment
  - new international division of labour
  - intellectual property protection regime promotes concentration of wealth
  - increasing dominance by powerful corporations
- Technological
  - high cost of R & D rawest entry barrier
  - technology ownership restriction
  - restricted production of key components
- Political
  - power shift within countries and across borders
  - knowledge is power: shared or distributed?
  - Transitional instability
- Religious and spiritual
  - knowledge as basis of religion
  - lack of meditating mechanisms
  - erosion of traditional values
  - default of religious groups



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