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# Corporate communications as a sustainable and active contributor to democracy - some remarks

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- 1 **The problem:** When developing the theme for the IV International Symposium on Global Corporate Communication, the main questions defined a focus on Public Relations and Corporate Communication's role in the democracy. We were questioning how much time we devote to thinking about the impact of our practices on democracy? If it's true that legitimacy is an overriding objective of corporate communications and public relations, how is this pursued in the practice of global corporate communication? We were certain that one of the major social functions of communicators today is to contribute to clearer and less confusing communicative environment, but how can we use the classic tools of corporate communication to achieve this aim? How do we assess the impact of our communication strategies towards democracy? How do we use the power of lobby or issues management to promote and protect greater values that overlap the interests of present and future stake-holders?
- 2 These broad questions led us to develop a program including several possible derivation areas and the main conclusions are hereby presented according to the structure of event's the program. In this publication, presenters at the IV International Symposium on Global Corporate Communication also explain their ideas in more detail so these remarks are only intended to provide a global look to how the several contributions added to the initial questions and how they have show «Corporate Communication as a Sustainable and Active Contributor to Democracy».

## 1. Public Relations' contribution to democracy

- 3 Similar to what happened when environmental activists challenged companies to raise awareness of their impact on ecology, we face today a similar and growing criticism

about «spinning», «misinformation» and «distortion» which can seriously question a corporation's positive impact on democracy and deliberative thinking. Our challenge should not only be to focus on the tension between a global corporation's objectives and national economies, cultures and governments, but to emphasize our duty, as communication professionals, to be advocates in protecting democracy and promoting public awareness and citizenship by adhering to the highest ethical standards. Moreover, our contribution towards democracy and the assessment and measurement of our efforts should be recognized as an emerging new area of social reporting that can enable us to re-discover a basic PR concept – the concept of «publics».

### 1.1. Conclusion # 1 – Protection of the communicative environment

- 4 The role of the PR professionals in making a clear choice between useful and non-useful communication, their ethical capability to judge between *concealment and exposure*, their obligation to sound counsel and information gathering techniques, might well be among the most important actions to protect the communicative environment. We live in a much overloaded communicative environment and it is our duty to better manage what we send into this environment.

### 1.2. Conclusion # 2 – Publics as citizens

- 5 In today's world, organisations are showing more and more concerns with the rights of publics as citizens. This means moving away from the notion of consumers (or audiences) and also move away from confusing publics with masses or crowds. Understanding publics based on knowledge of their relevant background and trying to arouse their participation are among the main positive contributions that PR professionals give to a healthier society.

### 1.3. Conclusion # 3 – Public Relations as promoters of grassroots diplomacy

- 6 If we want to practice Global Corporate Communication and Public Relations for development, then promoting grassroots diplomacy initiatives, based on one-with-one efforts is of pivotal importance. The everyday notion that we can make a difference is a real challenge for our future.

## 2. Participation through lobby: limits and limitations

- 7 The first keynote session was aimed at assessing the limits and limitations for the participation in public life through lobby, meaning the directed efforts to influence public policies and legislators. Large global corporations see lobby as normal and have long since given it much attention. But if lobby is to be accepted as a competitiveness factor, since the corporations who use it are actively protecting their value creation capability, the truth is that it must be the matter of attention for a much larger basis of companies. This is why we proposed to look at how Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) organize to lobby and to the limitations they face. To this regard, the role of national institutes for the support of the SME's and industrial associations

was highlighted as they aggregate resources and make available collective means to access resources.

## 2.1. Conclusion # 4 – Increased understanding of lobby

- 8 Drawing from the fact that lobby is still badly regarded in many countries, presenters explained the inclusion of Lobby as part of the broad function of Public Affairs and underlined that lobby is a tool that global corporations have protect themselves from unregulated (or «badly regulated») environments. Explanations of the basic concepts of lobby, of the reality of lobby in the major hubs (Brussels & Washington being among the most important) and examples of countries that still have to change their legal context in order to adapt to this need where of great interest in the presentations
- 9 Along with the need to understand what lobby means, presenters reminded the importance of adequately choosing between top, bottom or direct lobby according to the situation.

## 2.2. Conclusion # 5 – Ethical challenge

- 10 The need for global standards is a reality in many areas, but the broad area of Public Affairs and the specific activity that we call Lobby call for an articulation between global standards with local principles and values.
- 11 The ethical problems associated with third party endorsement (Front groups) are related with the ethical obligation (by several codes) of making the public aware of on whose behalf a certain group is acting. Different challenges were identified for those working as corporate lobbyist or those working as external consultants.

## 3. Involving publics in participatory decision-making processes encourages synergistic communication

- 12 A fundamental requisite of democracies is to involve citizens in decision making as a means of promoting belongingness, shared responsibilities and policy making at all levels of society. This is abundantly clear when one examines, for example, the European Commission's «Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate», an effort to overcome the so called «legitimacy crisis» as part of the implementation of a European Constitution. Similar problems have led global companies to implement and test participative decision-making projects in order to engage stakeholders and reduce the costs of implementation for decisions.

### 3.1. Conclusion # 6 – Public's involvement as a rational imperative

- 13 The involvement of publics in decision making processes results from the capability to operate a series of relationship management principles and the case of Mobility Venice was used to demonstrate how this can be accomplished. Publics' involvement can contribute to the acceleration of decision's implementation time and to the reduction of their implementation cost. However, this shouldn't be confused this with organisations losing their decisional power.

### 3.2. Conclusion # 7 – Conceptualization of the company

- 14 Corporate Communication and Public Relations professionals should consider their role in the conceptualization of the organization, what was called by Prof. Toni Muzi Falconi as the «Envisioning Process». This means the highest strategical levels (Mission, Vision, Values, and basic policies) should be understood and shaped by the professionals before being communicated. The communicator's role in helping conceptualize the company, integrating concerns with publics and their interests, is one of the most important contributions for a sustainable economy.

### 3.3. Conclusion # 8 – «Communicating with» as a new paradigm

- 15 The «communication to» attitude is the prevailing professional attitude of those that equate public relations with unidirectional and non symmetrical relations. We urgently need that global corporate communication and public relations professionals apply a «communicating with» paradigm. The notion of public diplomacy as programs beginning within the hearts and minds of individuals that foster understanding through communication further emphasizes the power of «communicating with» as a force for social development and positive change in societies.

## 4. Challenges for global corporate communication

- 16 The implementation of powerful environmental scanning mechanisms and the growing number of technologies available for opinion sharing and community building highlight the changing nature of the corporate communication function. What are the hottest new technological possibilities in a time when blogs are no longer something new and when RSS, Podcasts, Webcasts are being used in communication strategies by companies worldwide? The growing importance of Google and its powerful tools cannot be neglected by corporate communication professionals. And we no longer can ignore that traditional issues management function should be re-framed to allow us to deal with «global issues management», as global issues are starting daily and on very different basis.

### 4.1. Conclusion #9 – Commitment

- 17 People commit themselves to the organisations with whose values they identify themselves. This underlines the need to settle the PR strategy by means of defining and acting upon corporate values. This allows us to improve the internal relations as well as corporate social responsibility policy by bringing together organisations with the civil society.

### 4.2. Conclusion # 10 – Training and research – networking as training

- 18 It is important that PR professionals monitor not only their own perceptions about public relations but also the perception that others have about our field. This is the

basic co-orientational principle that we have been away from applying in our studies. If we are to avoid problems related with false disagreements (those that exist when people agree but think that they disagree on something) we must rethink the design of our studies.

- 19 During this symposium we had several examples that ongoing professional training and lifelong learning is a must if we are to work in global corporate communication/public relations. It is important also to consider debate and conversation platforms to stimulate ideas and new approaches to traditional concepts. Platforms such as theme weblogs like [www.prconversations.com](http://www.prconversations.com) are of special interest to global corporate communication/public relations because of its global approach.

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## ABSTRACTS

**Background:** The Organisational Communication Department at Lisbon's Superior School of Mass Communication and Media Arts and its Sponsors, are proud to have hosted in Portugal the IV International Symposium on Global Corporate Communication, June 27-29 2007. The Symposium was organised as the closing event for the 2007 term of the GlobCom project. GlobCom is an international project run by 9 universities in 9 countries of 4 continents. It aims to give students a chance to learn Global Corporate Communication by developing a strategy for a real client with colleagues based all over the world. The students of the universities are involved in PR/Communications courses and are at least in their 3rd Semester. They form 6 international e-teams and each one gets the same PR brief and has to develop and submit a solution in the form of a professional presentation, like in a real international agency pitch. The students of the e-teams communicate and co-operate with each other using different distance working tools and benefiting from an exclusive GlobCom platform available at [www.pr-got.com](http://www.pr-got.com).

GlobCom was founded in 2003 by Dr. Volker Stoltz, former CEO of Weber Shandwick Europe and currently a lecturer in international PR at the Erfurt University in Germany. The objectives of the GlobCom project are to make participating students learn how:

1. To work in an international team
2. To act together online
3. To solve a global PR problem like an agency
4. To overcome cultural barriers
5. To recognize cultural diversity as a strength
6. To learn that a global strategy has to be implemented locally
7. To convince with a presentation

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