

*Vernon C. Schranz Distinguished Lecture in Public Relations*  
*John Paluszek – 2007*

Good evening, all. Thank you for coming together tonight for the 2007 Vernon C. Schranz Lecture. Actually, I hope that tonight we can make this the 2007 Vernon C. Schranz Dialogue a bit later as you respond to my remarks.

I also hope that you'll forgive another caveat here at the outset: You see, I intend to address my thoughts primarily to the students who are with us tonight. All others – faculty, administrators, civic leaders, families and friends – now that you are comfortably seated, you are, of course, invited to stay.

I'd like to engage primarily with the students because, frankly, I have so much I'd like to tell them about public relations. I can't possibly cover it all in the next 30 minutes, so I hope we can have a lively exchange of ideas immediately afterward.

As you know, our topic tonight is "Public Relations, The Global Profession." So here at the outset, let me offer the lead on this story. It is this: "Public relations, in its fullest, finest sense – developing and maintaining relationships – is arguably a global profession because it now functions in the public interest in virtually every part of our interconnected world."

Before I try to support that lead, a short digression with a true confession: When Professor Pritchard first asked me what I might address tonight, I thought about offering this title:

"The Peripatetic Public Relations Professional: What I Saw and Heard in Russia, China, India, Argentina, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Great Britain, Italy and Switzerland."

Although that has a certain rhythm, even some alliteration at the outset, I'm sure you'll agree that it would have been difficult to fit it on the promotional poster.

And yet, it would have been relevant, because I have visited all of those places recently on behalf of the Public Relations Society of America, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, the United Nations Global Compact and my very patient and supportive employer, Ketchum.

I'll return to the "Peripatetic Public Relations Professional" in a few moments. But first, I'd like to offer some necessary context. The context comes in two dimensions and it's offered as an answer to the question, "How do we – meaning public relations professionals – fit into our fast-changing world?"

In the first dimension, we have to agree on what we mean by "public relations in its fullest, finest sense."

James and Laura Grunig, the eminent public relations educators and authors, long ago articulated this better than I could. I'm sure that the public relations students with us tonight are familiar with the Grunigs' concept of "Two Way Symmetrical Public Relations."

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In this articulation, “listening” to audiences – via substantial, ongoing research – feeds into an organization’s policy formation and performance, which is then subject to communication to target audiences. It’s two-way communication that helps build and maintain harmonious relationships. There is, indeed, symmetry here. And it illustrates how public relations can exist, and function at the interface of the organization and society.

Some would say that this is the “high-minded” description of public relations, but I disagree. Because “harmony,” as our mission, is scalable.

It can be pursued in the humble product news release seeking to promote, in the famous aphorism, a “commercial transaction between consulting adults.” And, at the other end of this spectrum, harmony is also the objective of the macro public relations commitment called “public diplomacy.”

In recent years, Karen Hughes in the U.S. State Department has been pursuing what has been called public diplomacy’s “mission impossible” – trying to offset the tremendous damage to our country’s reputation abroad due to foreign policy decisions.

In a parallel activity, and perhaps with greater potential for success, there are the efforts of public relations educators such as Ball State’s Mel Sharpe and Pritch Pritchard – as well as Dr. Judy Van Slyke of Virginia Commonwealth University and my Commission on Public Relations Education co-chair, Dr. Dean Kruckeberg of the University of Northern Iowa. These intrepid educators, to name only a few, have, for some time, been introducing public relations education – and the very concept of true public relations, at universities in regions as diverse as South America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

To complete the first of the two dimensions of context, “public relations in its fullest, finest sense,” a few words about the designation of public relations as a profession. There is some controversy here.

Some would say that this is a stretch. They point out that we don’t have an entry credential such as that of law, medicine or accounting. This has driven the long-standing debate on whether public relations practitioners should be licensed. I believe, however, that the current emphasis on outcomes assessment at our colleges and universities may some day produce a consensus entry credential. Again, Professor Mel Sharpe has led the discussion of outcomes assessment for quite some time.

Moreover, I present to you the dictionary definition of a profession: “A vocation or occupation requiring advanced education and training and involving intellectual skills.”

And public relations can certainly demonstrate the three other standards for designation of a profession – an ethical code, ongoing social-science research and a body of knowledge – although the public relations body of knowledge is so broad, diverse and growing that it has defied codification.

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Still, some will say, “but public relations practitioners are “advocates” – as if that was necessarily a pejorative. Doctors, lawyers and other professionals are advocates as well. The overriding criterion here is performing in the client’s (or patient’s) best interest as well as in the public interest, and within an ethical code.

The second contextual dimension relating to “how do public relations people fit into the world,” is a brief reflection on how the world is changing – the direction and velocity of such change, especially as it pertains to public relations.

I have to ask you students to trust me on this, but I believe that most folks here tonight over say, 40, will support much of what I’m about to tell you.

In the last two decades, the world has become so interconnected, and new international macro forces have become so powerful, that a fundamental reassessment of the status of our nation and our profession is critical.

In this regard, I’ll not even attempt to describe the importance, the impact, of the fast-evolving information technology which, in a sense, can link everyone around the world at any time. You students probably know more about that than I do; I’m not into Facebook, YouTube or MySpace. And I’m certainly not into Wikipedia.

Instead, a quick list of some of the other current – and future – global linkages:

Energy: Did you buy gasoline or heating oil this week? At what fast-escalating price? With our country importing about two-thirds of its needed crude oil, what happens in oil-producing countries – countries ranging from Iraq to Venezuela – affects us directly and viscerally. And did you know that about 80 percent of the world’s oil reserves are held by 13 foreign, government-owned companies – and that many of those governments are not friendly to the U.S.?

Environment: Surely a global issue. The United Nations, at its upcoming pan-national meeting in Bali, will attempt to build a consensus global commitment on addressing climate change. No easy task.

Immigration: Not just in this country, but the mass movements of people in many parts of the world seeking a better standard of living, more freedom or both.

Add to this list international tourism, trade and commerce, disease and health issues, capital flows – and, tragically – terrorism and the threat of war. It becomes unarguable that multipolar cooperation, in place of the unipolar policies of earlier decades, is critically important today.

There are, of course, no “power ratings” for countries as there are in, say, sports. If there were, the U.S., apart from its military strength, would surely have had to “sacrifice points” to other countries

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which in recent decades have recovered from the ravages of World War II, the Cold War, misguided political and economic systems and colonialism. Yes, our economy is the largest in the world, but it is increasingly tied to other national economies. And, yes, the values of our country's founders still inspire people around the world, but we must live those values not simply pontificate about them. But perhaps I digress. Back to the "Peripatetic Public Relations Professional And What He Heard and Saw" around the world:

Before I do "John as Marco Polo," I'd like to offer the conclusion drawn from these travels, a conclusion that I hope will resonate with you students. It is that what I learned represents both a dramatic opportunity and a distinct challenge for you.

The opportunity is this: Because public relations is now being practiced all over the world – yes, it varies by political and economic systems as well as culture and traditions – your generation has an unprecedented opportunity to work in any number of other countries. Perhaps not immediately upon entering the field, but certainly eventually.

But on the flip side, there is the challenge: I saw many hundreds of young people studying public relations in these countries. They are your potential competitors for these opportunities abroad, and, for that matter, for jobs even here in the United States.

Well, what did I see and hear in these countries?

In St. Petersburg, Russia, with the Grunigs, I attended the 10th anniversary of the introduction of public relations higher education in that country. Students and faculty came to the celebration from as far away as Vladivostok, six time zones away! And they came by railroad, traveling several days. In China, visiting Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong with PRSA and Global Alliance colleagues, I visited six universities where hundreds of enthusiastic students were preparing for public relations careers, many hoping to work for China on the 2008 Olympics. And I was astounded to learn that one of the leading growth areas in public relations in China is investor relations -- counseling government-owned companies that are seeking listing on New York, London and other stock exchanges – listings that require much more transparency than those companies have ever had to provide.

In India, at the Global Alliance's World Public Relations Festival, I heard speakers report on the success of win-win partnerships between companies and local officials. For example, Hindustan Lever has supported establishment of first-time entrepreneurs among women in hundreds of remote Indian villages.

In Argentina, I functioned as a preliminary examiner for the first PRSA university certification in South America. The institution is Universidad Argentina de la Empresa (UADE) in Buenos Aires and it, too, is educating hundreds of public relations majors enthusiastic to enter our field.

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Another Global Alliance World Festival, this one in Brasilia, provided surprising insights into the application of public relations to social causes. And there, the GA issued its seminal “Letter from Brazil” which proclaimed “That the practice of Public Relations is an instrument for the development of people and nations in the construction of just nations.”

In San Juan, Puerto Rico, I witnessed an energetic chapter of PRSA prospering even in a depressed economy. And, once again, a vibrant public relations student cadre was not only present but actively engaged.

In Great Britain, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations – “chartered” being a very prestigious designation in that it represents royal endorsement – provided an opportunity for an in-depth discussion of corporate social responsibility at CIPR’s annual research conference.

Rome, Italy, about this time last year, hosted a World Bank global conference on the bank’s commitment called “Communication For Development”. Several hundred communications experts from around the world examined which communication efforts work most effectively in delivering World Bank services in less developed countries around the world.

And finally, just this past July, I attended the United Nations Global Compact Leaders Summit in Geneva, Switzerland, where again, public-private partnerships advancing corporate social responsibility were discussed. The summit’s “Geneva Declaration,” endorsed by both Secretary Ban Ki Moon and Coca-Cola CEO E. Neville Isdell, states that “through responsible business practices a more sustainable and inclusive economy can be realized.”

Back home, it was rewarding to help the Commission on Public Relations Education begin to translate its recently-published report, “The Professional Bond, Public Relations Education and the Practice” into five languages – Russian, Chinese, Arabic, Spanish and Portuguese.

I realize, of course, that this travelogue may well sound like an ego trip on steroids. Frankly, I have risked that because first, I don’t think anything will help me advance my career any further; and second – much more importantly – because I truly believe that you students can benefit greatly from a global perspective on our profession.

Having reported on all of these recent developments, I’d like to conclude with just a few comments on the future.

At a recent meeting of PRSA’s International Section in New York City, we heard a seminal presentation on the macro issues of the future facing society and, therefore, public relations professionals.

Delivered by Erik Petersen, senior vice president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., it’s called “The Seven Revolutions Initiative” and it forecasts projected trends through the year 2025. (You can get more details at the CSIS website – [gsi.csis.org](http://gsi.csis.org).)

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The coming “revolutions” center on population growth, especially in the developing world; resource availability, especially water; technology; information; integration; conflict; and governance.

In his summation, Mr. Petersen asked: “Are we going to move to a better or more dangerous world?”

The answer, of course, is not solely in the hands of public relations professionals. But I believe it is fair – and critically important – to ask: “What can the public relations canon and portfolio, as they continue to evolve, contribute to a better society?”

I hope you agree that the answers to questions like that represent an exciting future for our profession. I, for one, feel that the future of public relations is so exciting that I wish I were starting all over again.