

A speech by Dejan Vercic FIPR to the Institute of Public Relations AGM on the public responsibilities of public relations

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Dear professional friends and colleagues,

I am honoured to have this opportunity to talk to you about the public responsibilities of our profession on the day when we, as the Institute of Public Relations, have decided to apply for a Royal Charter. **Public relations is an old and noble profession, essential for the preservation of an open society** and we deserve Chartered status because, as an industry, we have matured and because the IPR is the professional body for the profession, representing the interests of its members and the wider communications industry.

Before I develop my argument for the role of public relations as an essential element of an open society, I need to express my personal indebtedness to the IPR. It was here in London, fifteen years ago, at the Institute of Public Relations that I first learned about a profession called public relations. At that time I was living in a country that later disappeared, under a regime that is – at least in Europe – gone by now. Neither Yugoslavia nor socialism tolerated public relations and yet it was this profession, which I first encountered at the IPR, that I decided to pursue. I am happy that I did. IPR colleagues, I thank you.

It was also through my professional work that I first encountered a colleague who is now my friend, who advised me to take doctoral studies at the London School of Economics, and who agreed to be my supervisor during those five academic years here. Professor Jon White, I thank you.

Let me start now with my speech on the public responsibilities of PR.

When we think about public relations and even more when we are talked about, it can seem that there is no more profane and no more vulgar practice than ours. Based on what is said, thought and written about us, one could easily conclude that ours is one of the oldest professions; which in a certain, but a very specific way - it is.

The message I want to convey through this speech is that **public relations is an old and noble profession that can only flourish in a democracy.** Most of the time most of us work on the mundane activities of trying to sell a product, service, organisation or idea to people that seem not to care about it. We appear to others, and sometimes to ourselves, pushy, rarely fabulous; and absolutely fabulous only at parties after hours. **But we are the essence of a free society, market economy and political democracy. And we should start thinking about ourselves as such.**

There has never been and there will never be a closed society with public relations. Yes, totalitarian regimes may hire public relations services abroad, but they don't allow their subjects to freely practice PR. Think about it! We may mentally travel back in time through the 20th century, when our practice developed into a profession. On that journey we can travel to different countries and different continents and look where public relations emerged and when. And then we can understand why PR is so developed in the US and in the UK. (And why it is ignored in Brussels, one might add.) And even today we can venture outside Europe and find regimes that are restricting the free practice of public relations. **All countries that are hostile towards public relations have one common deficiency: they are not democracies.**

"Only democracy provides an institutional framework that permits reform without violence, and so the use of reason in political matters," wrote Karl Popper, some fifty years ago. The use of reason referred to by Popper is today facilitated by public relations.

Public relations provides an essential component of contemporary free society. Our societies are complex: they are composed of semi-autonomous subsystems: an economic, a political and, one of the latest to emerge in our globalised and mediated society, a communication subsystem. The communication subsystem is dependent on several professions (journalism being the most visible and notorious) and public relations has a prominent role amongst them.

No contemporary social communication system can fully develop without the free and undisturbed practice of public relations, a fact acknowledged by social sciences. In a book I recently edited with a Dutch colleague, Professor Betteke van Ruler, on *Public Relations and Communication Management in Europe*, a prominent German sociologist, Klaus Merten, described why public relations is crucial for the operation of contemporary communication systems. He wrote: "Public relations is a strategy for using communication processes to generate desired effects by constructing desired realities."

If we are free to use our mental capacities, our reason, to construct desired realities, we live in an open society in which we are free to relate to each other and to build our reputations based on our merits. We may think this is self-evident, self-explanatory and undisputable but if we do so, we are naïve.

For 2,500 years philosophers have discussed the nature of people and their societies. If what is good, just and virtuous can be discovered, then there must be laws governing our fortunes - and we are not free to construct desired realities as we like. If this is the case, it is others, philosophers, scientists and technocrats, who decide what is the 'real' truth about us (and for us) and what is in our best interests. It was Plato who articulated this position and it was he who proscribed rhetoric, one of the predecessors of modern public relations. On the other hand, his

pupil, Aristotle, acknowledged the conflicting and imperfect realities of human life, in which more is uncertain than certain, and where people, in their social groups, need to negotiate what is right and what is wrong, where, when and under what conditions.

The dispute between Plato and Aristotle for and against sophists and rhetoric has continued for more than two millennia and is as alive today as it was then - only for rhetoric read public relations and for sophists, PR practitioners.

Hugh Lawson-Tancred wrote in the *Introduction* of his translation of Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric* published by *Penguin Classics*:

“It was a truism of later antiquity that rhetoric and democracy were coeval. In the societies of the early archaic age, the prevalent systems of government were either aristocracies or tyrannies. Neither of these was conducive to the flowering of public debate. There is no great mystery in the fact that it took rise of democracies and otherwise open societies at Athens and elsewhere to create the climate in which public eloquence became a political indispensability. When power was to be secured either by brute force or by the inheritance of authority from ancestors, there was little need for the politician to find convincing reasons for the citizens to accept his politics. Indeed to have offered them such reasons might well have been to risk undermining his other credentials by implying their insufficiency.

It was the coming of the true democracies that changed this and created the threshold over which systematic rhetorical practice was to enter Greek life.”

Why was rhetoric so important for Athens? Lawson-Tancred explained:

“Thus all those who lived in the limelight of public opinion ran the constant risk of finding themselves before their fellow citizens, in highly unpredictable mood, possibly needing to refute the most extravagant allegations against them mustered by their political or private enemies.”

This was the background against which Aristotle envisioned a move for rhetoric from a subject of philosophical to scientific study.

In Lawson-Tancred’s words:

“Thus persuasiveness becomes for the first time a fully systematic and even scientific exercise; it can indeed be taught, but only by deep grasp of some of the most central features of human nature. Thus the study of rhetoric, instead of being a philosophical outcast, transcends its humble and practical origins to become an important component in the general study of man.”

We are the legitimate heirs of this indispensable element of democracy that first emerged in ancient Greece and that prospers worldwide today. We have to understand our position in the world and we have to behave responsibly towards those who trust us: the general public with whom an open society rests.

Public relations practice became a profession when it took over responsibility for preserving the freedom of the public to be more intelligent than any single body or individual: government, corporation, scientist, or prophet. We are the guardians of common sense. We are not alone in that, but we are indispensable.

For that reason, as the guardians of common sense, we have special responsibilities to the general public, what I call here our public responsibilities.

Firstly, to survive and to prosper we need to keep our open licence to operate - not only for our clients and organisations, but for the good of a free society. We should never forget that out there are our existing and prospective clients, their partners and adversaries, other organisations, audiences, markets, publics and targets; but out there also is a society that enables us to live as we like. We need to keep that society and preserve its licence to operate.

Secondly, we represent the reflexiveness of our free society in that we enable its members to live through its complexities without going mad. If public relations influences 80% of mass media content, as social scientists claim, then we should understand that mass media can not operate without public relations: journalism and public relations are co-dependent and although they may clash from time to time, if one goes, the other also disappears.

And thirdly, we have a responsibility to preserve and develop the way our societies use reason in deliberating social change. A systematic study of public relations practice and, through it, a systematic study of contemporary society is our professional responsibility – it is a part of what makes us professionals. We must preserve, develop and disseminate the knowledge that is essential for democracies to prosper. And for this reason we are applying for Chartered status for our Institute.

I thank you for your attention and patience and I heartily hope that we will meet next year at the annual general meeting of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations.

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From 1991-1993 he led the foundation of the Slovenian News Agency – STA, and since 1994 he has organized the annual BledCom international public relations research symposia. He holds a Ph.D. from the London School of Economics.

In 2000 he received a special award from the Public Relations Society of Slovenia and in 2001 he was awarded the Alan Campbell-Johnson Medal for outstanding service to international public relations by the UK Institute of Public Relations.

Dejan is a past president of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) and his most recent books are: *The Global Public Relations Handbook* (with K. Sriramesh in 2003) and *Public Relations and Communication Management in Europe* (B. van Ruler in 2004).

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