

Looking for Institutionalization Italian Public Relations and the Role of Credibility and Professionalism

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to revise recent discussions on the need for institutionalization of public relations in Italy, by presenting different conceptual claims against the need for this postulation. Through critical argumentative discourse, I will show how the question of institutionalization within the Italian PR context is rather difficult to put forward at the current stage of Italian PR development, since other problems related to professional credibility and professionalism are still unsolved. In this paper, I intend to discuss the impact of credibility and professionalism on the process of professional recognition of Italian public relations and on its institutionalization, by referring to the results of a qualitative and quantitative investigation about Italian PR practitioners' opinions on the perceived need and possible means for regulating PR profession and on the role of professional PR codes of ethics.

Introduction

The concepts of credibility and professionalism have been widely discussed in public relations literature in the past thirty years (for example Callison 2001, Grunig 2000, Pieczka 2000, Serini 1993, Grunig & White 1992, Judd 1989, Brody 1988), especially in relation to the capacity of public relations practitioners to be effective in different communication actions (Sinaga & Callison 2008, Schwarzkopf 2007, Sharpe 2000) and on ethics (Lieber 2005, Hickson 2003, Kima & Choi 2003, Fitzpatrick 1996, Aronoff 1975). However, the concept of credibility and professionalism should be reconsidered to explain other emerging questions about institutionalization of public relations that have been recently discussed by professionals and academics. Institutionalization is perceived as the process of embedding something within an organization, social system, or society as an established custom or norm within that system. For public relations, this means having recognized the status of a 'profession' that plays an important and strategic role within organizations.

Some scholars (Invernizzi 2000, Corvi 1993) think that being part of the dominant coalition is an indicator of institutionalization and professional recognition, as the real value that public relations can provide to organizations is related to PR strategic, reflective and educational functions, which can be performed only when PR managers are members of the dominant coalition (Grunig et al. 2002, White & Dozier 1992). Institutionalizing public relations does not necessarily involve demonstrating the value of PR practitioners at organizational level, but rather it involves providing the parameters that ground public relations as a profession and through which the CEOs can value practitioners' effectiveness. If for institutionalization it is meant the process towards attaining a certain state or property (Jepperson 1991), then, when public relations become an 'institution' - that is it retains a status of profession - it should not be necessary to question every time its functions, values and professionalism in order to grant

legitimization to PR practitioners to do their jobs. In addition, the problem of evaluating case by case PR roles, functions and added values to organizations is still a doubtful method to gain legitimacy, as this approach is strictly dependent on personal performance rather than professional practices. Yet, it is still the most common approach. In today's business life, the dominant coalition decides the roles and tasks of public relations in respect to other organizational functions and strategic decisions on the basis of the performances of PR practitioners, rather than considering the added value which public relations as a profession can offer. The profession is thus evaluated more on individual basis than on general normative rules and professionalism.

This sort of 'individualistic paradigm of public relations' is truer in countries where public relations is not yet fully professionalized nor institutionalized by the society. In countries like Italy, the majority, besides some cases of large companies where PR practitioners have managerial and strategic functions, believes that public relations is a supporting profession to marketing and advertising activities. Because of this imprecise distinction of public relations from marketing and advertising activities, public relations in Italy still suffers from problems with credibility and legitimacy at the societal level. Can we then talk about institutionalization of Italian public relations when PR is not fully professionalized nor legitimized at the societal level? Would it be more appropriate to re-conceptualize the question of institutionalization with an issue of PR professionalism and modes by which it is performed by PR practitioners?

This paper discusses the process of institutionalization of public relations in Italy through the concept of credibility and professionalism. Through critical argumentative discourse, I will show how the question of institutionalization within the Italian PR context is rather difficult to put forward, at the current stage of Italian PR development, since other problems related to professional credibility and professionalism are still unsolved. By referring to the results of a qualitative and quantitative investigation about Italian PR practitioners' opinions on the perceived need and possible means for regulating PR profession and on the role of professional PR codes of ethics, I will demonstrate the impact of credibility and professionalism on the process of professional recognition of Italian public relations and on its institutionalization.

Credibility and Professionalism

Besides the fact that institutionalizing a profession can take place either internally or externally in organizations (Sandhu 2008) and that external institutionalization, either by law or public recognition, does not imply an internal institutionalization (within an organization, among the dominant coalition and clients), the process of institutionalization is inevitably reconnected to the level of credibility and professionalism that a profession has. The institutionalization of public relations in organizations is very much dependent on the credibility of PR managers among the dominant coalition.

Credibility is the probability of being believed (Gili 2005: 3). In contemporary psychology and sociology, credibility, like authority, is not only a personal characteristic, but rather something that is attributed, recognised by others. Even if credibility is dependent on the personal values and morality of individuals, it is not a natural characteristic of the communicator, but a result of relations. Credibility is a result of relationships between a source and a receiver. The extents and modes of credibility vary depending on different types of relationships. Frequently, a person who is credible for a public is not credible in the same way or for the same reasons for another group of people. Credibility also relies on contexts and situations (ibid: 4-5). In certain situations, even the most credible individuals may change their behaviour because of

different interests, pressure or external power and become less credible. The same is true for those who are generally less credible.

Credibility plays an important role in professional life. In activities concerning communication, credibility refers to the judgments made by a message recipient concerning the believability of a communicator (Callison 2001: 220). Among the features that make a profession more credible, scholars indicate trustworthiness, expertise and ethics (Boynton 2006; Pieczka & L'Etang 2001; Fitzpatrick 1996). A recent study of Sinaga and Callison (2008) shows how still today a professional journalistic background contributes to the credibility evaluations of public relations practitioners as regards expertness and the capability to meet journalistic values and expectations. However, having a professional journalistic background does not necessarily render public relations practitioners any more trustworthy than not having such credentials.

Credibility per se is not enough to reach a level of institutionalization and recognition at organizational and societal levels. Another important element is professionalism. Professionalism has been understood by different scholars (i.e. Grunig 2000; Cutlip, Center & Broom 1994; Wylie 1994; Ehling 1992; Grunig & Hunt 1984) as a necessary and important parameter to assess the quality of PR practices as well as to legitimize the existence and need for this occupation. Since 1973, American academics and practitioners have striven to develop and implement common standards for public relations education (Pieczka 2000: 213), in other countries, like in Italy, the definition of common standards and norms for public relations education have not yet been completely reached. An important contribution in identifying the main characteristics of PR professionalism was given by Grunig and Hunt (1984). According to the two authors, the PR profession should have: a set of professional values; strong professional organizations that socialize practitioners into these values; professional norms -such as those provided by a code of ethics - that can be used to enforce values; technical skills acquired through professional training; an intellectual tradition and an established body of knowledge (Grunig 2000: 26). Other scholars (i.e. Niemann-Struwega & Meintjes 2008; Gupta 2007) agreed that an established body of knowledge, ethics, and certification are the pre-requisite of profession, but the profession needs also to have the power to do what it is meant to perform (see Serini 1993; Beam 1990). Similarly, Sandhu (2008) sees the levels of power, independence and specialisation of public relations from other organizational functions as the internal indicators of PR institutionalisation. In this respect, power within the professionalism discourse is very much linked to the concept of institutionalization. It is possible to argue that a combination of professionalism and power within organizations or with clients paves the way for institutionalizing public relations. Professionalism provides PR managers with the credibility needed to negotiate for autonomy whereas power allows them to negotiate with and bring about change in management, as opposed to being controlled by management (Serini 1993). Institutionalization of public relations is therefore a further step from the achievement of professionalism. If PR managers have been recognised professionalism and certain power within the organization, and they do not need to reconceptualise, explain and motivate their actions to the dominant coalition each time, then a claim of PR institutionalization, at least in that specific professional environment, can be postulated. Therefore, an institutionalization of public relations can happen if beforehand conditions of professionalism, credibility and power are set up.

Italy and Public Relations: An Historical Overview

The history of public relations as a profession in Italy is rather recent. First signals which could be associated with the origin of this profession can be traced back to the years

preceding WWII, when the propaganda machine was developed and largely implemented by Mussolini (Muzi Falconi & Kodilja 2004: 229). However, the first organized experiences that could be correlated to PR activities date back to the fifties. During this period, public relations was conceived either as activities supporting marketing, thus focused on product information, or as activities aiming at enhancing companies' reputation through cultural and social entertaining programs (Scarpulla 2006). As a support of marketing, public relations' main task was to provide and spread written informative texts about companies' products and services, whereas in the cultural and social entertaining function, its task was organizing remarkable events of high public visibility. Both approaches were, however, present only among big, multi-national corporations, like *Esso*, *Shell* and *Mobiloil*, and some public and private companies like *Italsider*, *Montecatini*, *Pirelli*, *Fiat* and *Olivetti* (Roggero 1997: 60). For the majority of Italian companies, which are small and medium sized, public relations was an unknown profession.

It was in the mid-fifties that the first PR agencies were constituted in Rome. Their methodologies and techniques of communication were strongly influenced by US approaches. Some scholars (Introvigne 2007; Muzi Falconi 2005) believe that it is exactly from the direct work with Americans at the Italian office of the United States Information Services (USIS) that some Italian PR professionals were trained and learned to do public relations. In its early conception, public relations was considered, in the best case, a more subtle and indirect form of publicity, or an 'activity' dealing with organizing dinners, receptions and events. As a result, PR practices were understood as something that was occasionally relevant to organizations' operations. There was no strategic approach of public relations, as there was no business interest in understanding stakeholders' opinions and needs. Business affairs were regarded as 'private matters' appealing only to owners, shareholders, stock market actionists and business men. Business matters were meant as something that only specialists could understand (Scarpulla 2006). No other public was relevant for companies. It should be said that until WWII, Italy was mostly an agricultural country with a high percentage of illiterate population. Interests in and participation to organizational activities and the influence of public opinion and groups in companies' decisions were limited to those who were, somehow, involved in companies' affairs, like shareholders and business men. The need for diffusing information outside the 'private circle' was therefore not so important. Actions of spreading information were even excluded in small and medium sized organizations. These were even more reluctant in disclosing companies' information to external publics. The situation started to change in the sixties, as a consequence of the economic boom and the increasing diffusion of mass media which brought education and development (Roggero 1997). In the new era, Italian working people increased their awareness of economical and political matters, and subsequently trade unions and worker associations played a crucial role in business life (Muzi Falconi 2005). From the original private circle of business men, companies started to include trade unions, workers associations and the political elite as their stakeholders. A new approach of public relations was developed, as a result of the rapid changes in the political, economical and social situations of the country. This new approach is recognized to have a more 'Italian style' of doing public relations than the previous. People and organizations became more and more interconnected. Companies realized the necessity of external communications; communications that could bring companies' opinions into different aspect of citizens' life. The original PR mission of selling products and services became a mission of 'image management', where the main task of PR officers was to make customers associating products and services with companies' names (Scarpulla 2006). Media relations and lobbying activities were thus the PR practices of that time. In the sixties,

public relations of the main public and private organizations also recognized the status of an occupation separated from marketing and advertising.

Public relations did not work only for increasing consensus upon organizations and in image management. By the late sixties, PR officers were asked to find out for companies possible reasons of conflicts and to change negative opinions scattered in the society. Especially in the seventies, public relations shifted again. It was within the movements of ‘peace and love’ that public relations acquired its new strategic mission of helping companies in avoiding conflicts, mediating interests, creating conditions for mutual and trustworthy relationships between different parties. In this phase, public relations activities also played a new role in employee relations. The situation, however, was not the same for Italian PR agencies, which continued to operate specifically in support of advertising and marketing (Invernizzi 2001).

A further step was made in the eighties, when public relations started to be seen as an important skilled occupation for managing relationships with different publics. It was in these years, public relations activities increased exponentially within larger private organizations and became more specialized according to particular branches of business goods or services. Companies spent more on market research into their effects of their communication, rather than into what consumers thought of their products (Muzi Falconi & Kodilja 2004: 233).

The nineties were characterized by further developments. The national scandals, which shadowed the PR profession too, led towards a more professionalized and regulated way to carry out public relations. When in 1992 the *Mani Pulite* scandal erupted¹, it involved several public relations professionals who were implicated in mediating illegal operations between businesses, political and media organizations (ibid: 233). This corruption scandal had a strong impact on the reputation of public relations as profession, specifically questions about ethics and legal practices raised among the Italian community. The activities of national PR associations and federations like FERPI and ASSOREL, which were created in the seventies and eighties, played a critical role to push forward the process of professional recognition, and professionalization of Italian public relations. Additionally, the nineties were characterized by an increment of agencies’ activities as more and more small and medium sized companies recognized the importance, besides doing advertising and marketing activities, of engaging their publics through more specific public relations actions.

At the educational level, university degrees and specialized schools of public relations and communication management started very late. The majority of PR professionals of the past fifty years were thus people from different backgrounds; many were journalists, others were from economic and political areas. Hence, PR education and preparation was ‘in the field’. The first course in PR was offered in 1992 by IULM University in Milan. After a few years, more universities started similar courses. Nowadays, almost every university in Italy has a general program in Communication Science, where PR courses are also taught, and six universities have a specific program in Public Relations.

Current Pr Situation in Italy

¹ *Mani Pulite* [trans. ‘Clean Hands’] was a nationwide Italian judicial investigation into political corruption held in the 1990s. *Mani pulite* led to the demise of the so-called First Republic, resulting in the disappearance of many parties. Some politicians and industry leaders committed suicide after their crimes were exposed. The corruption system that was uncovered by these investigations was usually referred to as *Tangentopoli*, or ‘bribeville’.

For the past fifty years public relations in Italy has generally addressed selected stakeholders representing specific organizations' interests. These interests dealt mostly with organizations' key publics, such as consumers and customers, news media people and the political decision-makers at the local or national levels. PR practices widely concerned product information through media relations, lobbying and 'recreational' activities, like organizing dinners, parties, receptions etc. Accordingly, public relations were activities in support of marketing and advertising. For several years, PR professionals did not show an interest in differentiating their work from that of marketing and advertising people. This confusion allowed practitioners to engage in different types of activities behind PR traditional areas, on the other hand it created blurred perceptions and undermined the PR field's own professional identity. A typical association with the concept of public relations is of a manipulative occupation with no specific duty other than seeking to entertain companies' influential publics.

Even today, professional organizations like FERPI and ASSOREL are fighting to see recognized public relations as a real profession and are promoting a culture of best practices and professionalism among their members. The profession continues to suffer from a quite widespread ambiguity in the Italian society. Many people do not exactly know what public relations is about, or they have a misleading interpretation of its functions and roles. This is partly as a consequence of lacking a consistent proposition on the boundaries and contents of this profession. A proper communication on public relations has never fully reached the general public. It has principally remained inside professional associations (Valentini & Muzi Falconi 2008). Also, many specialists still tend to use diverse terminologies to define themselves. It is more common to use external relations, image, communication, press relations officer, etc. Such terms, which represent only some of the functions of public relations, may create the illusion that public relations is something different. Some changes are visible in the last few years (Assorel 2007a) showing that the role of communication as strategic component of organization' wellbeing is growing. Public relations is thus proving an effective tool to organizations, and as a result it is taking shares away from other marketing and communications disciplines.

Italy is paradoxically in a situation where some best practices and excellences in PR co-live with arcane PR activities focusing on press-agentry/publicity concepts. A recent study conducted by Invernizzi (2008) on PR/Corporate communication managers of some largest Italian public and private companies shows that among the 318 companies contacted, 240 have a PR or Corporate communication manager as part of the dominant coalition. However, in Italy, it is estimated that more than 100,000 people work on public relations fields (Valentini & Muzi Falconi 2008). The number of those actually practicing public relations is much larger as the above number, since it does not include journalists who still retain their professional status but work in media relations departments of public institutions². So, the finding of this study represents only a specific typology of public relations practitioners, which is not representative of all PR activities. PR activities in Italy are not equally developed. Depending on the sector and on the size of the company, the roles and functions of public relations as well as its credibility and professionalism vary quite extensively.

Regarding the practices, public relations in Italy is mostly conceived as a technical/operative function. In some larger organizations, the managerial and strategic roles are

² In Italy media relations officers working in the public sector need to be professional journalists registered in the Italian Journalist Guild (law n.150/2000). No other communication professionals can work if not registered in the Italian Journalist Guild.

present, whereas the reflective and educational roles are still at their infancy. In 2007, the top areas of public relations for share of revenue were media relations (27.3%), product communication (18.5%) and corporate communications (16.8%), with the three categories accounting for more than 60% of total turnover. Growing fields include public affairs (+35%), organization of events (+21%) and environment and social communications (+11%), (Assorel 2008b). If communication activities have generally increased in terms of companies investments, it is because more and more senior managers start appreciating and recognizing the utility of these activities for organizations. On the other hand, recognizing the utility of public relations does not translate automatically into a position among the dominant coalition. Senior managers still have some concerns about the role that public relations should have within the organization. The perceived image and role of public relations among CEOs of some large Italian organizations is not so promising; many describe public relations as something ‘ephemeral, undefined’, but still a ‘useful means’ for establishing ‘relations’ with different stakeholders (Assorel 2008a: 5). Public relations is considered an important element of companies’ activities, but it is, generally speaking, still an ‘accessorial’, often ‘not strategic’ activity. It appears that public relations activities in Italy are very complex and surely differentiated, but at the same time ambivalent. Especially the occupation, although much more professionalized than in the past, is still looking for its own specific identity. As other scholars (Introvigne 2007; Scarpulla 2006) have also noticed, PR practitioners are more and more interested in obtaining specific qualifications and training. However, PR professionals are frequently considered to lack know-how, and their actions are seen as not so sophisticated, advanced and well-structured as in other Anglo-Saxon countries (Assorel 2008a: 13). Moreover, there is still a firm belief among CEOs that public relations is rather a job that is ‘learnt by doing’ than a real profession. Consequently, public relations is regarded as an activity that ‘welcomes’ specialists from disparate fields looking for a ‘second chance’ (ibid: 14). For some CEOs who have people with different backgrounds and experiences among their PR practitioners, it is an advantage for the organization, for others it is a weakness, as they believe that PR officers that do not come directly from PR training are deficient in specific competences.

The problem with identity and reputation of public relations is frequently associated by senior management with the corresponding neglected preparation of those practicing public relations. An earlier study made by Assorel (2007b) shows, in fact, that most of Italian PR professionals have not a specific PR degree. Accordingly, 39% of current PR managers has an economic or political science degree, 34% has a humanistic degree and only 27% has either a communication and/or PR degree. Consequently, about two out of three PR managers in Italy have probably learned their profession by doing, since their education was neither in PR nor in Communication Science. The situation seems to improve, if we look at PR practitioners with less than seven years of experience. Of these practitioners, 44% has a communication and/or PR degree, 32% has a humanistic degree and 24% has an economic and/or political science degree (ibid: 7). Besides these evident changes, if professionalism and credibility of public relations stand today on education and training of current senior PR managers, it is rather difficult to demonstrate that Italian public relations is not simply a ‘skilled occupation’ but a real ‘profession’ like lawyers, engineers, doctors are considered.

Institutionalization without Credibility and Professionalism

The question of institutionalization of public relations in Italy is nowadays very important, since this country has seen, especially in the last decade, an increment of financial

investments in public relations activities and a boom of new practitioners in the market (Assorel 2007a). However, institutionalizing public relations requires first and foremost that public relations are considered a 'real profession' and not only a mere occupation. It also requires a certain level of professionalism and credibility. As I will show with the following arguments, it is rather difficult to promote an idea of institutionalization of Italian public relations, if the basic requirements of professionalism and credibility are not fully met and above all the profession at societal level is not considered a 'real profession'. There is, in fact, a distinction in the interpretation of the term 'profession' between Italian and English languages. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term 'profession' involves the application of specialized knowledge of a subject, field, or science to fee-paying clientele. Professionals are thus people with a high degree and intellectual knowledge, such as lawyers, doctors and engineers. Until the 1960s, the dominant paradigm of defining professions was the functionalistic-sociological one, where a body of knowledge was a powerful source of the profession's status and power (Pieczka 2000: 211). Later on, a post-functional approach, based on the idea of license and mandate, was the main paradigm. Although a common and agreed idea on how to define a "profession" and, specifically, on defining "PR" itself is not yet reached (Niemann-Struwega & Meintjes 2008). Today, the term 'profession' is frequently synonymous with the term 'skilled occupation'. Profession is characterized by the existence of determined qualities, such as competences, knowledge and reliability. The term, thus, has lost its specific intellectual component that differentiates 'professions' from 'occupations'. In Italian language, however, the term 'profession' still refers to the original meaning of a liberal, intellectual profession (Brambilla 1982: 17). Consequently, professionals are defined as "those who are in possess of a university degree, or higher diploma, and subsequent professional certification, engages independently and continuously in intellectual activities for which enrolment on a professional register is required" (Malatesta 1995: 8)³. Along with this definition, Italian public relations of the past fifty years cannot be considered a real profession. In fact, the majority of its practitioners came from different backgrounds and experiences, they did not necessarily have a specific higher education, and learned their job in the field. Even today the term 'profession' is commonly used and interchanged with the term 'occupation', thus closer to the current English definition of profession, the original definition still endures at societal level.

The Italian State recognizes the existence of different typologies of professions, beside those which are intellectual professions by definition. There are specific laws regarding, so called, 'liberal professions'. In particular, those indicating the dimensions and identities of professions are very important. The Italian law conceptualizes 'liberal professions' in two distinct types: those which are regulated and protected by law and for which it is necessary to have a specific education and being member to a professional guild, which is controlled by public bodies; and those which are not regulated. Among the unregulated professions, a distinction is made between those for which a specific education degree is required and the others for which there is no need for a specific degree (legislative degree n. 115 of 01/27/1992 and n. 319 of 02/05/1994)⁴. Only the liberal professions belonging to the regulated group

³ For more information on the use and development of the term 'profession', see the book 'Society and the Profession in Italy, 1860- 1914' by Malatesta.

⁴ More information about these legislative degrees (in Italian) at URL: http://www.giustizia.it/cassazione/leggi/dlgs115_92.html, http://www.giustizia.it/cassazione/leggi/dlgs319_94.html

correspond completely to the original conceptualization of ‘profession’. On the contrary, those belonging to the unregulated group, like Italian public relations, lack some of the criteria for a professional characterization.

The current situation Italian public relations is thus of an unregulated profession with no specific degree requirement (O’Connor & Muzi Falconi 2004) – although this is slowly changing – which implies that it is seeking recognition and institutionalization, but still misses credibility and professionalism. Credibility in public relations is frequently a personal rather than a professional characteristic. PR practitioners are credible among their clients and companies, because they are perceived as competent, reliable, ethical and trustworthy as individuals. For Italian practitioners, the concept of personal credibility is more important than professional credibility (Valentini & Muzi Falconi 2008).

“About the credibility of public relations practitioners, I do not believe that codes and regulations can be a proof of their professionalism, but rather it is the way they conducts the daily PR activities that counts. Today to be credible, what it matters is the respect of rules....Being transparent with your influential publics is an agreement that each single practitioner does with them and not a question of codes. Hence, the credibility that comes from the respect of rules is more a personal question than a professional one” (Interviewee n. 6, quoted from Valentini & Muzi Falconi 2008).

At societal level, public relations fails to emerge as a credible profession for its past dark history, some implications with illicit cases, like those related to *Mani pulite* scandal, and above all because of the unethical practices of some practitioners, who claim to be public relations experts, but what they do is rather distorted and far from acceptable professional standards. The poor credibility of public relations in Italy is also related to a problem with accreditation and regulation of the profession at State level. As there is no specific law, anybody who has his/her own consulting business could theoretically claim to do public relations (O’Connor & Muzi Falconi 2004; Introvigne 2007). Professional organizations, like FERPI, have, for several years, tried to present the need for a specific regulation at government level, but so far it has not happened. The poor credibility of public relations has also been created by some misleading interpretation of the original English name. During the past decades and much less today, the abbreviation ‘PR’ has been distorted and linked with a rather awkward occupation. The Italian ‘PR’ (pronounced *Pierre*) is a person that promotes the activities of clubs and discotheques, for instance, by distributing invitations to parties and events. The intensive work of PR professionals ‘to educate’ the public opinion on what public relations is all about is visible, as mistakes on the use of the terminology are reducing, but they have not yet completely disappeared.

In respect of professionalism, whether we look at the functionalistic-sociological definition of the term ‘profession’ within the Italian context (Malatesta 1995; Brambilla 1982) or whether we consider the five main traits identified by Grunig and Hunt (1984) distinguishing a profession from a mere occupation, in both cases Italian public relations do not completely meet the criteria to be considered entirely a profession. First of all, Italian public relations does not share its own intellectual tradition, an established body of knowledge. Professional associations and universities have only recently started to convene on the necessity to have organic and structured programs of qualification by providing specific training and knowledge in the field. An Italian body of knowledge is also not yet established. Some studies and publications of well-

known PR experts⁵ have appeared especially in the last 10 years, but it is far from exhaustive. Also, most of practitioners that are trained today have an understanding of public relations mostly through American concepts and theories, which are not necessarily suitable in practical business life to explain specific Italian situations. Another factor that has delayed the development of a specific body of knowledge is that at present, the majority of practitioners has different educations and is formed in the field. Their knowledge is thus mostly a practical one. Especially in the last ten years, the situation seems to have changed, as organizations tend to ask young practitioners to have a PR/communication degree. It will probably take another 10 years before this new generation of PR people will be in senior positions and thereby a stronger say in companies' decision making and in the way public relations is perceived by the dominant coalition.

The second aspect of professionalization, that is the values underneath the profession, is also partly fulfilled. Today, PR practitioners' values are more frequently based on companies' and clients' values than on professional ones. There are professional associations like FERPI and ASSOREL, whose aims are to promote initiatives, to analyse and improve the awareness of public relations in Italy at professional and agency levels and to enhance the specific characteristics of the PR profession⁶, but as they are not recognized by the State, their values and regulations compel only their members (Scarpulla 2006). Similarly, the third aspect related to professional norms is not enforced. Professional norms and code of ethics exist at the level of professional organizations, but they are not binding for two reasons. First, because the majority of Italian PR practitioners are not members of a professional organization, they are not obliged to conform to ethical codes (O' Connor & Muzi Falconi 2004). Second, there is not an external institution monitoring PR practitioners' activities and sanctioning unethical practices. In this respect, even if a practitioner, member of a professional organization, carries out some unethical activities, in the worst scenario he/she will be expelled from the professional organization, but he/she could continue practicing public relations.

Conversely, it is possible to see as fully reached in the current Italian public relations the other two traits, technical skills acquired through professional training and strong professional organizations. Italian public relations are robustly influenced by a tradition of learning by doing, as the past history of public relations has shown. Thus acquiring technical as well as strategic skills through professional training is the most common way to learn to do public relations. Most of the university programs nowadays include in their curricula a period of student's internship within an organization (Introvigne 2007: 71). This is also a response to the frequent request of companies to prepare future graduates, not only with theoretical backgrounds but also in practical matters. Furthermore, the presence of strong professional organizations in Italy has been essential, especially in the last years, to increase the awareness of public relations among different stakeholders, to provide specific training and requalification for those practitioners coming from different background and to encourage the development of best practices and the respect of international norms of conducting public relations.

⁵ Among the most active PR experts that have contributed to the Italian body of knowledge in Public Relations there are Toni Muzi Falconi, Emanuele Invernizzi, Giuseppe A. Roggero, Mauro Pecchinino and Giampietro Vecchiato.

⁶ As defined in the 'Mission' of FERPI and ASSOREL webpages, www.ferpi.it and www.assorel.it

PR Opinions of Their Professional Standards

The problem of institutionalization of Italian public relations is not only at conceptual dimensions, as described above. It is intrinsic in the way PR practitioners behave, think and consider the question of being a reputable and credible profession. If we look at some of the findings from a recent study (Valentini & Muzi Falconi 2008) which investigated PR opinions on professional regulations and code of ethics, we could see clearly these traits. This study which was supported by FERPI and FNSI (Italian National Press Federation) investigated different dimensions of public relations practitioners and journalists' self-perceptions and perceptions of the other profession and was based on qualitative data collected through depth-interviews with six senior journalists and six senior PR practitioners as well as quantitative data through an online questionnaire. 562 questionnaires were correctly completed, of which 245 were from PR practitioners. Specifically the data presented in Table 1 shows how important the question of professional regulations and law recognition is perceived by the community of public relations practitioners. The majority of respondents believe that Italian public relations could be more institutionalized, if knowledge on their profession and law recognition goes hand in hand. A deeper knowledge of what public relations is and does among the general public would help increase PR professional credibility and would work as a stimulus for further professionalism. The question of the State's recognition is not, however, so settled. Some believe that an increment of PR professional credibility will lead to a concrete recognition by the State; others think that it is the State's recognition that will lead to a professional credibility. Others would not consider State recognition so important, but rather legitimacy at societal level. In practice, it is probably a combination of the three together with the development of a body of knowledge and specific professional standards that would move Italian public relations towards institutionalization.

TABLE 1 PR practitioners' opinion on professional regulations

<i>Opinions on professional regulations of PR</i>	<i>PR answers</i>	
	m	σ
PR activities could be more institutionalised by the means of law recognition.	5.5234	144,291
PR could be more institutionalised by creating a professional guild similar to the National Journalism Guild.	3.6509	205,655
An authority that observes and supervises PR practices and has power of sanctioning organizations and professionals which employ PR activities against national and international codes is necessary.	5.1121	155,604
A wider knowledge among the general public of the roles and functions of public relations can help this profession to be more legitimised and credible.	5.9151	107,010
The credibility of public relations as profession does not depend on the existence of a professional code but on the quality of actions that each PR practitioner daily manages.	5.4112	152,311

Table shows mean (m) scores, their standard divisions (σ)
 Response Scale: 1= strongly disagree; 4= neutral; 7= strongly agree
 Sample: 245 PR practitioners

A further problem with the idea of institutionalisation is inherently related to a problem of current PR professional standards. It would be rather difficult to promote among the dominant coalition the idea of institutionalising public relations as one of the main company's functions, if the dominant coalition does not perceive that those working in public relations share the same professional standards. Frequently, PR professionalism, which is also the expression of collective professional standards, is perceived as something more personal rather than related to the profession per se. PR practitioners recognise that the problem exists, and they are even aware of the need for developing common professional standards, but yet a solution is far from being reached.

I would like to see recognised public relations' professional qualities for what they are and not by whom they are applied. I would like that trustworthy relationships between CEOs and PR/Corporate communication managers were less important. If compared with other professions, public relations managers' positions within a company are much more dependent on their relationship with the CEOs than on the recognition of PR professionalism. Today, the first person that changes position within an organization that has changed its CEO is the Corporate communication/PR manager. It is completely normal that this happens, but it seems to me that it happens too frequently. PR managers should be valued more on the basis of their professionalism rather than on their relationships with their bosses (Interviewee n. 4 quoted from Valentini & Muzi Falconi 2008).

Furthermore, an inherent feature of professionalism and credibility is a question of 'ethical' dilemma. The dilemma is whether or not PR codes of ethics are required to prove that public relations is a profession and a reputable one; whether or not having and adopting a code of ethics means for PR practitioners to be more credible among the general public and above all among the dominant coalition and clients. Also, for this feature, PR practitioners prefer an individualist approach, that is they perceive it as being important to be considered credible, ethical and trustworthy as individuals rather than as members of a profession. PR practitioners do not believe that their professional codes of ethics would actually increase their professionalism nor would they necessarily increase their credibility and reputation among their clients and/or among the senior management of the company they work for (Table 2).

TABLE 2 PR practitioners' opinions on their professional code of ethics

Professional ethics for PR practitioners	PR answers	
	M	σ
The PR code of ethics is effective in regulating the	3.6263	111,196

profession.		
PR practitioners' priorities of professional ethics are: transparency in their actions, accuracy in informing and loyalty towards their publics.	5.5769	113,798
Being ethical does not depend on the existence of a professional code but on the characteristics of each person.	5.1058	167,748

Table shows mean (m) scores, their standard divisions (σ)

Response Scale: 1= strongly disagree; 4= neutral; 7= strongly agree

Sample: 245 PR practitioners

Discussion and Conclusions

“The aspect of my profession that I would like to change is the missed institutionalisation. In our job, trust is gained daily though our professional successes, but not being institutionalised like the marketing director makes hard to prove every day the added values that our profession give to the organization. This, I believe, it is a negative aspect of this profession.” (Interviewee n. 1 quoted from Valentini & Muzi Falconi 2008).

The question of institutionalization of public relations is rather important and concerns not only practitioners that need to negotiate their functions day-by-day, especially for those who are in managerial and strategic positions, but also public relations as a profession and as a field of study. We cannot deny the relevance and importance of public relations at global level, but we need to take into considerations that certain questions, like the institutionalization one, are not exactly pertinent in all countries at the same time. In Italy, public relations is fully professionalized for certain traits and has nothing less than its counterparts in other Western countries. However, it still misses some dimensions, like having its own body of knowledge, legal recognition and law enforcement of ethical practices. Above all it misses public opinion's legitimacy. Can we then talk about institutionalization of Italian public relations, when PR is not fully professionalized nor legitimized at the societal level? No, we cannot. Far from saying that in Italy there are not cases where PR is not institutionalized – there are in fact excellent practices in some larger organizations – at a macro level, it is not possible to say so. Italy is a country of small and medium size companies, and these have only started in the last fifteen years to see the value of investing in communication. The value, they see, is still attached to the press agency/ publicity practices. Sometimes, the reason is related to not knowing what exactly PR can do for clients and organizations; sometimes it depends on the resources and priorities of those small and medium sized organizations. It is evident from Valentini and Falconi's study (2008) that some practitioners are highly concerned with the lack of status they have within their organisations. The lack of professional credibility and thus legitimacy is felt as a strong barrier for further professional development. Many practitioners, who would like to see public relations more institutionalised, think a wider knowledge among the general public of the roles and functions of public relations could help this profession to be more legitimized and credible, as increased knowledge would help distinguish the professionals from those who are pretending to do public relations.

It appears that the question of institutionalization loses all its intrinsic positive connotations, if credibility and professionalism are not developed before. Specifically, it will be

easier and more natural to see institutionalized public relations in organizations, when those who practice PR have acquired specific competences and knowledge and are supported by strong professional norms and regulations. The problem, however, is not to be blamed only on PR professionals. These should surely be accountable for lacking the strength to put forward a public discussion on their profession, standards and practices outside association and professional circles, but also companies and clients are responsible. Still too many do not demand and expect – perhaps unconsciously – specific preparation and expertise from PR practitioners. The little knowledge among some senior managers of what public relations is all about, what it can do for organizations, and which standards and norms should people practicing abide to, make those senior managers choosing even those who assert to be public relations practitioners, but are not fully trained to work as such. A larger knowledge on the profession at societal level would make it possible to limit the amount of unprofessional PR practitioners that continuously blur the image and reputation of Italian public relations. Additionally, a clear distinction between PR competences and fields of activities from those of advertising, marketing and journalism would serve as a starting point to legitimate this profession, at least at societal level. In conclusions, it is rather too premature to discuss institutionalization of public relations in Italy, as the profession is not yet ready for this. Institutionalization of public relations in Italy should be re-conceptualized with an issue of PR professionalism and modes by which it is performed by PR practitioners. Institutionalization at macro level would come at a later stage, as a consequence of the development and maturity of the profession.

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