

# Public Relations Professionalism and Excellence in the Arab World

## Problems and Drawbacks

Mohamed Kirat, Ph.D. Professor  
Department of Mass Communication  
College of Arts and Sciences - Qatar University

### *Abstract*

This paper discusses the issue of professionalism and excellence in public relations in the Arab World. Professionalism has been described as a set of parameters that improve the image, and social impacts of an occupation. The professionalization of PR requires a body of knowledge, a domain of expertise, a high social status, accountability toward the public, a code of ethics and education as a means of testing competence and maintaining standards. After forty years of public relations practice, the Arab World has a long way to go to achieve professionalism and excellence. The profession lacks professional bodies, well educated and trained practitioners. PR in the Arab World suffers from a negative perception from society, an environment hostile to transparency, one way communication, absence of managerial role and research.

**Key words:** Professionalism, excellence, code of ethics, altruism, accountability, continuing education.

### **المخلص:**

تناقش هذه الورقة مسألة الاحتراف والتميز في مجال العلاقات العامة في العالم العربي . ويعرف الاحتراف كمجموعة من المعايير التي تعمل على تحسين الصورة، والآثار الاجتماعية الناجمة عن الاحتلال. ويتطلب الاحتراف في العلاقات العامة مجموعة من المعارف، مجال الخبرة، حالة اجتماعية عالية، والمساءلة تجاه الجمهور، مدونة للأخلاقيات والتعليم كوسيلة لاختبار الكفاءة والحفاظ على المعايير . وبعد أربعين عاماً من ممارسة العلاقات العامة، يبقى أمام "العالم العربي" طريق طويل لتحقيق الكفاءة المهنية والتميز. فلمهنة نقفقر إلى الهيئات المهنية، والممارسين المتعلمين والمدرّبين تدريباً جيداً. فللعلاقات العامة في العالم العربي تعاني من نظرة سلبية من المجتمع، وبيئة معادية للشفافية، و أحادية في اتجاه الاتصال، وغياب لهور القيادة الإدارية والبحث.

## Introduction

The problem, which haunts PR's attempt to professionalism, consists in its association with the manipulative dark side of communication. Very broadly speaking, PR's roots in advertising, marketing and propaganda, its engagement with the promotional culture, a culture of spin doctoring and manipulation, and the tendency to serve the interests of its paymasters as opposed to some notion of the Public Good, lead to a generalized suspicion of PR as such. Are public relations practitioners working for the good of society? Do they respect the professional standards of PR to promote good governance, good business and after all the good of the whole society?

Professionalism is a continuous topic among practitioners of various disciplines to keep up with standards and quality management, theory and knowledge, recognition from the community and ethics. The issue of professionalism is an ongoing debate in a score of professions, among them public relations. Profession is a term used to describe a domain of expertise. Public relations is seen as a profession that suffers from misconception, misunderstanding and lacks ethics and accountability. The profession is accused of not having a clear distinct domain of expertise, and clear professional standards. In addition, there are no universal standards of accreditation and licensing implemented by professional bodies. Lastly, the profession lacks rigorous research and training.

The profession of public relations remains one of the most polemical and controversial in most parts of the world. In the Arab World, after more than four decades of practice, public relations is called ironically "the profession of who he has no profession" and still has a bad reputation and a subject of harsh criticism. Despite these drawbacks, public relations in the Arab World is expanding and growing very rapidly. Government departments, businesses, educational institutions, welfare organizations, hospitals, political entities, sectors like tourism, sports, arts and the like are all investing in public relations; whether they have their own PR department or they have accounts with PR agencies. In addition, public relations programs in colleges and universities in the Arab World are mushrooming and expanding at a very fast pace. Moreover, more than half of the students enrolled in Mass Communication departments in the region specialize in public relations and choose it as their major.

Everybody nowadays is talking about public relations but few people raise the issue of standardization, professional PR, symmetrical and managerial PR,

professionalism and excellence. Public relations in the Arab World has a bad reputation, lacks professionalism and focus on publicity and press agency. The challenges are huge and the stakes are very important. How can PR industry in the Arab World reach professionalism and excellence? Is it possible to overcome the problems and obstacles it is going through? What about the milieu – economic, political, societal, and cultural -in which it operates. Is there a will, a strategy and a plan of action to move forward towards professionalism and excellence?

The question to be addressed here is where to go from here? What to do to move forward toward professionalism and excellence in the profession. To answer the main question of this paper, the state of PR should be analyzed and assessed and the criteria of both professionalism and excellence should be studied. Are people in the industry aware of them? Are they trying to implement them? Is the social, economic, political, educational and cultural environment in the Arab World ready for professionalism and excellence in the practice of public relations?

Addressing public relations professionalism and excellence in the Arab world is to raise issues related to knowledge and skills based on a body of theory developed through research. This is to assess the academic programs in charge of qualifying students to meet the challenges of public relations in society. Are these departments and colleges teaching the right courses and skills and offering the right training to the future PR practitioners? Does the community and society in general recognize the public relations profession as a provider of a unique and important service? Is there enough autonomy in practice and acceptance of personal responsibility by practitioners? Are there codes of ethics and standards of performance enforced by PR societies and associations?

To professionalize PR in the Arab world, the following should be addressed: issues such as involvement of PR in strategic management, integrated PR function, having professional managers heading PR units, as well as the practice of two-way symmetrical model of PR, as well as symmetrical system of internal communication and ethics and integrity. This paper attempts to highlight the major weaknesses and drawbacks that constitute obstacles to professionalism and excellence in the PR industry in the Arab World.

### **Education and Training**

Hainsworth considers professional education as a cornerstone for any profession, he argues:

A major element in any true profession (medicine, engineering, accounting, etc.) is professional education. That is, to be a part of that profession, a person must receive a professional education in the field and pass competency-based examinations throughout the educational experience. Given PRSA's professional concerns, such an education should be as necessary for public relations as it is for any other true profession. (Hainsworth, 1993:312).

Public relations is one of the world's fastest growing professions and areas of study, yet great differences exist globally in its practice and teaching. Much has happened in public relations with the advent of the Internet and social networks. For over thirty years universities and higher education institutions in the Arab World have been preparing their students for careers in public relations. Yet, significant cultural, social, political and economic differences between countries remain and these differences shape the way public relations is practiced from country to country. In its report, "Public Relations Education for the 21st Century: A Port of Entry" ([http://www.commpred.org/\\_uploads/report2-full.pdf](http://www.commpred.org/_uploads/report2-full.pdf)) the PRSA 1999 Commission on PR Education focused on necessary knowledge and necessary skills to prepare PR practitioners of the future. Necessary knowledge includes communication and persuasion concepts and strategies, communication and public relations theories, relationships and relationship building, societal trends, ethical issues, legal requirements and issues, marketing and finance, public relations history, uses of research and forecasting, multicultural and global issues, organizational change and development, and management concepts and theories. According to the report necessary skills include: Research methods and analysis, management of information, mastery of language in written and oral communication, problem solving and negotiation, management of communication, strategic planning, issues management, audience segmentation, informative and persuasive writing, community relations, consumer relations, employee relations, other practice areas, technological and visual literacy, managing people, programs and resources, sensitive interpersonal communication, fluency in a foreign language, ethical decision-making, participation in the professional public relations community, message production, working with

a current issue, public speaking and presentation, applying cross-cultural and cross-gender sensitivity.

On the other hand Grunig and Grunig argue that “professional education must be based first and foremost, on a solid body of scholarly research. They also believe that the research must address problems faced by working professionals and be directed toward improvement of the profession”. (Grunig and Grunig, 2008).

What about courses taught, textbooks and profile of PR instructors, study plans and courses syllabi of Arab universities offering PR degrees. To what extent departments of Mass Communication and Public Relations have adjusted their curriculum according to the latest developments of online and virtual PR, integrated marketing communication, image building and reputation management. Are Arab universities PR graduates well prepared and qualified to perform the profession? Do they have the necessary knowledge and skills to face the escalating demands of a highly competitive and fast growing profession?

Results of a survey ( 80 respondents), and in depth interviews with PR faculty members from twenty six universities in the Arab countries show that the majority of interviewees (Table 1) strongly agree or agree with the following statements : PR curriculum needs change and development (97%); needs to focus on management and marketing courses (100%); needs to focus on ethics and law (90%); needs to focus on electronic PR (98%); needs to focus on managerial skills (99%); needs to focus on research skills (95%); needs to focus on writing skills (100%); needs to focus on new technology (98%); needs to focus on integrated marketing communication (90%); needs to focus on strategic planning (98%); and needs to focus on image building and reputation management (94%).

<b>Areas of development and change in teaching public relations</b>	<b>St. agree %</b>	<b>Agree %</b>	<b>With. Opinion %</b>	<b>Don't agree %</b>	<b>St. don't agree %</b>	<b>No answer %</b>
PR curriculum needs change and development	85	12	-	3	-	-
Needs to focus on management and marketing courses	90	10	-	-	-	-
Needs to focus on ethics and law	75	15	-	5	5	-

Needs to focus on electronic PR	90	8	-	2	-	-
Needs to focus on managerial skills	87	12	-	1	-	-
Needs to focus on research skills	80	15	-	3	2	-
Needs to focus on writing skills	95	5	-	-	-	-
Needs to focus on new technology	94	4	-	2	-	-
Needs to focus on integrated marketing communication	85	5	-	5	5	-
Needs to focus on strategic planning	92	6	-	2	-	-
Needs to focus on image building and reputation management	90	4	-	4	2	-

Table 1: Faculty members’ opinion about PR curriculum in their universities (N=80)\*

On the question of what is your opinion about the PR curriculum in your university, faculty members interviewed stated that study plans are theoretical and lack practical skills courses. Respondents also complained about lack of Arabic textbooks in major public relations subjects and topics. They also think that the PR curriculum didn’t accommodate itself to the development of the PR profession in terms of new media and virtual PR. They also mentioned the scarcity of experienced PR faculty members.

Hainsworth calls for certification and accreditation of academic programs in public relations. He writes:

A linkage between certified educational programs and accreditation would also lay to the rest the prolonged and useless debate over licensing versus accreditation that has paralyzed us for so long.

More must be done to encourage, if not demand, a professional education as the door to full professional practice, and public relations programs in higher education must be certified and recognized as the foundation of true professionalism. (Hainsworth, 1993:313).

This suggests that professional PR bodies have to be established in Arab countries and a close relationship between them and PR programs in universities

and higher education institutions should be initiated to revisit the curriculums and study plans to respond to the challenges of the industry. PR programs have to be reviewed and adapted to the new era of digital communication and social networks, as well as appropriate textbooks, internships and training programs.

### **Ethics and Integrity**

Cameron and others (1996), Parsons (2004), Cutlip and others (2006) and Nieman-Struweg and Meintjies (2008) all emphasized ethics as a main component for PR professionalism. This means that the profession needs in the first place professional bodies, associations and societies to set up the professional ethical guidelines to practice the profession and work towards the public interest.

Ethics are considered to be an important factor for the success of any public relations work. Public relations practitioners must be ethical; they have to be honest, credible and trustworthy. They should act at all times for the public interest that also represents the interest of the organization they work for as well. ( Bowen, 2004). Are there ethics in public relations? The question is very relevant and should be posed because current research supports a historical trend which associates public relations with lying, bluffing, spin-doctoring and all kinds of unethical practices. Some critics argue that public relations cannot be ethical because its practice is the art of manipulation, propaganda and persuasion by all means and techniques. This is an unfortunate belief among journalists, politicians, decision makers, businessmen, and people from all walks of life. For common sense knowledge, public relations industry lacks ethics because its strategic goal is to influence public opinion through persuasive messages, and lobbying that only considers the interests of the client or the organization. According to some, this is a threat to responsible and committed journalism and communication. Some critics argue that modern public relations' practices are having a very significant negative impact on the democratic process through obfuscating, deceiving and derailing public debate on key issues and focusing on the other hand, on what clients and organizations would like to have on the agenda of the media and public opinion.

Modern public relations is facing an identity crisis, and itself needs some public relations to improve its image and react to the various stereotypes and criticism it is getting from all walks of life. PR watch raises the following questions: Can ethical public relations be possible? Are public relations practitioners professionals really? The question is: Are these criticisms and claims true? If they are so, how the PR industry is emerging very rapidly throughout the world and it's gaining as well in

education, academia, research and scholarship. Indeed, public relations discipline is based on ethics and believes in ethics. The ethics of public relations consists of values such as honesty, loyalty, social responsibility, fairness, respect, and integrity, responsible and forthright communication. The PR industry in the Arab World has very few professional societies and associations; it also has almost no codes of ethics that lay down the duties, rights and responsibilities of the PR practitioners and his/her accountability to the client, the public and society.

Since the early days of public relations, the problem of ethics has been posed critically in the professional circles and the media industry. Media professionals as well as those who are concerned with ethics have raised the problem of credibility, truth, trust and morals of those behind the work and crafts of public relations. Many voices have been raised against the vicious and malicious motives of the majority of the public relations activities and programs. Bowen argues That Current research supports a historical trend of associating public relations with all things unethical-Lying, spin-doctoring, and even espionage. Many critics argue that there can be no ethical public relations because the practice itself is akin to manipulation and propaganda. (Bowen, 2004).

Critics have been complaining about the partiality of PR practitioners when they market their organizations or their clients to the media and the public. They usually emphasize the positive stories and events and they hide the negative sides and practices of the corporation. According to critics, public relations is becoming the profession of manipulating the media to influence public opinion to be positively receptive to the organization and its activities. Core ethical challenges to the practices of public relations have included manipulation of stakeholders, consumers, publics, general public and the media. The case of the US misuse of PR and public diplomacy during the third Gulf war is very relevant here. Challenges also concern lying, bribery, pandering and distorting public communication channels through privileging the powerful financial and political players in society.

Why the issue of ethics should be addressed by scholars, practitioners, different publics who deal with public relations and the public in general? And why critics are claiming that public relations cannot be ethical? The general public thinks that governments are corrupt, businesses, organizations and all types of entities in society are using public relations to lure the general public and to crystallize public opinion in the shape and direction they want. Ethics, by its nature, demands personal engagement. The search for best practices, and an understanding of the rational decisions to be taken and a good grasp and understanding of consequences.



Ethics can't be legislated, it comes from within us and is nurtured by life training and the standards and codes of conduct, and ethics followed in our chosen fields.

Ethics in public relations deal, basically, with the principles of ethical thinking which include roots of professionalism, truth telling, responsibilities, rights and loyalties. Debating the issue of public relations ethics is exposing the dilemmas inherent in media relations, confronting ethical problems in organizational communication, employee and peer communication, corporate social responsibility, lobbying, and community relations.

The emergence of public relations as a profession is essentially a twentieth century phenomenon although its roots can be traced to ancient civilizations. Since its early stage the practice of public relations has posed many concerns and problems related to ethics. In its report " A Port of Entry: Public relations Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", the Commission on Public Relations Education recommended the teaching of Public Relations Ethics and Law as an essential topic to a strong undergraduate education. Public Relations Ethics and Law introduce the students of PR to codes of ethics and practice in public relations and in other professions; specific legal issues such as privacy, defamation, copyright, product liability, and financial disclosure; legal and regulatory compliance, and credibility. PR Professionals and various stakeholders should admit that without ethical behavior there is no credibility, and without credibility there is no business. Public relations cannot reach professionalism and excellence without a strict application and respect for ethics.

### **PR as a Subsystem**

Going over the PR profession in the Arab World, one should look at the issue from the systemic theory. This is to say that public relations operate in a system characterized by clientelism, the domination of the state apparatus over all the professions and an authoritarian approach to the practice of various occupations. This means that the system lacks democracy, a culture of dialogue and the implication of individuals and the civil society in political life. Professional PR requires transparency, democracy, respect of individualism, two way communication and ethics. Although the profession is expanding very rapidly, there still a lack of professional PR associations and societies in most of the Arab countries. As a result, the PR profession in the Arab world encounters a total absence of code of ethics. The profession is misunderstood and regarded as a megaphone of the organization and the clients. It is associated with spin doctoring,

manipulation and propaganda. Although there are over two hundred university programs offering PR degrees, still the practice has an orientation towards marketing and press agency. In most cases PR departments and agencies lack professionalism, ethics and accountability towards the general public and society as a whole. The main cause of the poor performance of public relations is the fact that the majority of managers, officials and decision makers conceive PR as a tool of manipulating public opinion through press agency and public information. There is almost a total negligence of the managerial role of public relations, as well as the role of research and counseling.

Public relations is a reflection of the society in which it operates, it is as well a cultural act. (Al Enad, 1990, 1992). In other words, it is a subsystem that reflects the way the whole society thinks and works. Effective PR needs democracy, and the respect of individual opinion. Public relations needs political participation through a dynamic civil society, and a high level of transparency and respect between the organization and its publics. Public relations is based on the role, status and respect of public opinion in society. In most Arab countries the media system operates in a milieu that lacks press freedom and works within the boundaries of a closed system where investigative journalism and addressing the real problems of organizations, institutions and people are a rare commodity. This affects very badly the performance of public relations and has negative impact on the relationship between the media and PR. (Kirat, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, Al Enad, 1990, 1992, Alanazi, 1996).

### **Sociology of Professions**

A professional occupation has values that emphasize a shared identity based on competencies, which are usually acquired through education, training and apprenticeship socialization and sometimes guaranteed by licensing. Usually professional relations are characterized as collegial, cooperative and mutually supportive and relations of trust characterize practitioner/ client and practitioner/ employer interactions. According to Larson (1977) and Abbott (1988) the concept of professionalization is regarded as the process to achieve the status of profession and has been interpreted as the process to pursue, develop and maintain the closure of the occupational group in order to maintain practitioners own occupational self-interests in terms of their salary, status and power as the monopoly protection of the occupational jurisdiction.

There is a list of attributes that an occupation has to have to claim professionalism. Sager (2008), Christensen (1987), Broom (2009) listed the following:

1. A commitment to ethical standards (codes of ethics).
2. A prevailing attitude of altruism (the principle or practice of concern for the welfare of others).
3. Mandatory educational preparation and training before entering the profession (specialized educational preparation).
4. A body of theory-based knowledge developed through research. (textbooks, theories and models).
5. Compulsory continuing education (training workshops, seminars, lectures...etc.).
6. A formal association or society (professional bodies).
7. Independence. (Autonomy to act, distinct roles and tasks).
8. Public recognition as a profession (social status, respect)>

Larson links professionalization with the overall ideological climate, he writes:

“The structure of the professionalization process binds together two elements...: a body of abstract knowledge, susceptible to practical application, and market- the structure of which is determined by economic and social development and also by the dominant ideological climate”. (Larson,1977: xvii,40)

The profession claims to be the most reliable authority on the reality it deals with... In developing its own “professional” approach, the profession changes the definition and shape of problems as experienced and interpreted by the layman. The layman’s problem is re-created as it is managed-a new social reality is created by the profession.

### **Excellence Theory and the Practice of PR in the Arab World**

According to the excellence theory, the following should be applied to the practice of public relations to reach the best performances.

1. Involvement of public relations in strategic management. According to Grunig and Grunig, this is one of the main indicators of excellent public relations. They assert:

Based on this theoretical premise about the value of public relations, the excellence theory derived principles of how the function should be organized to maximize this value. First, the research showed that involvement in strategic management was the critical characteristic of excellent public relations. Public relations executives played a strategic managerial role as well as administrative manager role. Public relations also was empowered by having access to key organizational decision-makers (the dominant coalition). (Grunig, Grunig 2008).

Most public relations departments in the Arab World perform routine PR tasks and activities. Kirat (2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2006; El-Enad 1990; Badran and Ayish 1996) argue that top management in the organizations does not believe in a managerial role for public relations. Most of the tasks assigned and executed by PR revolve around daily routine activities, which hinder very badly the true role of PR, namely strategic research, management, image building, reputation management, and empowerment of public relations in the dominant coalition or a direct reporting to senior management. Unfortunately this is not the case in most Arab countries

2. Integrated public relations function. This means that public relations has access and authority in all levels and functions of the organization and enjoys a high degree of autonomy. This is not the case of the practice of PR in Arab countries where still PR is regarded as a support function for marketing, customer services and media liaising.

3. Public relations as a management function, separate from other functions.

Another problem that alters excellence in public relations is sublimation to marketing, Grunig and Grunig argue:

Second, the study showed that public relations loses its unique role in strategic management if it is *sublimated* to marketing or other management functions. Sublimation to another function resulted in attention only to the stakeholder category of interest to that function, such as consumers for marketing. Sublimation to marketing also usually resulted in asymmetrical communication. (Grunig, Grunig 2008).

The practice of public relations in the Arab World is characterized by asymmetrical communication, a one way communication from the organization to the public. Its functions and objectives revolve around press agency, media liaising and the search publicity. Other strategic functions like research and managerial roles are not on the agenda of PR tasks and activities.

4. Public relations unit is headed by a manager rather than a technician. In most cases, the concept of public relations in the Arab World is still in the stage of press agency and public information to seek media exposure and publicity, thus most PR units are run by technicians and not managers.

5. Two-way symmetrical (or mixed-motive) model of public relations is used. In this regards, Grunig and Grunig assert:

Then, organizations must communicate symmetrically with publics (taking the interests of both the organization and publics into account) to cultivate high-quality, long-term relationships with them. (Grunig, Grunig 2008).

The situation in the Arab World is alarming as we witness a one way communication from the organization to the publics. There is a high focus on the corporation's objectives and goals at the expense of democratizing communication with the public.

6. Department with the knowledge needed to practice the managerial role in symmetrical public relations. Public relations in the Arab World has not yet reached this level of practice for several reasons. To begin with the profession is not conceived by the top management in the organization to have a managerial role. In most of the cases communication flows from the top to lower levels of management without considering feedback.

7. Symmetrical system of internal communication.

On this point Grunig and Grunig argue that internal communication leads to more understanding and more job satisfaction and a harmony within the organization: They write:

Third, the excellence study showed that a symmetrical system of internal communication increased employees' satisfaction with their jobs and with the organization. However, internal communication generally was not practiced unless organizations had a participative rather than authoritarian culture and a decentralized, less stratified (organic) structure rather than a centralized, stratified (mechanical) structure. (Grunig, Grunig 2008).

In the case of the Arab World, and given the fact that the authoritarian culture is prevailing in most organizations, internal communication is limited to strict rules and orders due to the closed system and centralized structure of management and decision-making process.

8. Diversity embodied in all roles. Public relations should reflect diversity in order to communicate most effectively with varied internal and external publics. This is hard to achieve when the system is closed and one-way communication is prevailing.

9. Ethics and integrity. The issue of ethics brings up professional bodies and codes of ethics to set a framework within which the PR practitioners operate. Integrity is the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles; moral uprightness. It is generally a personal choice to uphold one's self to consistent moral and ethical standards. In ethics, integrity is regarded by many people as the honesty and truthfulness or accuracy of one's actions. The main problem facing this issue in the Arab World is the scarcity of PR professional bodies which are supposed to develop codes of ethics and look after the good practice of the profession.

Excellence in public relations cannot be reached without the following: Involvement of PR in strategic management, an integrated PR function, having professional managers heading PR units, as well as the practice of two-way symmetrical model of PR, symmetrical system of internal communication, ethics and integrity should be discussed and researched thoroughly and with deep concern and responsibility. Public relations in the Arab World has played important roles and supported successfully various development plans in all sectors of life. However; the question to be asked is to what extent is the PR industry applying the parameters of professionalism and responding to the requirements of excellence in PR. It should be noted here that in addition to the ethical foundation and moral imperative, indicators of professional status include the following: Specialized educational preparation to acquire unique knowledge and skills based on a body of theory developed through research; recognition by the community of a unique and essential service; autonomy in practice and acceptance of personal responsibility by practitioners and codes of ethics and standards of performance enforced by a self-governing association of colleagues

Furthermore, indicators of professional status in the practice of public relations include the following:

1. Specialized educational preparation to acquire unique knowledge and skills, based on a body of theory developed through research.
2. Recognition by the community of a unique and essential service.
3. Autonomy in practice and acceptance of personal responsibility by practitioners.

4. Codes of ethics and standards of performance enforced by a self-governing association of colleagues. (Cutlip, Center, and Broom, 2000).

### **How to reach PR Professionalism and Excellence in the Arab World**

If we apply the above criteria of professionalism to the practice of public relations in the Arab world, it can be argued that Arab PR has a long way to go and much has to be done. First of all, changes have to be done concerning specialized educational preparation. The curriculum must be developed in parallel with what the profession is witnessing in real practice. The professional PR practitioner needs skills in the following: writing, management, planning, research, new media, integrated marketing communication image building, and reputation management. Here we have to admit that the body of theory is coming from the West and research is very scarce. (Kirat, 2005; 2006).

Concerning the community recognition, we notice here that after more than forty years of practice, the profession is still linked with propaganda and spin doctoring. This is due in the first place to the malpractice of public relations where the practitioners focus on the organization or client interest. Still the practice of PR in the Arab World is concentrated on the first communication model of Grunig's typology namely press agency. Public relations practitioners play in their majority the role of technicians rather than managers. They lack independence and just execute what they get from top management. The profession still lacks professional bodies and associations, thus codes of ethics which harms very badly the integrity, engagement and independence of the practitioners. This affects negatively professionalism and excellence of the public relations in the Arab World. ( Kirat, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2006; El-Enad 1990; Badran and Ayish 1996)

According to the issues addressed by the excellence study (Grunig, and Grunig 2002), public relations in the Arab World needs a radical reconsideration and change in its conception and practice at the societal, organizational and individual level. Much has to be done at the definitional level to set clearly what public relations is and what tasks, prerogatives and goals it has to achieve. The notion of image building reputation management through strategic communication, research and assessment are rarely adopted by most PR departments and practitioners mainly in the government sector. The press agency and public information models are still dominating the practice of PR in the Arab World ((2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2006; El-Enad 1990; Badran and Ayish 1996).

To reach excellence, public relations should engage in strategic management, integrated PR function, having professional managers heading PR units, as well as the practice of two-way symmetrical model of PR, symmetrical system of internal communication, ethics and integrity should be discussed and researched thoroughly and with deep concern and responsibility. The question to be addressed is to what extent is the PR industry applying the parameters of professionalism and responding to the requirements of excellence in PR. It should be noted here that in addition to the ethical foundation and moral imperative, indicators of professional status include the following: Specialized educational preparation to acquire unique knowledge and skills based on a body of theory developed through research; recognition by the community of a unique and essential service; autonomy in practice and acceptance of personal responsibility by practitioners and codes of ethics and standards of performance enforced by a self-governing association of colleagues.

Grunig and Grunig outline the following for professional PR practitioners:

“PR professionals, therefore, must understand organizations- their structures, cultures and working conditions. ...both undergraduate and postgraduate students should be encouraged, if not required, to study organizational sociology, psychology and communication, human resources management and the role and value of gender and racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity to an organization and to society.” (Grunig & Grunig 2002).

According to the excellence theory, the following are to be applied and respected: Involvement of public relations in strategic management; empowerment of public relations in the dominant coalition or a direct reporting to senior management; integrated public relations function; public relations as a management function separate from other functions; public relations unit should be headed by a manager rather than a technician; two-way symmetrical (or mixed-motive) model of public relations is used; department with the knowledge needed to practice the managerial role in symmetrical public relations; symmetrical system of internal communication and diversity embodied in all roles, ethics and integrity. To summarize, public relations professionals, managers and practitioners in the Arab world should take the necessary actions and reforms towards the following issues.

1. Education
2. Membership in professional organizations



3. Continuous education and training
4. Codes of ethics and commitment to ethical standards
5. Independence
6. Public recognition as a profession
7. Involvement in strategic management
8. Integrated public relations function
9. Two way symmetrical public relations
10. Symmetrical system of internal communication

Over two decades ago (1993) Hainsworth wrote:

Until attitudes and current practices change, it is not realistic for public relations practitioners to expect to see themselves recognized as true professionals by anyone other than themselves certainly not by true professionals in other more integrated and rigorous professions, not by other professionals within the organizations of which public relations practitioners are a part...in short, public relations practitioners will continue to be seen as second class citizens among constituencies with whom they must prove themselves on a daily basis. (Hainsworth, 1993).

This is exactly what PR practitioners in the Arab World should do if they want to be professionals, have a profession and be respected by their organization, colleagues, public and society in general. They have no other choice but to change their practices and abide by the normative generic principles of excellent public relations developed by Vercic, L.A Grunig, and J.E Grunig (1996).

## **Conclusion**

Public relations is emerging very fast as an indispensable tool of sustainable development and success for any organization or corporation in the Arab World. Public relations education is flourishing in the region. More than 200 Mass Communication programs in the Arab World offer courses in public relations and hundreds of students if not thousands are graduating with a major in public relations each year. The PR degree is attracting a large number of students each year. Statistics show that over half of the students enrolled in journalism and mass communication departments choose PR as their career. International public relations firms are catering for local and regional organizations and businesses. (Kirat, 2005, 2006a, 2006b).

The public relations profession has a challenging future in the Arab World. There is an urgent need for the profession to provide services to hundreds and thousands of businesses, institutions, and organizations, whether private or public in all sectors of life. The profession is badly needed to meet the challenges of economic, political and cultural globalization. However; it should be noted that excellent PR departments do not flourish in authoritarian cultures, mechanical structures, asymmetrical communication systems and organizational conditions that devalue freedom of expression and the right to know.

To reach professionalism and excellence in public relations in the Arab world a lot has to be done. In the area of education and scholarship programs have to be developed in terms of study plans, textbooks and faculty members. More training, more skills courses and internships are needed to better qualify future practitioners. The profession also needs professional associations and societies. Codes of ethics have to be developed and implemented by practitioners under a close supervision of professional bodies to assure accountable and responsible public relations practices. Research is badly needed to assess the state of the profession in terms of drawbacks, weaknesses and malpractices. Continuous education and professional development is a must to keep up with the latest developments in the field. Public relations needs more engagement in social responsibility by serving the public interest, the general good and the community.

Public relations practitioners should focus on strategic management, evaluation research, environmental scanning and public segmentation. More attention should be given to institutional and organizational communication, open communication with internal and external publics, and professional approaches to image building and reputation management. These professional standards and values require a high qualification of practitioners, continuing education and periodical training workshops to keep up with the latest developments in the world of public relations and other related fields. Last but not least, excellent PR professionals must be encouraged, supported and empowered by the dominant coalitions of their organizations.

To professionalize PR in the Arab world the following should be considered : Use of advanced technology, partnering with major stakeholders, developing evaluation procedures, striving to make public relations a profession rather than a step child of marketing and advertising, reconsidering integrated communication, teaching management skills, strategic thinking, PR on the net and social media. The future is very promising and very challenging; however the profession should

be looked at as an integral part of the organizational decision-making coalition, should be more involved in strategic planning, should be accepted as a profession and as an indispensable part of the organization and a key player of its success and effectiveness.

**\*Note:** A 15 items questionnaire was sent online to faculty members in the following universities: Qatar University- University of Sharjah- Ajman University- United Arab Emirates University- Emirates College of Technology- Sultan Qaboos University- Cairo University- Algiers University- University of Tunis- University of Rabat- University of Baghdad- Kuwait University- Bahrain University- Gulf University- King Saud University- University of Tripoli- Lebanese University- Tripoli University- Benghazi University- University of Khartoum, Ain Shams University, Yarmouk University, University of Constantine 3, University of Annaba, University of Skikda, and University of Jijel. Eighty questionnaires were collected.

### References:

1. Abbott, A. (1988) *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labor*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
2. Abdullah, Zulhamri and Terry Threadgold (2008) Towards the Professionalisation of Public Relations in Malaysia: Perception management and Strategy Development. *Public Relations review*, 34, 285-287.
3. Al Enad, Abdulrahman (1990) "Public Relations' Roles in Developing Countries", *Public Relations Quarterly*, Vol.35. No1, spring, pp: 24-26.
4. Al Enad, Abdulrahman (1992) "Values of Public Relations Conduct in Saudi Arabia", *Public Relations Quarterly*, summer, pp: 210-218.
5. Al Enad, Abdulrahman (2004) "Public Relations in the Age of Globalization and Reforms in the Arab Gulf Countries", paper presented at the International Conference "Public Relations in the Arab World in the Age of Globalization: Current Realities and Future Prospects", University of Sharjah, College of Communication, Sharjah 4-5 May 2004. (In Arabic).
6. Alanazi, Ali (1996) "Public Relations in the Middle East: The Case of Saudi Arabia", in Hugh M. Culberston & Ni Chen (eds). *International Public Relations: A Comparative Analysis*. Mahwah, NJ. Erlbaum, pp: 239-256.

7. Albadi, Mohammed (1991) “The Problem of Practical Training in Public Relations in Universities”, *Journal of Arts and Human Sciences*, King Abdulaziz University, Vol. 4, pp: 3-19. (In Arabic).
8. Albadi, Mohammed (1991) *Professional Problems of Public Relations*. Cairo: Almaktaba Alanglo Missriya. (In Arabic).
9. Badran A. Badran and Muhammad I. Ayish (1996) “Manager and Technician Roles of Public Relations Practitioners in Public and Private Organizations in the United Arab Emirates: An Exploratory Study”, paper presented at the conference on “Strategic Planning in Public Relations”, Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, United Arab Emirates University, Al-Ain, UAE, December 17-18, 1996.
10. Bowen, Shannon. A. (2004) Expansion of Ethics as the Tenth Generic Principle of Public Relations Excellence: A Kantian Theory and Model for Managing Ethical Issues. *Journal of Public Relations Research*. 16(1).65-92.
11. Bowen, Shannon. A. , Brad Rawlins and Thomas Martin. (2010) *An Overview of the Public Relations Function*. New York: Business Express Press LLC.
12. Broom, G.M. (2009). *Cutlip & Center’s Effective public Relations* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). Engliwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
13. Cameron, G. T., Pang, A., & Jin, Y. (2007). Contingency theory: Strategic management of conflict in public relations. In T. Hansen-Horn & B. Neff (Eds.), *Public relations: From theory to practice* (pp. 134-157). Boston, MA: Pearson Allyn & Bacon.
14. Cameron, G.T, Sallot, L.M., and Weaver-Lariscy, R.A.W. (1996) Developing Standards of Professional Performance in *Public relations*. *Public Relations Review*, 22(1) 41-61.
15. Cancel, A. E., Cameron, G. T., Sallot, L. M., & Mitrook, M. A. (1997). It depends: a contingency theory of accommodation in public relations *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9(1), 31-63.
16. Christensen, B.A. (1987). What makes a Professional. *Journal of the American Society of CLU & ChFC*. 41.6.41.
17. Creedon, Pamela J., Mai Abdul Wahed Al Khaja, and Dean Kruckeberg (1995) “Women and Public Relations Education and Practice in the United Arab Emirates”, *Public Relations Review*, spring: 56-62.
18. Cutlip, S. M., Center, A.H. and Broom, G.M. (2006) *Effective Public Relations*. 9<sup>th</sup> ed. Upper saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
19. De Bussy, Nigel and Katharina Wolf (2009) The State of Public relations: Professionalisation and Paradox. *Public Relations review*, 35, 376-381.

20. Glen T. Cameron, Lynne M. Sallot, and Ruth Ann Weaver Lariscy (1996) Developing Standards of Professional Performance in Public Relations. *Public Relations review*, 22, (1) 43-61.
21. Grunig, J. E. (1975). A multi-systems theory of organizational communication. *Communication Research*, 2(2), 99-136.
22. Grunig, J. E. (1992). Communication, public relations, and effective organizations: An overview of the book. In J. E. Grunig (Ed.), *Excellence in public relations and communication management* (pp. 1-28). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, p. 27
23. Grunig, J. E. (2003). Constructing public relations theory and practice. In B. Dervin, S. H. Chaffee & L. Foreman-Wernet (Eds.), *Communication, a different kind of horserace: Essays honoring Richard F. Carter* (pp. 85-115). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
24. Grunig, J. E., & Grunig, L. A. (2008). Excellence theory in public relations: Past, present, and future. In A. Zerfass, B. V. Ruler & K. Sriramesh (Eds.), *Public relations research: European and international perspectives and innovations* (pp. 327-347). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.
25. Grunig, J. E., Grunig, L. A., & Dozier, D. M. (2006). The Excellence theory. In C. H. Botan & V. Hazelton (Eds.), *Public relations theory II* (pp. 21-62). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
26. Grunig, L., Grunig, J and Dozier, D. (2002) *Excellent Public Relations and Effective Organizations: A Study of Communication Management in Three Countries*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
27. Grunig, L.A., Grunig, J. E., Toth, E. L., (2007). *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management: challenges for the next generation*. New York: Routledge.
28. Gupta, Seema (2007) Professionalism in Indian Public relations and corporate Communications: An empirical Analysis. *Public Relations review*, 33, 306-312.
29. Hainworth, Brad E. (1993) Commentary: professionalism in Public Relations. *Public Relations review*, 19, 311-313.
30. Kirat, Mohamed (2004a) "Public Relations Practice in the United Arab Emirates: A Meta-analysis Study", a paper presented at the International Conference "Public Relations in the Arab World in the Age of Globalization: Current Realities and Future Prospects", University of Sharjah, College of Communication, Sharjah 4-5 May 2004. (In Arabic).

31. Kirat, Mohamed (2004b). Public Relations in the Arab World: Realities and Challenges *Al-Bayan*, no's, 8715,8722,8729.
32. Kirat, Mohamed. (2005) Public Relations in the Arab World: A Critical Assessment, *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 31, no3, Fall, PP: 323-332.
33. Kirat, Mohamed. (2006a) "Public Relations Industry and Curriculum: The Experience of the United Arab Emirates", *ELMiayar*, no 13, , pp: 265-300. (in Arabic).
34. Kirat, Mohamed. (2006b). Public Relations in the United Arab Emirates: The Emergence of a Profession", *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 32, no3, Fall, PP: 254-260.
35. Larson, M.S. (1977) *The Rise of professionalism*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
36. Leichty, G. (1997). The limits of collaboration. *Public Relations Review*, 23(1), 47-55.
37. Maloney, K (2006) *Rethinking Public Relations*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. London: Routledge.
38. Managing differentiation and integration Boston: Division of Research, Harvard Business School Press.
39. Meyer, Andrea L., and Anne Leonard (2014) Are We There Yet? En Route to Professionalism. *Public Relations review*, 40, 375-386.
40. Murphy, P. (1991). The limits of symmetry: A game theory approach to symmetrical and asymmetrical public relations In L. A. Grunig & J. E. Grunig (Eds.), *Public relations research annual* (Vol. 3, pp. 115-131). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
41. Nieman-Struweg, Ilse and Corne Meintjes (2008) The Professionalism Debate in south African Public Relations, *Public Relations review*, 34, 224-229.
42. Parson, P.J. (2004) *Ethics in Public Relations: A Guide to Best Practice*. London: Kogan Page.
43. Pratt, Cornelius. Professionalism in Nigerian Public relations. *Public Relations review*
44. professional communication: Asymmetric presuppositions for a new theoretical discussion. *International Public Relations Review*, 16(3), 8-11.
45. Public Relations Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century- The Professional Bond- The Report of the commission on Public Relations education [http://www.commpred.org/\\_uploads/report2-full.pdf](http://www.commpred.org/_uploads/report2-full.pdf). (Retrieved February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016).

46. Quinn, R. E., & Rohrbaugh, J. (1983). A spatial model of effectiveness criteria: Towards a competing values approach to organizational analysis. *Management Science*, 29(3), 363-377.
47. Sager, W.H. (2003) Professional Conduct: Symbol of a Profession. *The National Public Accountant*, 14.
48. Sallot, Lynne M., Glen T. Cameron, and Ruth Ann Weaver Lariscy (1998) Pluralistic Ignorance and Professional Standards: Underestimating Professionalism of Our Peers in Public Relations. *Public Relations review*, 24, 1-19.
49. Sallot, Lynne M., Glen T. Cameron, and Ruth Ann Weaver Lariscy (1997) Professional Standards in Public Relations: A Survey of Educators. *Public Relations review*, 23 (3) 197-216.
50. Sha, Bey-Ling (2011) Accredited VS. Non-Accredited: The Polarization of Practitioners in the Public Relations Profession. *Public Relations review*, 37, 121-128.
51. Sha, Bey-Ling (2011) Practice Analysis: Professional Competencies and Work Categories in Public relations Today. *Public Relations review*, 37, 187-196.
52. Sriramesh, K. (1992). Societal culture and public relations: Ethnographic evidence from India. *Public Relations Review*, 18(2), 201-211.
53. Vercic, D., Grunig L.A. & Grunig J.E. (1996) Global and Specific principles of Public relations: Evidence From Slovenia. In H.M. Culburston & N. Chen (Eds.) *International Public Relations: A Comparative Analysis* (pp. 31-65) Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
54. von Bertalanffy, L. (1950). The theory of open system in physics and biology *Science*, 111(2872), 23-29.
55. Wylie, F. (1994). Commentary: Public Relations Is Not yet a Profession. *Public Relations review*, 20 (1): 1-3.

