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Communicating Catalan culture in a global society

Melissa A. Johnson^{a,*}, Xavier Cester^b

^a Department of Communication, Campus Box 8104, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC 27695-8104, USA

^b Catalan Institute for the Cultural Companies (ICEC), Rambla Santa Monica 8, Barcelona, Catalunya, Spain

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ABSTRACT

This case study describes the communication objectives of the Catalan! Arts organization based in the autonomous region of Catalonia in Spain. Best practices in public relations, particularly in digital and social media, are described. The authors highlight the use of sound and bold visuals in public relations programming, and address the importance of interactive tactics. Program evaluation includes digital analytics plus an analysis of cultural industry export data and employment statistics in the creative industries. The case is an example of identity-based communication in international public relations. It also adds to the literature on public relations in government and arts organizations.

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1. Introduction

One of the limitations of current research in international public relations is the centrality of the nation state in definitions of the field (e.g., [Sriramesh, 2009](#)). And according to [Bardhan \(2013\)](#), public relations discourse about globalization is rooted in Western and capitalist/corporate models. Thus, most international public relations research has focused on corporate public relations, usually based in English-speaking environs. However, a recent study ([Johnson & Sink, 2013](#)) argued that communication for organizations such as ethnic activist groups or cultural heritage organizations has growing influence in global society and yet has received little scholarly attention. Although ethnic media scholarship has investigated the role of such niche media, there has been no similar examination in public relations, even though practitioners now produce globally distributed “owned media” themselves ([Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, 2014](#)).

Given this organization-controlled media production, along with traditional media relations and other tactics, public relations by culture-specific organizations bears attention. One such organization is Catalan! Arts, part of the Ministry of Culture for the Government of Catalonia, an autonomous region in Spain. Catalan! Arts was created in 2005 by the International Promotion Department (now Market Development), a unit of the Catalan Institute for Cultural Companies. The organization's aim is to create a brand that can help markets abroad visualize the Catalan cultural companies. The main purpose is to offer support to the production of professional projects and their promotion abroad. While diffusing Catalan identity and cultural knowledge worldwide and contributing to the cultural industries sector of the Catalan economy, this arts organization also improves the well-being of artists, performers and their audiences. Ultimately, this contributes to the creative economy of Catalonia.

The goal of this case study is to discuss the role of identity-based public relations in global society by demonstrating how Catalan! Arts employs a combination of digital and traditional public relations strategies to reach audiences throughout Europe, the Americas and beyond. The study provides insight and practical examples for communication professionals. In

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 919 515 9756.
E-mail address: mjohnson@ncsu.edu (M.A. Johnson).

addition, by concentrating on an autonomous region's strategic communication, we hope to help reduce what Sriramesh has termed the "extreme ethnocentricity" of the public relations body of knowledge (2009).

1.1. Catalonia

One of 17 Spanish autonomous regions, Catalonia and its capital, Barcelona, have historically been known for entrepreneurship and innovation (Hughes, 1992). In the 21st Century, Barcelona has become a digital and communication technologies hub, the site of gaming companies, Yahoo's research and development office for Europe and Latin America, and much more (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010). The city's decade-old 22@ district is an urban innovation center where many companies engaged in these activities are based (Clos, 2004). Thus, championing the creative arts fits with the overall vibrant Catalonia identity and commitment to an array of inventive industries.

1.2. Public relations in Spain and Catalonia

Except for a few articles related specifically to Catalan public relations in recent years (e.g., Garcia, 2013; Xifra, 2009; Xifra & McKie, 2012) or to Basque strategic communication (Garcia, 2012), most articles about public relations in Spain have focused on the practice at the level of the nation state (e.g., Arceo, 2004; Smith, 2013). However, as Smith (2013) described, the Galician, Castilian, Basque and Catalanian regions of Spain have distinct cultures and languages or linguistic variations. Thus, a study focused on one cultural identity and its positioning on the national, regional, and global stage is an appropriate addition to the public relations literature.

Xifra said that the Catalan government's sports policy has been the main channel for building relations with international publics (2009). The authors argue that the arts is another important channel. One method of extending Catalanian identity globally is the promotion of Catalan cultural industries, which enhances the identity and economic goals that Xifra and McKie identified as important for the region (2012) by linking the two. In other words, spreading understanding of cultural identity through the arts also benefits the financial status of Catalan artists (broadly defined) and the larger regional economy.

1.3. Cultural identity and public relations

Scholars such as Sha (2006) and Pompper (2005) have described the lack of attention paid to culture, ethnicity and/or race in public relations research. In the past decade L'Etang's work also elevated a concern for multicultural societies, saying a broadened understanding of diplomacy is needed to include "cultural identity projects" (2009, p. 611). She noted that "public relations becomes broader as technology facilitates communication across national frontiers and creates more publics" (1996, p. 20). According to L'Etang, "cultural diplomacy tends to be characterized by long-term 'hearts and minds' campaigns aimed at developing emotional bonds with overseas domestic publics to gain their identification and sympathy" (2009, p. 610). As examples, she mentions art tours and exhibits; Catalan! Arts extends her exemplars with its promotion of Catalan literature, music, dance and much more. Other work has described how culture-specific museums ("ethnic museums") communicate organizational identity via their digital communication, both locally and internationally (Johnson & Carneiro, 2014) and this case study found that to be a similar goal.

The afore-mentioned briefly described research led to the research questions for the present study:

RQ1: What are the public relations goals of Catalan! Arts?

RQ2: Who are the key international publics of Catalan! Arts?

RQ3: How does Catalan! Arts employ its branding and multiple communication channels to reach its publics and accomplish its organizational goals?

And finally, our over-arching research question is, how does the case of Catalan! Arts demonstrate the concept of culture-specific public relations?

2. Methodology

2.1. Method, data and sample

This article is a case study about Catalan! Arts public relations. As Yin (2014) noted, case study methodology is best for contemporary research questions related to "how and why." Following Yin's recommendations (2014), we used multiple sources of evidence (data triangulation) in the case study. We combined a content analysis of the Catalan! Arts Web site with an examination of one year of newsletters, e-magazines, flyers and other controlled message tools. We also examined a stratified (by country) sample of media coverage and a sample of social media mentions of Catalan! Arts. In addition, the authors reviewed organizational documents such as plans, budgets and reports. Qualitative analysis was used for all the content studied.

2.2. *Methodology: analysis*

One author took notes on the content of the main public relations tools and then used constant comparison analysis to determine how main themes fit into the research questions. The second author analyzed elements from the budget, strategic plan, marketing research and other organizational documents. Authors then compared findings and determined which elements of the case to highlight.

3. Results

Catalan! Arts relies on research and strategic planning as underpinnings to carrying out its mission. Staff in five offices in Europe, including Barcelona, Berlin, Brussels, London and Paris (and also, until 2013, Milan), work to implement goals. Catalan! Arts communication includes traditional controlled message tools (such as flyers), media relations, digital communication (such as a multi-language Web site, newsletters, and e-magazines), and social media. The communication unit also performs market research, advises on export and internationalization projects, and nurtures professional networking in Catalonia and abroad. In addition, Catalan! Arts organizes promotional booths at strategic international fairs, open to all the Catalan companies willing to attend these events.

3.1. *Research question one: goals*

An analysis of the organization's strategic plan shows that its main goals are: to ensure that the Catalan cultural and creative companies are more competitive in international markets; to boost the presence of these companies in the international markets, helping them to increase their activities and, therefore, making sure that this international business could be an integral part of their activities (and of the Catalan economy in general); to help these companies to have a distinctive profile in their offerings in order to have more chances in the international markets; and to drive the diversification of markets for these companies. The budget for 2013 was 1,986,864.06 euros, and, for 2014, 2,264,268.31 euros.

3.2. *Research question two: publics*

The main publics for Catalan! Arts have been professionals in the cultural sector abroad, because the primary aim is to put sellers of Catalan cultural products in contact with international buyers. Additional audiences include other public institutions similar to Catalan! Arts, programmers for music and performing arts festivals and venues and managers and bookers of cultural events. The organization also works with Catalan buyers, that is, festivals or cultural companies that go to international fairs and events to buy or to establish strategic alliances with similar companies. In short, the organization's work is Business to Business (B2B) oriented.

As for countries or regions of interest, Western Europe is the natural market for the Catalan cultural companies, but Catalan! Arts also has implemented activities in the United States and Canada and has made contacts in Asia and North Africa. Spain is also a field of action. In Catalonia, the focus is on the international aspects of the main Catalan cultural trade fairs and professional events.

Media are another public. The European offices distribute newsletters, e-flyers and other communications to a database of media in the countries where it is working and to the media who have subscribed to information channels. When there are Catalan artists performing in their countries, the Catalan! Arts representatives in Europe send press releases about the show. Press inquiries from international media are answered directly. However, for press releases and press inquiries within Catalonia or Spain, communication is channeled through the culture ministry's press office. In summary, the primary focus is on international publics with the intent that benefits accrue to Catalan creative professionals.

3.3. *Research question three: communication channels*

3.3.1. *Traditional media*

The organization's Web site includes samples of its print and broadcast press coverage. Typical were reviews from newspapers or other mass media outlets. Broadcast coverage included not only features on TV3, the Catalan-language television station, but also on global media outlets such as BBC. Typically the coverage features the artists rather than the Catalan! Arts organization itself. The media results suggest that the institution serves as a link to, not the focus of, coverage, which is appropriate given the organization's goals.

3.3.2. *Owned digital media*

A major tool for Catalan! Arts is its Web site. Prominent on the site are the calendar, newsletter link (and ability to subscribe to the e-newsletter), podcasts, music highlights (available via Spotify), and promotional news items for upcoming or recent events. An extensive calendar is a useful tool, searchable by date and sector (music, theater, etc.), which enhances the user's interaction with the site. A link to a section on prior events also is available. Demonstrating the organization's relationship with other arts organizations is a wealth of links to organizations such the Catalan Composers Association, the

Professional Association of Illustrators from Catalonia, the Association of Dance Professional Companies of Catalonia, and the Association of Professional Actors and Directors of Catalonia.

The Web site is available in three languages: Catalan, Spanish and English. However, messages are not direct translations of each other. Rather, the content in each version is tailored to the main language audience. For instance, the Catalan version aims to inform Catalans of what Catalan! Arts does (booths at trade fairs, CDs, books, mentoring sessions, etc.), in which activities they can take part (and how), and, most important, which international information could be helpful to them. This includes calls for artistic proposals at international fairs and festivals, business or work opportunities in other locales, information about international events, etc. The English version is just the reverse: to inform the professionals from outside Catalonia which Catalan artists are performing abroad, to give more general information about the Catalan cultural companies and, of course, to inform site visitors about organizational activities (fairs, publications, etc.). The Spanish version is a mix of Catalan and English content, but closer to the English version.

A second digital tool is the Catalan! Arts newsletter, for which interested observers can sign up through the Web site. During the last week of the month, subscribers receive an e-newsletter with highlights for the upcoming month or two. These are one-page bulletins. For instance, an April 29 edition featured May events such as a dance performance in South Korea, a theater preview in Brussels, and street art performances at Festival Kunsten Op Straat in the Netherlands. The newsletter also includes links to the Web site and social media.

Another more elaborate digital communication tool is the e-magazine. The organization produces Catalan! Films and Catalan! Music e-magazines, each published four times per year. These feature large, vibrant photographs and links to YouTube, Spotify and musicians' Web sites. Magazines are also available via an iPad app. These are substantial publications, each generally approximating 90 or more pages.

3.3.3. *Social media*

Interactive communication is also an option via the organization's social media presence on global social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Spotify and Google+. A review of one year of Facebook posts, for instance, not only displayed items dealing with upcoming events, but was visually rich with images of music album covers, event flyers, performer photos, attractive shots of performing arts venues such as Den Nationale Scene in Norway, and the like. The items are regularly updated at least several times per month. Users as well as Catalan! Arts staffers post reviews.

3.3.4. *Digital communication characteristics*

In summary, Catalan! Arts commands a diverse and consistent digital and social media presence. Three elements characterize its digital communication tools. The first is the interactive nature of the Web site. It features a broad network of links to other organizations and also a large number of user control features, such as allowing for the user to increase typesize, sign up for the e-newsletters, search the calendar, and the like. Scholars have listed such features in their taxonomies of desirable Web site interactivity (e.g., [Guillory & Sundar, 2014](#); [Searson & Johnson, 2010](#)). The second element is the savvy circular nature of the digital tools, where each outlet prompts the user to access others. To name just a few examples, the e-newsletter has links to the Web site and social media, the Web site has links to social media and the e-publications, and the calendar links to event and venue Web sites. The third characteristic is the visual power of the digital communication and its effective use of audio applications. Given the competition for attention in the midst of Internet clutter, this is a prerequisite in the digital sphere. The logo was designed by the prestigious designer Claret Serrahima's Barcelona studio ([Guayabero, 2012](#)). All of the trademarks for the various sectors are visually and linguistically linked. Vibrant colors, large photos wherever possible, and bold mostly sans serif typefaces characterize the visuals. Music downloads and podcasts are used to demonstrate musical variety and quality. These also provide other interactive features for Web site visitors, who can control what they hear and what they view. Again, these types of Web site features have been identified as hallmarks of interactive, two-way communication.

3.3.5. *Promotion of participation in festivals*

In addition to the organization's wealth of digital and social media tools, communication representatives of Catalan! Arts engage in interpersonal communication about Catalan creative companies. This is primarily via exhibits at major festivals. Examples include Jazzahead in Bremen, Germany; South by Southwest in Texas, USA; Midem in Cannes, France, and Babel Med Music in Marseille, France. Also, Catalan artists receive acclaim at other specialty fairs and festivals. For instance, Catalan films have been featured at film festivals such as the Cambridge Film Festival, one of the most prestigious in the United Kingdom, and the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam. Another interpersonal tactic is organizing specific business meetings. One example is the Lunch Meeting organized every year at FiraTàrraga, the main street arts fair in the south of Europe. Catalan! Arts arranges a networking meeting between Catalan companies (20–25) performing at the fair and approximately 100 international programmers.

3.3.6. *Controlled tools*

Finally, the organization produces a number of traditional printed controlled message tools. These include research reports, guides, directories, promotional flyers and the like for the various sectors. The organization also distributes CD compilations of various types of Catalan music, including jazz, pop/rock, electronic music and world music. These are

distributed at fairs and other venues. The CDs are another example of using sound as an element of public relations programming.

3.4. Evaluation

3.4.1. Evaluation of communication strategies and tactics

The organization uses analytics data to measure the success of its digital programming. For instance, in 2013, the Web site garnered 35,505 visits, with 18,274 users and 99,178 visited pages. Web site viewers from Spain, the United Kingdom, Germany, France and Belgium logged the most visits. This volume correlates with the locations of the organization's five European offices. Although the authors cannot assert direct causation with case study data (e.g., assert that practitioner activities are driving viewers to the Web sites), this points to a positive association. At a global level, the Web site occupies the 480.258 in the Alexa ranking and in Spain, the 16.662.

As for social media, there are 15,263 Facebook admirers and 8845 followers on Twitter. There have been 9759 Flickr visits and 1620 images; 48,048 YouTube visualizations and 99 videos; and 112 Spotify subscribers and 20 playlists.

As an indicator of the communication programming's impact, in 2013 the Web site registered 1358 international performances from Catalan artists that the organization helped to bring about. However, due to budget constraints in the current severe recession, there are no current surveys measuring perceptions of international publics or Catalan creative professionals that would evaluate awareness, knowledge or attitudinal changes resulting from public relations activities. Attendance at fairs also has been difficult to assess and Catalan creative companies need to report their results more regularly.

3.4.2. Financial contribution to Catalonia

As noted earlier, one cannot establish causation with case study data. But economic data from Catalonia and Spain suggest how marketing and public relations have assisted the cultural industries. For instance, in 2011 in Catalonia, cultural industries exports totaled 489 billion euros, compared to all of Spain's 972 billion euros ([ICEX – Spain Trade and Investment Agency](#)). In short, half of Spanish cultural exports originated in Catalonia. Regarding the Catalonia trade balance, cultural industries achieved a positive balance of 169.84 million euros, whereas Spain had a trade imbalance in the cultural industries of minus 74.65 million euros. Although the Catalan population employed in the cultural and creative sector dropped after the beginning of the deep recession from 2008's level of 184,800 employees, the 160,000 employees in 2012 represented just a 13 percent drop in sector employment, versus Spain's overall unemployment rate of 26 percent during the same period, or Catalonia's rate of 24 percent ([Catalan News Agency](#)). In short, promotion of the sector may have helped retain jobs.

4. Discussion

The present study makes three main contributions to public relations. First, the study sheds insights on best practices in public relations, especially concerning digital communication. Second, it expands the literature beyond corporate public relations to demonstrate contributions by government and arts-focused organizations. Third, the case study is an illustration of cultural identity-focused public relations and thus rejects the confines of the nation state as central to international public relations scholarship. The next section elaborates on these findings.

4.1. Best practices in public relations

The Catalan! Arts branding is visually bold, consistent, flexible enough for print or digital tactics, and able to serve as an "umbrella" for the various sectors such as Catalan! Dance or Catalan! Music. It also fits with Catalonia's branding, because the brand emphasizes cultural values, such as expressiveness and innovativeness, for which the autonomous region and its residents are known. The organizational branding challenge is complex because the brand must reflect the Catalan culture plus all the disparate elements of the cultural sector, from books to dance to videogame production. Nevertheless, it meets [Anholt's criteria \(2006\)](#) of a creative, ownable, sharp, relevant and usable (elemental) brand.

Two characteristics of the organization's communication tools were bold visuals and the effective use of sound. In general, public relations practitioners lack training in visual communication or communicating with sound, except for speech writing and delivery. Yet practitioners are more reliant than ever on these communication aspects because digital and mobile media are visual and aural, and practitioners must break through the communication clutter by using sound and visual techniques.

A third communication characteristic was high interactivity with publics in the organization's tactics, especially on its website and via social media. Studies show that interactivity is linked to liking an organization and involvement in the organization, thus interactive communications have a positive influence on organizational reputation ([Guillory & Sundar, 2014](#)). In this case that reputation may extend beyond Catalan! Arts to Catalan culture or Catalonia in general. In summary, Catalan! Arts sets an example for best practices in branding because of its effective use of multilingual texts, visuals, sound and interactive tactics.

4.2. Public relations contributions to Catalonia

Catalan! Arts is an example of using a unified brand to generate contacts outside the region in order to promote Catalan businesses in the cultural and creative sectors. This supports Xifra and McKie's statement about the relationship between identity and economic objectives (2012) and meets Smith's call for more research about public relations and the economy (2013). In this organization, cultural identity is harnessed to improve an element of the economy and the well-being of the professionals in it. The promotion of the Catalan cultural sector has had outcomes in "hard" currency, such as exports. Such outcomes in employment statistics also have the potential to reduce labor protests and behaviors related to social instabilities such as crime. Thus, the authors point to the relationship between attracting hearts and minds and the ultimate ability to stand tall in the global sphere.

Although the organization in this study focused on developing B2B cultural relationships outside Catalonia, building the Catalan brand also has the potential to shape broader perceptions of Catalonia and to present it as a region with a relevant creative potential. Such favorable impressions can expand business relations in other sectors, direct investment in the region, and cultural tourism.

Effective public relations builds long-term relationships. Results of the case study demonstrate that Catalan! Arts engages in extended relationship building with its many interpersonal events (e.g., business meetings, international fairs attended annually) and digitally via social media. One weakness in program evaluation is the lack of survey data to measure relationships or perceptions. However, as scholars have noted, international public opinion research is pitifully underfunded (Nye, 2008; Pamment, 2014).

This case study demonstrates how new technologies can facilitate outreach across national borders and to new publics (e.g., L'Etang, 2009; Zhong & Lu, 2013). The case also demonstrates how government-funded organizations can use digital media effectively, bypassing traditional widespread mass media campaigns.

4.3. Public relations for autonomous regions

Sriramesh (2009) has decried the focus of international public relations on the nation state and Johnson and Sink (2013) noted that culture-specific public relations is emerging as a specialty area. The growth of ethnic organizations, the increase in cultural tourism, the role of culture in global tensions and political separatist movements worldwide suggest that public relations tied to cultural identity is a vigorous area for scholarship and practice.

It is interesting to reflect on Catalan! Arts' achievements in light of García's analysis of Basque strategic communication (2012). Regarding Basque identity, García noted that one negative is the "hard power" exhibited by violence such as that of ETA. Catalonia's identity-building leans on its historic reputation as a business-savvy region, with dominant values of inventiveness and expressiveness that have blossomed heartily, especially post Franco.

The authors offer a friendly challenge to Xifra's assertion that Fútbol Club Barcelona (Barca) is Catalonia's "ultimate identity and reputation builder in the world" (2009, p. 74). Of course its outreach and draw for tourists is clear, and perhaps it is the "most efficient transmitter of the image of Catalonia for attracting foreign publics" because it is one organization and far less complex than many of the Catalan companies involved in the cultural sector. However, the economic and cultural contribution of the Catalan arts is robust, too, as this case study shows.

Future research should examine communication efforts of other regions and ethnic organizations. In particular, public opinion research on the outcomes of culture-specific public relations programming is needed.

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