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Tourism and public relations
A complex relationship?

Jacquie L’Etang and Jairo Lugo-Ocando

Introduction
No other economic activity is perhaps as dependent on reputation as tourism. Even after a year of the so-called Arab Spring and the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, the city of Cairo was already showing a US$3bn decrease in tourism revenue alongside 32 per cent fewer visitors (Shenker 2012). The effects on employment, family life and even politics have been devastating considering the fact that tourism had become over the past few decades one of the most important streams of income for that country. However, Egypt is not alone in facing collateral effects from political turmoil and social upheaval; many places around the world have also seen important changes in their own tourism flows due to news affecting the reputation of these places. The Swiss tourist who was gang-raped in India in 2013, China’s regular outbreaks of avian flu cases and crime in New York and Miami, all made for issues that at some point deterred tourists from visiting those places.

On the other side of the spectrum, some destinations have done remarkably well in turning around their reputation as a tourism destination after years of civil wars, terrorism or cataclysmic events. Colombia, Indonesia, Cambodia and Rwanda have many lessons to teach the world about how to change impressions and perceptions regarding a tourism destination. In the past few years, all of these places have managed to convince the public, or at least part of the public, that they are safe, attractive and interesting to visit. Even war-torn and still very dangerous Afghanistan has managed to attract a few tourists from the wealthy West (Nordland 2013). In all these cases, the concentrated effort to re-direct tourist flows back into these places by changing their tourism-reputation has required actions that go beyond marketing and advertising.

Public relations strategies to turn around the reputation in these places/destinations have included lobbying, public diplomacy, media relations and the management of relational networks. These efforts are set to foster and support tourism flows back, which has been achieved by articulating a variety of individual actors, organizations and institutions in order to orchestrate resources, efforts and set in motion certain dynamics. This is done despite the fact that sometimes these actors and organisations not only do not have anything in common but that in some cases they even represent competing or antagonistic interests. Under these circumstances, it takes a
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comprehensive series of PR strategies and actions to put these actors together and orchestrate their resources and actions towards attracting tourism flows.

In this context, we need to remind ourselves that public relations and related terms such as communication management, corporate communications, public affairs and integrated communications are twentieth-century terms associated with an occupation that has its roots in a variety of historical public communication practices. The idea of ‘relating to the public’, meaning the general public, has developed into more focused ‘stakeholder relations/management’. That is not to say that media relations and publicity are not still important, particularly in certain contexts such as marketing communications, but increasingly practitioners and academics advocate a ‘strategic’ role for public relations whereby public relations activities are closely linked to organizational strategy and objectives and operations such as intelligence gathering, issues and risk management as well as crisis handling and day-to-day media relations and event management.

In thinking about definitions it is important to understand that:

1. The term ‘public relations’ connotes different meanings in different cultural contexts (in some parts of the world it means ‘guest relations’ or hospitality, in others it means ‘working with publics and public opinion’ or ‘reputation management’; the terms ‘public relations’, ‘communication management’, ‘corporate communications’, ‘public affairs’ overlap even though a term may connote a particular emphasis, for example, ‘public affairs’ may imply work in a more political context, working with governmental publics (civil service and politicians).

2. The term ‘public relations’ has fallen into some disrepute in some cultures such as the UK, partly through its historical connections with propaganda and because more recently it has become associated with ‘spin doctoring’. For this reason, alternative terms for the occupation have become more common.

3. In some cultural contexts the term ‘public relations’ has become a term that is interchangeable with ‘media relations’.

4. Definitions need to be understood in terms of the specific cultural context since the term ‘public relations’ is not a neutral technical term but a concept that has historical and cultural baggage that varies from context to context – and therefore is of central importance to tourism.

Tourism, on the other hand, although a more established practice than public relations has nevertheless evolved in a parallel way, making use of public relations, marketing and promotional tactics since the second industrial revolution. Indeed, organized mass tourism evolved from the need to commodify the industrial workers’ free time and appropriate/alienate it in terms of capital and reproduction of social capital that could foster and help sustain social cohesion. Over the years tourism has become a complex social phenomenon difficult to describe succinctly, which is why some authors have called for ‘tourism systems’ in order to explain its dynamics (Goeldner and Ritchie 2009). We have our own reservations in using the notion of systems as explanatory frameworks for both tourism and PR as they are positivist-functionalistic interpretations that tend to exclude materialistic relations of power. Nonetheless, these systems are useful to explain certain dynamics and the orchestration of resources and actions with regards to PR and tourism.

Overall, tourism systems’ ability to attract tourism flows depend largely on their ability to present themselves and be perceived/understood by potential audiences as places of leisure, devotion and engagement with experiences of fulfilment (encompassing the full range of human emotions including empathy, pain, pleasure, solidarity). In so doing, they rely on reputation(s) that can articulate among the wider public a sense of what they are in terms of the touristic
expectations and experiences. This is where public relations largely intersects with tourism. This because despite its functional role as part of marketing and promotion, public relations also makes strategic claims to be responsible for reputation, risk and relationship management, issues and crisis management, public affairs and lobbying, and corporate social responsibility. Therefore, PR plays more broadly in the relationships within tourism and between tourism, its stakeholders and the wider global societies and cultural contexts. Consequently, over the years, the tourism-reputation systems to which we refer here have become increasingly complex, incorporating a diversity of new actors and social dynamics.

Taking all this into consideration, it is surprising how little we know about the way reputation in particular and public relations in general relate to tourism as an economic activity and the role that is played in the development of international networks (L’Etang et al. 2007). This chapter therefore explores the relationship between public relations and tourism. In so doing, it tries to highlight the challenges of multi-cultural communication, ethics, safety, social responsibility and globalization in the extensive range of tourism contexts that includes business tourism, spiritual tourism, eco-tourism, city tourism, wildlife tourism, adventure tourism, sex tourism.

We locate public relations as a central feature of organizational strategy that is fuelled by political and economic imperatives rather than being only considered as a set of communications tactics in relation to tourism as an economic activity and sociological phenomenon. We have used complexity as a conceptual framework that can help explore the articulation of relational networks and the articulation of media narratives that affects reputation. Complexity has already been deployed in tourism (Faulkner and Russell 1997: 93) and public relations literatures (Lauzen and Dozier 1994; Murphy 2000) and permits nuanced understandings of the way in which different parts of tourist-reputation systems react and adapt to environmental changes. We understand tourist-reputation systems as networks made up by a diversity of individuals, organizations and institutions that orchestrate – although not necessarily in an intentionally or coordinated manner – efforts to attract tourist flows to a country, region or place at regional, national or international levels.

Although the state remains the main orchestrator of these efforts and does so from a geo-political stance and in terms of its own needs and aspiration for economic growth and development, the different actions are nonetheless carried out in a multi-level manner by a diversity of actors even within the state itself. In fact, as we will argue here, the tourism industry intersects and interpenetrates government in relation to heritage, nation-building and national identity and programmes of public and cultural diplomacy as well as public events.

Hence, while a campaign from the Turkish government to attract tourists from the US would have to promote the country as an attractive and secure place to visit, diplomatic efforts would also be required to minimize sensibilities and issues in relation to its Muslim identity and the positions taken by its post-9/11 government. These same efforts would need to be complemented directly or indirectly by a variety of actions performed by international individuals and networks that set the reputation of Turkey as a tourist destination. Within a complexity framework, we can understand that the small travel agent in a suburb of Milwaukee (USA) would not only play a role in the establishment of the reputation of Turkey as a tourist destination but s/he would also have influence in the ability for the tourism-reputation system to adapt and survive post-9/11 challenges. One of the few works in public relations that has explored such issues is Lisa Fall (2004) who researched the increasing role of public relations as a crisis management function by examining the efforts among destination organization managers in the wake of 11 September 2001.

Nevertheless, further empirical work of this nature is required in order to understand how tourist-reputation systems react and adapt to environmental changes. This is especially true in a
time in which the relational networks and media ecologies that surround and shape reputation are undergoing important changes both in terms of inter-institutional relations as well as power-structures. By this, we do not only mean the emergence of digital media and social networks that facilitate active reconfigurations, the hyper-fragmentation of audience and the digitalization of information, but the over-arching process of globalization and interactivity that now frames all of the former. In this context, public relations needs to re-think and adapt its traditional research approaches and incorporate multi-disciplinary understandings if it is to explain fully the changing nature of tourism-reputation systems.

We have also linked this perspective in the broader context of the ethics of public relations and reputation because it is impossible to assess these tourism-reputation systems outside the ethical prerogatives that derive from tourism as economic activity. In so doing, the public relations field needs to raise questions regarding tourism-reputation systems and the economical sustainability of tourism in the face of commercial fairness, environmental issues and national/local politics. Is it ethical that tourism-reputation systems are designed and implemented only to attract touristic flows primarily for economic reasons while disregarding ethical considerations? What do tourism flows to Egypt under Mubarak tell us about reputation systems in terms of their ethical responsibilities? What can we say in relation to the politics of public relations and tourism visiting places under authoritarian and oppressing regimes? What can we learn about promoting touristic flows, the increasing pollution of beaches in the south of Spain and the financial crisis? This is indeed an overdue discussion in the public relations field; in particular in relation to the massive social, political and environmental impacts of tourism globally, nationally and locally and the issues that this raises for the PR industry in relation to risk, crisis, community relations and social responsibility.

Configuring public relations and tourism

The impact of strategic managed communication and relational activities in tourism has not received much attention even within public relations (Kang and Mastin 2008; Fall, 2004; L’Etang et al. 2007; Tilson and Stacks 1997). There has been some engagement within media and cultural studies, but the notion of public relations as a source for the media or as an occupation that is one of the cultural intermediaries in the touristic activities is still largely under-explored by scholars. Exceptions to this include of course the work of Crouch et al. (2005) and Long and Robinson (2009) and Pike (2005), the last of whom has influenced our approach in highlighting complexity as a useful metaphor for understanding the complex relationship between tourism and public relations.

However, the management disciplines (that have been highly influential on the public relations discipline even if it is largely understood as a communications discipline) have taken mostly a functional approach, while reducing communication to messaging and output-production rather than meaning-making; as consumer, rather than stakeholder and public focused. While we acknowledge the opaque boundaries and overlaps between public relations and marketing in many contexts, and the jurisdictional struggle between these aspiring semi-professions, our analysis is informed nevertheless from critical communications studies and our view that public relations plays an influential role in cultural intermediation and articulation of tourism-reputation systems. In this context we acknowledge the contribution made by the instrumental dominant paradigm in the use of systems theory as an explanatory framework to understand how PR in general creates reputation systems (Hazleton 1992; Hazleton and Botan 1989). Nevertheless, as indicated before, we believe that this functionalistic-system is overall unable to provide a comprehensive explanatory framework for the relationship between public
relations and tourism. This is because it excludes, for example, the type of power relations and political issues that set in motion the orchestration of dynamics and actors that make tourism flows happen on a local and international level.

Indeed, the international dimension is also central to our approach and the concept of intercultural communication has become synonymous with global communications, diasporas and multiple intersectional identity formations. It is only through this international approach that the tourism–reputation systems can be understood as systems of meaning and mediation of perceived and real experiences. This applies to the individual-local level where reputation systems provide meaning to the tourists during their experience as well as to the collective-global level where public relations mediates culture in global tourism flows. This ability to address the different levels has become increasingly important in times in which ‘the global–local tension [of globalization] has disrupted the traditional notion of geographically situated audiences contained within isolated national boundaries and identified by a set of permanent characteristics’ (Pal and Dutta 2008: 164).

Consequently, if we seek to understand how tourism-reputation system mediate and create reality, we need to undertake a social-interpretive approach. This in the sense that our notion of ‘reality is socially constructed, not objective; that knowing and acting are made possible through symbols and codes; that communicative action has a moral dimension and implications for self- and group identities since communication always conveys both explicit information about a topic and information that proposes “a definition of the participants and their relationship”’ (Banks 1995: 36–7).

On this account, tourism is a socially constructed reality, which is culturally mediated by public relations in order to articulate symbolic systems of understanding, experience and satisfaction, which in itself can only be understood in relation to expectations created by propagation of ideas about the event-place. As such, public relations – underpinned by values of commodification and ideology of neo-liberal capitalism – helps to construct the tourism-reputation systems as a cluster of expectations to which stakeholders refer when tourism takes place as an action of performance. The parents visiting a theme-park not only expect their children to be safe and have fun because they think that that is the purpose of parenthood in general but also expect to consume these leisure activities as a necessary ritual of validation of their own parenthood; users of a hotel expect the people to speak their language (or at least be able to communicate with them) even if it is in a foreign place because for them globalization is in a tangible sense an extension of their own reality to other places and the ability to access these event-places on their own terms; visitors to a rainforest expect to see wild animals even if that is unlikely to happen, because their whole experiences have been mediated in anticipation by expectations disseminated by mainstream media programmes of natural history and environmental propaganda.

Tourists, who are of course at the centre of the tourism systems, also perform individually and collectively rituals that bring together expectations and experiences in new ways by evoking different times. The parents who only enjoy Disney World through the enjoyment of their sons and daughters; the Jews, Muslims and Christians who re-live the suffering of the ancestors in their pilgrimages to historic or religious sites; the WWII or Vietnam War veterans and their families who re-visit their own or parental memories by visiting Normandy or Ho-Chi-Min City; the British family who despite having the resources to go somewhere else decide for the rainy Blackpool sea resort because it reminds them of the past; the couple who live in the beautiful South of France but decide to visit Sydney or New York to fulfil their aspirations of modernity and future.

The performance of travelling rituals happens because the tourism-reputation systems create expectations while mediating the overall experience of reality; going to a resort in Punta Cana (which creates an artificial and secluded micro-environment for the tourist) and fulfilling all...
expectation becomes – as artificial as it might seem to some – a legitimate visit to the Dominican Republic and it will be recounted over and over again as (socially constructed) reality. This is equally true for third and fourth generation Ashkenazi Jews visiting the Auschwitz concentration camp as they will re-live the suffering of their parents and grandparents in their minds throughout the mediated construction of regimes of pity (Boltanski 1999) which lead to solidarity and empathy (by now many descendants of Ashkenazi Jews have only heard the stories of the Holocaust through the media, their schools and third parties). This is applicable too to the relatives and descendants of The Great War (World War I) soldiers killed at the Battle of the Somme or for Australians in Gallipoli or those descended from World War II soldiers who perished in the battle of Ardennes – all re-tracing their steps, paying homage, identifying with a past era or with nationalism. While presented as historical tours, there are also deeper anthropological and cultural issues in relation to ancestor worship and national neuroses (of lost global influence) to which public relations studies need to pay more attention.

Indeed, these examples illustrate the deeper meaning making with which public relations is entailed in the articulation of tourism-reputation systems and particularly about its ability to produce and re-create ‘special events’ that can evoke past, present and future among potential tourism flows. This is because tourism itself has never been only about geography but also about time as a socially constructed reality. Public relations as a political activity is able to bring together cultural references, relational networks and mediated realities in order to build an expectation-experience for the tourism flows in terms of particular event-places. Some of the event-places are very special, singular in their global scope; for example, places marked by the tourist systems as genocide-holocaust experiences. In these cases, PR sets tourist experiences by means of media-created expectations that refer directly or indirectly to the event-place, while promoting tourist flows globally in relation to the tourism-reputation system. This guarantees both that the tourism flow is not exclusively limited to those who directly are related to the event-place (hence safeguarding its commercial viability) and that the resources to mobilize those flows are more abundant as they come therefore from a diversity of sources.

For us a quintessential example of the former is the Martin Luther King Memorial in Atlanta (USA), where the set of distinctive landmarks such as the memorial, Reverend King’s house and the Ebenezer Baptist Church are all brought together by a connected imagery articulated by a complexity of factors that operate individually but in an orchestrated manner to attract tourism flows. There is no tangible-centralized PR machinery in operation to bring all this together, rather it happens in terms of orchestrated complexity, allowing for tourist flows to visit the places despite vicissitudes and apparent disconnections among the different elements of the tourism-reputation system that encompasses the whole of the Martin Luther King Memorial. What does bring people to this place? Well a reputation system that allows among many other things African Americans to re-live the struggle of civil rights and white Americans and Europeans to exculpate their perceived sins by performing this pilgrimage. Such historical cases are particularly fascinating for public relations scholars because they are simultaneously part of public relations history (for example in terms of social movements or propaganda) so there is a double-layered meaning to this type of tourism and its rhetorical presentation.

This is why we do not think that what is often referred to as organized and disorganized complexity is able to explain wholly the way public relations as a communicative action tends to set in motion the different dynamics that allow tourism-reputation systems to promote tourism flows and adapt to challenges in changes. We suggest instead the concept of ‘orchestrated complexity’ – or ‘concerted complexity’ – is more useful here as an explanatory framework. We do acknowledge of course the risks and potential pitfalls when one translates these types of concepts into the sociology of public relations, but we find it relevant to the discussion that takes
place in relation to tourism; moreover, the type of complexity that applies to these public relations systems is only partially organized/disorganized and partially intentional. For example, it would be impossible that the Holocaust Educational Trust in the UK would be able to fund or let alone know about all the trips from school children in Britain that go to Auschwitz. Nevertheless, these school trips occur more often than not because the tourism-reputation system sets in motion, by means of the reputation of the event-place, a series of dynamics that integrate a variety of actors-elements that bring about tourism-flows as an unintended consequence.

In the context of the relationship between public relations and tourism, orchestrated complexity describes the dynamics and process that take place among a diversity of individual actors, organizations and institutions in order to adapt to change and direct or re-direct tourism flows. These actions and dynamics affect directly and indirectly the reputation of the place-destination, but they are not necessarily set in motion intentionally or in a coordinated manner. These actions happen in some cases in a chaotic way that manages to achieve orchestration by means of probability and interactivity among the different elements of the tourism-reputation. Indeed, orchestrated complexity is made possible because developmental processes are interactive (Crawford and Kerbs 2008: 184).

Therefore, orchestrated complexity can also help us to understand how PR allows tourism-reputation systems to overcome and adapt to particular situations/challenges that arise from global risks and their impact on the reputation of the event or place that otherwise would have traditionally brought about tourism flows but that now is threatened by new situations and changes to the environment. The volcanic eruptions can be a very disruptive phenomenon for tourism as in the case of the Eyjafjallajokull volcano in Iceland in 2010, which provoked the cancellation of hundreds of flights and million dollar losses because of the interruption of tourism flows. Yet volcanic eruptions in the Northern hemisphere (and many in the South too) have overall become one of the most cherished tourist attractions by means of worldwide networks of scientists and amateur observers who are more than willing to pay good money to observe first hand these phenomena because such chaotic events may at one level be uncontrollable yet managed.

The notion of orchestrated complexity could be also used to explore responses to communication crises that threaten reputation, allowing the real possibility of modelling communication strategies to mitigate collateral damage. Indeed, by learning from complexity, PR can offer tourism-reputation systems the ability to predict scenarios of chaos, while identifying the key dynamics that enable adaptation and survival to change. In a way, eco-tourism is already in most cases a product of the inter-play between mixed imperatives of economics, development, public relations, tourism and corporate social responsibility. As such, eco-tourism is a properly contentious subject (Higham 2007: 2) and thus far sadly neglected from a public relations perspective.

**Functional and critical perspectives**

Public relations activity, whether it is conducted by ‘professionals’ or ‘amateurs’, by corporations or by activists, is present at all political, economic, socio-cultural and technological change in contemporary, post-modern promotional cultures. In this sense, it relates to tourism as a sociological phenomenon because it engages with cultural beliefs and practices, communicative action, discourse ethics, organizational cultures and climates, formation of public agendas and debates and of course with interest-group activism.

Public relations practitioners in tourism or related economic activities work on behalf of many different types of organizations, institutions and individuals to engage with multiple stakeholders and to act on their behalf as an advocate to attract and preserve tourism flows. In
this context, public relations activity is integral to tourism at many levels. In addressing tourism flows, its concerns are central to public diplomacy, to international relations and state diplomacy, public and cultural diplomacy, corporate diplomacy and to inter-cultural communication as part of the political, economic and socio-cultural fabric, not solely management technocracy. More important in terms of tourism flows and as a consequence of a socio-cultural ‘turn’ (Edwards and Hodges 2011), it is becoming more common for public relations to be understood as a dynamic societal process or even, drawing on Appadurai’s notion of cultural flows, as ‘flow’ (Edwards 2012). If that is the case, then it is possible to argue that PR and tourism not only are interlinked but are in many ways intrinsic to each other.

Therefore, if we assume that public relations and tourism are indeed intrinsic, then we need to understand the nature of this relationship by exploring what public relations theory has to say about tourism. In this sense, public relations literature can be roughly divided into two main approaches along a continuum: work that focuses on improving the effectiveness of practice and work that pursues interpretive and exploratory themes. A functional approach to tourism public relations will likely focus on the way in which public relations supports a variety of tourism clients. Functional definitions may describe public relations as an adjunct of organizational management, a defender and protector of organizational reputation, a risk manager, a nurturer of relationships, and a producer of communication outputs. Functional approaches tend to assume a benign and rather ideologically neutral approach to public relations, but the main thing that they have in common is their organizational rather than a societal focus. Non-functional approaches, on the other hand, might explore, for example, the way in which power, enacted through communication and discourse, shapes tourism interactions at local, regional, national and global levels; the way the tourism industry promotes a consumerist discourse that disguises underlying political issues; hegemonic relations within the supply chain; exploitative practices promoted by sex tourism; industry evasion of negative tourism side-effects and efforts to ameliorate reputation through corporate social responsibility. Thus non-functional approaches will tend to take a societal or cultural approach to public relations.

Johansson and Heide (2008) identified three key approaches within the public relations literature: communication as a tool; communication as a socially constructed process; communication as social transformation. ‘Tool’ literature focuses on persuasive/education approaches to increase effectiveness by aligning organizational members’ views and behaviours with management goals. Some literature has suggested that communication during change needs to focus on the management of expectations in the context of uncertainty, to create readiness for change and to reduce resistance and dependence on rumour and grapevine. Literature pursuing this approach is functional and technical but does not engage with ‘the fundamental relationship between communication and organization that organizations are produced, maintained and reproduced through communication’ (Johansson and Heide 2008: 293). The exploration of the communications function as a socially constructed process focuses on understanding and sense-making processes so that planned change communication programmes can be seen necessarily to alter the communication and organizational context and the relationships within it. Although change processes are often presented as linear they are in fact non-linear, unpredictable and haphazard because all the time multiple interpretations are being formed and preformed within multiple relational contexts and communication dimensions constantly reinterpreted, reconfigured and re-mediated in digital space. Managers can initiate change processes and associated communications, but they do not necessarily control interpretations or responses to the discourse of change they set in motion. There will always be multiple narratives, there will be discourses that are more dominant and ‘communication managers’ (one of many terms used to describe public relations) will seek to create a dominant discourse that may be transformative, that is, managers’ discourses
are reproduced in the discursive practices of organizational members (Johansson and Heide 2007: 297). This is more evident in the area of tourism where the ability to establish or not a dominant discourse and derive from it a series of hegemonic narratives that frame and provides meaning to the expectation-experience of an event-place depends on the level of orchestrated complexity that a tourism-reputation system is able to achieve.

**Tourism, events and public relations**

Setting aside unplanned events such as natural and human disasters (that also impact the tourism industry with regard to its investment in intelligence and surveillance services, risk and crisis management) public relations motivations lie behind created events – ‘they exhibit many elements of religious evangelism and old style salvationism’ (Rojek 2013: ix). Information regarding these events is tightly controlled and advance information may be restricted, for example, at the Beijing and London Olympics, where the nature and contents of the opening ceremonies were kept a close secret despite the making distinctive claims of openness. In the case of London this had the advantage in terms of media handling because broadcast journalists, who were apparently unable to describe the unfolding episodic fantasy in front of them, appeared extremely reliant on a script that necessarily incorporated positive interpretations. Consequently, live media presented an uncritical view and much of the media discourse was around issues of national pride and historical achievement.

In the case of the London Olympics of 2012, part of the opening ceremony was used to promote the National Health Service – only a couple of weeks after the Olympics it was announced that the NHS ‘brand’ was to be marketed internationally, so the reason for its inclusion in the opening ceremony appeared to be driven by a marketing tactic. While mega-events (such as those for good causes) offer apparent transformative potential they operate within a status quo and may simply distract from more fundamental questions of social justice and structural change. The best example of this is the celebrity-led media event (sometimes defined as ‘celebrity activism’) to collect funding for foreign aid, which despite successfully raising important resources obviates a series of questions in relation to the nature of aid, the political regimes which will access those resources or the disparity and inequality in the comparative lifestyles between the celebrities promoting the event and those whom the event claims to favour.

We can claim that these constructed media events (Dayan 1994; Marriott 2007) are the catalyst to activate the different components of the tourism-reputation systems by creating a sense of community. These events – which are now devised specifically for the mass media – have been part of human history for millennia, a form of communication that performs and celebrates collective identifications through shared meanings of values and ideologies. Examples include the Roman Games, vast political rallies such as those conducted by the Nazis at Nuremberg or more recently mass weddings conducted by the Moonies. While all event-places have personal and cultural significance of some scale, some event-places in touristic terms are globally iconic and the focus of massive formal and informal media comment, social media, rumour, gossip and speculation. The Diana and Dodi Memorial located at the Harrods store in London became a main tourism attraction created by social networking rather than by any type of formal promotion.

As suggested earlier, historically, event-places have had a propaganda purpose as they propagate a particular ideology. Cuba, for example, besides the natural beauties, also attracts tourism flows thanks to the reputation-system that presents the island as a benign socialist experiment and nowadays as a historic relic of the Soviet era that still has resonance among some liberal and left-wing intellectuals. The fact that they are linked with business, trade and globalization makes no difference to this. The same can be said, however, of places such as New York and how it connects with
the imaginary of ‘America’ as a society, created by a complexity of sub-systems of reputation that include films, oral family traditions, advertising campaigns and literature. Indeed, the emergence of international Expos, for example, and the provision of entrepreneurial and investment opportunities at a particular time and place that is reconstructed (and subsequently re-marketed) as a destination event play a crucial role in terms of propagating the idea of an event-place as a secure place to do business, while selling the notion of open market and globalization. Those who visit these expos perform as businesspeople looking for connections and to take advantage of commercial networks established in those event-places. However, those who visit the Expos also do this as tourists, whose experience will be defined by their expectations, which is why we need to study the interrelation between tourism and PR in more critical terms (Lee et al. 2008).

In the United Kingdom, royal event-places such as weddings, jubilees, coronations are all public events that are the focus of inward tourism to the UK and ‘mega-media events’ (Roche 2000). Royal funerals are the object of thanatourism, probably the most famous example being Princess Diana (Marriott 2007). The fact that the costs of such events are paid from the public purse is often justified on the basis of tourism and national promotion. However, these are seen as centrally organized by the state and fundamental to establish discourses of social cohesion; tourism in these cases is understood only as a by-product but not as a main objective. Nonetheless, let us reiterate that these events are only catalysts; none of these media-events operate in a vacuum nor are able to establish dominant discourses in their own. To do that, they need orchestrated complexity; one that can mobilize, activate or relate to a variety of elements encompassed within the tourism-reputation systems by evoking time and connexion in a way in which the different parts of the system feel willing and able to be involved as a community of stakeholders (such as the community celebrations of the Queen’s Jubilee).

Globalization: risk, crisis and CSR

Tourism necessarily impacts upon natural, socio-cultural, economic and political environments and some of its side-effects are controversial and contested. For example, sports tourism has become a focus for inquiry into its relationship with a variety of issues such as sex tourism and disinvestment in local communities (one of the main criticisms of the Commonwealth Games in Manchester 2002 was that several local sport amenities were closed down in order to fund and sustain the main facilities of these games), highlighting it as both a reputational risk and a policy issue for future host cities (Matheson and Finkel 2012).

Indeed, tourism-reputation systems are vulnerable to risk partly because of their intangibility and complexity; therefore they are highly dependent on public relations and media discourses. As well as studying tourism, public relations assesses from a communicative action point of view the diversity of threats to safety and security such as crime, illness or kidnapping which is endemic in some locations such as Brazil and South Africa or terrorism threats in London or New York. It also needs to examine its impact in terms of local politics and culture. For example, tourism impacts on the natural environment, particularly in sensitive areas, and may threaten the very object of tourism or its authenticity. Adventure tourism results in human waste in remote locations, damaged coral reefs from recreational diving, rock faces damaged with permanent metal pegs, noise pollution (jetboating and speedboats). As much as we want to think of these activities as low impact because they are practised by few or because they are imagined to be ‘clean and neat’, the truth is that taking into account displacement, waste left behind and usage in general of the environment, these events can be as bad as the overuse of beaches in the south of Portugal. The effects at the end upon the tourism-reputation system can be devastating once a particular catalytic event is set in motion.
Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become the response by default from the tourist operators and key stakeholders involved in attracting tourism flows. It is, however, a complex concept that can be viewed from a variety of perspectives but that in practice is more often than not misunderstood and badly implemented. It is a culturally specific topic that has links with a variety of practices around the globe, thus it is important to be sensitive to local conditions and traditions. In relation to tourism, CSR is a global practice that given its nature and history raises constantly questions of corporate colonialism and patronage; which means that for PR scholars and practitioners it is crucially important to maintain a critical awareness concerning strategic intentions and its viability as a unique response to the challenges posed by tourism-reputation systems.

CSR may be defined as the corporate/company practice which, so it is claimed, recognizes a societal obligation above and beyond existing legal obligations and economic contributions and consequently develops programmes to respond to societal needs. CSR may also be defined as a concept of social obligation, which recognizes corporate/company impacts (this connects the concept to issues/crisis management) but also celebrates the power of corporations/companies to facilitate and catalyze positive change and outcomes in otherwise under-resourced communities. CSR may respond to ongoing social issues or focus on programmes that address the side-effects of corporate/company production e.g. environmental side effects. In other words CSR programmes may respond to a general societal problem or a specific response to address a corporate/company impact.

Since CSR programmes tend to be directed towards identified needs in specific communities, it is logical to assume that the implementation and strict monitoring of these programmes would be an ideal tool for public relations to deal with tourism-reputation systems. They could be used to explore response scenarios and model complexity of a potential crisis. However, the problem for PR practitioners is that overall CSR activities have a wider political impact, beyond corporate/company stakeholders. They are primarily and strategically concerned with anticipating and impeding possible regulation/legislation while guaranteeing growth and profit. This presents enormous ethical limitations for those trying to deal with the complexity of the tourism-reputation systems from a public relations perspective.

If well managed, CSR programmes represent a diversity of actions, encompassing youth programmes, community programmes, financial information/training, skills transfer, technology transfer and arts sponsorship. Trying to centralize a response is a non-starter, in our view, to deal with the complexity of challenges posed by the tourism-reputation systems. CSR may be posited as a response to ongoing social and political issues, but it is not a motivation, and the intentionality behind such programmes is as important as what they do (L’Etang et al. 2011). According to Kantian deontology, should motivation for an action be anything other than to meet a duty or obligation, then the action cannot be judged as moral. This means that we have to ask questions of programmes which are designed primarily to address issues with a view to an organization’s reputation. Likewise, publicizing CSR tourism programmes may be criticized because it suggests that the motivation behind such programmes is not to meet a moral obligation but to reap publicity (either through the media or personal networks) (L’Etang 1994, 1995, 1996, 2006). Others, however, take the view that communicating CSR is important in terms of accountability:

CSR can be better understood as a means of reinforcing both reputation and legitimacy, as it provides an opportunity to communicate to stakeholders the congruence of the organization with societal concerns.

(Farache and Perks 2009: 237)
In practice, however, there is little indication that in the tourism sector these programmes can be used as a measure of ethics or to contend the excess of the activity itself. In a study prepared for the CSR Practice Foreign Investment Advisory Service Investment Climate Department in Romania the authors recommend that ‘to ensure that a more sustainable form of tourism is pursued, there is a need for stricter legislation coupled with joined-up government’ (Dodds and Joppe 2005: 35). To hope therefore that CSR in itself can guarantee transparency, accountability and good behaviour is rather naïve or irresponsible.

Government, international relations and public diplomacy

As we claimed before, the state is central when dealing with tourism reputation systems. Although tourism is a global industry, it is still largely shaped, funded and constrained by nation-states and public money. Tourism is often seen as a major plank in economic policy and an element in the international positioning of a state. The nation-state and its cultural and historical heritage shape its tourism offerings, and the nation-state is a central sponsor and promoter in terms of marketing the destination and portraying the cultural identity; this by providing the regulatory framework for investment and resources in the face of subsidies, which are still key and largely present in the sector.

For the state, tourism is about more than attracting visitors and foreign capital, it is also about image-management, public and cultural diplomacy and development that together build the international status of a nation; thus tourism is a plank in political public relations and propaganda. Again the Beijing and London Olympics served to illustrate the intention of one country to portray itself as an emerging power and another as a still-wannabe world contender. Because of this, a tourism-reputation system makes use of public diplomacy aimed at foreign publics and aims to advance the nation’s interests by achieving understanding of, ‘its ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and policies’ (Melissen 2007: 11–12).

There has been renewed interest in public diplomacy since 9/11, reflected in the literature on public diplomacy, particularly in its communicative and relational aspects (Cowan 2008; Jonsson and Hall 2003; Kelley 2009; Wye 2008; Ronfeldt and Acquila 2009; Snow and Taylor 2009; Zaharna 2009; L’Etang 2009), for example:

Public diplomacy is part of a newly emerging paradigm of collaborative diplomacy, which requires an approach that is fundamentally dialogue-based . . . nation-building and the struggle against international terrorism are two prime examples where such an approach has the potential to contribute to international stability . . . new public diplomacy is increasingly about ideas and values, and involving non-governmental agents is seen as one of the most effective ways of promoting and developing it.

(Melissen 2007: xxi)

We believe that public relations approaches to tourism need to incorporate cultural diplomacy perspectives within their ambit. Cultural access to the language, literature, music, art, history, film and media, science and technology, medical sciences, are all ways of engaging with the nation’s values as a crucial aspect of the orchestrated complexity that takes place within tourism-reputation systems. Because of this, these same components are central to marketing the tourism potential of an event-place. There are some difficult communication challenges, however, since:

Cultures exist in continuous flux, continuously interpreted and reinterpreted through human interactions, and embedded within the context of the lives of the members of the
cultures. Culture is both a carrier of traditions and a site of transformation. It is within this dialectical tension between tradition and transformation that identities and relationships become meaningful, suggesting the necessity of conceptualizing public relations within an organic framework of evolving relationships rather than within a simplistic modernist frame that seeks to develop the best strategy for a national culture based on predefined markers.

(Pal and Dutta 2008: 167–68)

The key example of this are the difficulties and struggles which places such as the United Arab Emirates (UEA) face to attract, deal with and retain tourism flows into their countries. The responses of the UEA have been as complex as the challenge: by creating a diversity of options for expectation-experiences, such ‘reproductive tourism’ is designed to attract parents looking for less expensive and high quality fertility treatment (Inhorn and Shrivastav 2010: 685).

Conclusions

Tourism is largely sponsored by governments and commercial enterprise that use public relations concepts and approaches to facilitate the expansion of markets. However, as we see here it is a far from centralized activity. Because of this, those studying public relations need to understand tourism as a series of reputation systems that are based on a complex set of elements, institutions and actors that are not only directly and indirectly interlinked but that also act, intentionally or not, in an orchestrated manner. It is our view that by bringing about this perspective, public relations scholars can be better placed to interpret and analyze the field and especially the relationship between public relations and tourism. We do not think, however, that this approach is sufficient to solve all the questions posed here. What we can assuredly state is that insufficient research in this field has been done. At a time where the research councils in the UK and in Europe in general are looking for ideas for growth and recovery – with this being the main theme of the new research funding scheme Horizon 2020 of the European Research Council – public relations scholars are faced with a unique opportunity to develop groundbreaking knowledge with high impact for our communities by exploring the complex relationship between tourism and public relations.

References


