

# MAKING PUBLIC RELATIONS A TRUE PROFESSION IN MALAYSIA BY AN ACT OF PARLIAMENT: AN ADVOCACY

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## **Abstract**

The practice of public relations is becoming more sophisticated than ever with increasing areas of specialisations and functions. However, the tasks of public relations practitioners are perceived to range from the positive to negative. Sadly, more are now leaning towards the later. Unethical practices like spinning; astroturfing; fronting; and language managing are alleged to be increasing. Even the names or labels for public relations have become more varied than ever. It can range from public affairs, corporate affairs, perception management, to spin doctoring. To date, no one universal definitions of public relations exist. Every public relations professional body have their own definitions and so do public relations practitioners. This probably reflects the diversity of public relations practices and the environment it is operating. Despite the rapid growth of the public relations practice and its education and training globally its status as a true profession remains questionable. In Malaysia, the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) tries to overcome this issue by lobbying for a Public Relations Profession Act. This article attempts to explain the reasons why IPRM feels the need for the act, benefits of the act, actions taken to realise it, reaction of the government towards this effort, response by IPRM members and non-members, research conducted on public relations practitioners view of the propose act, overcoming fears/oppositions, some relevant points in the act, etc. This paper is written from the writer's involvement in trying to promote public relations as a true profession and also being a public relations educator for over 30 years. Thus, the research methodology is mainly the participatory approach, and basically advocacy in nature.

**Keywords:** Advocacy accredited Institute of Public Relations, lobbying, public relations, Public Relations Act, practice and profession.

## **Abstrak**

*Amalan perhubungan awam menjadi lebih canggih berbanding sebelum ini dengan peningkatan bidang pengkhususan dan fungsi. Walau bagaimanapun, tugas pengamal perhubungan awam dilihat dari pelbagai sudut positif kepada negatif. Malangnya, banyak pendapat yang condong ke arah yang negatif. Amalan yang tidak beretika seperti 'spinning', 'astroturfing', 'fronting' dan pengurusan bahasa dikatakan semakin meningkat. Malah, nama-nama atau label untuk perhubungan awam telah menjadi lebih pelbagai berbanding sebelum ini. Ia boleh terdiri daripada hal ehwal awam, hal ehwal korporat, pengurusan persepsi dan 'spin doctoring'. Sehingga kini, tiada satu definisi universal perhubungan awam wujud. Setiap badan perhubungan awam profesional mempunyai definisi mereka sendiri dan begitu juga dengan pengamal perhubungan awam. Ia mungkin mencerminkan kepelbagaian hubungan amalan awam dengan persekitaran di mana ia beroperasi. Walaupun pertumbuhan pesat berlaku dalam amalan perhubungan awam dan pendidikan dan latihan di peringkat global, statusnya sebagai profesion sebenar masih boleh dipersoalkan. Di Malaysia, Institut Perhubungan Raya Malaysia (IPRM) cuba untuk mengatasi isu ini dengan melobi untuk mewujudkan Akta Profesion Perhubungan Awam. Artikel ini cuba untuk menjelaskan sebab-sebab mengapa IPRM merasakan keperluan untuk akta, faedah akta, tindakan yang diambil untuk menyedarinya, tindak balas kerajaan terhadap usaha ini, tindak balas oleh ahli IPRM dan bukan ahli, penyelidikan yang dijalankan ke atas pengamal perhubungan awam bagi mencadangkan akta, mengatasi ketakutan dan penentangan serta beberapa perkara yang berkaitan dalam akta. Makalah ini ditulis hasil daripada penglibatan penulis dalam usaha untuk menggalakkan perhubungan awam sebagai profesion sebenar dan juga seorang pendidik perhubungan awam selama 30 tahun. Oleh itu, kaedah penyelidikan adalah pendekatan penyertaan.*

**Kata kunci:** *Advokasi bertauliah Institut Perhubungan Awam, melobi, Perhubungan Awam, Akta Perhubungan Awam, amalan dan profesion.*

## **Introduction**

The modern practice of public relations (PR) is claimed to have its origin in the United States of America (USA). Today, it has indeed blossomed. Now every organisation in any country may it be small, average, or big who want to be positively seen would hire PR practitioners to do the job. In today's world, the value of having a good reputation is increasingly appreciated. Being appropriately visible and possessing the right image and reputation not only brings commercial benefits and political advantages, but more vital sustainability, if not advancement and recognition.

In adapting to today's complexities and requirements, the practice of PR have become more specialised. Thus, now many labels are used to denote PR practice in its increasing areas of specialisations. Usually, the specialisations are based on the emphasis of the practitioner's tasks and organisation's needs. The labels for PR practice include corporate communication, perception management, public affairs, fronting, reputation management, lobbying, strategic communication, propaganda, psychological warfare, astroturfing, flack, spin doctoring and what not. These do not include PR specialisations like investor relations, financial relations, community relations, employee relations, health PR, leisure PR, education PR and the like.

Some of the labels bring positive connotations, while a few elicit negative perceptions. The labels usually arise from how the profession is practice, and the environment it is being practiced. It also means that some of the PR jobs or tasks are perceive as negative in nature.

As a profession that is hired mainly to cultivate and nurture positive reputation for its employers or clients, surely it must eliminate those that tarnish it. Otherwise, the credibility of PR will not only be at risk, but the practice as a reputable profession will always be questioned. It is pathetic that the profession that is hired to build and sustain a positive reputation itself has a fragile and questionable image.

To worsened matters, to date there is no one acceptable or universal definition for PR. Every PR practitioners seem to have their own definition

of PR. Their definitions are generally based on their own practice, experience and the requirements of their own organisations and the environment they are working. Expectedly, every PR professional body have their own definition. Thus, till now, PR can be anything to anybody. With that, PR as a true profession remains a mere illusion. Who cares? In most nations, a group of influential PR practitioners do and have instituted professional bodies for their beloved profession.

To address these negative tendencies in PR, its professional bodies have arisen in many nations. According to Reed's Worldwide Directory of Public Relations, today there are more than 200 professional PR bodies in 70 nations with memberships of over 150,000. An international PR professional body, Global Alliance estimated that there are over three million public relations practitioners worldwide. Obviously, a large number of people claiming to be PR professionals do not think it is necessary to be members as those professions that are having laws to ensure only those qualified and members can practice.

In Malaysia, the same phenomenon exists. Of an estimated 30,000 PR practitioners, with majority in the government services, especially in Department of Information, only about 1,000 deem it fit to be the IPRM members. The number of people claiming to be PR practitioners and its areas of specialisations is reflected by the mushrooming of educational and training institutions offering PR programs globally. The Reed's Worldwide Directory of Public Relations reported that the number of institutions offering PR training and education are rapidly growing. In USA alone, over 200 universities offer PR education. In Europe, more than a hundred universities do so. The same phenomena occur in the other parts of the world. In Malaysia, now more than ten universities offer PR education, with the Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) being the first to introduce a full program. Despite the rapid growth of the PR practice and its education and training globally its status as a true profession remains questionable.

A true profession here is defined as a profession that has a body of knowledge to its name, a professional body, education and training programs, code of practice, including a law empowering and enforcing it. Nearly all the

nations that have a significant number of PR practitioners have all it takes to be fully recognised as a true profession, except for an act to empower it code of practice or professional conduct.

Notwithstanding, it being perceived as not a true profession the growth of PR practice has been phenomenal worldwide. So, why do we need a law to recognise it as a true profession? What has the nations that have a law recognising PR as a profession benefitted from it? For that matter, what has the PR profession benefitted from it? These questions will be discussed later.

The practice of today's public relations has become universal. An increasing number of professionals even claim to be international public relations practitioners. Meaning they are operating globally in other people countries, usually representing multinationals or global corporations. Maybe, a majority of these people are true PR professionals, meaning they are very good at their jobs. The question is, are they ethical or are they mercenaries who would do anything it takes to make their clients or bosses happy, and making the host nations to lose or jeopardising their interest. Along the way the good image of PR practitioners, local or foreign, are compromise. Thus, among many things, Malaysia's PR Profession Act wants the PR profession to be recognised legally, it also wants to protect and promote the interest of the good PR professionals, may it be locals or foreigners, as well as public and national interest.

### **Institute of Public Relations Malaysia and the PR Profession Act**

In Malaysia, the idea of the Public Relations Profession Act (PRPA) began with IPRM birth in 1962. IPRM founding fathers were keen to ensure that only qualified, appropriately experienced and ethical practitioners can claim to be PR professionals. It was they and the successive IPRM councillors who requested the government to enact the PRPA to ensure only the qualified, experience and ethical can called themselves PR professionals. They also mooted a charter licensing. By proposing this, IPRM hopes to make PR a true, reputable and honourable profession.

According to IPRM Homepage, its overriding objective is to enhance professionalism among PR practitioners in Malaysia. To meet this main objective, IPRM organizes various seminars and trainings for members and non-members. It also supports research and other educational activities in PR. In addition, IPRM is practicing the accreditation scheme it introduced in 2005 and actively lobbying for the PRPA.

In 2010, IPRM in a media statement made known its intention to have the PR profession legislated along the lines of professions such as the lawyers, accountants, architects and company secretaries. This is to close the existing legitimacy gap where PR is currently not perceived as a profession. The proposed Malaysian PRPA, IPRM believed can act as a catalyst towards legitimising the PR profession in Malaysia. At present there exists different methodology of PR practice among MNCs, GLCs, SMEs, the government, NGOs and other entities which require integration into a comprehensive benchmark that will address the demands of industry. According to IPRM, the body of PR knowledge has grown exponentially, but the practice and ethical challenges have not kept in tandem with the demands on corporate governance, disclosure, professional conduct and national interest.

Also, according to IPRM media statement (2010) after more than 50 years of PR practice in Malaysia, there is no registry of PR practitioners operating in the country. IPRM hopes that with the PRPA there can be mandatory licensing and registrations of anyone claiming to be a PR professional. With the 'critical mass' it allows for a more systematic industry growth, supported by best practice standards and well-trained practitioners in a mandatory accreditation mechanism as do other professions.

Laws recognising PR practice as a profession is not new. Five nations are already having some form of laws recognising PR as a profession. They are Brazil, Greece, Nigeria, Panama and the United Kingdom. The PR law not only protects public and national interest. It also protects the qualified and ethical PR practitioners from charlatans. Further, the law will help to sustain the reputability, the ethic, and high standard practice in PR.

In USA, Edward Bernays, considered by many as the PR founding father, in his later years strongly felt the need for PR legislation. Bernays lamented, “If our profession was regulated, it would give our vocation a status comparable to lawyers, architects and doctors. Without it any crook, nitwit, dope, charlatan or ignomus can use the words public relations.”

Bernays spent many years trying to have the vocation of public relations licensed, elevating it, in his words, “to the level of a profession.” The bill he introduced to establish registration and licensing in 1992, when Bernays was 100, did not pass, yet the controversy over licensing persists. When this writer as a Boston University student met Edward Bernays in 1976, he was told that by having a PR law, PR professionals would be better respected. Further, it will attract more qualified and ethical practitioners while attracting more universities to offer PR education. Even then, the writer felt there was a lot of truth in what Bernays believed.

In 1999, when the writer was IPRM President the first proposal of PRPA was sent to the Ministry of Information and the Attorney-General Office. This proposal was formulated from the analysis of various professional acts in Malaysia which included the Bar Council and Malaysian Institute of Accountants. It also studied the Nigerian Communication Act 2003 and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations of UK. Further, IPRM studied the constitutions of the Global Alliance, International Public Relations Society and Public Relations Society of America. IPRM also did literature reviews of published materials, especially by Edward Bernays, the USAPR founding father that was pertinent to formulating a proposal for PRPA.

On 23rd October 1999, IPRM 16th Council members headed by Mohd Hamdan Adnan as IPRM president were invited by the Attorney-General Office to discuss the proposal in details. After much discussion with relevant bodies, a new PRPA proposal was officially submitted to the Ministry of Information on 2nd November 2000.

On 30th January 2001, the Ministry of Information invited IPRM and a few relevant agencies to discuss the PRPA proposal. Participants were from Bernama, Public Service Department, Ministry of Finance, Universiti

Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Institut Teknologi Mara (UiTM). Representing IPRM were Syed Arabi Idid, Doris Lim and Mohd Hamdan Adnan. The IPRM Proposal for PRPA was well received. However, nothing significant came out of it.

Finding great difficulties and the slowness in trying to facilitate the birth of the PRPA, IPRM in 2005 decided to introduce a voluntary accreditation scheme. Only those that have the required qualifications and experiences, plus two case studies and an interview are accredited. So far, only about a hundred members are given the accreditation. Those who are accredited can carry the initial APR (Accredited Public Relations) behind their names. This accreditation scheme is a step to the PRPA. IPRM Councils are actively encouraging those that are qualified to go for the APR. So far the response is not very encouraging.

Much credit should go to Doris Lim who chaired the Accreditation Scheme and championing the Public Relations Profession Act. Between May to October 2002, she had written 13 articles on the importance of the Act to the PR profession and nation. She also had organised numerous workshops to facilitate the APR scheme and to promote the PRPA.

In April 2003, a forum jointly organised by the Ministry of Information and IPRM was conducted to seek the best methods to promote and upgrade PR practice in Malaysia. Of the 150 participants, 127 wanted the PRPA. They urged the Ministry and IPRM to start the process of enacting it soonest.

Five significant resolutions of the forum were;

1. Public relations practice should be duly supervised by an appropriate authority.
2. Public relations education and training should be duly accredited and monitored.
3. Political leaders and top managements are still hazy about the importance of PR.
4. People in authority should be duly educated on the importance of PR.



5. Public relations practitioners should always improve their expertise and be involved in life-long education.

The participants of the forum urged the Ministry of Information and IPRM to work jointly to further discuss the resolutions and take the appropriate actions to resolve it.

At the IPRM 2004 AGM, members present urged the council to be more aggressive in championing the PRPA. In fact, 99 percent of them would like to see the Act becoming a reality soonest. The IPRM 2010 AGM saw a repeat of this demand.

Also, in 2010 the Minister of Information, Communication and Culture, Dato' Seri Utama Dr Rais Yatim at the launching of two of the writer books declared his interest in having the PRPA to become a reality. To prove his enthusiasm, Dr Rais on 7th July 2010 chaired a roundtable meeting on the PRPA Proposal. Attending the meeting were senior officers from his ministry, senior PR practitioners from all sectors, PR educators and representatives of IPRM. At the meeting Dr Rais suggested the following;

1. To do a comprehensive study of the status of PR practice in Malaysia.
2. To know the views of PR practitioners on the PR Profession Act.
3. To get the support of all PR practitioners for the PR Profession Act.
4. To conduct a road show throughout the country explaining the importance of having the PR Profession Act. This road show should involve PR practitioners at all levels and geographic areas as well as sectors.
5. To conduct forums in the mass media regarding the PR Profession Act. This would enable the general public to better understand it and provide ideas to fine tune it.
6. To facilitate the process of realizing the PR Profession Act.
7. To establish a special committee headed by the ministry legal officer to fine tune the PR Profession Proposal together with representatives of PR industry and IPRM.
8. To fine tune the various concepts essential in PR practice, including definition of PR.

During this roundtable, IPRM President, Hamdan presented the current negative scenario in Malaysia that should hasten the need for the PR Profession Act. It includes;

1. The PR industry and practice is still unstable and disunited, despite its rapid growth.
2. Public relations as a true and honourable profession are persistently disputed.
3. The definition and scopes of PR practice are still hazy.
4. Public relations practice involves some unethical activities.
5. Only a small number of PR practitioners are members of PR professional bodies.
6. Disunity, if not enmity, among PR professional bodies.
7. PR practice continues to have negative images.
8. Allegations of PR education and training not meeting industry requirements.
9. Despite IPRM having an accreditation scheme and promoting it actively, the response from PR practitioners are negligible and not very encouraging.
10. No clear authority or no specific government agency to ensure PR practice in Malaysia is jeopardizing the good name of the profession and the nation image.

On the bright side, Hamdan noted that the climate for having the PRPA in Malaysia is now very conducive, and thus very timely. The encouraging environment includes;

1. Nearly all PR practitioners in Malaysia are employed full time in the government, profit or non-profits organisations, or working as consultants.
2. Nearly all the PR practitioners are having some forms of qualifications and appropriate experiences pertaining to their practice.
3. Increasing number of PR practitioners are graduates, may it be from the communication discipline or the appropriate degrees relevant to their work.

4. The body of knowledge in PR is fast expanding. Numerous books in PR in Malaysia plus from other nations, though mostly from USA is fast increasing.
5. The number of universities and colleges plus training institutions offering PR education and training is fast growing. Now in Malaysia at least ten universities and training institutions are offering PR subjects.
6. The level of PR education in Malaysia now range from certificates to doctorates. More universities are offering doctorates in PR.
7. Public Relations educators and trainers are better educated and trained as well as more experienced.
8. PR are giving a unique service to their employers and communities as well as the nation that is recognised for its own area of expertise.
9. PR Professionals have the independence to practice their profession without much interference from the management.
10. Increasing number of organisations from all sectors is beginning to employ train and experience PR practitioners. Even small organisations regardless of sectors are beginning to employ PR experts.

Hamdan also reported that a study conducted by IPRM with UiTM in 2010 found that about 80 percent of the 500 respondents from PR practitioners of all sectors and levels have a positive view of the profession being legislated and licensed. 38 percent believed that the PRPA will ensure that it will establish standards of requirements and quality. 20.5 percent felt that the PRPA will be a reference point, acknowledging it as a profession and determining its standardisation. 10 percent felt that the PRPA will establish the role and duties of the PR profession. 9 percent stressed that the PRPA will recognise the value of PR skills and services, while 4 percent said the recognition of PR depends highly on individual practitioners. The rest, about 18 percent gave no comments. This 18 percent might reflect many things, including apathetic towards the profession, ignorance and objections towards PRPA even though they prefer silence or passivity or to play safe.

### **Benefits of the Public Relations Profession Act**

To realise the recommendations of the Minister, IPRM together with the Department of Information went on a roadshow on all the state capitals

including Kuala Lumpur and Labuan to explain the advantages of the PRPA. At the road shows, Professor Hamdan offered 25 benefits of the PRPA:

1. **Determines the term public relations have specific definition under PRPA.** In the words of Edward Bernays: “The words public relations are presently in the public domain. Thus, anyone, regardless of education, experience, character or conscience can call him or herself a PR practitioner. This is the primary reason that PR suffers from an unfortunate number of charlatans and incompetents within its ranks. Not only does the status quo leave the public vulnerable to quacks, know-nothings and even anti-social individuals, but it also erodes the legitimacy of qualified practitioners who have long labored to attain the high standards appropriate to this field of practice. There is a need for PR practitioners to fulfill certain educational requirements and be held accountable for ethical behavior.”
2. **Determines that PR is being recognised as a true and reputable profession in Malaysia.** Currently, PR practice or profession is not recognised as a true profession that is protected and promoted by law. Even though certain anti PRPA individuals may say it will not stop unethical conduct among PR practitioners, under it they will be duly punished when proven guilty. This will surely reduce the numbers tempting to do it or breaking it.
3. **Determines the objectives, scopes and responsibilities of a PR professional.** Currently, everyone can define PR objectives, scopes and responsibilities as they like. A profession without clear objectives, scopes and responsibilities will remain dubious or questionable at best.
4. **Determines the qualifications and experiences required to be a PR practitioner or professional.** Currently, everyone can claim to be a PR practitioner without proper qualifications, experiences or accreditations. Under this condition, PR practice as a profession will always be questioned.

5. **Determines that PR employers and clients enjoy competent and ethical PR professionals as prescribed in the PRPA.** Having minimum standards to be a PR professional ensure employers or clients can enjoy quality standard of service or services.
6. **Determines that PR professionals be accredited under a recognised accreditation scheme.** Currently, IPRM is implementing such scheme. However, as currently it is not mandatory, the number of PR practitioners acquiring it is negligible. This is despite the fact that increasing number of PR practitioners in Malaysia has exceeded the requirements.
7. **Determines that PR professionals in Malaysia are duly licensed and registered.** It is essential for determining the number of people actually involved in PR and to know the levels of practices as well as their qualifications and experiences. This will help in planning for human resource development, and the types of PR education and training required. It will ensure only the qualified and ethical can be called PR professionals.
8. **Determines that PR professionals adhere to the PR Code of Conduct and prescribing the punishments for breaching it.** That is the Code of Practice/Ethics/Conduct is enforceable by law under the PRPA.
9. **Determines that PR practitioners or professionals practice life-long education to ensure their relevancy and competency.** Like in other recognise professions the world of PR and its tools and levels of expertise is fast expanding and progressing. Any PR professionals not updating themselves will quickly become redundant or obsolete.
10. **Determines that PR professionals practicing in Malaysia contribute to public or community services.** For any professions to be accepted and respected, it must contribute to community and national services apart to their own profession.

11. **Determines that PR professionals subscribe to the concept of social responsibility.** Today, governments expect all professions to practice social responsibility. In fact, in Malaysia today corporations registered as a public listed company must do their social responsibility or corporate social responsibility.
12. **Determines that PR practitioner's safeguards public and national interest.** Any PR practitioners found to harm public or national interest can be duly punished under the law, including revoking their licence to practice as PR practitioners.
13. **Determines that PR practitioners are members of their recognised PR professionals' bodies.** It is a universal phenomenon that a profession without the backing of an act will generally continue to have a small membership, no matter how active it is. The PRPA will ensure that only those registered with their professional bodies can be a professional for the PR profession. For now, author can only see IPRM able to fulfil this function.
14. **Determines the credibility, accountability, responsibility and transparency of the PR profession.** This is a critical component of being a reputable profession. Especially today, when governments, including Malaysia are practicing good governance, or claiming so.
15. **Determines that all PR unethical/negative practices or activities like astroturfing, spin doctoring, flacks, fronting, opponent defining and the likes are ban in Malaysia.** If this is not done, the reputation of PR practitioners will always be at risk.
16. **Determines that PR professionals do not subvert any communication channels to serve their own ends or their employers or clients' interest.** In other words, PR professionals must uphold the integrity of any media they utilises. When proven deliberately sabotaging it their licensing can be revoked and they can be fined or jailed or even both.

17. **Determines that PR professionals uphold public and national interest above their own, their employers/clients' or the market forces.** This is crucial as human nature tend to be heavier on self-interest, especially when the incentives are too tempting to decline.
18. **Determines that PR education and training are accredited to ensure it meets the professional requirements and the industry needs.**
19. **Determines that PR educators and trainers are qualified and accredited.** This is essential to ensure that PR education and training meet the specified requirements.
20. **Determines the motivation for more universities and colleges as well as training institution to introduce PR education and training.** By being officially recognise as a true and reputable profession more students would consider PR as their future career. Parents also would not look at PR as something sinister or subject to disrepute.
21. **Determines that only those that have been recognise as a PR professional can hold the position means that nobody without the right qualifications and experience can be hired as one.** Now, anybody can be appointed to the PR position. Bosses still thinks that anyone can be a PR person without proper training and experience. Inevitably not only the organisation suffers but the reputation of the PR profession gets tarnished.
22. **Determine the level of PR professional in an organisation.** By being recognised as a profession by law, PR professionals can more easily reach the highest position in their organisation. Also, promotions would be easier to achieve by belonging to a profession that is legally recognised.
23. **Determine the appropriate body or bodies authorised to enforce APPR.** On choice and mechanism of monitoring and enforcement, we should look at existing ones, like in the law, medical, engineering, and the like that already have the laws with them.

24. **Determine that the laws of the nation are adhered to.** Those found guilty of breaking the laws in the course of their PR can be suspended of which the duration can be based on the severity of the breach. Otherwise, they can still practice as PR practitioner and continue to tarnish the profession.
25. **Determine the sustainability of the PR profession as a true and ethical profession requiring special expertise.** This will surely not only facilitate the rapid growth of the PR industry, but also sustain it. When the writer was involved in trying to strengthen the insurance act so that consumers are not easily victimised, he was sued a few million ringgit by the insurance agents association for allegedly tarnishing their image. The writer stuck to his gun, and when the concerned act was further strengthened the insurance industry began to prosper more rapidly now that its image is much improved.

During the roadshows to promote the PRPA, hardly anyone objected to it. Most would like more information. This writer missed two of the 13 locations selected for the road show. During his absence, he was represented by IPRM senior members. Generally, the Deputy-General of the Department of Information, Datuk Pooziah Haji Abdul Rahman represented the Department of Information. The roadshows were generally well attended by PR practitioners. Usually, about 300 practitioners participated in the roadshows.

Fulfilling Dr Rais suggestion, IPRM went on the national radio and television for more than ten times explaining the advantages of the PRPA to the general public. The main feedbacks received from these electronic media sessions are from those who want to be PR professionals and those already in the profession who that feel that they are not qualified under the PRPA. They are told that the PRPA is not meant to be exclusive, but more to be inclusive. Further, there will a grace period before it is fully implemented. For further inquiries they are welcome to come to IPRM and they will be assisted to make their ambition come true. Feedback from the electronic media sessions showed that the general public welcome the PRPA to make the PR profession a true and a reputable profession.



## **Questions and Answers Sessions**

The questions and answers sessions can get very lively. Below are some of the most frequent questions and its answers:

**1. How would the proposed Public Relations Profession Act regulate the industry? What are some of the compulsory requirements? In short, what exactly is in the propose draft?**

The propose PRPA would regulate the industry in terms of qualifications, expertise, experience and a code of conduct to earn the status of a truly professional PR practitioner. Like in other recognised profession, it would look at the required level of qualifications and experiences before practitioners can be accredited as a professional PR. Otherwise, one does not meet the requirements to reach the professional status. Like in engineering one will not be called an engineer but instead a technicians. In medicine, one is called a medical assistant. In PR, one that has not met the requirements can be called a PR assistant. IPRM now has an accreditation scheme. The ministry concern might want to adopt it. However, the accreditation scheme is still something that can be fine-tuned to serve PR practitioners better and to make them competitive globally. The PRPA must be seen as the profession has come of age in Malaysia and not as hindrance to global trade. IPRM is fully aware that people with all sorts of qualifications and experiences are now in the PR business. Therefore, the qualifications requirements can be case by case. What is essential is that they have undergone basic PR courses like principle of PR, writing for PR, code of PR practice and the like. In addition, IPRM is aware the PR industry has become very open and wide, with many areas of specializations. Therefore, the PRPA will be imposed only on those who claimed that they are PR or public affairs professionals and doing PR functions.

**2. What efforts have the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture as well as IPRM taken to gather feedback on the PRPA? Do you show the practitioners copies of the draft? How has the feedback been?**

IPRM must thank the Minister, Dato' Seri Utama Dr. Rais Yatim. He had met with most of the interested parties to discuss the PRPA and

chairing the roundtable meeting. Before that, IPRM had tried to meet with all interested parties. Some parties simply refuse to meet. The draft was given to all interested in the PRPA. Before the first meeting with the minister, the draft was given to those who ask for it and for those attending the meeting. As in any act, the response to it has been mixed. But, it must be said that the response have been very positive. As mentioned, it is important to fine-tune the draft to make it worthy of the PR profession. Actions to explain the draft PRPA to PR professionals outside the Klang Valley are underway. We are making sure PR professionals outside the Klang Valley will also have the opportunities to give their inputs. So far the response from PR practitioners outside the Klang Valley has been very positive.

**3. How long has the current draft been in existence? Who drafted it - IPRM or the ministry?**

The current draft is about eight years old. Whatever changes to be made to the draft it must serve Malaysia and the PR professionals. Surely, it will also take cognizant of the rapidly globalising world, where PR professionals can serve anywhere in the world. The draft was initially drafted by IPRM but it was given to the ministry to ensure that it conforms to the Malaysian requirements and the format meets the legal standard.

**4. With opposition from certain factors would IPRM foresee that there might be significant changes in the draft to make it more palatable (for lack of a better word) to the industry as a whole?**

What is more important than palatable is that it serves the nation and the profession well. The aim is that it is a working act. It can be a model for those who feel the time has come for the PR profession to be duly recognised through legislation.

**5. It is allege the countries that have a legal framework in place to regulate the industry - such as Greece, Nigeria, and Panama – have seen no significant success from the legislations. What are IPRM comments?**

The question to be asked was why they decided to have legislations for their PR practitioners. If they reduce crooks in their PR industry, that could be a measure for success. If their PR practitioners are now more professionals, that could also be a measure for success. It is not for others to say they succeed or fail. Each nation will have their own reasons to regulate the professions in their country. If we are looking at it from the market forces perspectives, history shows that they tend to neglect public and national interest.

**6. Opponents to the PRPA argues that legal enforcement will make people to be accredited for the sake of accreditation, and will not bring about the same success as the market forces. What are IPRM comments?**

Accreditation is to ensure competent and ethical practice. At least it guarantees potential employers that they are employing people who are already verified for their competency and experience. Market forces are to make as much profit as possible. It tends to makes people to be very greedy and for that they might even sell their country, and jeopardise public and national interest. Legal enforcement is to ensure public and national interests are not forgotten for the sake of profits. The world have been jeopardise many times because of over dependency on the market forces. The market forces have not been kind with weaker nations and the big forces like the USA, Western European nations have gained the most from it. Let us not be a tool of those countries. It is better to enhance our level of professionalism.

**7. How do we judge a significant success in those countries that have a Public Relations Profession Act?**

IPRM is certain that they have it because there have been urgent needs in those countries. It has not caused the profession to die as claimed by some. IPRM is sure that all the professions that have acts regulating them are doing well because of it. In Malaysia, we hope it will enhance the recognition of the PR professions, ensuring those calling themselves PR professionals are duly accredited and that they adhered to the code of professional conduct.

**8. In the draft it is not stated what model is selected. So, which model would it used?**

Surely PRPA would follow a model which can best enhance the PR profession in Malaysia. We are studying various models and laws pertaining to PR profession. The CIPR model seems to be the closest with our needs. We are also looking at the various legislated professions in Malaysia to know which would best meet the PR profession requirements.

**Voicing Concerns About the PRPA**

The issue of the PRPA has evokes much concern and debates. Based on author observation, particularly among PR consultants working for global PR agencies, and journalists who think they want to be PR practitioners in the near future. Author also noticed that the candor of the debate, sometimes have bordered on the hysteric. Bernays noted that the same incidents occurred in USA when he proposed legislation for the PR profession. According to Bernays in USA the opposition to licensing is based primarily on fear. In Malaysia, I concurred with Bernays.

**1. PRPA Kills the PR Profession**

Despite my long list of benefits the PR profession can reap from the PRPA they are a small group of PR practitioners, especially representing the global PR agencies alleging that it will not only retard the PR industry but can kill it. To date, no profession with legislation had retarded or died. In fact, all professions that are regulated have prospered because of it.

**2. Increased Bureaucratisation**

I agree with Bernays that many fear a bureaucratisation of what is, in its essence, a social science that is creative in application. This fear is unnecessary. Architects and certified public accountants do not presently wrestle with more bureaucracy than others because of their licensed status.

**3. Limit Freedom of Speech**

They are those who have claimed that licensing is a thinly veiled “witch hunt” to weed out politically undesirable practitioners or to limit the freedom of speech for PR counsels. Here, author fully support Bernays who said that this is utter rubbish. There are no political overtones to licensing procedures for doctors, lawyers, accountants and other professions. Equally so in this case, there would be none either.

**4. Institute Unfair Competition**

Also levelled against PRPA have been complaints that it would institute unfair competition that would hurt small start-up companies and that it would limit the diversity of experience of PR practitioners’ schooling. First of all, it must be reminded that all who wants to call themselves must be accredited, regardless of whether one is starting a small company, or one is already having a big setup. Secondly, small companies would have no more or less to gain from the PRPA than anyone else. It is a decision as to what standards a PR practitioner wants to uphold.

**5. Barrier to Liberalisation**

They are also those that claim PRPA is a barrier to liberalisation, particularly of the global kind. Contrary to some opinions, the PRPA or ‘professionalising the practice’ does not infringe on the government’s policy of service liberalisation. The PRPA, magnanimous in its contents, has factored in the presence of foreign expert PR practitioners in the transfer of knowledge and skills, when they register with IPRM. Everyone benefits from the shared learning in issues of intercultural communications and a sensitisation to local cultural practices. This allegation mostly by representatives of global PR agencies, author feel mirrors their greed to exploit any nation without protection of the law to their maximum.

Nearly all the objections are almost baseless and are self-serving if not ridiculous. However, it is the duty of the PRPA sponsors to explain its importance to whoever requires the clarification.

## **Conclusion**

Today, PR practitioners do not enjoy the status and responsibility of esteemed professions such as law, medicine, architecture and engineering - professions that require licensing and registration. Since these are legalised professions, there is an educational requirement beyond the rudimentary body of knowledge. There is a specific regimen of courses required to pass the Bar exam, the Medical boards, and other examinations which define the necessary expertise that uphold the high standards of these professions. Today, no such standards exist for the field of PR. There is a need for PR practitioners to fulfil certain educational requirements and held accountable for ethical behaviour and can only be done through the PRPA.

Author believe it is now time for the PR profession to move forward through the PRPA. As said by Bernays the PR profession has now reached its Rubicon. It has developed into a fully realised interdisciplinary field of study. Thus, it should be ready to move toward becoming a true profession with legal backing.

However, a great deal of dead weight hindered the progress of PR becoming a true and respectable profession. As a vocation, PR is saddled with disagreement as to its identity and confusion regarding its direction. Hence, it cannot step boldly without first re-evaluating what it is and where it is going to go.

It must be reminded that the PRPA does not only protect the public from the misuse of PR by knowing persons with ill intent. There is an equal danger of the unknowing misuse of PR, both in name and in practice, by well-meaning, but uneducated ones. This is a field of great social impact. Those persons who heavily influence the channels of communication and action in a media-dominated society must be held accountable and responsible for their influence. Only through the PRPA can the enforcement of a strict ethical code be achieved.

Here, again author would like to repeat that we cannot overly depend on the market forces to turn PR into a true and respected profession. If we study history we would realise the number of times the market forces have put the world economy into a brink of total collapse. As usual it is the small and developing nation that is going to suffer the most. We should not allow the powerful nations to bully us and make us their easy prey. Remember: **“Uncontrolled globalisation can turn into “globalisation”. I am sure we do not want to be gobbled.**

Author see the purpose of the PRPA as simply to spark the future development of PR. As said by Bernays: “The real advances of the field will take place in the school rooms and lecture halls across the country - even globally. The licensed practitioner is not necessarily the competent practitioner. A licensing system is, however, a first step in establishing the direction in which public relations can move forward while held within the framework of its guiding principles.”

Currently, the proposal draft of the Malaysian PRPA is being fine-tuned. IPRM hopes to submit the final proposal draft to the minister within a few months so that can be given to the cabinet for approval to be brought to parliament to be considered as a law.

Finally, author would like to emphasise again that only through the PRPA can we aspire to transform PR into a true and respected profession.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from a paper presented at the AMIC-UiTM International Seminar, Shah Alam, July, 2012.

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