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An interview with Dr. Paulo Nassar, president of the Brazilian Association of Business Communication (ABERJE)

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ABSTRACT

In October 2014, the Journal of Professional Communication's senior associate editor, Dr. Terry Flynn, APR, FCPRS, sat down with the Dr. Paulo Nassar, the president of the Brazilian Association of Business Communication (ABERJE), professor of public relations at the University of Sao Paulo, and 2012 recipient of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) 'Atlas Award for Lifetime Achievement in International Public Relations,' to discuss his thoughts on the current state of the profession in Brazil and his hopes for its future. Nassar discusses his background as journalist and a teacher. He discusses the importance of the publication of his first book to his professional development. Nassar also discusses how developing links between ABERJE and the academic research and teaching communities was a key factor in establishing its validity and credibility as an organization. He finishes by sharing his thoughts on the key skills for success in the rapidly developing practice of professional communication.

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In October 2014, the Journal of Professional Communication's senior associate editor, Dr. Terry Flynn, APR, FCPRS, sat down with the Dr. Paulo Nassar, the president of the Brazilian Association of Business Communication (ABERJE), professor of public relations at the University of Sao Paulo, and 2012 recipient of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) *Atlas Award for Lifetime Achievement in International Public Relations*, to discuss his thoughts on the current state of the profession in Brazil and his hopes for its future.

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TF - Paulo, you have had an illustrious career in public relations and communications. From your early days in video production to your days as a popular radio news journalist to now as one of Brazil's most recognized public relations thought leaders, can you give our readers a sense of your personal, professional and academic journey?

PN - Terry, I come from a generation here in Brazil that spent its youth in an environment of political turbulence, the hardest period of which was the military dictatorship (1964-1985). We, the youth of Brazil in the 1960s, wanted to live in a society where we could express ourselves freely; where we could enjoy all the benefits of democracy. Let us keep in mind that we were in the Cold War period. In that period, particularly in third-world countries, people who were in a context of opposition, even those with a democratic vision, were identified with communism. Because of this, they were arrested and even murdered. Many of them were journalists. The Newseum, an interactive museum of journalism and media in Washington, D.C, has documents on the murders of the Brazilian communicators, one of which was on the murder of the journalist and university professor, Vladimir Herzog, in October 1975.

We suffered a great deal at that time. It was in that environment that I, like many others, started a process of valuing freedom and cherishing public relationships with the community, in short with all those in our daily lives. That was when I believed the seed was planted: it was my start in the field of public relations and communication. Public relations is an activity that only thrives in an environment of freedom and democracy. In this environment, I participated in the challenges against the dictatorship, seeking democracy, seeking an environment where we could express our thoughts and move forward despite the differences, where we could contribute to the development of Brazil - a country that was very different 40 years ago from the one we know today.

I remember that in 1969 I voluntarily taught people from poor communities in Paraná, a Southern estate in Brazil where I was born, how to read and write. I also started to take part in the Brazilian students' movement demanding the return of democracy, something similar to what is currently happening in Hong Kong. At the time that I created a school newspaper, I also joined a theater group in that youthful and restless environment. We developed the feeling that it is important to have good relationships and communicate well. There is a strong connection between these two things, communication and relationships. If you do not communicate well, it will be very difficult to establish good relationships.

In November 1970, one of the main police torturers of the military regime, chief of police Sérgio Paranhos Fleury, arrested me. I spent some time of my life with my freedom curtailed: three years of my daily life were monitored by the military police. Amazingly, 40 years later, I gave my first lecture on the topic of my PhD dissertation at the same place I was arrested. Today that same prison has been turned into a beautiful museum dedicated to freedom. The topic of my lecture was the importance of memory within a corporate and institutional environment. It was a coincidence, something that had not been planned, that while lecturing to academicians about memory, I evoked my own memory of those years of military dictatorship.

After being released from prison, I did not immediately enroll in a school of communication. At first, I attended a technical school where I learned technical drawing and thermodynamics calculation. Late in the 1970s I enrolled in the School of Journalism at the Pontifical Catholic University (PUC-SP). After completing my undergraduate degree, I worked with one of the first companies in Brazil to specialize in audiovisual communication. I spent the late 80s working at Globo, Brazil's largest TV broadcaster, where I developed a special program related to video-communication. After that, I worked at an important radio station, Rádio Bandeirantes, where I hosted a program with the largest audience in São Paulo for the 3 years it was aired. The program addressed issues of communication and relationships.

It was at this time that I made my first contact with Aberje, which was a small but important professional communications association. Communicators already recognized it as a place where people, in addition to meeting other professionals of the area, had information, knowledge and literature. In other words, qualified information from the field of business communication and public relations.

The year 1995 was a milestone in my career: I wrote a book that is currently in its 30th edition and has already sold nearly ninety thousand copies, entitled *O que é comunicação empresarial? (What is business communication?)*. This book entered a very traditional collection in Brazil—an encyclopedic-style collection—that has over 300 titles and works to address themes using the groundwork and structural concepts of a field of knowledge. The book, like a passport, allowed me to meet many communicators from several places in Brazil, and people from the Brazilian university environment. It was at this point I met Professor Margarida Kunsch, who is an important professor in Brazil in the field of public relations.

In a lecture I gave at Federação das Indústrias do Estado de São Paulo-FIESP (Sao Paulo Industries Federation), I joked with Margarida saying: "One

day I will be your student in the master program of the University of São Paulo." She took my words to heart and invited me to be her special student, a student who is not yet part of the official program, but is invited to attend regular classes. In the following year, the end of 1996, I took my graduate entrance exam, and was officially enrolled in the USP public relations masters program in 1997. In 2001, I defended my master's thesis on the connections between public relations, communications and administrative/management models, focusing on the influence the Brazilian Association for Business Communication (ABERJE) had on the evolution of communication within the environments of those models. I am talking about models from the Scientific School of Management (Taylorism) and about models of Human Relations Management. I pioneered the development of relations between communication and those models of administration and human resources management in Brazil.

In 2006, I defended my PhD dissertation at USP, with a focus on the interface between public relations and narratives – how those narratives take place in the field of memory, in the field of history of the businesses and institutions and the links to public relations. This work was also a pioneer in the field of communication studies.

It should be said that since the end of 1994, I was already formally integrated into the structure of Aberje. I joined Aberje as an executive secretary at the invitation of then chairman Ruy Altenfelder, with the mission to change the profile of the association. Until that time, Aberje was an association that had the publication of a magazine, *Revista Comunicação Empresarial (Corporate Communication Magazine)* as its primary activity. Members received it with no regularity, only when it was published. I quickly managed to have the magazine published four times a year. At the same time, we started to change the profile and course offerings the association was offering, adding courses that were generally on internal communication and some of them were courses on communication with the press. Today the education and training area of Aberje has 12 different practice streams, each with its own specialized courses.

In the early 1990s, I remember Aberje had an annual budget of R\$120 thousand; For the sake of comparison, Aberje's current budget reaches as much as R\$10 million. The association structure in 1994 was a structure that would quickly lead Aberje to extinction, or at least to be an association with no relevance in Brazil. So, during the process of transforming the Aberje educational activity, we had the contents organized based on the magazine. Then we expanded it and we began to print books. Today, Aberje's publishing division has 27 books in print. In 1996, we created our website, which was the

first public relations association website in the Latin world, including Latin America and Europe. Today the site has 1.5 million views per month – that number is audited.

During that period, I also managed to bring Aberje closer to the academic field, causing the association, through the process of changing its profile toward becoming a professional and scientific association. This was relevant because it provided consistency and academic rigour to the courses Aberje offered. In the 2000s, we created a research institute, the DatAberje, which has conducted dozens scientific studies. Being connected to the academic world has always been important for Aberje. We were the first professional association to conduct scientific research on the field in Brazil. The research was published in the Administration and Economics journal of Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV) – Brazil’s leading business school.

Those links between the elements of Aberje’s past were crucial to strengthening the attributes for which Aberje has been recognized by its audiences. We started a movement that resembles the Roman god Janus. Janus is depicted as having two faces. He looks to the past with his feet in the present, and looks to the future with his feet in the present. He is a Roman god linking tradition and innovation, based on the needs of the present.

Aberje has had an award program for 47 years, which includes more than 40 award categories. The Aberje Awards are a window into the best practices in communication in Brazil. We also have an international award, the Aberje International Award that is targeted at international researchers to encourage them to turn their eyes to see what Brazil does best. We also have an award for our public relations students which asks students to develop ideas, plans and strategies for issues that are relevant to the business world.

We have developed programs that cause the association to be extremely contemporary. For example, another relevant strategic pillar is knowledge management. We are developing our Memory and Reference Centre, a program in which Aberje has already invested over R\$6 million. In that centre we have the knowledge of the area of business communication and public relations, all organized in a professional management structure, that since 2007 has been certified by ISO 9000.

All these pillars have had a great influence on my career at Aberje because they did not exist when I joined the association. To be fair to Aberje’s history, they were beginning to have the educational pillar and the publication pillar, but along all those years we expanded this activity almost as a metaphor of what happened in the area of business communication and of institutions of public relations in Brazil. Public relations and organizational communication

in Brazil, which once worked only on the technical aspects of the area, expanded its scope to all aspects involving communication and relational processes. This meant looking at these processes from other perspectives such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, memory management among other fields of knowledge.

TF - Thank you Paulo for such an interesting recollection of your educational journey and your career path over the last four decades. Given all the work that you have done to establish Aberje as the preeminent communications thought leadership organization in Brazil, what from your perspective were the important periods for the development of the field of communications?

PN - I see four relevant periods in the history of public relations and contemporary communication here in Brazil. The first is the period of transformation – marked by the founding of Aberje – which was extremely important and crucial to what public relations and business communication is like today in Brazil. In 1967, the first strong phase, which we call Brazilian industrialization, took place here in São Paulo, together with some companies in Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais and Rio Grande do Sul. This was a period when managers of nearly 60 companies, many of them large multinational companies, established an association that would work, in an organic manner, on the development of thinking and practices of the area in this field.

Aberje has worked hard to show the importance of communications and communicators within the organizational context: promoting the message that communication is vital to the survival and continuity of organizations. Aberje has been honoring the importance of communication and communicators for 47 years – at every point of its existence, really – through advocacy and lobbying for the importance of communication and public relations in the country.

The second critical moment was Brazilian redemocratization. I am talking about 1985, when Brazil went from dictatorship to democracy. Why is this period important? During this period organizations became aware of the importance of business communication to their relationships. Organizations recognized that relationships and communications must be managed excellently with all stakeholders and strategic targeted audiences in order to maintain competitiveness. That period was important because organizations stopped looking only inwards, only at the production line, and started to consider their relationships with the entire society, especially in the economic, social and relational spheres. This demonstrated that organizations need to establish

relationships with society in an organic manner and could no longer remain isolated islands, or protect themselves with high walls.

The third period is the internationalization of Brazil's relations with the world. That period is important, because it expanded the role of communications even further. This period caused leading players of Brazilian international development, companies like Petrobras, Embraer, Votorantim, Vale, Gerdau, and BRF, among others, to go through mergers and acquisitions, and expand into key markets in China and the Middle East, without giving up markets in Europe, North America and Latin America. Professional communicators working in Brazil in that period started to address issues related to intercultural communication, which meant examining and improving how they communicate in other countries, which necessitated a new understanding of how to communicate in other political, social, religious, and behavioral environments.

The fourth important period began in the late 90s and grew stronger in the 2000s, which is when communicators, already operating in an environment of democratization, internationalization of issues regarding sustainability, started to increasingly understand that their responsibility is also to create and manage their organization's narratives. It was important that professional communicators examine how communication and relationships work within society. All this was enhanced by the advent of information and communication technologies, as well as digital culture. In addition to understanding relationships, the need to communicate using large databases of information [*big data - ed.*] demanded that communicators develop a new attitude towards numbers and quantitative aspects of the area and profession.

TF - Paulo, in your professional life you wear many hats; educator, leader of Aberje, author, mentor and senior advisor, as you sit here and reflect on this profession and the multitude of changes that you have witnessed over the last 45 years, what do you believe students today need to do to shape their thinking and ready themselves to a public relations career?

PN - Public relations is a profession that requires more than just technical training from academic institutions. Technical training is important, of course. Students need to know the techniques, languages and processes related to the job. However, it is important that they have training in ethics and aesthetics in addition to technical training. This is the trio that provides depth and coherence to public relations education. This trio provides intellectual as well as technical training, which enhances the educated professional who is ready

to work in public relations. Why is it important to be strong in the three areas of technique, ethics and aesthetics? Because public relations professionals work on connecting different targeted audiences, stakeholders and networks, and what I call “moveholders,” that is, audiences in an environment of digital technologies. Insofar as the communicator works in those environments, she needs to see the relationship of her activities with the historical, political, technological and behavioral environment. This requires that public relations practitioners obtain an education with multidisciplinary characteristics. Other disciplines such as philosophy, social sciences, anthropology, law, history and psychology, all bring knowledge to the communication and decision making of our area.

It is impossible to work in public relations without a multidisciplinary vision because the issues of our time boil constantly with controversies and numerous points of view. Here in Brazil, for example, we have the construction of large hydro power plants that have a great impact on the environment and on Indigenous communities – in the Amazon, an area that has the world’s eyes on it. Corporate action there, which causes strong impacts on social, economic and ecological environments, has to be a relational action with great intellectual density, and has to take into account all implications which requires going through several fields of human knowledge. Considering all this, students who want to work in public relations must necessarily understand that their education will not finish the day they are awarded their diploma. Theirs will be a continuing education, which has no end because a society in which issues create controversies and generate numerous points of view needs to be prepared for dialogue. A dense dialogue that incorporates politics, ethics, and aesthetics requires an extremely solid education.

TF - Thank you Paulo for your insights and perspectives.