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Public Relations in the network society: A tale of two professions

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for the opportunity to deliver this talk today.

The outlook from the Ivory Tower of science is much different than the one the people have, who stand at the frontlines of organizational communication every day. But I think that we can agree, that the emergence of practices such as content marketing, native advertising and brand journalism, represent an unprecedented challenge for the profession of public relations.

While many practitioners, though by no means all, look optimistically in the future, I think that the field is in grave danger to achieve a Pyrrhic victory, when it intends to bypass journalism via self-organized content marketing.

The relationship between PR and journalism has never been easy, but I think, it profited both sides. Journalism, as of today, is in intensive care and it might well be, that the patient will not recover. So the obvious question in this situation is: Quo vadis, public relations?

Introduction

Let me begin with a little historic flashback.

On Easter Sunday, 1929, a small group of women marched at the Easter parade on New York's Fifth Avenue, dramatically lighting and smoking cigarettes in the public. The next day, statements like the following by a certain Miss Hunt, could be read in newspapers across America: "I hope that we have started something and that these torches of freedom, with no particular brand favored, will smash the discriminatory taboo on cigarettes for women and that our sex will go on breaking down all discriminations."

Students of public relations and communication management hear that story in their first semester. Edward Bernays, the mind behind the freedom of torches campaign and by many seen as the founding figure of the profession of public relations, The Father of Spin, as Larry Tye named him, left the profession of public relations with an ambivalent heritage.

On the one hand, public relations is usually heralded for its function, to give particular interests a voice in the arenas of the public sphere. Democracy, at least in its liberal form, needs to give every position the chance to be heard in the public discourse. Public Relations, freshman students are told, helps these voices being heard in a society, where otherwise only journalists would set the agenda. However, usually the second part of the story is not as much highlighted, namely that it was American Tobacco who approached Bernays, not to free women from sexual repression and discrimination, but to find a way to increase the sales of cigarettes. It is this Janus face that marks Bernays' contribution to the profession: The fifth estate that makes every voice heard, and the communication tool, wielded by those in power to get even more powerful.

Public Relations – A tool for the powerful

I would like to argue, that the situation in which the profession of public relations is today, is a result of this special ambiguity. Being a useful tool in the arsenal of corporate communications, it helped the profession to become an essential part of the public sphere. While many authors begin to reason about the end of journalism, PR, it seems, is at the dawn of a golden age.

Content marketing, brand journalism, native advertising – PR, it seems, does not need journalism anymore to tell its own stories. The great narrators in the control rooms of organized communication cut out the middle man, and are now free to tell their stories the way they want to tell them.

However, there is something rotten in the state of Denmark. Since the emergence of the Internet, professionals and scholars alike have wondered, what the decay of journalism will mean to PR. Far-sighted members of the community were never enthusiastic about the looming downfall of journalism, because this century-old antagonistic relationship also served its purpose for both sides.

Journalism and Public Relations: A love-hate relationship

Journalism first emerged as a profession in the days of the Glorious Revolution in England, at the end of the 17th century. For the first time in human history, non-members of a legislative body were allowed to report on the occurrences in parliament. Suddenly, the public was – through the eyes of journalists – watching its representatives doing their work. It did not take long until the executive bodies in the newly forming European nation-states became worried over this new power. After the collapse of the French revolution and the downfall of Napoleon Bonaparte, the restoration forces across Europe began to develop instruments to manage the press – i.e. to censor them. Scholars and professionals usually think, that public relations was invented by corporations based on the desire to draw a more positive image of themselves in the public – another heritage of Edward Bernays. But it was the states themselves, who first recognized the need to handle the press.

Thus, we should not forget, that PR always was, and always will be, a tool that can be used in more than just one way.

Both, journalism and PR have founding myths that tend to over-represent their democratic function. Journalism as the fourth estate understands itself as a necessary corrective in the political system of liberal democracy. Consequently, freshmen in journalism studies learn to equate their profession with the heroes of investigative journalism, Bob Woodward, Carl Bernstein and alike. But journalism, that is also yellow press, paparazzi, smear campaigns, and character assassination. For most of the time, news media have usually been businesses whose owners did not finance their editorial departments out of civic duty. Money has always been a strong driver of the news media. It is thus no coincidence that news is primarily what sells – and most often sensationalism carries the day, not investigative journalism.

Likewise, PR has never been the fair arbiter that many scholars and practitioners have imagined. Symmetrical communication and principles of dialogue, as they have been proposed so vividly by scholars such as James Grunig or Michael Kent, were always just one side of the coin. PR also included, always, public affairs and lobbying on behalf of special interests, who could afford to buy a privileged access to law-, policy-, and, of course, news-makers. To spin and frame the public view on issues, was always easier for big business, than say, a union or environmental activists. Like the fourth estate, the fifth estate has a dark side that is too often swept under the rug. In the second half of the 20th century, the love-hate relationship of PR and journalism worked remarkably well.

Journalists got newsworthy stories and PR a credible access to the public sphere. It was nice, while it lasted.

The downfall of journalism – The ascendance of public relations

The late German sociologist, Niklas Luhmann, once famously said: “Everything we know about society and its world, we almost exclusively know through mass media.” When Luhmann said that in 1994, the Internet was still in its infancy. Most people chuckle these days, when they hear the term mass media – that’s so 20th century, daddy! These days, it is all about social media influencer, blogger and social networks. It seems, Luhmann made that remark in a totally different time. But did he?

To be fair: Many of the problems that plague today’s mass media, such as a decline in perceived trustworthiness, started long before the dawn of the network age.

In a recent Gallup poll, a representative survey among Americans, 32% were saying that they had a fair amount or a great deal of trust in the media – i.e. newspapers, television and radio. This is a new record low, and perhaps understandable, given the divisive campaign in the presidential elections in 2016. However, 32% are well within a trend that saw trust in mass media decline since the mid 70ies. The highest point of confidence was at 72% in 1976, in the wake of investigative journalism in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal. But nevertheless, the Internet seems to deliver the death blow to an already ailing system. Just to give you some numbers on how bad the situation has grown as of today: In 1960, the ratio between people employed in PR compared to journalism was 0.75-to-1. Today, the same ratio is massively turned upside down: Five professionals in PR face only one (usually underpaid) journalist. And it gets more dramatic: “Between 2000 and 2009, the newspaper advertising revenue in the US dropped from \$49 to 22 billion. Between 1997 and 2007, revenues of the US public relations agencies went up from \$43.5 to \$87.5 billion”, as the PR-scholars Vercic and Vercic note. Their conclusion is simple: “In relative balance between journalism and public relations, public relations is gaining and journalism is losing”.

With the end of journalism looming, we have to ask, how did we get there?

And what does that mean for PR?

Ansgar Zerfaß and colleagues come to mixed conclusions: “While there is no obvious replacement for mass media as societal institutions for the creation of the public sphere and control of abuses of economic and political power, changes in mass media as organizations are changing what used to be a traditional partner of many public relations practitioners in media relations exercises – the journalist. Some public relations scholars fear that a new relative balance between journalism and public relations stimulates organizations as sources to exhibit ‘hegemonic tendencies’. (...) Contrary to these academics, practitioners in our study seem not only be comfortable with new media relations practices, they see them as opportunities.”

These new opportunities are known these days as Content Marketing, Brand Journalism or Native Advertising. Let me just briefly clarify, what these terms mean, before I can argue, what this will do to Public Relations and the Public Sphere.

Content marketing’s purpose is, as defined by the Content Marketing Institute, “to attract and retain customers by consistently creating and curating relevant and valuable content with the intention of changing or enhancing consumer behavior. It is an ongoing process that is best integrated into your overall marketing strategy, and it focusses on owning media, not renting it”. Native advertising fits into this spectrum as “paid advertising that takes the specific form and appearance of editorial content”, as the scholars Bartosz Wojdyski and Nathaniel Evans not.

Finally, brand journalism according to Lewis Dvorkin from Forbes Magazine is the process of “digital publishing and social media to speak directly to consumers.”

It is easy to see why practitioners expect a new golden age for public relations. The Israeli researchers Tamar Lahav and Dorit Zimand-Sheiner phrase it nicely when they say: “The long-standing notion that there is a ‘wall’ separating editorial content of news organizations from its business organization counterpart, endowing both with a sort of credibility – is no longer relevant.”

Or to put it in more prosaic terms:

The storytellers and narrators are finally unshackled and there are no more journalistic Liliputians to stop them.

Framing empires

Political leaders such as Winston Churchill, Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt have popularized the phrase: Where there is great power, there is great responsibility. However, the human drive for power has usually little regard for those who end up on the wrong side of history. In today’s information society, power is in the hands of those who are able to shape discourses. And discourses from a business point of view, are ultimately a mean to make profit. The Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells, one of the most received scholars in the social sciences, gives us an idea why discourses are so central: “Discourses”, he writes in his seminal work Communication Power, “frame the options of what networks can or cannot do. In the networked society, discourses are generated, diffused, fought over, internalized, and ultimately embodied in human action, in the socialized realm constructed around local-global networks of multi-modal, digital communication, including the media and the Internet. Power in the network society is communication power.”

For a very long time, journalists could afford to deem a story, offered by PR, as either newsworthy or ignore it completely. Corporate communications had nowhere else to go to tell its stories.

As we all know, these times are gone. Google, Facebook and Twitter have changed the world forever.

And, we do not know how we will one day look back at the latest actors that entered the stage – I am of course referring to strange programs like SnapChat, which grown-ups do not understand.

Nowadays, entire corporations can afford to completely forgo journalism and publish their stories in owned media. Red Bull is maybe the most prominent case here. Media relations, once the crown jewel in the fold of every PR-division has been degraded to a kind of communication fire department: Use only in case of emergency!

The European communication monitor, a yearly survey of Europe’s professionals in the field of PR, shows a dramatic shift in expected importance of future communication channels. While today 64% of communication professionals see press and media relations with print newspapers and magazines as important, only 1 out of 3 think that this will still be the case in 2019. Conversely, already 76% think that social media and social networks relations are important and 89% expect them to be in two years. The same is true for mobile communication and online communication via websites and e-mail in general.

The only glimmer of hope might be, that 83% still expect online newspapers to be important in 2019.

Before I conclude my argument, let me just briefly sketch, how powerful the framing of the public discourse can be. In a poll from October 2016, the Pew Research Center asked the participants of a representative survey whether they agreed with the following statement: “Almost all climate scientists agree that human behavior is mostly responsible for climate change.” A stunning 27% - only 27% - agreed with that statement.

In fact, as John Cook and colleagues showed in their paper on the scientific consensus in that field of research, 97% of all scientists agree, that global warming is man-made. By the way, Frank Luntz, one of America’s most capable spin doctor, managed to disavow the use of the term global warming. Instead, everybody is talking about climate change, a process, as scientists acknowledge, is always happening, no matter what.

The point is: PR, who frames public discourses on behalf of corporations who have no interest in environmental legislation, and a degenerated journalism, who treats all sides of an argument equally, no matter what, fuel a downward spiral, which will render the public sphere meaningless. With journalism losing ground, there is no arbiter of public consensus any more.

The stories told by PR via content marketing will be just shivers in a splintered public sphere, where reality has no meaning any more.

Conclusion: Ways Forward

Hence, PR is in grave danger. It is losing its opponent, its necessary counterforce: Journalists. The emergence of content marketing, native advertising and brand journalism might turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory for the profession. Fake news and alternative facts already seem to prove post-modernism right: There is no such thing as reality. Truth is just a feature in the eye of the beholder; a dangerous proposition. Companies will feel the pain of post-reality in times of crisis, when they will be in desperate need to get out their view. But as a wise Jedi-Master once said, there is always hope.

To conclude my argument, I would like to briefly outline four scenarios, how to go from here.

The first scenario, the CSR-approach, suggests that business realizes the responsibility it is endowed with in this brave new world.

Sustainability, in this view is not only environmental and social sustainability, but also communicative sustainability that tries to preserve the public sphere as a place for societal deliberation. Personally, I think this scenario is more wishful thinking than a probable path. Being responsible in terms of communication will do as much to stop the blurring between paid and earned media as conservation areas have helped to stop global warming. And even if some businesses decide to act responsible, most will probably not. As Milton Friedman – the figurehead of Neoliberalism – once put it: The sole responsibility of business is business. I fear, many CEOs and politicians might agree.

I would label the second approach as a radical individual one, brought forward by Internet activists such as Evgeny Morozov.

Nowadays, each and every one of us gives her data for little to nothing. If we would treat data production as we treat labor, every individual would be bestowed with the right to decide for herself what to do with the data. Facebook would need to pay us for sharing our data in its network. However, this also strikes me as naïve. Most people obviously do not see any problem in giving up their private information for free and furthermore, no business would be likely to support such legislation. Why should they pay Facebook AND the users?

The third way is an old hat, taken straight from the social democratic playbook.

One of the distinct features of most European market economies is their emphasis on public goods. Hence, in Britain, France, Germany and Austria, a large share of news media is publicly owned and financed through taxes. If we regard the public sphere as a place, where important societal issues are negotiated, then our societies need to make sure that the arbiters of these negotiations remain impartial – or at least fair. This solution would thus require publicly funded journalism – and publicly funded public relations. Like an assigned counsel in a court of law, every cause would have the right to be represented in the public sphere. To me it seems, this would be the worst option, except for all others – to use a slightly altered quote by Winston Churchill.

The fourth option, however, seems to be the most probable and least desirable.

It is a scenario, spelled out by the aforementioned Vercic and Vercic, who warn of a “dystopian future in which communication managers are the true rulers of the society. If non-media corporations became the major providers of what-used-to-be-public communication content, the notion of a general public as a space of public deliberation and representation of a society will probably disappear. Without public communication and publicity there can be no democracy.”

Epilogue

Now, where does that leave us? The public sphere was a fiction to begin with – at least in its ideal form we hail as an indispensable part of democracy. But quite many things are fictions: Money, nations, religions. They work, because people believe in them. To believe in deliberation in the public sphere is not sexy any more. Talking about the merits of journalism might well feel like a too well known situation from the family dinner at Christmas: Oh no, Grandpa tells his war stories again.

We are witnessing a revolution the world has not seen since the invention of the printing press.

The boundary between the private and the public sphere is on the verge of collapse. If PR loses its journalistic counterpart completely, it also loses the adaptive, and thus productive, pressure to adhere to journalistic standards. It will be only a matter of time until the cheap mass of self-published stories in poor quality will also render PR meaningless. Marketing will have its way alone. We are not there yet, in fact, we are only at the beginning. Today, people who are in their mid-30ies and older still get most of their information from traditional mass media. The ascendance of Donald Trump, who is marveled and feared for his use of social media, is still by and large, a success of mainstream mass media coverage, especially television. Neil Postman, who famously predicted that we will amuse ourselves to death with TV, still carries the argument. But when today's teenager generation will come of age, classical news flagships such as the New York Times or the Washington Post will look like dinosaurs, the last of their kind struggling to survive the impact of the Internet-meteor. And I am not so sure whether or not in the future museum of communication, visitors will see next to the journalistic dinosaurs their cousins from the also gone profession of PR. Thank you very much for your attention.

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His Research is focused on three areas of interest. First, he is concerned with trust in organizational communication and public trust in society. Second, he researches the impact of digital communication and their procedures on users and their instrumentalization by organizations. Last but not least, strategic communication is at the center of his interest, too.

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