

A walk in the public relations field: Theoretical discussions from a social media and network society perspective



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ABSTRACT: For public relations officers the last years were momentous. Changes in the surrounding life dictated also changes in the public relations (PR) practice. The birth of a so-called network society was significant not only for different information technology and computer-related professions, but also for communication science, including public relations, from a larger perspective. Talking about public relations we are mostly talking about managing communication and about relations born as a result of the managed communication flow. From a historical perspective communication and relations management means quite often a kind of use of power. At this point the existential question today is — how to manage communication and relations in the new situation — in the society which is guided by social networks where power is not always at the “top” of hierarchy anymore, but is “down” in the networks. Who has power, and who and how will control communication processes in the society of “mass self-communicators” (Castells, 2007), which is designed and created by authors who are writing and expressing their ideas through social media, using their right of speech more than ever and which is no longer easily controlled and managed by others — authorities, press officers, public relations managers, censors, etc.

KEYWORDS: public relations, network society, changes, professionalism, social media



INTRODUCTION

Public relations has been seeking legitimacy for its existence as an expert function of managed communication by trying to assure its efficiency and contribution to an organization’s success as well as its ethical public interest orientation. Combining these views has not been without contradiction. Sometimes it may seem that organizational and societal approaches have opposite views: the latter accuses the former of profit seeking, while the former claims the latter has an unrealistic utopian world view.

During the past couple of decades when social practice in organizations have dictated organizations to put less value on social interests and more on business and

profit interests in general — consumer society is a perfect example of that, it has sometimes been problematic to try to convince organizations to be more sensitive in their communication and relations processes and responsive to the stakeholders' and society's needs. The questions how to create a real dialog between stakeholders and organizations, and how to build good relations between them are the key questions today and also key for legitimizing public relations profession at the new quality level in the network society. However, many have held on to the idea that public relations task is to serve society by mediating conflict and by building relationships essential to the dynamic consensus upon which social order is based (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1985).

The uncertainties of contemporary world, economic crisis, political conflicts and wars have changed the circumstances where PR aspires to legitimacy. The attention is now turned towards questioning the legitimacy of every organization and every action. As all social decisions are finally trialled in the court of public opinion, public relations plays a major role in resolving cases of competing interests in the network society. Public relations' social function is served when it replaces ignorance, coercion, and intransigence with knowledge, compromise, and adjustment (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1985). Public relations has an impact on individual, organizational, and social behavior. Those professionally engaged in helping organizations identify, establish, and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with their stakeholders, perform an essential management function that has an impact on today's network society.

“Public relations responds to social needs, not special interests” as famous PR teacher Cutlip wrote in his book (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1985, p. 20).

The biggest existential question today for public relations practitioners is how to manage communication in the networks and how to deliver messages in the “mass self-communication” (Castells, 2007) situation. In the situation when stakeholders in the networks started to be active in communication arena. And freedom of speech is more topical than ever in the history of democracy.

As present author's research shows (Tampere, 2003; 2006; 2009), the dominant public relations practice trend in the last 20 years has been promotion, selling and productivity, and thus it has been difficult sometimes to draw a line between marketing and public relations. Now the focus in society has changed and PR has opportunity of a lifetime to show its true professional character as a social actor and integrator. The trend of questioning the legitimacy of organizations legitimates the role of PR — if PR dares to take its role as a function that reflects the world and promotes societal values and responsibility. PR needs to take a reflexive role and focus its critical eye on the needs of society and actions of the organization. The task of professional PR today is to point out the consequences of organization's actions, and communicate to the organization how it could change the course of its actions, in order to achieve and maintain legitimacy. The role of public relations is no longer interpreting organizations to the world in order to build up a nice image,

to sell good product and to protect organizations in different ways, but interpreting world to the organization in order to make it understand how to build dialog, trust and through those also legitimacy. Important is also to learn to formulate own messages in such a way to be able to participate in the social networks as equal partners to own stakeholders.

The development of public relations parallels societal development, particularly from the 19th century. Five distinct paradigmatic changes have occurred in public relations: (1) Confused relations with propaganda and conflict between different political ideologies together with the emergence of totalitarian societies, (2) Internal communication as part of PR and the exponential development of capitalism, (3) Opening period and collapse of the Soviet Union, which ended with planned economy in crisis, (4) Postmodernist PR, the rise of consumption and the market economy in crisis, (5) Network PR, computer-mediated communication and relations (Tampere, 2010).

From a public relations perspective, today the concept of network society is the most important of Castells' positions, because it can be logically related to the stakeholder thinking of public relations and use of social media in the modern public relations practices. It can also explain changes in the present network society from power and relations perspective including PR fields' legitimacy problems. On the other hand, Castells' treatises on organizations, information and power (Castells, 1996; 1997; 2004; 2007), on the communication process in general, and also his discussions on identity (Castells, 1997; 2004; Castells et al., 2004) are also important for modern public relations. Castells is explaining the background and implications of processes at the level of social and cultural practice, which substantially and directly influence the public relations practice, and the use of social media instead of mass media for this. Through Castells' explanations also stakeholder relations will get a completely new nature just because the nature of relations changed and because the position of power changed in the present democratic society. Power is no longer at the top of hierarchies, but in the hands of networks. As Castells said:

the development of interactive, horizontal networks of communication has induced the rise of a new form of communication, mass self-communication,¹ over the Internet and wireless communication networks. Under these conditions, insurgent politics and social movements are able to intervene more decisively in the new communication space. However, corporate media and mainstream politics have also invested in this new communication space. As a result of these processes, mass media and horizontal communication networks are converging. (Castells, 2007, p. 238)

In the present paper connections between modern public relations and Castells' network society will be discussed from a theoretical and practical point of view.

¹ Castells' term for the use of social media.

to networks. This transformation is as much an organizational as a cultural question. There is a deep relationship between how social processes are organized and the values they embody (Castells, 1996; 2004).

NATURE OF NETWORKS

Networks are not specific to twenty-first century societies or, for that matter, to human organization. Networks constitute the fundamental pattern of life, all kinds of life. (Castells, 2004, p. 4)

In social life, social networks analysts have for a long time investigated the dynamic of social networks at the heart of social interaction and the production of meaning, leading to the formulation of a systematic theory of communication networks (Monge & Contractor, 2003). In terms of social structure, archaeologists and historians of antiquity have forcefully reminded us that the historical record shows the pervasiveness and relevance of networks as the backbone of societies, thousands of years ago, in the most advanced ancient civilizations in several regions of the planet (Castells, 2004).

Networks have very specific characteristics:

1. *A network is a set of interconnected nodes.* A node is a point where the curve intersects itself. A network has no centres, just nodes. Nodes may be of varying relevance for the network. Nodes increase their importance for the network by absorbing more relevant information, and processing it more efficiently. The relative importance of a node does not stem from its specific features but from its ability to contribute to the network's goals. All nodes of a network are necessary for the network's performance. When nodes become redundant or useless, networks tend to reconfigure themselves, deleting some nodes, and adding new ones. Nodes only exist and function as components of networks. The network is the unit, not the node (Castells, 2004).

2. *Network process flows.* Communication networks are the patterns of contact that are created by flows of messages among communicators through time and space (Monge & Contractor, 2003). Flows are streams of information between nodes circulating through channels of connection between nodes. A network is defined by the program that assigns the network its goals and its rules of performance. This program is made up of codes that include valuation of performance and criteria for success or failure (Castells, 2004).

3. *Networks cooperate or compete with each other.* Cooperation is based on the ability to communicate between networks. This ability depends on the existence of codes of translation and interoperability between the networks, and access to connection points (Castells, 2004). Competition depends on the ability to outperform other networks by superior efficiency in performance or in cooperation capacity (Castells, 2004).

ganization of the entire base of society. Informationalism is based on the augmentation of the human capacity in information processing around the twin revolutions in microelectronics and genetic engineering. (Castells, 2001, p. 159)

Under the informational paradigm, the capacity for any communicating subject to act on the communicative network gives people and organisations the possibility of reconfiguring the network according to their needs, desires, and projects. Yet, and this is fundamental, the reconfiguring capacity for each subject depends on the pattern of power present in the configuration of the network. (Castells, 2004, p. 8)

What makes the technological paradigm unique in relations to previous historical developments of information and communication technologies (printing, telegraph, analogue telephone, etc.) are three major, distinctive features of the technologies at the heart of the system: “self-expansion, recombination and distributional flexibility” (Castells, 2004, p. 9). Self-expansion refers to the fact that computers are the basis for constructing new computers, and the more powerful computers become, the more complex technologies can be built using them. Recombination has two elements. One is the fact that information technologies are extremely modular — existing elements can be used to construct entirely new technologies, further accelerating the development cycle. Also, the other element is the ability of the technology to combine all kinds of information into something new and meaningful. The world wide web is paradigmatic for this. It is characterized by the ability to connect anything with everything and the potential to create new values from these connections that are no longer disciplined by boundaries of professional or academic segregation. The last point, distributional flexibility, refers to the fact that information, once it is digitized, can be processed anywhere, and it can easily shift from one state of aggregation to another, say from a sound file on a CD to a stream on a cellphone, or a graph on a flow and the social organizations build around them. These three features provide the distinct character of informationalism, based on the application of computing and genetic engineering. Informationalism, then, is a set of features that comes to characterize the social organizations which rely in their practice on information technology and, with increasing importance, on genetic engineering (Castells, 1996).

As far as we can trust the historical record, all known societies are based on information and knowledge as the source of power, wealth, and meaning (Mokyr, 1990; Mazlish, 1993). Castells’ opinion is that information has not much value per se without the knowledge to recombine it for a purpose. Knowledge is, of course, relative to each culture and society. Information and knowledge are the key factors for power and wealth in all societies, it is misleading to conceptualize our society as such, even if for the practical reason of making communication easier (Castells, 2004).

ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION IN THE NETWORK SOCIETY

The media in the network society present a large variety of channels of communication, with increasing interactivity. Social media is a key here. They are inclusive of

a wide range of cultures and social groups, and send targeted messages to selected audiences or to specific moods of an audience. The media system is characterized by global business concentration, by diversification of the audience, including cultural diversification, by technological versatility and channel multiplicity, and by the growing autonomy of an audience that is equipped with the Internet and has learned the rules of the game (Castells, 2004).

The socialization of society — the construction of shared cultural practice that allows individuals and social groups to live together — takes place nowadays in the networked, digitized, interactive space of communication, centred around mass media and the Internet. Thus, the relationships between citizens and politicians, between the represented and the representative, depends essentially on what happens in this media-centred communication space. We live in a complex world where communication media and cultural flows extend more and more across boundaries. Accordingly, one of the characteristics of communication media in the network society is that they take place on a scale that is increasingly global (Tubella, 2004). Concepts like time, space, and distance obtain new meanings because of the proliferation of networks of electronic communication, which, as Castells (1996) has pointed out, represent the new social morphology of our societies. The end of distance involves the reordering of time and space, and a set of processes that are transforming modern societies. These processes are described today as globalization, a growing interconnections producing complex forms of interaction and interdependency.

The role of mass media is clear as an instrument for creating an image of the collective identity for insiders and for outsiders, and in doing so, they contribute to the construction of the identity itself. We shall understand that identity formation in a global communication environment is highly influenced by the media, which construct our everyday perceptions of the other and ourselves. People live in a symbolic environment, a world of meaning, and it is clear that the mass media play a critical role in people's perceptions and attitudes in industrial societies and even more so in the information society where they play a central role (Tubella, 2004).

The increasing importance of communication media in a changing and dynamic society and the development of information and communication technologies have created a new situation, where communication and identity need to be rethought. This is because of the social media phenomenon, which differs from mass media remarkably. Such development belies any idea of culture or identity as a monolithic force and reinforces the idea of community and connectivity, a community that has its own cultural specificity but is open to explore distant worlds. The construction of identity has to be shaped in relation to the rapidly changing circumstances of social life on a local and global scale where the individual and the collectivity must integrate information and knowledge from a diversity of communication-mediated experiences.

The Internet, and its associations with globalization, can have a “pluralizing impact” (Hall, 1997) on the construction of collective identity, producing a less fixed

identity because communication flows and interconnection promote cultural encounters and interactions. As Castells et al. stated,

the Internet is a technology of freedom. It allows the construction of self-directed networks of horizontal communication, bypassing institutional controls. It also allows information to be retrieved, and recombined in applied knowledge at the service of purposive social action. (Castells et al., 2004, p. 244)

MASSIVE SELF-COMMUNICATION

The victory of the Internet and computer technology inspires new forms and routines in the communication landscape, which create a totally new situation from a relations point of view in the society.

Castells presents some hypotheses on the transformation of this relationship, as a result of several trends that are connected but independent:

- the predominant role of media politics and its interaction with the crisis of political legitimacy in most countries around the world;
- the key role of segmented, customized mass media in the production of culture;
- the emergence of a new form of communication related to the culture and technology of the network society, and based on horizontal networks of communication: what Castells calls mass self-communication (social media phenomenon);
- and the use of both one-directional mass communication and mass self-communication in the relationship between power and counter-power, in formal politics, in insurgent politics, and in the new manifestations of social movements (Castells, 2007).

The diffusion of Internet, mobile communication, digital media, and a variety of tools of social software have prompted the development of horizontal networks of interactive communication that connect local and global in chosen time. A lot of organizations found social media to be a tool for their communication strategy also and they would really like to participate in the interaction with stakeholders through this. In this situation the main question for public relations officers is how to participate in those networks, how to formulate messages and how to deliver messages to the right stakeholders — how to get a result according to public relations practical professional criteria. The situation is that network society (and social media) production is filling our public sphere with huge amount of messages and information, and somehow information and knowledge margins are not visible. The result of those processes can be an intellectual trash. For example, PR on Facebook or on another social media channel, while being innovative, may also destroy good stakeholder relations because of producing intellectual trash, if the organization is not strategically correct in developing and focusing their messages to the right stakeholders. For example, the Obama-PR team sent a message to one interviewee in present author's research (Tampere, 2009): "Urmas (guy who was

ing more and more topical in today's world, because the trend of globalization can destroy identities. Castells discusses this and asks: globalization, identification and the state — a powerless state or a network society? (Castells, 1997).

How to cope with new situations, how to interpret changed identities in a rapidly changing society and in new communication networks and social media? How to analyze factors within and around organizations, how to find and interpret the different meanings of processes? How to achieve success and create and maintain good relations in this changed, and in the future more rapidly changing, new type of society, the network society, which is powerfully represented through social media?

Stakeholder thinking, which today has become an important factor in public relations processes, and network society, are each other's contemporaries. Their content is similar. Castells basically speaks about an organization's relational networks with different stakeholders, generated as a result of communication. Many practitioners in public relations field note that public relations' essential contribution is to build up trust, dialog, the public information system, communication networks, through which democratic society functions (Tampere, 2006).

Relations are built with the help of communication: if communication on the organization's part is honest, clear and oriented toward dialog, network members are more interested in remaining network members. Good and effective communication is a necessity of good relations. Obviously, it is more beneficial to the organization if it is capable of consciously creating its own networks systems, and managing relations with them. Stakeholder relations are in reality possible only in a network society, because both the nature of stakeholder relations and the nature of a network society are vertical, with low hierarchy. Stakeholder relations are effective when modern communication tools are used — the different parties to the communication process value each other's time and communicate as economically as possible. It also enables very precise communication, because the use of electronic means facilitates information recording, the creation of data bases and memories, which in turn increases the quality of relations and makes the processes underway more precise and also more rapid.

And last but not least important aspect includes the nature of relations — equal partners whose operational position is located at the same power level can develop their activities much more efficiently. The network society structure enables and even favors it (Castells, 2004). And thus minimizes autocracies and hierarchical dependencies, therefore being also the carrier of democratic world-view and thought.

The nature of stakeholder thinking is based on the fact that an organization treats other organizations and persons in its environment mostly "vertically." This means that the organization and its stakeholders form a network where the parties are equal and relations between the different participants are based on the principles of cooperation or competition, they are dialogical. This approach enables to draw parallels and find analogies also with Grunig's symmetrical communication model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), where the parties to the communication process are in an

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