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POSITIONS OF ETHICAL CHOICE IN PR PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCY: PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

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Abstract

Under the conditions of modern Russian society (mediatization of politics, network communication expansion, approval of the principles of transparency and egalitarianism), the responsibility of public relations (PR) professional increases. On the one hand the problem of ethics formation consists in the variety of professional PR models, academician personal subjectivity and a relatively small but diverse life experience of students on the other hand. The authors believe that professional ethics reflects the depth and consistency of academic knowledge about the societal communications as a whole. However, in each specific communicative situation it is necessary to form and evaluate a number of ethical choice positions. This article presents methodological support to the development of ethical norms as basic professional competence for PR-specialist. Methodology of educational process is based on paradigm of modern social epistemology with dynamic aspects of society figurations and new mediainfrastructure of higher education system. This approach allows to exemplify each of four PR-models and to form critical attitude and predictive skills of students in the context of ethical positions of choice.

Keywords: Ethics, public relations models, practice theory, mediality, social epistemology, transdisciplinarity.

1. Introduction

Contemporary mediatized world with globalized information flows has its numerous threats to stability, sovereignty, identity as well as possibilities for public solidarity, personal and social development, new ways of social ties formation. Public relations (PR) have become professional institution of modern society. The main function of PR is to organize, coordinate and control public opinion of different social groups. Professional competencies "for public relation practice in 2010 centered on general business skills, media relations, and theoretical knowledge" (Sha, 2011). Public relations ethics belongs to two first aspects. Mexican researchers pointed out some inconsistency between designed for students' specific competencies and public relations professionals' needs (Flores-Mayorga & Castillo-Esparcia, 2018). Due to specific circumstances discussed below PR in mundane consciousness imply scandalousness and manipulations. Though opposed to common perception of this activity PR as a professional sphere is unnoticeable and the ideal model of PR centers around harmonization of relationships of state, business and society. Professional codes and theoretical studies declare that PR is oriented on detection of the problem and anticipative problem-solving in the dialogue mode. "Ideal" PR forms and broadcasts new or updated public perceptions of important social meanings, values, rules and norms. Coexistence of many social contexts cause difficulties in ethically correct professional decision-making. As noted by some authors (Aladyshkin, Kulik, Michurin, & Anosova, 2017) discrepancy is a symptom of the reality of our society. At the same time a new promising methodology of teaching is being formed in Russian higher education (Dorozhkin, Kislov, Olkhovikov, & Shcherbina, 2018; Shipunova & Berezovskaya, 2018).

2. Problem Statement

A set of theoretical public relations models presents specific features of this kind of professional activity. Each of the PR models reflects the special characteristics of the institutional development of public relations, they are associated with the economic and technological development, the state social control and the growing power of the media, freedom of speech, availability of information.

The idealized requirement of PR activity is the implementation of its "soft power" so that the audience had the sense of adequacy and relevance of the immanent but still low-reflected expectations. In the context of mediatized society with many simultaneously existing contexts, the formation of the ability to make ethical choice for a PR specialist seems to be a fundamental goal of professional training.

We use Grunig and Hunt's classification of PR-models as the generally accepted one in the professional circles (Grunig, 2001; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). For each of these models the ethical position requirements vary.

The first two models are characterized as one-way communication with information impact on passive mass audience. The first model called "publicity" describes influence of constructed by PR technologies, scaled by media and seeming evident for people virtual image. Such PR-strategy can serve as a guarantee of social stability for particular social groups. There is a range of professional and personal ethical contradictions in this model.

The second model "public information" presents necessity of regular provision of facts to the public in return of public and state support. The truthfulness of information transmitted by a PR officials in this model becomes an ethical regulator of activity. There is a conflict in this model between the truth and possible negative material about the company. For PR-practice this situation is dysfunctional and requires more crisis communication management skills. That means necessity to teach students analytical and predictive skills in the field of PR.

Lack of feedback and absence of dialogue between the parties of communication reproduces effect of silent audience that leads to imitation or simulation of public opinion. Baudrillard (1982) demonstrates the results of the silence as uncontrollability of masses, and the only way to overpass it is openness to the public but not the simulation of its activity.

The third model is two-way asymmetrical and reflects change in the communicative situation in the direction to acknowledging the audience and its subjectivity. Communication technologies are also changing: it is necessary to involve the audience emotionally in the communication and to get feedback. Two-way asymmetrical model is typical for the period of the information society development with its possibilities of new media technologies: multi-channel information dissemination, technical capabilities of access to communication and the implementation of the principle of egalitarianism for participants. Despite the above, the third model is asymmetric from the position of the beneficiary and the target audience remains a quantitative criterion for the success of the PR campaign of a brand. The ethical position of a PR specialist is characterized by the desire to strike a balance between the benefits of the organization and society. There could be a hidden conflict between the phenomenon of corporate social responsibility and the need for open society. The contradiction might be expressed in the appropriation of symbolic resources and historical memory of society for the purposes of small selected groups' image. The exploitation of the symbolic resource could lead to the degradation of civil society. Thus, the third model of PR activity also contains the problem of ethical choice for the PR specialist.

The fourth model of PR, two-way symmetric, reflects new opportunities and social trends of modern society: the desire of the recipient to become active, understanding and responsive. This model has both creative and destructive potential (for those who continue to live by the rules of the first model). However, an important feature of the fourth model is making possible conditions for dialogue of social groups. Here we can state a qualitative change in PR activities: the need for constant communication processes, the complexity of long-term forecasting in the conditions of rapid changes in the communicative situation.

In the fourth model the principle of "common good" passes from the declared to the implemented state, and the choice of the ethical position of a professional corresponds to the general humanitarian ideals. The institutional position of PR is also changing – in addition to the implementation of partnership programs within the fourth model, the public's expectations for the formation of civil society are becoming relevant. However, the last remark highlights the new requirements for the PR-training. The ethical positions' activation in the last model is possible under the conditions of understanding the value of each participant and the acceptance of dialogue as a means of constructing new social reality.

The change in target setting of these models reflects different ethical positions (or lack of ethics). The problem of formation of professional competencies of a specialist is that modern practice reliably

shows the relevance of all PR models. As noted by Y. Farmer (2018) in this regard "the models offered to PR professionals do not provide all the conceptual tools for thinking through more complex issues". The last two models are not reflected in the results of the study of communications between government and society (Akimovich, 2017; Evseeva, Bashkarev, Pozdeeva, & Tarakanova, 2017).

3. Research Questions

In connection with the above mentioned arguments, we will formulate several questions of this study. What kind of methodology of communication science will teach students to determine the relevant PR-model? How should the student relate to the simultaneous presence of different ethical positions in the mind of a specialist? How to determine the conflict between declared by the customer ethical principles and the real goals and objectives of professional activity?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to show the possibility of integrating the methodology of social epistemology and the concepts of social philosophy in the field of communication for the formation of ethical choice positions in multi-context communicative situations of PR activity

5. Research Methods

In order to answer research questions and reveal the essence of the studied problems within the framework of social philosophy and epistemology, we used discursive and epistemological procedures that formulate and clarify the content of the ethical positions through the mediality and practice theory concepts. Methodic procedures of social epistemology allow to determine the positions of contextual discourse and to identify existing contradictions.

6. Findings

The ideas of paradigmatic dynamics were formed due to the discussions of K. Popper, I. Lakatos, T. Kuhn. Works of these authors presented the need for the liberation of methodological reflection from the established views and authorities (Kuhn, 1970). Examples of a paradigmatic turn in communication society are the concepts of practice theory and mediality.

Founders of practice theory – M. Foucault, N. Elias, P. Bourdieu – studied low-reflected implicit components of the routine communications of a particular community. L. Wittgenstein and M. Heidegger refer to conditional use of norms in public and interpersonal communication. The objects of research reality for P. Sztompka are not groups and individuals, but the processes of structuring, organization of spontaneous social connections - ideas, rules and actions from the grassroots. In the ideas of L.Thevenot and L.Boltanski the concepts of "figuration" and "configuration" are finally formed allowing to move from the static models of research to processual ones. The latter finds its methodological basis in the works of social epistemology.

The modern epistemological procedures of the non-classical paradigm consider how beliefs are institutionalized in a particular community, culture, or context (Kasavin, 2010). A fundamental change in the attitude of the researcher to the goal setting and hypothesizing distinguishes the non-classical methodological paradigm. The Russian philosopher A.A. Guseynov (2012) notes the transformation of research facilities from the present to the future and gives reasons for the researcher's moral responsibility: "The truth says about something that exists. The goal suggests something to be" (p. 107). Thus, the category of the truth becomes relative, requiring systemic representations and understanding of different or interdependent contexts of a social phenomenon.

In the description and prediction of some public communications, especially in recent political communication practices, we find contradictions, in fact they are also reflected in the definition of the relevant methodology (Aladyshkin, Kulik, Michurin, & Anosova, 2017). Therefore, in the educational process it is necessary to master interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary principles of analysis and to predict the dynamic aspects of communication.

To train specialists in the field of communication it is necessary to study modern theories of communication and media. So called "medial turn" currently has different aspects in social and philosophical contexts (Grigoryeva, 2015). To understand the main content of mediality as the fundamental philosophical concept, we quote Inishev (2015): "Paradigm of mediality ... allows to think the relationship of the various forms and stages of human experience avoiding false oppositions and reductionism" (p. 19).

Ideas about flexible and conditional boundaries between the form and the content of media communications can be found in the works of N. Luhmann, M. McLuhan. The concept of simulativeness of media and "death of the symbolic" by J. Baudrillard, the concept of media space "Symbolic – Imaginary – Real" by psychoanalyst J. Lacan allow to reveal the topological model of the mediality of public communication and the dynamic mechanisms of public consciousness. The last mentioned model is described in detail in the articles (Grigoryeva, 2016, 2018) as an representation of the social dynamics of modern society. The analysis of media practices (Turina, Lutsenko, & Oleynikova, 2015), insights from the mediality of the language practice and communications of the game (Grigoryeva, 2015, 2016, 2018) form a model of transformation of social ties in changing social communications.

Transdisciplinary researches reveal the actual methodological problem of humanitarian research – the problem of intersubjectivity – which is formally reduced to the consistent application of the procedure of discourse analysis of the main categories, concepts and definitions used in various related disciplines (Kasavin, 2010). Experts in communications denote quantum leap from communications to media in the period of television mass circulation and so called "culture mediatization" (Zemlyanova, 2010). Media became the main resource of economic development and society transformation. This qualitative shift "from communications to media" chronologically coincides with the formation of the third PR-model by Grunig and Hunt.

One of the main tasks of social epistemology is "to understand the kind of sociality in the context of philosophical analysis" (Kasavin, 2010). Thus the discursive and epistemological procedures given in the article to formulate and clarify the content of the "mediality" concept, reflect both the mechanism of

transformation of sociality and the emerging "third type of sociality" - so called "open sociality" (Kasavin, 2010) or "new sociality (Grechko et al., 2009) or "pluralistic" one.

the above we can report that everyday practices of public communications reveal the effects of complication and change in communication value system and a variety of ethical choices of PR-specialist. In addition to studying the technologies of influence, it becomes necessary for students to master the spectrum of knowledge of research and prognostic nature in order to understand the fundamental laws of the development of society in routine communication practices.

Cases of the present time are becoming highly-demanded (Evseeva, Bashkarev, Pozdeeva, & Tarakanova 2017), e.g. preparation activities of students on crisis situations as well as creative laboratories in anti-utopia projects. The latter option is important for the development of meta-level analysis of social communications and is necessary for the synthesis of abstract symbolic and imaginary categories of communication.

7. Conclusion

Methodological support for contemporary socio-humanitarian studies means to settle the question of relevance of the object, the subject with the methods of research affecting the vision of the considered problem.

Consecutive implementation of social epistemological methodology allows to teach students to determine the relevance of an appropriate PR-model. The task of the professor is to reveal the polycontextual nature of modern communications, to show how the contexts are defined by different ethical positions, to arrange a dialogue as a comprehensive open communication. Resolution of the ethical conflict between the parties of the customer and the contractor in professional public relations activity should be achieved in a dialogue as social creative act.

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