INNOVATIVE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

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Abstract: *The responsibility of education of professionals in the field of public relations is conditioned on the exponential increase in the use of information communication technology and social media. New circumstances, due the rapid development of information - communication technologies, rightfully conditioned that in the scientific and user circles we increasingly speak not so much about the technology, but more about social revolution. Social media enable new ways and means of reaching target groups, and professionals in the industry of public relations more and more often use the advantage of new Web 2.0 technology. There is a new task before the teachers in Public relations - to carefully rethink the way in which students learn about social networks, especially at a time when the value and use of public relations is increasingly questioned. It is necessary to adapt the curricula of public relations to the ways of using social networks, which is a very complex and sensitive issue both for educators and professionals. Innovative educational curriculum, from the perspective of public relations that rely on social networks and new - digital media, should view the social media as a disruptive inovaciju.*

Keywords: *innovation, knowledge, public relations, ICT, social networks, education*

1.   INTRODUCTION

In comparison with other parts of the information and communication systems, sector of activity specialized in public relations recorded over the last ten years, the highest growth. The American Association of Public Relations (PRSA) argues that the only limit to the further development of this prosperous area is the insufficient number of people who can do this job. There are more and more of these jobs and they are increasingly well paid. However,

the new communication developments imposed new standards of performance in this area. It is no longer enough to use traditional media as communication channels through which to reach out to the public. Mutual consequently - this means that users of the messages (sent out by the public relations service) can no longer be viewed as traditionally static. Adoption and use of social networks and the new - digital media in public relations for educators presents an excellent opportunity to re-examine the way they teach this discipline. Thanks to the practically immediate feedback from social network users, public relations departments can be much faster in evaluating their policy of action, i.e. whether the strategies of their performance are successful or not. In this case the role of educators is new and different, innovative.

2.   THE INNOVATIVE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATORS

Innovative educational curriculum, from the perspective of public relations resting on social networks and the new - digital media, should view the social media as a disruptive innovation. Actually it is a way to establish new forms of relations with new customers and shareholders. If we bear in mind that in a production environment "disruptive technologies create entirely new markets through the introduction of new types of products and services, which are initially measured by metrics of established consumer value, worse than the previous' (Christensen and Overdorf, 2000, p. 7), it is then realistic to expect that, despite all the expected resistance, a new educational curriculum of public relations, which has in its agenda both social networks and digital media, certainly contribute to building the innovative attitude of the organization with its publics. After all, the nature of these relations has already been changed through the increasing use of the Internet and social media, which for users, if nothing else, facilitate discussions about products, brands, etc.

In fact, target groups not only participate on social networks in the exchange of experience about producte, services or brands, but this public is now entitled to virtually alone produce public relations and reproduce messages (changed or unchanged) for their own goals, and to influence their outcomes. Reproduction can vary: in function of the delivery system or in the function of the basic content. Whatever the mode, it represents a challenge to the traditional paradigm by which public relations function as message development and control of the debates that take place through the mass media.

Whether this means loss of control over the flow of information, messages and values in the changed circumstances - it is hard to say. At this point, we might say that the control will be reduced to moments in the communication exchange, when the time comes for the organization to speak in a particular context or negotiate on issues of public importance. All this will require not only a change of good manufacturing practice, but also a change of organizational values and processes.

Where are the educators in this field? To what extent do they recognize the need to introduce innovative practices that we have discussed so far? Is insistence on the traditional approach to teaching regarding the subject of public relations in the new environment of social media wrong and dangerous?

Paradoxically – but the profession that is related to trends more than many other profession, seems to be late to jump into the trend of digitalization. In Serbia this is definitely the case. In fact, thanks to the process of accreditation of higher education institutions and

study programs in Serbia and the obligation of faculties to place their curricula their web sites, curricula in the field of public relations have become generally available. Through examination of their content, we conclude that there is virtually no curriculum that is particularly committed to public relations in social media, a new way of communication in digital technologies. Where they are commmited, the public relations courses have either technological or communication focus or a combination of these two. Careful examination of these documents shows that there is compliance regarding the terms, concepts and models that describe and define social media and communications practice in relation to the performance of activities of public relations in a Web 2.0 environment.

This picture implies at least two things:

[1] The lack of institutional understanding of the trends dictated by new digital technologies and

[2] the problem of teachers who fail to articulate a new field of practice of public relations for their students.

In this context, the issue of inclusion of social media in the curricula of public relations is very complex - it should not be a simple transmission of a number of skills that will motivate students to learn how to use different social media channels (although many claim that this will be an important component of any curriculum of public relations). In addition, this inclusion should not be reduced to learning the use of another tool of communication arsenal that can be used to reduce the risks and threats, and taking advantage of opportunities or to solve problems. Students must learn to understand *why* and *how* social media modify professional practices and processes, how organizational values can and should be changed under the influence of social media.

3. INTRODUCTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE PUBLIC RELATIONS CURRICULUM

At this point, the theory and practice of public relations applied to social media is fairly undeveloped in Serbia. This can partly be understood through the fact that social media is a completely new field, a new communication tool that educators do not yet have the courage to engage in training on new tools when they are not adequately investigated and described, that the audience is not yet sufficiently trained to use social media public relations, etc. However, all of the above neither justifies educators nor solves this problem.

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terminology to link the education or potential research? The question is - who are the authorities who could set this field onto new bases, bases which are required by the new media? Domestic professional literature certainly does not provide basic knowledge for such bases.

However, foreign professional literature, available through new media also fails to show consistency in the selection of terms nor in the manner in which to approach to this problem. Moreover, in the foreign professional literature too authors suggest incompleteness, uncertainty and inconsistency of certain terms and definitions. Authors such as Kaplan and Haenlein or Macnamarra, see Web 2.0 as "... the ideological and technological foundation ..." (2010, P.61), which allows "the creation and sharing of content that is generated by users through social media applications." However, at the same time they emphasize that the content generated by users is collaborative and changeable, "evolutionary", and that this idea itself is a huge challenge to the practice of public relations that relies on the "published" communication because published things suggest a degree of immutability and therefore control. Already this example suggests that the way in which we define social media and related concepts, and it usually depends on the context, has very significant implications on how we shall establish connections between existing theories and models of public relations and the future innovative curriculum, which will be a guideline for educators in public relations.

In addition, the definition and position of the social media in school curricula is problematic because of the invisible and intangible things that are hidden behind the public relations, viewed in the context of social media. Namely, in the communication mediated by social media, interest of the organization, as well as the establishment and maintenance of all the interrelations, have the potential to be implemented as different because of the influence of social media to appear as moderators and mediators of communication. So constructed relations between the actors in the situational context and the environment vary in duration and complexity. However, despite these factors it can be said that they have common characteristics. The common denominator that will generate future joint activities, among other things, needs to be defined by the educators themselves, placing a much broader framework in which they operate innovative public relations, compared to existing traditional frames. Hon and Gruding (1999, p.3) identified six elements of these relations:

- control of reciprocity,
- trust,
- satisfaction,
- commitment,
- relationship of exchange and
- group relations.

Five years ago Johansoozi (2006) identified also: dialogue and transparency as important relationships stressing that they, in the literature on public relations, did not get the attention that they deserve. Features such as these that we have listed are very useful for both students and educators because they provide an effective framework for developing an understanding of the relationship as well as for planning and evaluation of activities related to building relationships in practice.

On the other hand, there are authors who warn of the negative consequences of public relations directed via new communication channels, considering that dialogue and transparency are not favorite parts of the public relations which will continue to strive that their relations with the public remain more "economic". Among them is the Bourdieu (1990, p.115),

who points out that "the more relationships are impersonal, the more they become more economical'...". Indeed, communication in public relations through the traditional channels of mass media has the potential to separate itself from the body and and fail to hear the voice of the impersonal public – thus becoming impersonal. In this context of speaking, the public are homogeneous groups of segmented variables classified not by what they may want or can recognize, but they are defined in a way that brings them into line with the interests of the organization. Thus individuals remain unknown as well as their personal interests. Lack of desire in building transparent relations and dialogue, or perhaps failures in building dialog communication in practice of public relations go in favor of the impersonal "economic" relations and privileging interest of organizations, which are placed above the interests of stakeholders, providing a very fertile ground for spinning. Practitioners of public relations are or are not aware of this danger, but educators certainly must be aware. Apart from that, communication through new channels - social networks and new media, provide opportunity both for practitioners and educators to be on the same business - building of transparent relations and dialogue between the department of public relations and the public itself.

4. CONCLUSION

Although educators are not the only ones responsible for a fairly modest practice of public relations and media representation of this job as a spin, they still bear a good part of the responsibility for the preparation of future professionals and their ability to effectively and in accordance with recognized standards perform tasks of public relations. Unlike the traditional channels of mass media, social media facilitate both synchronous and asynchronous two-way communication, fostering a high level of engagement of the audience, giving users much greater control over the communication as well as communication and relationships that they themselves have chosen to follow. Compared to the traditional channels of mass media, social media show a greater capacity to build a dialogue, not just the exchange relationships. Organizations working in unstable areas, in transitional circumstances - as is the case in Serbia, with a high risk in business, should realize that all the above is actually the quality of social media which goes in their favor. All this makes social media disruptive and this requires much more than naive and superficial acceptance of social media as a communication channel in public relations. The very disruptive nature of social media is a challenge and requires a change and adjustment of processes, practices and values of public relations.

Public relations will not succeed representing the profession in a comprehensive, balanced and accurate way if they position themselves as super-institutions which base their existence and their profession on inequality. Inequality is reflected in the formulation of the image of the profession that is based on producing power in the relationship between the organization and the public, on which depends the survival either of the organization or the public. For practitioners and educators of Public Relations, one of the ways to overcome accusations of being super-institutions is precisely the involvement in social media and social networks. With joining the social media they open up the possibility of better understanding the new channels of communication, but also the nature of social contacts that govern their use. Social media, it is argued, provide public relations tools necessary to restore the balance of communicative and relational power, as well as the relationship between the or-

ganization and the public. At the same time they provide a new way of understanding the role and purpose of public relations. Social media will increasingly facilitate and create a structure of meaning regarding issues of social, political and economic importance, which greatly exceeds the character of mere classic consumption and marketing decisions. Further, in this context, individuals will increasingly set up the unexpected relationships in all these spheres - relations that will not be easy to predict.

It is exactly interactive media services, such as social networks, that provide the possibility to change the position of consumers and amend the sources of information. Public relations departments are able to, thanks to the feedback of users which is virtually instantaneous, establish a much quicker assessment of their policyof action, i.e. whether the strategies of their performance are successful or not. The role of educators, viewed from this angle, is new and different, innovative. The way educators in the field of public relations manage to transform the well-known theory of public relations and coordinate with social media channels used today will affect how the future students of public relations will develop their approach to ethical and professional practice of public relations. The rating of the profession will to a large extent depend on the harmonization of social networks as a channel of communication, on the one hand, and of the good practices applied in public relations. For now, the public relations profession remains tied to "the dark skills" and it is a profession where 'spining' is the most important thing. From this we can conclude that social media provide a timely opportunity to reflect on approaches regarding teaching of the very essence of public relations. Highlighting the building of the organization's relationships with its publics in the foreground, giving it an advantage together with economic and other organizational imperatives, creates a possibility for a better understanding of the role that social media can and must have and a much more important role in education and in the public relations as such. This approach allows us to understand social media in a much deeper way and not, as is often done, just as a set of communication technologies.

. Although the universities in Serbia on graduate studies already have the subject of Public Relations (under different names), there is no research that can give us an indication why higher education institutions adopted different approaches in the curricula of this course. If social media technology are built into the teaching units such as: media relations, crisis management and problem management, or campaigning for instance, it can be assumed that students in the framework of such curriculum will not have enough space to learn about the uniqueness of communication mediated by social media and to explore and expand their capabilities. Also, lectures on social media with a focus on technology and function serve the outcome of of the profession (teaching units in the type 'how to') can create a misunderstanding of the role and nature of social media in public relations.

Whichever direction we choose, the inclusion of social media in the teaching of public relations should be guided by ethical principles of communication and the paradigm of building a relationship that recognizes new technologies as inherently disruptive and dialog-like. Dialogic limitations of traditional media tell us that the use of social media in public relations we must teach in a different way. Accepting different approach will enable teachers to help their students in the conceptualization and communication technologies of social media as a tool that has its consequences, and not as a tool that is sufficient in itself. At this point we should recall the warning made by Carey: "It is exactly because we viewed each new advanced communication technology as an opportunity for political and economic life,

we devoted them, almost exclusively, to the issues of power and trade. We have rarely seen these advantages as an opportunity to expand opportunities for people to learn, exchange ideas and experiences "(2009, p.27). Therefore, properly understood social media present an opportunity for rethinking the very nature of public relations. It is a social role that has an impact on how the organizations use public relations and help themselves to become a better and more efficient service to citizens.

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