

What ethics for governmental communication? Ethical issues on government public relations

Que ética para a comunicação governamental? Questões éticas nas relações públicas governamentais

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Abstract

As government is both a public and a political organization the goal of communication can thus be complex. Government communication balances between political marketing and the noble aim of government public relations – inform citizens and promote bidirectional communication. The aim of this article is to discuss the evaluation criteria of government communication, both theoretically and applied, based on the ethics of virtues. Instead of focusing the ethical analysis on the consequences of action (utilitarianism), or on a list of duties (deontological ethics), it is argued that the true foundation of moral life and ethical-political coherence lies in the character of the agent, be it the politician or the public relations professional. This argument is illustrated by a recent example of the communication from the Government of Portugal.

Keywords: governmental communication; virtue ethics; utilitarianism; deontological ethics; Portugal.

Resumo

Como o governo é simultaneamente uma organização pública e política, o objetivo principal da sua comunicação é complexo. A comunicação governamental oscila entre marketing político e a finalidade mais nobre das relações públicas governamentais – informar os cidadãos e promover uma comunicação bidirecional. Neste artigo, debate-se os critérios de avaliação da comunicação governamental, tanto a nível teórico como aplicado, a partir da ética das virtudes. Em vez de se centrar a análise ética nas consequências da ação (utilitarismo), ou numa lista de deveres (ética deontológica), defende-se que o verdadeiro fundamento da vida moral e a coerência ético-política se encontra no carácter do agente,

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seja ele o governante ou o profissional de relações públicas. Este argumento é ilustrado com um exemplo recente da comunicação do Governo de Portugal.

Palavras-chave: comunicação governamental, ética das virtudes, utilitarismo, ética deontológica, Portugal.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As government is both a public and a political organization, the main goal of government communication can be difficult to ascertain. Government communication balances between political marketing or propaganda and the noble aim of government public relations – to inform citizens and promote bidirectional communication (Lee, 2012). However, as public relations practitioners, with self-interests, often manage government communication an important question arises: is government communication managed only to promote the government's political goals (party or election interests) or also to pursue the democratic purposes of government PR (ideally the public interest)?

From a theoretical and critical perspective, this chapter aims to: discuss the field and practices of government communication; to evaluate the main approaches to communication ethics – deontological, utilitarian and virtue ethics; and finally, to defend a virtue ethics approach to analyse government communication cases.

The literature on public relations ethics is strongly influenced by a deontological perspective, grounded in professional values (eg., Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001; Parsons, 2008; Theaker,

2004) and codes of conduct (eg., Day, 1991; Kruckeberg, 1989, 1993). The originality of this chapter is therefore twofold – on the one hand, it presents a critical discussion that places government communication in the centre of attention; on the other hand, it claims the virtue of a virtue ethics approach into government communication analysis.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. The field and practices of governmental communication

The field of political communication deals with processes of communication and interaction among politicians, the media and publics. In its original and most visible form, political communication means the communication efforts made by political parties and agents, disseminated in the media, with the aim of influencing election results. But political communication is not restricted to political marketing in political campaign contexts. It also includes governmental communication, which takes place continuously, also during so-called “normal” periods, i.e. between electoral campaigns.

The act of governing in democracy relies on constant exchanges of information and communication about public policies, ideas and decisions, not only between members of the government and political parties, but also, and in particular, between those who govern and those who are governed. As Fairbanks et al. (2007) point out, a healthy democracy requires an informed public and a government that is transparently accountable for its actions to those who elected it.

Providing information and accountability are goals established in what Lee called “the democratic purposes of government public relations: media relations, public reporting and responsiveness to the public as citizens” (2012: 12) These goals can be implemented directly or indirectly. Directly, when governments inform citizens through public relations, the most common way of transmitting information about public policy and the use of public funds. The growing computerisation of government functions (e-government) has been guided by the same goal: facilitating direct contact between citizens and boosting the government’s ability to respond to their questions and criticisms.

The “democratic purposes” of government public relations may also be achieved indirectly through news coverage. This can either be the result of the government’s initiative, normally

through press office strategies (e.g. press releases, press conferences, interviews), or when news stories arise from journalists' investigation with government information sources (e.g. PR professionals) or non-official sources (e.g. politicians or civil servants).

As Norris (2014) argues, the ideal of watchdog journalism is probably the best synonym for journalism as the fourth estate – an independent guard within civil society that is able to counterbalance the executive, legislative and judicial branches. By querying the accuracy of information provided by the government, by questioning political agents and investigating their conduct, journalists are a bastion of public interest, unveiling cases of misinformation, incompetence, scandal, corruption and criminal behaviour in the public and private sectors.

The responsibility for drawing up and spreading government messages normally falls to communication professionals shoulders. Civil servants may belong to a communication department/service within different government organisations at national, regional or local level. They are in charge of keeping citizens informed, boosting public knowledge about public policy and the way it is created, as well as enhancing bidirectional communication and feedback with journalists and citizens (Garnett, 1992; Grunig, 2008; Lee et al., 2012).

It is also not uncommon for those in charge of governmental communication, especially within central government organisations, to be appointed based on party affiliation rather than professional grounds. It may also be the case that a press advisory service is contracted from communication agencies on an outsourcing regime, with the agencies often being chosen based on their political preferences. This situation appears indicate a politicisation of governmental communication, which raises several questions: is governmental communication managed only to promote the government's political goals (party or election interests) or also to pursue the democratic purposes of government PR (ideally the public interest)? Would it be naive to think that governmental communication could ever be politically neutral? Since the government is both a public and political organisation, the answer to this question will always be problematic.

In the media-dominated 21st century, image management, crisis management and scandal management have become governments' main concern (Negrine et al., 2007). In the age of ubiquitous technology, no political leader can neglect his/her image anywhere or at any time

without consequences for his/her popularity and visibility. With the blurring of the boundaries between public and private acts, no action in the private sphere is left free of media attention. Controlling the media agenda is therefore at the core of governmental communication. So the act of governing has ended up becoming a “permanent campaign”, since it combines “image creation with strategic calculation”, making government an “instrument geared towards supporting public popularity of those elected” (Blumenthal, 1980: 7).

In this context, it can be understood why political consultants, public relations, press officers and communication consultants are today at the heart of the political system, strengthening what Pfetsch called the “professionalisation of government communication” (1998: 71-72). Some authors see that professionalisation as an explanation for the decline in citizens’ confidence in the government and public institutions and, ultimately, the weakening of democracy itself (e.g. McNair, 2004).³

The most negative view about the role of communication professionals in the context of government institutions comes from their association with manipulation or spin (Moloney, 2000). The term spin doctor is used for press officers who manipulate journalists and, therefore, public opinion on behalf of parties or governments. Certainly the idea that politicians (and their advisers) are manipulators or liars has not only emerged in the age of the spin doctor. But it is above all due to their growing presence and power that some governments have been pressured to draw up ethical and deontological codes or codes of conduct for carrying out government communication.

Professional values has been placed, along with a body of knowledge and professional training and certification, in the centre of defining a profession. In the case of public relations, Parsons (2008) defined values in terms of five pillars of ethics as follows: (1) *Beneficence* or to do well; (2) *Confidentiality* or to respect privacy; (3) *Non-maleficence* or to do no harm; (4) *Fairness* to be fair and socially responsible; and (5) *Veracity* or to tell the truth. Values shape the direction of the profession, and, in many ways, members of the

³ According to the last Autumn Eurobarometer, published in October 2016, citizens’ continued to lack confidence in governments: most Europeans tend not to trust the national parliament (62%) or national government (64%). Source: <http://ec.europa.eu/COMMfrontOffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKY/2130> (accessed on 15/01/2017).

general public evaluate the profession if the practitioners adhere strongly to the values that they defend, at an individual but also at a collective level. In fact, the establishment of professional bodies at a national and/or transnational level have led to a widespread adoption of codes of conduct, usually as self-regulatory guidelines of practice (Global Alliance, 2002). Some authors argue that a written code of ethics to be the best way to encourage professionals not to trust subjective judgments internalizing the values the profession (Day, 1991; Kruckeberg, 1989)

2.2. Evaluating governmental communication based on what ethics?

From an ethical standpoint, each stakeholder in the governmental communication process is faced with his/her own ethical dilemmas. For those who govern, to start with the main stakeholders and agents in this process, the dilemma relates to the conflict between their personal interests (career, material advantages, honours, etc.) and the public interest, the common good, which is joined in many cases by the interests of their political party, which should not be confused with either of the other two. Even the public relations professionals who are involved in the process on the government's side or the private companies' side share the profession's overall ethical dilemma: giving priority to the client's interests, which in this case is the government, or giving priority to the public interest, the "common good". In the literature dedicated to the ethics of public relations, there are critics and defenders of each of these positions (Harrison & Galloway, 2005, 3). Things become even more complicated with the (neo)liberal trend towards privatising functions that, since the times of Max Weber until a few decades ago, were exclusively performed by the civil servants, whose ethos was naturally strongly in favour of defending what is public. Today, communication advisers and operators, even on the government's side, work for private public relations agencies hired by those who govern for that purpose. What interests should be prioritised: the agency's (i.e. the agency owner's), the person who governs' or the public good or interest? Are these interests compatible?

As well as the issue of communication agents and their interests, there is also the question of the objects to be evaluated. What object or objects are subjected to ethical evaluation in governmental communication? When we talk about "political communication", we think firstly about words, speeches, press releases, and declarations by those who govern or their

spokespeople. However, decisions, measures and acts by those who govern are also an integral part of the communication process. Furthermore, the relationship between words and acts is of significant ethical importance. Someone in a position of government that promises one thing and does another betrays the fundamental social institution of promise, as well as showing a lack of consistency in action. These behaviours are ethically improper, as well as compromising the relationship of trust needed for the proper functioning of the communication process between those who govern and those are governed, which also raises an ethical problem.

As well as the ethical issues that are raised in the governmental communication process, which include lying, manipulation of statistics and information, etc., there are the issues that emerge relating to acts along the edges of that process, often in the private or semi-private sphere of the lives of those who govern. This category includes corruption, nepotism, unfair favouritism of oneself or those close to oneself, etc. Mere suspicion, whether properly founded or unfounded, may give rise to media events that disturb the communication process. Regardless of whether the agents are innocent or not, ethical shortcomings are frequently practised when managing crisis communication.

After the matter of subjects and objects comes the issue of methods and criteria. Bearing in mind the ethical theories that are most widespread in moral philosophy, this issue essentially involves knowing what ethical school of thought should be used to make an ethical evaluation of governmental communication.

The moral philosophies most applied in the field of governmental communication were, for a long time, utilitarianism and Kantian ethics, often called “deontology”.⁴ More recently, from the beginning of the century, a third moral philosophy, virtue ethics, has widely been applied to the ethical evaluation of different professional fields, including communication, specifically journalism and governmental communication.

2.3. Application of utilitarianism and kantian deontological ethics

⁴ It should be noted that this final term has two different meanings, that should not be confused, on the one hand, it refers to an ethical theory, on the other, the application of any ethical theory to different professional activities.

Utilitarianism is an ethical theory that, at first glance, seems to be particularly suitable for the ethical evaluation of governmental communication, in that it is based on a principle that also guides the actions of many of those who govern and is believed to be correct by most political agents. It is not by chance, in fact, that utilitarian ethics emerged in a context where it was sought to justify the British government's decisions depending on their "usefulness". The utilitarian principle states that a good decision – or action or "measure" – is one that has as an overall consequence (adding together all the consequences) "the greatest possible good for the greatest number of people". This good is calculated by adding together the partial "goods" of the individuals that make the society. But is this the goal of any political decision or measure taken by a good governor? Will he or she not pursue the public interest to maximise the "aggregate good" of citizens while at the same time minimising the negative consequences that may arise for some or even all from their decisions? In this case, the governmental communication task would essentially involve explaining the forecasts and calculations made by those who govern that justify the measures taken, especially when they involve "sacrifices", to citizens and voters.

However, utilitarian ethics has some weak points that make its application to governmental communication problematic. The first is that the utilitarian concept of good – conceived as pleasure, happiness, welfare or the satisfaction of personal "preferences" (whatever they may be) – bypasses ethical standards. These are only justified from a utilitarian perspective if, in the overall calculation, they help increase the aggregate good. Considering and justifying decisions is therefore based on a pure and simple analysis of costs and benefits, which leads to a relativisation of ethical values. Applying this to political communication, one consequence may be the following: the government agents responsible for communication may be tempted to follow Plato when he suggests that good rulers turn to the "noble lie" (Laws, 663 d-e; 1961: 125) whenever it means guaranteeing the greater good of the city. A little closer to us, some people defend some tolerance in regard to the informal economy, in favour of GDP growth, which would mean an increase in happiness and well-being.

From an ethical point of view, the central problem that utilitarianism poses is its tendency to quantify everything, and there are some ethically very important things that cannot be reduced to numbers, such as the value of a person's life or dignity. Another looming problem that utilitarianism imposes that has obvious consequences for its application to

governmental communication has to do with the issue of justice; it relates to the fact that, from its perspective, the majority is always right in imposing its preferences even if this is to the detriment of minorities.

Faced with the problems that utilitarianism poses, at a certain point its application to such ethically sensitive activities as media communication and the exercise of political functions began to give way to Kantian deontology, another great philosophical tradition in modern philosophy. Deontology made a clean state of problems that, at heart, are inherent to utilitarianism, placing the absolute priority on ethical principles, moral law, on the ethical evaluation of human actions. Meeting the duty imposed by the moral standard overtakes the “good”, which is largely subjective, that guides the utilitarian perspective. From the perspective of deontology, no ethical shortcoming, no neglect of the moral “duty” can be relativised or nullified by cost-benefit calculations, however great the “aggregate good” arising from the relevant actions or failures to act.

Deontological ethics has made a significant contribution to institutionalising ethics applied to professions thanks to the drawing up of deontological codes adapted to the different activities. It is an institutionalisation inspired by law, performing something approaching a juridification of ethics. Codes compile local prescriptive standards that translate the supreme ethical principle, which is overly abstract and formal, into more concrete rules for action that include specific empirical content for professional practices. Alongside the codes, the practice of ethical audits has been introduced to check whether or not their rules have been met or violated. The bodies charged with drawing up the codes and carrying out audits are normally vocational organisations in different sectors (orders, professional associations, etc.).

As in utilitarianism, ethics of professions focused on codes of rules also has its weaknesses. If the limits of utilitarianism are, as already mentioned, inherent to the utilitarian ethical theory itself, the problems that applied deontological ethics raises are mostly related to its application, i.e. the drafting of the codes, their use in day-to-day life and carrying out audits. The central problem of rule-based ethics is that there cannot be a rule for every situation and circumstance and, even when there is, their application in a specific case is always highly delicate. There are many way to work around rules in practice while at the same time

appearing to comply with them to the public's eyes. And that is what the spin doctor's work fundamentally consists of. In the literature on application of ethical codes in public relations, including in governmental communication, there are authors who believe that in many cases the use of ethical codes "is more cosmetic than anything else" (Harrison & Galloway, 2005:4).

2.4. Virtue ethics and its application to communication

Virtue ethics, which takes its name from the fact it is not focused on a formal principle with the application of normative rules stemming from it, aims to overcome the problems of deontology. The distinctive feature most often used to characterise virtue ethics is that it is an agent-based ethics, as opposed to deontological ethics, which is based on Kantian ethics, considered to be action-based. While in the deontological perspective the agent should start with the question "what is my duty?", "according to what rule should I act?", in virtue ethics the agent poses the question "how would an upstanding person of excellent character feel and act in this situation?".

From the virtue ethics perspective, it is believed that an agent's actions are largely guided by character traits that drive him or her to act in a certain way. "Virtues" are ethically significant and valuable character traits. They can be practical skills, as Aristotle says, "dispositions acquired to act" in the best way possible in the face of challenges in certain situations. The Greek term *aretê*, which the Romans translated as *virtu*, becoming "virtue" in English, literally means "excellence". From this perspective, it is important to know what the agent is, ethically, i.e. what capacities his or her character contains, what virtues or vices it has. The acts are undoubtedly important, although they are derived and are the consequence of a presence or absence of "excellence" in the subject.

A virtue is the internalisation of a way of acting when confronted with certain types of situations. Courage, for example, is the ability to take inevitable and necessary risks in dangerous situations to perform a valuable good, controlling fear and acting rationally. Virtue is normally the ability to regulate emotions; in the case of courage, controlling fear. The inability to control fear causes a vice of deficiency: cowardliness, lack of courage. Completely neutralising emotion is a vice of excess: temerity, overconfidence. The virtuous

do not need to follow an explicit, reflected rule because they have internalised a way of acting. But it is also true that we can explain that way of acting in a general rule; for courage, it would be: “act with courage whenever the situation so requires”. However, such a rule would be too general. The decision to perform a courageous act requires a lot more information: what situation requires it? How far should courage go, i.e. controlling fear? What justifies greater or lesser courage? There are subtle considerations to be made for which there are no pre-established rules. When defining virtue, Aristotle says that it is “a settled disposition of the mind determining the choice of actions and emotions, consisting essentially in the observance of the mean relative to us, this being determined by principle, that is, as the prudent man would determine it” (Nicomachean Ethics 1106b36; 1982: 95). The “mean” refers to, in the case of courage, an emotional regulation that places the mark somewhere in the “middle” on a scale between excess and deficiency. Furthermore, the regulation of greater or lesser courage must be adjusted to the objectives at play in the situation. The same courage is not spent on saving a human life in danger as on a cap carried away by the wind. The “rule” therefore is always ad hoc, determined by the “prudent man” for each case. Using this ideal decision-maker, Aristotle avoids an ethics of universal principles and rules.

In virtue theory, the philosopher makes a key distinction between “ethical virtues” (êthikê aretê) such as courage, generosity, justice, etc., and “dianoethic” or intellectual virtues. The most important intellectual virtue is phronêsis, prudence or practical knowledge, the virtue of the prudent man (phronimos). This means that to be effective, giving rise to virtuous actions, ethical virtues are always dependent on an intellectual virtue, practical knowledge, which will have to resolve the calculation and consideration problems that emerge when they are actually used in a huge range of occasions in life, whether regular everyday life or more dramatic situations. Practical knowledge or prudence (phronêsis), intellectual virtue, guides the ethical virtues like a conductor guides an orchestra: in each situation it gives instructions to the most suitable and necessary virtues to intervene, to the minute, and how to intervene, in the most appropriate way, with the most suitable intensity.

In its function as guide of ethical virtues, practical knowledge must itself have a kind of compass, a polar star to guide it. That star is the “good”, which is more specifically a “good life”, for the Greek philosopher, or a human life worthy of being lived. The virtues and their

functions are to be understood in the context of a theory of human good. Aristotelian good is not simply a passive state of the subject (like utilitarian pleasure) or the satisfaction of the agent's "preferences" (as in utilitarianism), but the living of a successful human life, a "good life" which can be said to objectively achieve eudaimonia, a concept that is usually although imperfectly translated as happiness. This is not the result of actions or good luck, but rather lies in actions themselves. Eudaimonia, the human good, is an "active exercise of his soul's faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue" and this, the philosopher adds, "takes a complete lifetime" (Nicomachean Ethic, 1098a; 1982:33).

The various criticisms made of virtue ethics include the difficulty or even impossibility, according to some critics, of implementing it to ethically evaluate professional activities. This is, first and foremost, due to the aversion of this type of ethics to establishing general ethical rules of conduct and, therefore, deontological codes, whose rules, if properly adapted to the professions in question, would allow for a relatively simple ethical evaluation of real cases.

When applied to evaluating professional activities, virtue ethics favours the internalisation of ethical values by agents, which means developing specific virtues, whether ethical or epistemic, by the agents themselves, rendering them able to act with excellence in different situations. In this perspective, special importance is assigned to acquiring and developing skills, whether comprehensive or specific (to the profession) and so to discussion and two-way communication. The use of codes is not simply banned, but they should be more aspirational than prescriptive or juridical (Harrison, 2004, 3). It is more important to transform the agents' minds towards excellence – their character, their ethos – rather than making them stick to prescriptive codes that spin doctors' cunning would always be able to work around.

When applying virtue ethics to different types of activities such as professions or social functions, it is important to bear in mind, as well as the Aristotelian distinction between ethical and intellectual virtues, another distinction that does not overlap but may intersect with it, this time between specific virtues and comprehensive or general ones. The latter include virtues that intervene in all areas of activity, such as Aristotelian ethical virtues, as well as "practical knowledge", the intellectual virtue that coordinates use of ethical virtues. Particular attention to specific virtues should be paid in ethics applied to professions.

Moreover, there are comprehensive ethical virtues that are fundamental and especially important in certain activities. Truthfulness/sincerity (the Greek term *alêtheia* has both meanings), for example, a virtue listed by Aristotle in his table of the most common ethical virtues, is particularly important when dealing with an activity such as governmental communication.

On the other hand, a virtue such as leadership fits into the category of specific virtues. Robert Audi highlights its importance in business (Audi, 2012: 278). We could add that it is also fundamental for the work of governing. The same can be said of the consistency of decisions and the coherence of political measures. Are these ethical virtues? Or are they more technical instead? From a virtue ethics or good life point of view, the spectrum of the ethical is in some way broader than in the deontological perspective of the rule ethics, more focused on the narrower domain of “morality”. For virtue ethics, in the field of action, there is a watertight division between the ethical and the technical, between the ethical and the political. Inconsistency and incoherence in governance, as well as being bad for community life, therefore driving people further from good, call into question reliability of those who govern, a fundamental ethical virtue in politics.

One of the first people to discuss the cardinal virtue of governance was Aristotle. That virtue is the practical political knowledge, the *phronêsis*, of people who govern. For him, there is common practical knowledge, which we would all be interested in having to run our lives. There is, however, some specialised practical knowledge, including that of the judge (jurisprudence) and that of the politician. These specialised variants of practical knowledge are undoubtedly intelligence virtues, although they are the ones that regulate the use of ethical virtues.

3. METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF A GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION CASE

The difference in approach between deontological ethics and rules and virtue ethics can be illustrated in the following example.

A secretary of state, an avid football fan, accepted an invitation from a large oil company to watch the European Championship final in Paris, in which the Portuguese team would be

playing. The company gave the secretary of state the trip. When this was discussed in the media, the government representative conceded that it was regrettable but not serious enough to warrant dismissal. The government also guaranteed that, from then on, important issues, particularly outstanding tax questions, pertaining to the oil company to be dealt with at the ministry directly by the minister rather than the secretary of state, so as to avoid any suspicions of preferential treatment. Furthermore, the government immediately announced the decision to draw up and introduce a “code of ethics and best practices” which would henceforth establish the types and maximum value of gestures or goodwill gifts that could be accepted by members of the government in their dealings with private organisations.

The features involved in this case are acts and declarations by those responsible to try and justify those acts. The secretary of state’s behaviour clearly introduced entropy into communication between those who govern and the public, the governed, due to the ethical doubts it raised. It is not only government communications and official declarations by its members of spokespeople that form governmental communication. The acts of members of the government are similarly part of that communication and are as important as the messages transmitted in discourse.

In the context of a deontological duty ethics, it is not easy to directly apply the universal moral principle, moral law, to questionable concrete cases such as this one, where no violation of the moral law is visible to the naked eye. The secretary of state had not seemingly done the company any favours in terms of taxation. He could always say that he will never provide the company with any tax favours. Moreover, those types of invitations were common and deemed acceptable in the recent past. It is precisely because in questionable, borderline cases like this one that agents have legitimate doubts about their moral duty, about what they must or mustn’t do in their office or professional roles that ethical codes are needed. These codes are collections of rules that bridge the gap between the overly simple universal principle and the complex singularities of real life. Understanding the spirit of the time and following its aspiration to comply with its “duty” in everything and above everything, the government reacted nimbly to the ethical furore generated by the secretary of state’s actions, suggesting that a code of rules for cases of that type (and other types, while they were at it) be drawn up immediately. With this initiative, which likely came from the prime minister, the government, as well as preventing future incidents of the same

kind, cleared the secretary of state of any possible blame, thereby justifying the lack of resignation. The secretary of state could not have committed any kind of infraction for the simple reason that there was no regulatory code. The legal principles of *nulum crimen, nula poene sine lege* – there is no crime or punishment if there is no law – is transferred to ethics. There is a lot to be said about the properness, or lack thereof, of that transfer, but there is not time to do so here.

From a virtue ethics point of view, an analysis of the case would focus primarily on the weakness or absence of certain virtues in the agents. Even though virtue ethics is not absolutely against the creation of codes, and the rules contained therein may provide didactic support for beginners, for the (still) non-virtuous, who are perhaps the majority, what is essential lies in the possession and effectiveness of the virtues. In this case, the analysis would have to check which virtues may have failed, and, if they have in fact failed, who should take responsibility. For Aristotle, human beings are not only responsible for their acts but also, to a certain extent, for their vices or virtues, since they are not innate but are acquired through education and training and are developed thanks to the agent's efforts. It would not therefore be the absence of a written code that would clear the secretary of state. The infraction may be based on a deficit in the agent's virtue and, having acted badly, it is simultaneously the responsibility of the secretary of state and the person who appointed him, in this case the prime minister. Furthermore, for Aristotle, the functions of the government should, as far as possible, be entrusted to the best, which means those who have the greatest abilities for those functions, including not only technical skills but also ethical virtues and practical knowledge.

From the virtue ethics perspective, not turning to rules for singular cases is intentional; it is based on an ideal model of *phronimos*, the holder of practical knowledge, in which this is the person who has the hermeneutic and heuristic ability to make a good choice, to find for him or herself the rules that are most suitable for the situation and circumstances, always looking towards the goal of a dignified life. Ethical virtues carry an overall idea of general good objectives within them – being courageous, being honest, etc., are objectives – and the desire to achieve them, but they need to be regulated, activated and guided (in time, space, circumstances, etc.) by practical knowledge.

In the case analysed here, there would have been a lack of self-restraint (ethical virtue) by the secretary of state, either due to his passion for football and the desire to satisfy it or a failure to resist the act of flattery (ethical vice) of the company, which was an idea that was likely devised and implemented by the person in charge of corporate public affairs. Above all, what failed was *phronêsis*, political discernment (another possible translation for the term), a virtue that is considered to be intellectual but which is, deep down, the most important of the ethical virtues. The prime minister lacked the courage (ethical virtue) that would have been needed to dismiss the secretary of state, and instead opted for a utilitarian perspective of things: the loss of a (technically) competent man from the government would be too high a price to pay for a sin that was, in the end, venial.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

With a critical approach, this article aimed to open new avenues to the study of government communication and to highlight the importance of future research, based on the field of applied ethics.

The growing politicisation of governmental communication, the increasingly intense scrutiny of the actions of political agents and the growing porosity in the boundary between the public and private spheres are some factors that contribute to the increase in ethically problematic cases, at the same time making it difficult to perform an ethical evaluation of governmental communication. It is clear that, in this context, the level of ethics demanded of political agents, whether politicians or communication professionals (PR professionals, press officers, journalists, etc.), is tending to increase.

In these circumstances, the political agent and the professional will have a greater advantage in internalising solid ethical values that can be made to become their second nature when acting, thereby avoiding ethical traps and “affairs”. That would be the counsel given by virtue ethics. As for codes of ethics inspired by deontology, although there are always complex or *sui generis* situations that are not foreseen by those who draft them, they always provide a useful framework for ethical guidance, above all for political and professional agents who have less experience in the ethically challenging field, often filled with pitfalls, of governmental communication.

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