

An approach to the Public Relations from a social and ethical perspective

Un acercamiento a las Relaciones Públicas desde la perspectiva social y ética

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Recepción: 15/04/2011 Revisión: 01/05/2011 Aceptación: 07/05/2011 Publicación: 10/05/2011

Abstract

In the field of communication sciences, Public Relations constitute a very complex set of activities that are institutionalized under this denomination. So, I am speaking of the communicative conception of them. My feeling is that the theoretical research on it is, unfortunately, limited, and often with a dominant pragmatic and professional approach. We have to accept that practically speaking they are very important, but the degree of knowledge of the researchers on communication sciences and of the citizens is rather limited. Often they are assimilated or confused with the advertising, when, in fact, in this communicative field, they are nearer to the information as news, with all their implications. We cannot forget that their objective is the creation of a positive image and its aim and technique of persuasion is also an evident element.

Keywords: communication, public relations, ethical, theoretical research

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Resumen

En el campo de las ciencias de la comunicación, las relaciones públicas constituyen un conjunto muy complejo de actividades que se han institucionalizado en esta denominación. Por lo tanto, estoy hablando de la concepción comunicativa de esa disciplina. Mi sensación es que la investigación teórica sobre el mismo es, por desgracia, limitada, ya menudo con un enfoque dominante pragmático y profesional. Tenemos que aceptar que los aspectos prácticos son muy importantes, pero el grado de conocimiento de los investigadores en ciencias de la comunicación y de los ciudadanos es bastante limitado. A menudo son asimilados o se confunden con la publicidad, cuando, de hecho, en este ámbito comunicativo, que están más cerca de la información como noticias, con todas sus consecuencias. No podemos olvidar que su objetivo es la creación de una imagen positiva y su objetivo y la técnica de la persuasión es también un elemento evidente.

Palabras Clave: comunicación, relaciones públicas, ética, investigación teórica

Summary

1. Introduction
2. Professional Activity
3. Issues of Public Relations
4. Discussion
5. References

Sumario

1. Introducción
2. Actividad profesional
3. Ámbitos de las Relaciones Públicas
4. Discusión
5. Referencias

1. INTRODUCTION

The first problem that it poses is how to understand the role of ethics when the main aim is often the use of persuasion or seduction with an intentional interest objective.

I must emphasize again that this text pays a primarily attention to the communicative use of them, without ignoring that they are utilized in other fields. I must add that for me is primarily to set up the necessary relationship that should exist between ethics and any activity or event linked with PR. Is fundamental that this text be read under this point of

view. I believe that it should be impossible to approach their mind and practice without this approach.

I want to assert that my conception of the PR can be explained as the form of communication, with its own techniques, which is employed by a person, a public or a private institution, a firm, an initiative, which has the aim to create, modify or consolidate their public image, with the intentionality that it be positive and satisfying, in relation to a audience usually previously defined.

So, my purpose is to carry out a certain number of reflections to try to clarify this concept from a theoretical and empirical view. For such an aim I propose to set up a taxonomy of the actors, purposes and actions that we can state in this vast field of a communication science and activity.

First of all, I assert that PR and advertising belong to two different areas of the communication sciences and practices, because both are clearly separated.

The connections between PR and information as news explains and justifies the existence of agencies, called, for instance, in Spain “gabinetes de comunicación”, whose main and basic objective is to elaborate and to diffuse, through the mass media, news and content related to the organization, firm, governmental body activities,... They have been created for their own purpose and interests. Their aim is clearly intentional and interested and they are always compelled to use the persuasion techniques.

Professionally and practically speaking, as a profession, they embrace different areas, not only communicative, as I shall try to expose in the following pages, but from an institutional perspective this fact is not always clearly defined.

It is convenient to note that there are different types of independent firms or agencies devoted to them. They may be national based or branch-offices of big international ones. A specific example is the case of a firm which is a subsidiary or a branch of an advertising company, usually of international scope. Often it may signify that the weight of the

advertising business is evident, specially in function of their clients and of the services that they offer to them.

In addition, it is necessary to take into account the existence of independent professionals or when they are working in association but keeping their our autonomy.

It is fundamental that be known sufficiently which is the role of the professionals, to whom they serve, and why the target group that utilize their services. Moreover, the professionals should be very well acquainted of who are their prospective clients, and their needs and their intentions.

The controversial image of them, sometimes negative, and considered superficial, should be changed, even if it is a long and difficult task. We must accept that they are today an important element in the field of the communication, and it is a result of an evolution of a society where the persuasion and the spectacle are relevant elements of it and of its public opinion.

2. PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITY

I should like to mention that to be a professional in this activity require a certain number of conditions: open and imaginative mind; to be educated and sympathetic; to have the capacity to set up a good relationship with everybody; to possess an excellent educational background and culture, and the knowledge of different languages; to be aware that either he acts as independent or belonging to a private firm, public organism or any type of association, he should possess the conscience that he must serve the objectives and criteria of those who require their service, and forcibly he must accomplish his instructions and wishes. But at the same time, deontological speaking, he must be aware of the ethical limits of his behavior (indeed, no difference should be done irrespectively of the gender), according to their code of ethics.

In fact, it arises an important ethical issue, that I am afraid has not been taken sufficiently into consideration: unfortunately the ethics of information is in a more or less permanent

crisis, principally because it deals with a situation of ideological or interest crisis. That is what happens specially in the political, religious or economic arena, where very often we must face more on propagandistic or disinformation contents than precisely informative. This fact becomes worse in the elections, or when a political party rules with absolute majority and it does not respect enough in its communication the rights of the other political parties, or of the private institutions or the citizens.

Paradoxically, in spite of the fact that always the advertising is associated with the manipulation, in general, in this field, the ethics is more respected in the sense that if an ad is misleading, false or its interpretation is willingly confused, usually the consumer will be aware of it and the results will be negatives for those that utilize this practice. Owing to the advertising organs of self-control try to impede that the legislator enacts restrictive laws of the advertising, the advertiser is compelled to take into account the respective code of ethics. In fact, really, what they do, is to limit the impact of a false or deceptive message.

These previous and introductory considerations, pushes me to mention the great number of possibilities which offer their practice, and thus I formulate the following analysis of what I consider to be basic elements:

- In relation to the intentionality of any action or message, we to observe that the message transmitted, in relation with the objectives, may have or not a mediatic diffusion. It supposes to consider the role of the utilized language.

When it deals with the creation of an event, it is necessary to define which should be its characteristics and its limitations.

- The issue of the relationship with the mass media, and to consider the relevant role that they play.

- Which is the role conceived of the image which is intended to be obtained: namely, setting up it, to change it or to consolidate it.

- Which should be the criteria of evaluation of an action of PR?

- From an ethical approach, is necessary to apply an existing deontological code?

3. ISSUES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

As far as the place of the actions to be carried out, I should like to say that without any aim of being exhaustive, I take the liberty forthwith to mention the great number of areas where their role and utilization may seem more useful, effective, necessary or more justified:

1) In the political arena

- a) Governmental institutions in the different levels
- b) Political parties
- c) Social movements
- d) Non-governmental organizations
- e) Pressure groups
- f) The politicians, occupying or not elected functions
- g) In the public administration, they are considered necessary for the civil servants (irrespectively of their category), the members of the army, the members of the police or assimilated bodies, according to the regions or the municipalities.
- h) In the administration of justice, in its different levels, for the judges, members of the courts, public prosecutors, and the rest of the personnel of this body.

2) The economic field

- a) The firms, irrespectively of their size, localisation and their type of field and their activities
- b) The managers and their different categories and specialities, and the professionals on a whole
- c) The stakeholders
- d) The business organizations
- e) The trade unions
- f) Specific organizations like the chambers of commerce or of industry, the stock exchange
- g) The public service organizations and the firms, either public or private, principally maritime, railways or of roads or highways

3) The liberal professions and their own organisations defending and protecting their rights and regulating their activity, and in the ethical area through their own deontological codes. I enumerate fortwith the most characterisc professions:

- a) Lawyers
 - The activities connected with the legal exercise of specific professions
- b) The physicians, and the different types of hospitals
- c) The architects and connected professions
 - The engineers ad their different specialities and areas of action
 - The different profesionnals of informatics and related activities

e) The economists and their specialities

f) And a long etcetera

4) Educational system

In any system of education exists diverse degrees and in everyone the teaching and the function of the PR may have a different content. In fact, each degree raise a specific requirement of the role of PR. as a technique to establish the contact between the teachers or the professors and their pupils or students

We must consider that the teacher or the professor should have a background about the function of PR in their process of communicating their knowledge and their message to the students. It means that the relationship between the professor and the students should be based upon the principles of creating an adequate approach to the educational process. Thus, if the professor has a consciousness of the importance of transmitting an educational message, the PR techniques conceived from an ethical perspective, may be, indeed, an useful tool. It is not a question of using the persuasion as such, but of raising in the student the need to learn, to think and to understand the need of the education message and content.

5) Culture

In this area, I consider that the PR might play –or do- an important function. Because of its actors in the different aspects and fields, should act following this mind, because, otherwise, its objective is not fully covered. Unfortunately, the research in this aspect is very limited, what it is a pity on account of the connections between the society and its cultural development,

Thus, the connections with the cultural institutions, either public or private, in their vast typology, and the large taxonomy of cultural actors, should be presided by this criterium.

Moreover, a particular attention should be devoted to their function in the actions of sponsorship or patronage, and, again, in so far the cultural foundations are concerned. The same point of view should be applied to the distinctive nature of foundations, according their nature and aims.

6) In relation to the mass media and their role, as I have exposed along the text, the function of the PR is essential, even it is not fully recognized. The tendency has been increased in my opinion in the last time. It poses the question of the ethical relations between PR and communication through them, principally in the information, and we have to recognize that the influence and the weight of the first, if often too big, notorious and determining.

7) In the sports, when they become a spectacle, the influence of PR is also very significative and over-reaching, specially as far as the sportsmen and the clubs in concerned. And particularly when they are famous. In fact, PR are present practically in all the manifestations and events. So, because of it, in the news, frequently, it is difficult to distinguish between news and PR.

4. CONCLUSION

I have attempted to offer a certain number of reflections on the social use of PR. My intention has been to emphasize their presence in the evolution of the society in its distinctive areas. Actually, my text it is an invitation to the social science researchers to consider that PR exist, and it is necessary to study their effects in the various fields.

As I have indicated, my feeling is that the research on them is not very large and is not profound. And we have to assume their power, in one sense, and their possibilities, in the other.

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