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Participation in environmental decision making processes: between instrumental and communicative action

Abstract:

An open information flow and participation of citizens in environmental decision making have become a widespread and common practice since the Aarhus Convention was adopted in many national and international (EU) legislation systems. It appears that formal system arrangements support the argumentative substantial rationality that leads to the optimization of environmental democracy. However, it is not difficult to notice that such ideal conditions are quite often merely wishful thinking. Instrumental PR communication techniques in fact support a reduced, strategic, goal-oriented rationality. Actors, most commonly called stakeholders, who adopt such communication techniques, present them as democratic, open, and transparent; conflicts are avoided, emerging questions dealt with in a spirit of partnership, and various institutional arrangements invented to alleviate the tensions arising from heterogeneous opinions, attitudes, prejudices, etc. An analysis of instrumental communication in the siting process of risky technology revealed that numerous communication techniques in a way inhibit substantial, argumentative rationality. In such sophisticated communication processes, the fundamental goals are not questioned at all, substantial debate is avoided, and negligible questions instead gain priority. This is not only the strategy of the main protagonists, even less influential actors avoid substantial discussion. They, too, adopt a reduced, instrumental, goal-oriented and pragmatic rationality. As a consequence, participation in decision making produces conflicts and obstructs interactive communication. This paper is based on case studies and a comparative analysis of citizen participation and the decision making process in siting radioactive waste disposal facilities in different EU countries.

Key words: communication, participation, decision making process, radioactive waste

1. Introduction: The legitimation crisis

People's reactions to policy measures are increasingly influenced by the low credibility of the institutions that are responsible for providing information and decision making. In a number of domains, distrust of official actors is increasing, as is evident from public opinion polls (Eurobarometer, 2008). In theory, the problem of legitimating political power has been present for a long time,¹ as well as the necessity to open the decision-making process to public participation². The reasons for the legitimation crisis are paradoxically summarized as a consequence of modernist reflexivity, "which consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character" (Giddens 1990: 38). To the surprise of practical engineering minds, the solutions for many urgent environmental problems nowadays depend more on public acceptance than on technical possibilities. This development is, of course, not unique to environmental problems, but reflects a wider trend in governance in which the use of participation of and consultation with the affected public has become unavoidable and (the only?) credible way to achieve legitimation or social acceptability.

In theory, there are three possible variants of a decision making process: 1. authoritative decision making through the legal state (suprastate, municipal) institutions; 2. market decision making through market negotiation; 3. consensual decision making through a transparent information process and participatory decision-making. These three different decision making procedures are correspondingly supported by three types of capital: ad 1) political capital, ad 2) economic capital, ad 3) social capital. In (environmental) practice all three options are, of course, combined, but due to the depleted efficiency and related eroded credibility of state institutions and market mechanisms in emerging environmental questions, legitimation through communicative, participatory decision-making is becoming, at least in theory, the most plausible and desirable option to solve the legitimacy crisis. Here we tackle the long lasting and permanently exciting debate on the effectiveness and relevance of decision making. The legitimation deficit of the state and market institutions is to be improved by comprehensive distribution of relevant information, argumentative discussion and open

¹ See J. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975).

² The Aarhus Convention is an international document implementing Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, signed by 40 (primarily European and Central Asian) countries and the European Community, and ratified by 41 countries.

participation in environmental decision making procedures³. The old question here is whether the participation is in practice an autonomous procedure or just a limited, auxiliary instrument to improve the democratic (legitimation) deficit of the state authorities and market institutions⁴. There seems to be no doubt among the general public, policymakers, developers, academia, etc. that public involvement in decision making processes can help to overcome the problems of legitimacy, i.e. trust and public acceptance of policy and institutions dealing with environmentally dubious or hazardous projects. Trust seems to be deteriorating in correlation to the complexity of current environmental problems⁵. This belief is based upon the growing evidence, from several cases, of progress towards solutions after years, sometimes decades, of controversy and deadlock⁶.

2. The reductionism problem

Nevertheless, an open information flow and participation of the public in decision making processes is far from being a matter of routine, quite the opposite: it still presents a challenge to all involved actors, triggering a series of theoretical and practical questions. In short, the basic dilemma is: how strong and broad is the right to participate in decision making processes? One interpretation is that participation is merely the right to be informed about what is going on and what decisions have been made. On the other hand, a few “utopians”, claim that affected groups have the right to autonomous judgment about their “destiny”. In between these positions many actors make “creative” use of the idea of participation as an efficient technique to placate the most furious opposition. From this standpoint it is therefore useful to implement participation when problems with opposition or the project policy are anticipated or already ongoing. This is evidently the source of quite widespread doublespeak, because such tactics are often not even veiled. With the exception of some enthusiasts, almost

³In this respect, Becker (1997) described a simple and transparent decision making model aimed at legitimate sustainable development.

⁴More than thirty years ago this was a politically very sensitive question in the former Yugoslavia which was at the time implementing its “self-management” of comprehensive participation of affected groups at all levels and in all sectors. See more in Pusić, E. Mlinar, Z., Rus, V. (1972) Participation and self-management. Proceedings of the International Sociological Conference on Participation and Self-Management; Dubrovnik. These experiences are almost forgotten even though Slovenia was a federal unit of the former Yugoslavia. It is somehow embarrassing that quite often the similarities between participation and the idea of self-management are not perceived.

⁵The Eurobarometer survey (2004/2008) clearly shows that the trust in institutions dealing with environmental problems is low. See appendix.

⁶In Slovenia, a case at hand is the siting of a radioactive waste disposal site.

everybody knows that participation is frequently not meant seriously, that it is merely a frequently cited politically correct buzzword. But although the idea and practice of direct involvement in decision making projects is distorted, it still remains the only (?) discernible opportunity to achieve legitimate decision making processes. It is therefore of great importance to analyze and study in which cases participation is a realistic option, capable of replacing or at least partially substituting “traditional” decision making institutions. Systematic analysis should however be carried out on the limits and problems associated with the participation of individuals and interest groups. The success of participation depends on the complex historical, cultural, political, and legal background that is incorporated in the carefully designed involvement of all interested parties.

In this respect, the environment is an extremely interesting field to study since it generates a paradigmatic interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary range of contemporary global problems. There is hardly any other topic so widespread, catching, and all-embracing, because it includes social and political problems, religion, the economy, technology, etc. From a common-sense point of view it is also obvious that environmental issues affect nearly everybody and everywhere, and that environmental problems are present at least at the bottom of everyone’s sub/consciousness, influencing his or her behaviour. The old and perhaps most famous ecological slogan “think globally, act locally” advocates this broad approach to environmental problems. It is therefore not surprising that participation in environmental decision making is everybody’s (natural) preference, from people who adopt an active (activist) ecological style of life to those who do not care much, or have little information and knowledge about nature protection. The question is how this tendency is realized in a quantitative and qualitative manner. Nevertheless, ecological activists are easily identified as participants in decision making because they **want** to take part in environmental decision making processes. But there are also other groups, whose objectives are not consistent with ecologism, for instance those striving for more automobile infrastructure, more parking places in the urban living environment, uncritical fans of the ideology of automobility (Urry, 2004), etc. In fact, striving to adapt the environment to one’s ideas, needs, and wishes is universal and depends on different inputs; environmentalism as ecologism is but one, recently more significant motivation. This is the reason why participation as (a sometimes and somewhere) strongly supported idea is not simple to implement. In short, the field of the environment is not just “one” of the problems, it is in fact a broad domain where basic, existential, social, political, religious, philosophical etc. questions are raised, discussed, and attempts made to

bring them under control. In pragmatic modern society, this field is much too broad to deal with in its integrity, and it is therefore systematically reduced to the instrumental level of manipulation. This of course produces constant disagreements between different groups with different interpretations of the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of environmental problems.

2. The paradigm shift

It is therefore evident that environmental problems are so complex, intertwined and interdisciplinary - often touching the very limits of valid scientific and technical knowledge - that it is hard to image a rationale for quite everybody participating in decision making. The range from common sense to complex scientific efforts dealing with environmental problems puts into question the adequacy of broad public participation. There are numerous cases of problematic common sense reasoning in environmental disputes, providing powerful arguments to those opposing broad participation of the kind that is already part of the legislation system of the EU and many other countries since the adoption of the Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters. From this position, it is also possible to criticize the high participation standards of Habermas (1987/91) and communicative action as one of the theoretically best elaborated and consistent decision making concepts. Non-expert groups or lay people have little chance to fully understand high science and the high technology derived from it. "There is simply no possibility of individuals deciding for themselves on the nature of truth, when it comes to fundamental questions concerning life, the natural world, or the cosmos (Campbell, 2007: 373). The processes of scientific validation of truth is going on in narrow peer groups, communication between these specialized expert groups is "fundamentally undemocratic and hence something of an anomaly in modern Western democracy, for scientific truth cannot be decided by referendum" (Campbell, 2007: 372). It means that scientific truth is to be either trusted or not, and rational discussion in public is rather limited.

But this is obviously an already outdated position, based and deduced from the canon rules of modern society such as system differentiation and specialization. In postmodern circumstances, the elitist logic of expert competency does not work any more. A number of

cases prove the paradigm shift that erodes the monopoly of modernist expert evaluation systems. This is especially the case with environmentalism, where new “postmodern” ideas neglect the rationality rooted in the Western Enlightenment tradition. The traditional (in fact modern) expert systems, which should legitimate various environmentally sensitive practices, are no longer efficient in this context. This is a rather radical conclusion but there is an abundance of evidence and literature confirming the thesis that “Western science” is not an as influential legitimation system as it was before (Holton, 1994, Maddox, 1994, Fuller, 2000, 2007,).

Some are going even further in generalizing and stating that the paradigm switch in science “challenges some of the deepest assumptions underlying the Western worldview – what one might even call its primordial assumptions – such as the premise that reality is ordered, predictable, and rationally comprehensible, or even the basic philosophical assumption concerning the independent reality of the external world. . . . There is the dramatic paradigm switch in science itself, involving the overthrow of the classical, mechanistic Newtonian worldview in favour of a vitalistic organic system, and even a quasi metaphysical perspective based on ecology and the new physics. This, is probably the more dramatic and significant change than secularism and romantic utopianism as the other two paradigm shifts.” (Campbell, 2007: 322-323). Science becomes a kind of western “occultism” (Campbell, 2007: 371) meaning that it is “hidden knowledge”. Although there is more information on its achievements than ever, people who do not belong to specialized expert groups have very little understanding, for instance, what quantum physics is. On the other side, science produces “knowledge of that which is hidden” (DNA, nanoparticles) and there is almost no chance for common sense to really grasp such knowledge. Although the products are already present in everyday life practices, the great majority of people has no idea how modern gadgets, substances, or particles work. But this does not mean that people with no or very little understanding don’t have opinions about them, or that they won’t fiercely discuss pro et contra.

Here we have come to an exciting paradox. Contemporary science produces knowledge that allows new technologies to make many very popular devices, changing our everyday lives to the better – at least according to the majority. But at the same time modern (postmodern?) science also produces doubts, fears, angst, a kind of new Frankensteinian syndrome, especially in connection with nature, i.e. the sustaining quality of the environment. These

reservations substantially change the general public attitude toward the role of contemporary science and technology. In short, the credibility of science diminishes, its authority has eroded, and expert assessments of technology's impact on the environment are not as efficient in building public support as they used to be⁷.

Interpretations why this is happening are, of course, very diverse. According to some, the starting point was the explosion of the atomic bomb over sixty years ago⁸. In this line of argumentation, the accidents at the Three Miles Island and Chernobyl and the dispute on the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository are imPORT 212,235,140,92,134,73097 but also raise serious doubts about the safety of science and technology and erode the authority of scientists. In this respect, the interpretation that Armstrong's walk on the Moon in 1969 was just a TV show, produced in a studio on Earth, is no longer bizarre. There are many other indicators of distrust of modern science, from the growing New Age literature with its central and recurring stress on the fundamental holism and consequent basic interconnectedness of all things (Campbell, 2007: 126), to renewed questioning of Darwinism and support for Creationist ideas (Fuller, 2007), as well as many other manifestations of public doubt about the safe use of modern technology⁹.

It is indeed becoming extremely difficult to legitimate any new environmentally sensitive project that can not guarantee absolute safety. Even if it is designed by experts, scientists with the highest qualifications, its legitimation is very troublesome. Here it is important to stress the adjective "new", because in spite of the paradigm shift, the "traditional" everyday routine in the most developed modern societies is still very much "dualistic". These practices prove how extremely difficult it is to reorganize everyday modern life in a "holistic" manner. In fact, the schizophrenic split between theory and practice, ideal values and everyday pragmatism is one of the main sources of the widespread "doublespeak" in the environmental field, make participation of the public in decision making processes rather incomprehensible.

⁷ The idea or slogan that that EU should build a society of knowledge seems not to be really congruent with the general social trends.

⁸ "It was the development and testing of the atomic and hydrogen bombs, together with growing appreciation that both people and environment were being seriously damaged by human intervention that brought a marked change of attitude. For then more and more people began to feel that science - like the sorcerer's apprentice- had unleashed forces that it could no longer control" (Campbell, 2007: 372).

⁹ Examples of such doubts are literally uncountable. In Slovenia (which is rather small country) alone, the list is huge. One of the most convincing cases is perhaps the increasingly crowded waiting rooms of healers. There are no exact data about the phenomenon, but the number of healers practicing "unorthodox" medicine is comparable to the number of "traditional" physicians with a degree in medicine.

It is not clear yet what the consequences of science losing its authoritative position in modern societies are, and which are yet to come, but it is already evident that the “empty space” triggers a somehow relaxed reflexivity of elaborated and complex scientific and technological problems. Reflexivity easily goes beyond rational scientific methods to include “holistic” New Age interpretations, which are in fact matters of belief and very difficult to discuss, at least in the traditional argumentative way. A cynical interpretation would be that the change is not that big at all. Modern faith in instrumental scientific knowledge and technology is replaced by faith in a dispersed and variable set of knowledge. Only the source of authority has changed, but the religious nature of the relationship remains. People who are not familiar with rigorous scientific methods now feel free to decide on truth matters, although, or just because, such interpretations contradict modern science. Even before, when reflexivity was subordinated to scientific authority, the result was quite shaking since no one less than “Karl Popper acknowledged that “all science rests upon shifting sand” (Giddens, 1990: 39). Since science is no longer an exclusive system of truth searching, the social construction of truth is becoming extremely pluralistic, and this makes it difficult to establish a hierarchy of interpretations - at least in public.

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After this draft presentation of the legitimation problems following the radical paradigm shifts in science – the most influential system of truth construction since Enlightenment - it is now possible to point at one of the main paradoxes of modern “developed” societies. There seems to exist a strong divergence between the complexity of social, political, economic, technological, and last but not least, environmental problems and, on the other hand, the simplicity of the means and instruments to achieve legitimation. The interpretative arsenal is poor, and only simple and obscure instrumental communication technologies are available. Where one would expect eminent intellectual capacities to be mobilized, plain and partial interpretations monopolize the public debate. Most strikingly, such plain approaches are quite successful, at least in the short run, and prosper as “brave new PR business opportunities”¹⁰.

¹⁰ Actually, this business is not really that new. Its founding father E. L. Barnays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud, published his most influential book *Propaganda* already in 1928. This volume is important even nowadays because of its frank discourse: “The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. ...We are governed, our

The paradox is that in “high modern” societies, where individual and institutional reflexivity supposedly culminates, public relations (PR) techniques promoted and executed by “spin doctors” successfully disseminate simplified answers to very complex problems, without being publicly ridiculed. But, on the other hand, it is a very telling phenomenon that one can survive and even flourish in our complex modern society by using elementary socio-psychological propaganda techniques and basic communication skills. If nothing else, the thesis of reflexivity at the individual and collective levels as a basic characteristic of modern societies should be reconsidered and retested. It seems that Weber (1920) was right when he proclaimed that the ultimate phase of modern society’s development would only give space to “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart“, who would imagine to have attained the highest level of civilization ever.

3. Public relations as “new science”

It is precisely because it is so successful in filling the rather empty interpretative space that it makes sense to further examine the role and development of PR in modern societies. What makes such selective, i.e. partial dissemination of information possible, given that there have never been so many sources of information in history? How to explain that the obvious intellectual and ethic deficits, acknowledged directly or/and indirectly even by PR practitioners (Bowen S. A. 2007) and distinguished advocates of PR (Gruning J. E. 1992), fail to restrain the increasingly broad and intensive use of PR services in modern societies. A tentative answer would be that the demand for specific information in a situation of information abundance, or even overflow, is so strong that the average person faces difficulties in differentiating credible from incredible information. In such circumstances, the existence of specialists, who perform information selection and interpretation as a service to us, is practical and welcome. This answer of course to a large extent denies the reflexivity thesis, according to which every modern person and institution is constantly monitoring its position in social and natural environment and reacting accordingly (Giddens, 1990). Nevertheless the interpretation makes sense because it is in line with classical modernist

minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized. Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society. ...In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons...who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind.”

technology. Whenever a system detects a problem, a new subsystem is established. In modern, very complex systems, intersystem communication is threatened, and it therefore makes sense that a new agency is constructed, specialized in dealing with the system's communication problems.

So far so good, but communication problems are not “ordinary” problems. Resolving them requires the active participation of two (or more) sides, and the role of special communicators lies precisely in facilitating this interactive communication flow. This, then, is the point where problems emerge, problems of the kind communicators or PR specialists are not capable of resolving. Selecting and presenting information is not just a problem of communication, it concerns fundamental, substantial, ethical problems, which are quite often very difficult to present, if possible at all, in a simple, reduced way. But the most problematic fact is that every hired communicator has to perform a strategic reduction and selection. This means that the strategic objectives of institutions, organisations, or anybody who hires PR practitioners, direct the reduction of information complexity. And this constantly produces conflicts with scientific truth and ethic standards.

That is why PR practitioners are somehow likely to obtain the status of presenters, if not producers, of scientific truth, and it is also the reason why the ethics of PR are questioned even in circles practicing and advocating the PR profession¹¹. Because it is difficult to communicate scientific truth if it is not in accordance with the aims of an organisation, PR ethics are often said to be an oxymoron. It is also very difficult to communicate with a public that demands absolute truth. According to Popper, there is no such thing as absolutely certain scientific knowledge. And it is of course difficult to work ethically, if the PR activities are strategically and instrumentally defined. In fact, this is the point of radical divergence between PR actions limited by externally determined objectives and “neutral”, hypothetical scientific discourse. Science must follow its own methodology and validity claims. But even if PR would not be constrained by externally defined objectives, the communication of scientific truth would be problematic, since science is no longer the only system to legitimate dubious (environmental) projects. As presented in the first part of this text, competitive systems are emerging and gaining increasing support in public.

¹¹ “We don't have the greatest image, which is funny, as it's our job to shape an image or idea for what a company is more than anything.” See: http://gamasutra.com/features/20070314/brown_01.shtml

Nevertheless, it is symptomatic that PR professionals try to use the (remaining) prestige of an expert system based on science to legitimate their activities. In fact, the main strategy is to present PR as knowledge based on a consistent theoretical background and firm scientific methodology. In the words of a PR scholar: “We have searched the literature in communications, public relations, management, organizational psychology and sociology, social and cognitive psychology, feminist studies, political science, decision making and culture to produce this book. The result is a “theory” of excellence and effectiveness in public relations, that is based on research review in this book” (Grunig, 1992: 2). It looks like PR science is a condensed interdisciplinary mixture of almost all fields of social theory. And rightly so, because it is a practical, pragmatic, instrumental mixture of knowledge, used and sold as craftsmanship to interested governmental (sometimes also to non-governmental) and business organisations¹². But interpersonal and social communication is actually the research field of almost every social “science” and this is the reason why PR’s added value to established academic disciplines is very limited. Behind the instrumental, practical, goal-oriented application of general social and communication knowledge, there is no real specific PR theory. In fact the “scientification” of PR is an attempt to improve the instrumental, to some even manipulative, image of the profession, a “useful” practice which “adds value” to the client by helping him to meet his objectives” (Grunig, 1992: 8). The chronology of establishing PR as an academic discipline is quite informative. PR was already a widespread practice and lucrative business before it was established as an academic discipline¹³. Many PR departments at universities numerous PR institutes around the world, as well as “scientific” journals available online at Science Direct¹⁴ prove this¹⁵. But building a better image of the PR profession does not stop here. Some claim that with the changing times, which bring powerful PR Internet technologies, “public relations is as much of an art as it is a science.”¹⁶.

¹² PR is also present at universities as a service that is to improve the traditional, rather conservative and rigid image of many of them.

¹³ In the words of an practitioner who later become a scholar: “We succeeded quite well to establish PR as efficient practice and business, but the image of scientific enterprise would help us even more to improve our stakes.”

¹⁴ See: www.sciencedirect.com

¹⁵ See:

http://www.google.com/search?hl=sl&q=Public+RElations+University&btnG=Iskanje+Google&lr=&aq=f&oq=http://www.google.com/search?hl=sl&lr=&ei=xUWBSvKUNojK_gaP9Y2nCw&sa=X&oi=spell&resnum=0&ct=result&cd=1&q=%22Public+Relations%22+University+%22USA%22&spell=1

¹⁶ See: http://gamasutra.com/features/20070314/brown_01.shtml

4. Public Relations Ethics?

Although even science itself is losing its ethical “aura”, the idea behind the „scientification“ of PR practices is to improve the rather poor image of the profession, which prevents it from being used even more widely. This makes sense because their ethics are nevertheless the most important source of criticism and argumentation from those who reject PR as dubious, one-sided, instrumental communication. The questions “is there such a thing as public relations ethics”(Bowen A. S. 2007: 3), “public relations ethics: an oxymoron ?” or “is it possible to be a PR practitioner if you are not lying?” (Parsons. P.J., 2004:), are often heard even among PR professionals themselves. Fellow journalists also do not really trust PR practitioners as a credible source of information. Tensions and conflicts are reported between journalism-oriented faculty members and those who teach public relations courses (Ehling, 1997: 457). Public relations are compared to advertising and therefore „should not be taught in schools of journalism or mass communication – instead, they should be taught in such places as schools of business administration“ (ibidem). The common stereotype is that PR practitioners only „want to get publicity and that they “stonewall the press” (Rios, Hinnant, Park (2009). PR professionals are sources of “vested interests who tend to be untrustworthy” (Cameron et al. (1997).

It is therefore not surprising that textbooks of PR often start with the issue of ethics, trying to answer why so many people claim that “public relations is an inherently evil pursuit, equating it with “spin”, propaganda, and manipulation” (Scott. M.C., Allen. H. C., Glen. M.B., 2006: 424). In one of the most comprehensive texts on PR concepts and practices Grunig mentions that “some people view public relations basically as manipulation” (Grunig, 1997: 6). He and many other advocates of PR are of course quoting criticisms in order to answer and effectively reject them. We shall see how they defend PR’s ethical integrity, but first of all it is important to notice what is missing from their advocacy. There have been very few attempts to answer the question why criticism of PR and its ethic deficit is a general topic, why doubts are so widespread, why PR methods are so often characterized as manipulation and propaganda? This denial in fact reveals more than it hides, and a text in which the authors are trying to solve the PR ethical oxymoron yields a similar result (Parsons, P.J. 2004: 4). Reading various textbooks on how PR should improve its ethical standards actually gives us good picture of what is acknowledged as an ethical deficit by PR practitioners themselves: “The ability to engage in ethical reasoning in public relations is growing in demand, in

responsibility, and in importance. Academic research, university and continuing education, and professional practice are all attending more than ever to matters of ethics. The public relations function stands at a critical and defining juncture: whether to become an ethics counsellor to top management or to remain outside the realm of the strategic decision making core. How we choose to respond to the crisis of trust among our publics will define the public relations of the future. Although it is true that no single person or function can be the entire “ethical conscience” of an organization, the public relations function is ideally informed to counsel top management about ethical issues. Public relations professionals know the values of key publics involved with ethical dilemmas, and can conduct rigorous ethical analyses to guide the policies of their organizations, as well as in communications with publics and the news media. Careful and consistent ethical analyses facilitate trust, which enhances the building and maintenance of relationships – after all, that is the ultimate purpose of the public relations function” (Shannon, 2007: 11).

5. Symmetrical PR as a (the) solution to ethic problems?

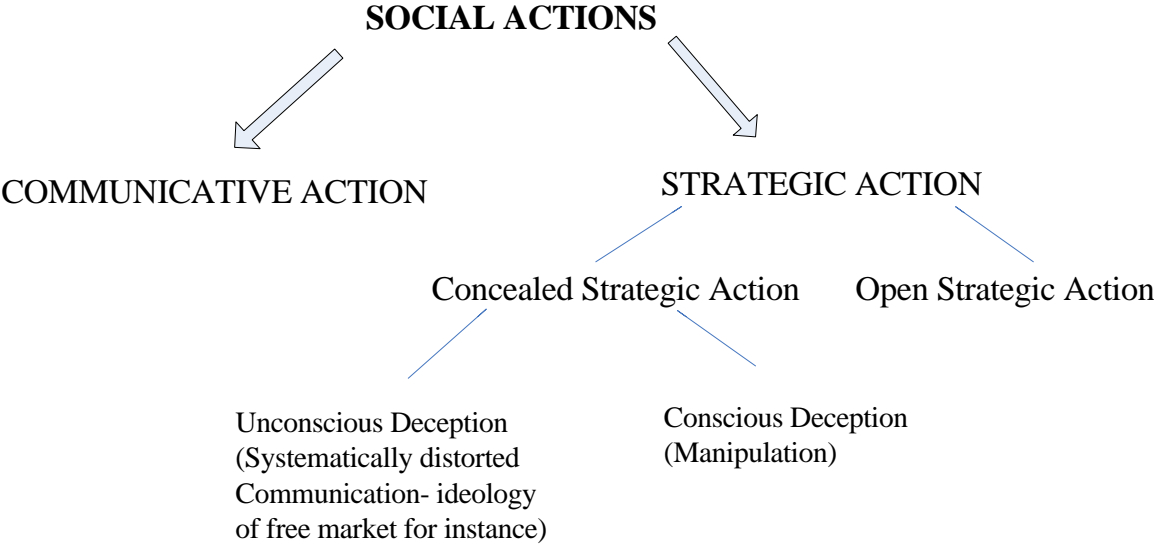
Grunig’s idea of symmetry in an organisation’s relations with publics is quite ambitious in the theoretical and practical senses and therefore deserves special attention. If this would stand firmly, it looks like the basic ethical problems of the PR profession are solved: “The two-way symmetrical model avoids the problem of ethical relativism because it defines ethics as a process of public relations rather than an outcome”. Symmetrical public relations provides a forum for dialogue, discussion, and discourse on issues for which people with different values generally come to different conclusions” (Grunig & Grunig, 1992: 308). This idea could even be congruent with Habermas’s theory of communicative action (Habermas 1987/91), to which the author explicitly refers to. But Grunig limits his ethical and supposedly pragmatic idea of symmetry with the interpretation “that organizations accomplish more of their long term goals when they integrate **some** (emphasis by D.K.) of what publics want.” In short , “excellent organizations realize that they can get more of what they want by giving publics some of what they want. Reciprocity means that publics too will be willing to give up some of what they want” (Grunig & White, 1992: 46). Who makes the selection and how, which wants should be integrated, and what does the integration of wants actually mean? The implicit answer is that the integration of some wants is part of PR’s strategic management, which is consistent with teleological moral philosophy, commonly known as utilitarianism consequences (Bowen,

2007: 10). Although Grunig admits that “the logic of reciprocity breaks down, however, when one actor (such as an organization) has more power than another (such as a/the public) (Grunig & White, 1992: 46) he is insisting on it since “in the long run this strategy is more effective”. The interesting question then is, how long “the long run” really is and how this long run efficiency is congruent with the ever faster pace of market economy. But what is needed most of all is empirical support to the thesis that “there is very good evidence that those who behave ethically ... are also those who make the most money” (ibidem). In short, Grunig’s idea of symmetry is based on utilitarian philosophy, as well as rather vague assumptions and weak or no empirical evidence of its long run efficiency. His argumentation looks like religious faith in justice which once will come and reward those who practice symmetrical, i.e. reciprocal public relations instead of manipulating the public. In this regard, the question when exactly this will happen is a little bit heretic. In religious interpretations it may be evident who will gain the rewards, but this is not the case with Grunig’s prophecy. He relies on Alvin Gouldner’s functionalist thesis that the norm of reciprocity is a universal component of moral codes (ibidem). This is perhaps true, but as Bernie Madoff would say: moral codes are OK as long as they support my Ponzi scheme.

It is therefore quite strange¹⁷ that Grunig refers to Habermas and his communicative theory. If only at first glance, the very idea of symmetrical relations of organisations with the public would be congruent with Habermas’s communicative action, but it is evident from Grunig and many others PR texts that symmetry is only a part of strategic action. According to Habermas, this is in fact in explicit opposition to his definition of communicative action. In his understanding, strategic action is a type of social action where participants mutually treat each others instrumentally as if they were objects. Instrumentalization of others means that people try to control and manipulate others. They do not strive to reach mutual understanding and reciprocity but are oriented towards their own success. Sometimes the strategic action is openly supported by force, and rather simple but brutal ideology, but in developed democratic and participative “politically correct” social environments more sophisticated and refined instruments are used, so “that the weaknesses of arguments are concealed in a flow of emotive language, exhorting the other to action” (Edgar; 2005: 144). Much of the success depends on the motivation of the communication players. The overall consensus about how legitimate strategic action is may be so strong that both sides –performers as well as recipients - are unaware of the

¹⁷ See also Benson, Rodney 2009)

strategic nature of the action. According to Habermas, strategic action is systematically distorted communication. This is put so clearly, even with the help of a graph, that from this point on any reference to Habermas's theory in order to legitimate PR actions is not correct; it is actually manipulation as well.



Habermas, 1987: 333

This, of course, does not mean that Habermas's theory cannot be criticized, mostly for establishing too high standards, in fact so high that they are utopian¹⁸. To some authors, Bourdieu's field theory seems more successful in describing the essential conflicting existence of human existence: "agents act strategically (more unconsciously than consciously) since their social existence (just as in the linguistic meaning, as in de Saussure) is bound up in the relational production of difference. But this conflict can take many forms, depending on the kinds of capital" (most commonly, economic or cultural) that agents possess.

Economic capital

means simply money or assets that can be turned into money; cultural capital encompasses such things as educational credentials, technical expertise, general knowledge, verbal abilities and artistic sensibilities" (Benson Rodney, 2009). In his opinion, Bourdieu's field theory is more realistic, less abstract, less idealistic (utopian) in claiming that "all social relations including every linguistic exchange contain the potentiality of an act of power" (ibidem). This is not in contradiction with Habermas, who also postulates ideal communicative action as a potential option, not a general quality of the life-world, in contrast with the systematically distorted communication that is a basic characteristic of the "system world". Further discussion on this topic would lead us to the Weberian roots of Habermas's theory: the interrelations between the system world and the life world, especially the colonization potential of the system that is motivated by effective strategic instrumental action. My intentions here are limited to denouncing the suggestion that ethical, i.e. symmetrical PR action is a practical implementation of Habermas's ideal commutative action. In other words, referring to Habermas is an attempt to legitimate PR action as ethical, misuses his theory. Even those who agree that Habermas established unrealistically high, utopian standards, have to admit that systematically distorted communication is the very reality of social relations. This demystification is also the reason why PR is needed and why it has developed into such a flourishing business. Doublespeak is therefore essential in general, and the environmental field is no exception, quite the opposite. (q. F. Hartmann?)

It has already been mentioned that PR's ethical deficit is acknowledged by many PR professionals and it is therefore possible to find many texts (textbooks) dealing with this problem. This is indirect proof that there are indeed problems with PR practices from the ethical point of view. The approaches (in these texts) are symptomatically simplified, partial,

¹⁸ See more in Kos, 1993

and reductionist. No analysis why public relations have a negative image, no arguments why PR are intrinsically positive. A number of measures are listed which should help to improve the image, because this will help the business. The instrumental motivation is covered by quoting philosophical sources from antiquity to present times. But it is telling that Plato's Symposium is not included. This ancient text should be the first reading material for anyone researching and practicing PR. Plato efficiently reveals the difference between (PR) rhetoric and substantial logical argumentation. Some people advocate that PR "serves the organizations best when it acts as an ethical conscience" and stress that "public relations executives evaluate the options from an ethical point of view, independently from what the organization desires. The role of ethics counsel to top management is valued as distinct, expert input for strategic decision making" (Scott, M.C., Allen, H. C., Glen, M.B., 2006:119-122). This really is a high standard, but it is only a recommendation, because the decisions are made by the top managers, who no doubt faces difficulties in harmonizing deontological principles with the strategic objective of a market organization.

The idea of PR professionals being ethical counsellors actually sounds rather cynical if we consider the finding that PR students "had little if any academic training or study of ethics (Shannon, 2007: 7)¹⁹. The deficit in ethic training is therefore acknowledged since "only recently have public relations scholars incorporated a substantial amount of moral philosophy into the body of knowledge known as communication (ibidem: 9). PR professionals are thus expected to be counsellors of ethics although they have no or very little training and education in ethics. The task appears simple, and professionals may well eliminate the profession's ethic deficit simply through work experience or perhaps by taking an additional course. But learning about ethics is under question as well, because "any professor who believes, that his or her book or course on ethics will ensure ethics in practice is living in a dream world" (Parsons, 2004: xvi). Instead of a sophisticated academic approach, soul-searching is recommended (ibidem). Nevertheless, the same author recommends a back-to-the-classroom strategy of teaching, learning, reading, and watching documentary and fiction movies, and this contradicts her initial assumption that ethics can be learned. The other most often recommend measures, listed by Shannon (2007), are: a) Professionals must pay attention to

¹⁹ From the IABC study on ethics: 30% said they had no academic course in ethics of any kind, and another 40% of the practitioners in the study said they had "a few lectures or reading on ethics" These figures mean that 70% of the professional communicators surveyed "could be ill-prepared to face an ethical dilemma if they had no professional experience with ethics to support them. Practitioners advise on ethics reported that what they have learned about ethical issues comes from professional experience rather than academic study"(Shannon, 2007: 7.

ethics before they desperately need it! b) Know your own values! c) Spot and discuss ethical issues! d) Time and time again research finds that organizational culture has a significant impact on ethical analyses and decision making! d). Engage in systematic and analytical means of contemplating ethical dilemmas! Nothing is wrong with these recommendations, but they reveal much more than they recommend. From this and many other recommendation lists we may conclude that PR was ethically disoriented in the past, and that radical improvements in this respect are needed, at least according to PR textbooks.

Media relations are of special interest to PR. According to the definition, PR is a broader topic but since media communication in modern societies is the dominant form of communication practice, PR very much depends on it. It has been mentioned above that this relation is not without tensions. Why this is so, is quite an important question and searching for answers one cannot overlook the professional narcissism that often produces long-lasting conflicts, at least between scholars. The difference between journalists and PR people is “often at the heart of the potential ethical conflicts” (Parsons, 2004: 98). In principle, the difference between the media and PR is the difference between a free flow of information and a directed flow, meaning a selected constrained, and distorted flow. The answer to the question why we need PR is in this respect rather simple – because every organisation strives to communicate to the public favourable information about itself, and not unfavourable one.

The assumption that journalists inform the public absolutely independently, that the media presentation of information is free and unconstrained is of course a huge simplification. But at least at the normative level the idea of autonomous journalism is accepted and consistent with the role of journalism in society. On the other hand, the very idea of autonomous PR practitioners is strange and not consistent with the *raison d’être* of PR. At this point all the basic problems of PR activity resurface. As far as independent autonomous journalism will be the normative ideal in any democratic society, PR communication services will and should be suspicious to professional journalists and others of course. Because of such paradigmatic tensions, the long term PR strategy is to influence the reporting of journalists. The list of spoken and unspoken measures is long, from producing correct briefings to activities which meet the definition of corruption.

The development in societies which went through the transition from state socialism is quite enlightening in this respect. Under the past regime, journalists were classified by the political

elite as “socio-political workers”. This meant that their principal duty was not to inform the public autonomously, but in the first place to support the “building of socialism”. This was of course quite often in conflict with their autonomy. Because the strategy and social objectives were firmly in the hands of a single political party, journalists were at first directly and openly controlled by the communist party, and only later was this control to become more sophisticated and indirect. Following the transition to the post-socialist capitalist era, journalism tended to move in the direction of PR. These “autonomous” journalists do not report or comment on open social issues, but advocate, whether intentionally or not, the interests of the media owners and their clients. This is why the ownership and control of media is one of the most intense conflicts that goes on constantly and is particularly intensified in pre-election periods.

Even more strikingly, it looks as if the process of PR’s colonization of the communication system is already affecting science as well. There are numerous cases where the scientific community communicates with the public with the help of a PR specialist, or where intensified conflicts with general and special publics are attempted to be solved by means of reduced and partial PR communication. Instead of developing direct and symmetric communication with the social environment affected by scientific and technological projects, indirect PR communication takes over which include partial participation in decision making processes as well. Why experts are not willing to support a symmetrical dialogue with the interested public is quite an intriguing question. One of the negative side effects of such a communication strategy is that it is inefficient in improving expert credibility, and that there are even bigger problems with achieving legitimacy. As stated at the beginning, the relations problems between experts and the public are getting bigger in the quantitative and qualitative senses. It is therefore highly unlikely that this growing body of problems can be solved by using the simple and reductionist methodology of PR communicators, who themselves suffer from lack of credibility.

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