

THE NORMATIVE IMPERATIVE

SOCIOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES
OF STRATEGIC AND ORGANIZATIONAL
COMMUNICATION

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Technical Specification

Title

The normative imperative: sociopolitical challenges
of strategic and organizational communication

Proceedings of the ECREA Organisational and Strategic
Communication Section Conference held at the Autonomous
University of Lisbon, 5-8 July 2023

Editors

Evandro Oliveira and Gisela Gonçalves

LabCom Books

www.labcom.ubi.pt

Collection

Communication Books

Direction

Gisela Gonçalves

Graphic Design

Cristina Lopes

ISBN

978-989-654-939-8 (paper)

978-989-654-941-1 (pdf)

978-989-654-940-4 (epub)

Legal Deposit

518170/23

DOI

10.25768/654-941-1

Print

Print-on-demand

Beira Interior University
Rua Marquês D'Ávila e Bolama.
6201-001 Covilhã. Portugal
www.ubi.pt

Covilhã, 2023



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FROM ENGAGEMENT TO ACTIVISM: WHAT PUBLICS ARE DEMANDING OF ORGANISATIONS

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The field of Public Relations is grounded on a conceptualization of the publics as active. Publics have specific interests in the activities of certain organisations, and organisations strive to keep their interest. Publics are also referred to as stakeholders, in the sense that they have something “at stake” when it comes to the performance of a certain organization, which can be positive or negative for them, beneficial or harmful.

Organizations strive to keep the interest of their publics, and to take this bond to the next level, building a strong, meaningful, and long-lasting relationships. The contours of such relationships have changed throughout the times, having these changes been driven by the technological development of media, by new trends in consumption behaviour, and by specific political and economic contexts that frame human activity. Thus, our communication sets out to answer the following research questions: What are contemporary publics requiring from organizations to engage in meaningful and long-lasting relationships with them? How can contemporary publics be characterized? And how are organizations changing in order to meet their requirements and preferences

Currently, organisations are adopting missions and purposes that go beyond survival or profit. The contemporary conceptualization of organizations regards them as complexly intertwined with their publics, partners, community, and context, at a global scale. As organizations started to own responsibility for their actions and their impact on others and the planet, publics started to hold organizations accountable for those very same actions (Cizsek, 2015).

Strategic Communication publics have been guided by a core of central questions that Botan and Soto (1998) identify as (a) definition, what are the publics; (b) segmentation, how to significantly differentiate publics; (c) function, what roles different publics play in society; (d) process, how publics come into existence and respond in a certain way. These issues have been addressed by authors from different perspectives with evident hegemony of the situational perspective introduced by Grunig and Repper (1992). According to this point of view, a public is considered to result from a state motivated by a problematic situation and does not constitute a permanent state of consciousness. It is believed that publics appear as responses to problematic situations and that they self-organize to solve them. This perspective considers the segmentation of publics through certain variables. The variables pointed out by Grunig and Repper (1992) are inferred (cognitions, attitudes, and perceptions) and objectivized (demographics, media usage patterns, geographic location). The construction of this model is associated with most studies in Marketing, Advertising and Public Relations.

The situational theory of publics by Grunig and Repper (1992) is part of a broader context, seeking to defend a strategic management model for Strategic Communication. The main concern was to build a reference framework to explain the evolution of the behavior of certain social groups towards a given organization. Three states of development of these groups were defined: the stakeholder state, the public state, and the subject state. Stakeholders are understood as those who affect an organization with their decisions or are affected by the organization's decisions. When stakeholders recognize a problem, they increase their level of involvement, and if they are willing to get involved to address that problem, they move to a state of publics, and may stay there for a longer or shorter time. Finally, if the publics are not satisfied with the behavior of a particular organization, one may reach the state of issues or controversies (Eiró-Gomes & Duarte, 2005). The situational variables that are involved in the shift from stakeholders to publics include (a) problem recognition, which leads to information seeking, (b) constraint recognition, which discourages communication since people

do not communicate about issues, they feel they cannot do anything about, and (c) level of involvement, as an individual's cognitive perception of his or her connection to a given situation. An audience is more likely to be active when its constituents perceive that what an organization does involves them (Level of Involvement), that the consequences of what an organization does constitute a problem (Problem Recognition), and that they will not be embarrassed if they do something about the problem (Constraint Recognition) (Eiró-Gomes & Duarte, 2005).

Contemporary publics are deeply informed and highly demanding. Not only do they have instant access to online information and recommendations, but they also have a wide selection of competing offers to choose from. They are empowered and have the necessary media literacy to understand the messages that organizations direct at them, identifying the underlying persuasive intent that is embedded in most of them (Demetrius, 2013).

Corporate social responsibility, in the traditional sense that organizations “give back” part of their profits to their community by supporting specific solidarity causes and initiatives, is not enough for the contemporary publics, who can spot if such causes are aligned with the values that drive the organization or not. Environmental responsibility, when adopted partially and at convenience, is not enough for the contemporary publics, who can easily scrutinize if organizations are doing what they are communicating, and to which extent.

With the advance of information and communication technologies and, observing the transformation of the publics, it makes sense to report to the Communication Strategy the proposal of Sonia Livingstone (2005), who presents the notion of audiences and publics not as opposite contexts, although they are different notions, with many similarities. For the author, “the analysis of publics focuses on an attempt to understand the meaning and consequences of public, as opposed to private, forms of activity or spaces for that activity” (Livingstone, 2005, p. 35). According to Livingstone, media (traditional and new media) provide a window into the world (Livingstone,

2005, p. 21) mediatize, select, assign priorities, shape, according to the institutions, information and communication technologies, and discursive conventions of the media industry. Sonia Livingstone refers to civic citizenship (Livingstone, 2005, p. 34) to speak of a withdrawn public, from privacy, that can generate social capital to achieve greater engagement, with forms of identity.

At the organizational level, crisis and risk management requires special attention to the public, both internally and externally. Therefore, in terms of communication, it is convenient for the manager to define priority groups for informative action. However, with the development of the new media and the Internet, and the increasing movement of people, the management of information flows can no longer be viewed only locally or regionally. The globalization of markets and societies in general suggests considering audiences on a more global level, including both actual and potential audiences.

As publics become increasingly activists, in the sense that the current post-pandemic trend of searching for self-growth and self-fulfilment is driven by value-led action, they feel that the attempts of organizations to catch their attention, hold their interest, foster engagement, and nurture a relationship are not enough. They are demanding that organizations become activists themselves (Holtzhausen, 2011), and act, in all their scope, according to the values upon which they are grounded. Concomitantly, publics are demanding transparency from organisations. They prefer an organization that admits it is attempting to become more sustainable, more accountable, more solidarist, even if there is still a long way ahead, than an organization that claims to be sustainable, accountable, or solidary, but is only partially so (Meyer, 2021).

In our communication, we explore and discuss how publics have changed, particularly in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic (Grant & Smith, 2021), and how these changes are consequently driving change in organizations, and particularly in strategic communication (Gallicano et al., 2021). As a departure point, we take the international reports from Activist Insight, a US-based consultancy firm specialized in activism and corporate

governance, between 2019 and 2022, as an empirical base to explore how stakeholders are becoming more activists and how organizations are becoming more vulnerable to such activism. Following an interpretivist and hermeneutical approach, we explore and discuss this data in the light of the state of the art of research on this topic that we present in our theoretical framework, aiming to point relevant directions for future applied research.

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In this proceedings book, we can find 29 extended abstracts selected for presentation and discussion at the interim ECREA Organizational and Strategic Communication thematic session conference that took place from 5th to 7th of July 2023 at the Autonomous University of Lisbon, in a joint organisation with LabCom – Research centre, from the University of Beira Interior. Some of the topics debated along the conference were: normative governance for organizational communication and strategic communication; impact of rhetoric, persuasion and brand narratives on society; public sector implications of normative dimensions; nonprofit and hypocrisy; impact of communication on consumers identity and well-being; B-corps as a new relationship management approach; accountability, integrated reporting and communication; greenwashing and other “image” washing; internal relationship management and well-being; corporate social advocacy and CEO activism.

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