BIG DATA-DRIVEN PUBLIC RELATIONS: FROM BUILDING BELIEF TO AGENCY DEPRIVATION

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Abstract

The paper discusses the *Building Belief Model* of public relations in any of the three sectors (private, public, and civil society) which is threatened by the lack of social regulation of the impact of externalities. It debates the potential damage which data-driven public relations can inflict upon the foundation of public relations and public communication profession - the trust and guarding of citizens` and stakeholders' interest. The profession also has an extremely important social role which is threatened. That is why these issues need to be taken up by public relations academics, so the ongoing process does not materialize into some version of algorithmic governed reality where communication has very small role to play. Although it is hard to imagine it would ever happen, now, indeed, is the time to again evaluate the *Building Belief Model* of organizational communication and the social role of public relations to fill the gap between the speedy process of big data practice taking over the profession without social and ethical considerations being significantly debated by public relations professionals and academics.

No more cushy jobs!

To introduce the issue, it is useful sketch some of the trends of the development of the corporate communication (or public relations, or public affairs, numerous names for one profession). Corporate communication field is indeed about corporations and organizations in general communicating with publics and stakeholders. Public relations profession is taking care that the process is benefiting to all of them, professionals, and stakeholders, equally faced with the opportunities and challenges of the development of the big data usage.

The issue debated here is not totally unrelated to the fact that the corporate sustainability function, which used to be placed in environmental protection and similar such functions in the companies, is by now well established within corporate communications function. Communication people were always considered "people`s people", not the " numbers` people". The general idea was that that this is the reason why they chose to work in communications in the first place. Now, numbers and some mysterious powers based on algorithms, bots and other agents seem to be taking over the reality to the extent that corporations are likely to get a full emersion experience of the process. As if the times of cushy jobs of a communication function professional being the *know-it-all* person

always advising CEOs how to deal with their worst nightmares (only happening if the publics found out about them), are gone forever. Not the nightmares. They are there to stay, only they are much worse as it is very difficult to hide any secrets while the company is in the spotlight all the time.

Changes that were brought with new technology are on just one side of the coin. The visionaries of communications warned us back 2007 in certainly the most important proclamation of what awaited us in terms of communication management when the Society of High-ranking Communication Managers *Arthur W. Page Society* published results of a global research entitled "Authentic Organization". In the meantime, the numbers that were in the background of this research, drastically changed, increased. So, today we speak of 6.4 billion people who have the potential to become global publishers, for free and in minutes since they all have smart phones; 8.3 billion mobile phone subscribers, the number which has exceeded five billion according to the UN Telecommunications Agency (the figure predicted by the Arthur Page Society report was lower) and most have a camera which means they can produce photos for publication and video.

The original numbers and predictions by *A.W. Page Society* were much more conservative. In their report of 2007. they warned what this meant for the area of communication management: yesterday the role of the communication manager was to establish relations with the media, corporate journalism, internal events, writing newspapers and documents; today, it is encouraging media coverage, influencing external criteria of action, changing organizational culture, influencing organizational strategy and policy, that is, listening to organizational partners; having a deep understanding for clients, the public and employees; tomorrow, the communication manager will be expected to create and influence ecosystems of advocates of positive social trends, manage organizational values, brand and reputation, form organizational culture and behaviors, empower employees as top communicators. (A.W. Page Society, 2007).

In 2012, five years after this report, *Arthur W. Page Society* had released a report on *Model of Communication Management for Future Generations*. In the humble opinion of this author, it remains one of the best global guides for communication managers. No wonder - it was made by the best minds in this field and based on knowledge from the practice of many high-ranking communication managers around the world.

Before further elaboration, a word or two about a man named Arthur W. Page who lived in the United States in the last century. In the world's largest companies, in his role of a communication director, he has always been positioned as the vice president of the company, primarily due to his vision of the importance of communication in overall management. He was, in addition to his business positions, an unpaid adviser to US presidents from Roosevelt to Eisenhower and many foreign ministers, a board member of numerous universities, banks, the military, everywhere and always in a position of communication leader by vocation and personal conviction. As he did not write books, the top professionals who founded the company named after him distilled numerous documents he had left and made principles that can be read on the Society's website, and which represent a certain manifesto of corporate communication management.

The authenticity imperative

This latest model, as a vision for the future for organizational communicators released five years

after the visionary report "Authentic Organization" is also a visionary concept name "Building Beliefs" platform. It describes two important new dimensions of the role of the communication manager, each of which is grounded in the creation of shared beliefs.

The first one is defining and activating the organizational character. Corporate character refers to the unique identity of an organization, to its distinctive purpose, mission, and values. Corporate governance involves the integration of organizational reputation and culture, and Chief Communication Officer (CCO) has two responsibilities: defining it and activating it.

Corporate character is defined by history, those who founded it, and how it was later refined in the decades of organizational life. It has probably been shaped by many other events, mergers, acquisitions, and the like, but, in any case, the character of a corporation includes its purpose as well as the principles on which everyday decisions are based.

Activation, on the other hand, is a never-ending job of ensuring that an organization behaves in accordance with its proclaimed character. The *Building Belief Model* is a framework for judging whether an organization looks, sounds, thinks, and acts as proclaimed in its character. It is a framework that presupposes partnership with other functions because it involves responsibilities that go far beyond the traditional frameworks of communication management.

The second most important dimension is establishing advocacy at the levels. Word-of-mouth and the influence of people from the same social group or orientation has never been more powerful than now when billions of people can share their experiences, opinions and views with others and organize them for action. All of them put huge amounts of information about themselves on the Internet, which has unforeseeable consequences for organizations. Among other things, they must be able to extract from this data those publics and stakeholders who are actively oriented. The importance of this phenomenon is not so much related to social networks or related technological innovations as to the simple question: How and why individuals advocate something about an organization? They do this when they are motivated, that is, when they have convinced themselves of the value of their decision to buy, invest, to work for an organization or, simply, make a decision in favor of the organization. The opposite works too. They can be advocated but they can also be enemies.

This new model differs from previous models of communication management in at least two important aspects. First, with the already known engagement of the organization towards stakeholders and the publics, this model is primarily about how the organization treats each individual. And, secondly, the goal of the organization is not only to shape the opinions, feelings, attitudes, or perceptions of these individuals but to encourage them to act, to behave constantly and to advocate.

This is something that goes beyond word-of-mouth marketing and its derivatives. To liberate the power of advocacy, to encourage others to advocate for you (instead of the organization advocating for itself) is a huge step in the development of public relations. It requires modern knowledge in the field of behavioral and cognitive science that provides a kind of pattern for authentic advocacy. Such a pattern begins with the creation of shared beliefs with decision-makers, customers, consumers, investors, employees, citizens, and this is something completely different from traditional patterns of awareness or information. Such beliefs encourage people to act - buy a product, accept a job,

invest money, give their support to a policy or measure and the like. When these actions are successful, they inspire people's confidence in their own decisions and turn their actions into behavior. When such behaviors increase an individual's sense of being a mediator and having a purpose, it can generate advocacy based on their own motivation - and thus initiate a virtuous circle as these advocates build shared beliefs among new decision makers. So, the communication director must now also be an integrator (ensure that the organization thinks and acts in accordance with its corporate character); system designer who not only understands marketing and communication systems but also the way they work towards operating and management systems; a master of data analysis, particularly in order to understand consumers, customers, employees, investors and other stakeholders as individuals rather than as public or segments of the population; must be a publisher and master perfectly all the tools of production and transmission of information that millions of people have in order to be able to directly inform them, equip them, empower the target individuals; CCO must also be a behavioral science expert to inform the formation of beliefs, actions, behaviors, and advocacy and, finally, a corporate caregiver to ensure that the communication and people of an organization behave in accordance with its identity. Add big data to this. No more cushy jobs, indeed!

Love and hate relationship

So, communication managers operate in organizations that are surrounded and dependent on millions of individuals who can trust their organization, accept it, act for its benefit, gain trust in it and then advocate for it with the great power, or, on the contrary, to harm it, even to destroy her. It is potentially a love but also hate relationship. This all comes to them in big data, but also in small data and through other channels. Let us not forget, communication people are people`s people. To succeed in their role, they must be leaders in their organization but also use the tools they have, the data they get which are now very challenging and not easy to interpret.

According to the signs coming from the field, communication managers accept this challenge because it is their only choice. Leadership has no alternative. What is unquestionable is that the *Building Belief Model* as a paradigm of corporate communications is in fact a modern derivative of the Grunig model of two-way symmetric communication as a key principle of excellence in the function of public affairs and corporate communications. It is indisputable that it defines the conceptual derivative of the only visible and above all present model of the development of the function of strategic and even operational corporate communications or public relations. Grunig's so-called fourth model, the two-way symmetrical communication model, provoked great opposition in the professional ranks and relentless criticism, before finally establishing itself as a key foundation for all possible corporate communication models at the beginning of the new millennium. In the similar way, *Building Belief Model*, although much younger, is still insufficiently recognized among professionals as a key paradigm of the development of the profession but also of the corporate communication sciences. In addition, *Building Belief Model* now operates in the big data environment which is a risky and bumpy ride.

How does a trend of increased use of big data driven public relations fit in this model? Big data-driven public relations have, in the meantime, become practice of not only global systems with

developed departments of public affairs but practically universally in the profession. As the communication departments in corporations are becoming increasingly complex and extended to cover various areas – from human rights and legislation lobbying to integrated marketing communication and corporate branding, to mention only a few, the big data-driven complexity may seem overwhelming even for a function that in its definition is holistic and is an umbrella function for other corporate functions.

It has been six years since at a leading European communication professional` forum, the European Communication summit held a conference dedicated to big data-driven public relations. On that occasion results of a regular yearly research titled *European Communication Monitor* were presented. It was a deep analysis of answers by 2710 professionals from 43 countries on various questions related to understanding and using big data in the public relations function. The results were not particularly flattering for the profession.

The study revealed that three out of four communication professionals in Europe indeed believed that big data would change their profession; that 23.4 per cent stated that this is one of the most important issues for communication management soon, but, nevertheless, only 59.3 per cent of the respondents have given close attention or any attention to the debate about big data. The researchers concluded that probably because of this, only a minority showed a comprehensive understanding when they were asked to rate various definitions representing different characteristics of big data. Also, related to this limited understanding, only app. 20. percent of communication departments and agencies had implemented big data activities prior to the research and even smaller number planned to do so.

Summary of the results of this research that also focused on related topics like stakeholder engagement, roles of social media influencers, social media skills and management competencies were as follows:

- Big data: 72% of communicators believe this will change their profession, but only 21% of all organizations have implemented activities by now

- Automation: few use the power of algorithms for adapting content

- Strategic issues: longitudinal data over a decade (2007-2016) indicate dramatic changes for communication management

- Communication channels: face-to-face is more important than social media

- Social media influencers: 43% use specific strategies to approach them

- Competencies: gap between training offered and development needs

(European Communication Monitor, 2016)

While this longitudinal research that publishes research results each year focused on other topics in the following years, the complex and somewhat controversial role of big data in the profession remains not fully clear. Artificial Intelligence in the further development of the profession and its crucial role in overall corporate strategy became next topic of great interest to the academics dealing with corporate communication and other areas within communication field. Many of these focus on the role of stakeholders, or, rather, their current position in this new mediated environment

whereby digital corporate communication function, being at the same time a producer but also a main beneficiary of the big data it needs to use for its basic strategic goals – creating perceptions that build reputation – has a role to play it, which, by no means, it had a decade ago. Most of those experts are individual players, while, at the same time, organizations, associations or less formal professionals' groups like above mentioned *Arthur Page Society*, or *European Communication Forum* also perform wide research to investigate how aware or how ready the corporates communication or public relations profession in general is to take a leading role explained in the current *Building Belief Model.* How will they to take over the leadership role and the responsibility that goes with it in the corporate world that would increasingly become big data and AI dominated?

Damaging public relations

In the similar context, the most powerful professional association of communication experts strongly connected to academia in UK and beyond – London based *Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR*) has published *AI and Big Data Readiness Report* with the goal to assess how ready is the profession to function in the new circumstances and what has the penetration of big data brought to the everyday reality of corporate management.

The research provided an overview of current AI understanding and preparedness within public relations/corporate communication professionals and outlined how they assumed the profession should equip itself to better use the potential of the AI and big data and also protect itself against possible traps and be able to face the challenges.

According to the report "a significant number of PR practitioners have limited knowledge of AI and lack confidence in using it (43.2%), compared with only a small number of those who feel "very comfortable" (13.9%). However, practitioners are optimistic and have an eagerness to learn. Their challenge seems to be that they do not know what they need to know, and they don't know where to start.

The report finding are as listed:

- 41.5% of respondents claim to understand what AI as a technology means but do not consider themselves technical

- Over one in three (38.9%) PR practitioners feel 'excited' about AI compared to just 3.9% who feel 'overwhelmed'

- 30% of practitioners are familiar with AI technology but don't feel confident to apply their knowledge to their role

- One in five practitioners (20.7%) feel very comfortable using data and analytics in their role compared to just 8.2% of those who feel the same about AI

- Around one in five practitioners are familiar with the relevance of both AI and Big Data on the communication profession (CIPR, 2021)

What seems to be very interesting here is the fact that the discussion of the ability, competence, power, very identity of the profession in its corporate management role, has since, 2016 when the focus was on big data now mainly shifted to AI, big data almost being taken as granted, a part of this

even more challenging future, and somewhat challenging present. The research like this has its limitations as do all similar social sciences empirical research. After all, we ask people to tell us what they think, and we base our results and further conclusions on the assumption that they are telling us the truth. It is a limitation to consider in interpreting data, be they big data or small data. While small data are not the topic of this paper, no doubt that the credibility of small dana relies on trust and the elements that make *Building Belief Model* based on seemingly more tangible complexities than powerful big data that fully rely on knowledgeable and lucid interpretation in order to become really useful.

From the corporate interest side, it is all about impacting perceptions to create reputation, preferably with facts and truth, since everything else bordering manipulation is a slippery slope that can negatively affect the triple bottom line. Not to mention the ethical side of the use of big data in public relations, an elephant in the room of which technical experts might not be fully aware, or care very much, but is a big challenge for public relations professionals and academics.

The quantity of academic research and critical reviews on the subject has been growing daily, particularly because of many huge opportunities that are being given at the disposal of the profession by big data access and magnified use in corporations in general. As the practice changes rapidly so does the academic field that tries to catch up. Every now and then, research or even a review of previous research appears that focus on the dangers and challenges the profession is facing, by underestimating the power of big data but, also, being too much big data-driven.

Recently published article by Anne Gregory and Gregor Halff indicates these challenges already in the title: The Damage Done by Big Data Driven Public Relations. This is a very strong statement and a call for caution in the big data enthusiasm environment. It has been stated here a few times that what public relations/corporate communications do is in fact impacting perceptions to create reputation. At least that is the perception of what the function should be doing by all those who are not communication professionals, and many of those who are.

But is it as simple as that?

That, certainly, remains the same conceptual framework in which, however, there are numerous questions, all based on stakeholder approach and stakeholder rights that are the basic starting point for any consideration of corporate communication role. Or any business for that matter. Anne Gregory, who is the first public relations professor on UK, a globally active and eminent scholar in the field, was, at the time, among the first professionals to point to the here mentioned *Building Belief Model* as a crucial model of significance. It all boils down to the role of corporate communication in the company, to the role of the corporation in the society (hence this sustainability role now comfortably sitting in communication function as the one advocating the "business in the society" holistic approach). In her work Anne Gregory insisted that public relations as a profession, regardless in which sector it is positioned, should always fulfill it social role, a role it plays in the society as a whole, and thar requires not only commercial or political but primarily ethical approach and accountability.

So, where do big data fit in all this in opinion of Gregory and Halff and what are the dangers of big data driven public relations? First, big data development might be too fast for anybody, let alone academics in social sciences who are used to benefiting from some distance in time and space to be

able to objectively assess what is really going on. After all, articles on topics of big data often focus on technical side of the huge and interesting big data phenomenon, while social science approach might be of a minor interest. Not to mention very rare profound ethical considerations which pop up in many relevant debates. It is still difficult to find a reasonable normative framework for meaningful ethical debate.

Hegemonic in nature

In the cacophony of admiration of technological development and unimaginable opportunities it brings to people, who wants to hear doubtful discussion about ownership of the data, human rights, citizens-based democracies and alike? That is in the academic field – some but not heated debate. On the level of what we call everyday life, we see a more polarized debate. For a comparison, it is worth remembering the recent COVID 19 vaccine history where the only option was to be pro or con, where there were violent and politically dubious reactions to citizens` claims for freedom and in some countries ethically debatable government reactions which somewhere ended up with water cannons and brutal police interventions. This might be just a mild reflection on what Gregory and Halff invite us, public relations professionals, to consider before embracing wholeheartedly the big data as the new blessing for the profession that has just, let us not forget what we claimed in the introduction, rediscovered its essential value that benefits all – the trust of stakeholders and audiences. And any practitioner knows, trust is difficult to get, very easy to lose.

They start with spelling clearly the concept of hegemony of public relations, the one that was mentioned before in simple terms like influencing perceptions to create reputation. This concept, they claim, has not been well understood by public relations scholars and needs to be revived exactly because if what big data bring to the profession. Who can live without technology? "Human agency is being profoundly affected by the hegemonic nature of technology" (Bourne, 2019)

The main point of relevance is what we in public relations call stakeholder management. Big data repositories are serving this function. Gregory and Halff, when complaining about academic lagging behind the practice, do not complain about research and academic enquiry when it comes to the interest of the companies. On the contrary, apart from organizational view, there is a macroscopic perspective that is lacking in public relations academic enquiry, and this is a gap they wish be filled, at least considered more carefully. (Gregory & Halff, 2020). Indeed, as I have followed Gregory academic work for twenty years now it only makes sense to me that she would insist on this need for serious deep analysis in face of big data influx in public relations, because it all, finally, boils down to the basic long debated issue of public relations role in the company and society.

So, what is it all about? An individual engages in special transactions (buy, sell, read, write, publish), that information becomes available to somebody or something with commercial interests and various resources who then use these data. In addition, or simultaneously, they also use it for public relations purposes. Corporations want to know what people think of them to be able to establish hegemony over the stakeholders. Public relations is on both sides of this equation.

Public relations is both a producer as well as a main beneficiary of such hegemony (Wener & Kochar, 2016), especially through descriptive as well as predictive data mining, a market that is set to grow from 4.5 in 2014 to 274.3 billion in 2022. Predictive mining makes inferences based on the data to

predict what stakeholder groups may do in future… In particular, algorithms create agency for organizations conducting public relations (Collister, 2015) while the agency of individuals and stakeholder groups over their own data drops to nearly nil (Gregory & Halff, 2021, p.2)

Gregory and Halff explain this hegemony at the expense of stakeholders' agency by using the concept of "externality" this being defined as "cost or benefit imposed on or provided to others but not considered by economic agency who generate the effect" (Barnett & Yandle, p. 130). Externalities of data-driven public relations, which is the loss of agency for stakeholders remains without proper pricing as only those benefiting from the data have enough information of its value. So, one would expect a collapse of such an imbalanced market, but it is not happening in public relations, because those supling the valuable information are not becoming more selective in the information they provide. Even if they wanted to withhold it, they would be prevented. Those who are after their information understand their comfort zone and the practicality wish. Ever tried to withhold cookies or not complete the information, they ask? You are prevented in your further action.

This hegemony happens in all areas affected by big data-driven public relations: corporate sphere concerned with profitability, governance sphere dominated by the government where the main factor is power and civic sphere of civil society organizations whose drive force is participation. In all the spheres there is a decrease of agency for individuals and increase of agency for whoever are the dominant players.

Tax them!

Gregory and Halff are very open as they claim this not happening by accident, but these externalities are constitutive of big data-driven public relations. The remedies they propose are related to what economics offers as two major remedy types against externalities. The first one is the concept of "Pigovian taxes" (intervening into price of a good via taxation) (Pigon, 1920), in this case a tax equal to the marginal social cost of data aggregation) would make the prices go up and force organizations to internalize social cost of data aggregation.

A possible alternative remedy proposed is the "Coase-theorem" which is about ownership of the data that is not well defined. In case of better regulation of the field and in the case, they were legal owners of data, citizens and stakeholders would be able to negotiate the price of the data. To simplify "the remediation of hegemony and the restoration of agency" needs to be placed at the center of the broader debate about hegemony 2,07 in public relations" (Gregory & Halff, 2020, p.5) Consumers, stakeholders, citizens must be given a choice to decide whether how, where and when there data would be stored and then later used for various purposes.

How realistic is that when considering data aggregated by giants like Amazon or Google? Gregory and Halff propose four interventions:

1. That consumers-citizens be aware of interactions involving their data when these are market transactions for big data-driven public relations.

2. That people must be aware how their data were aggregated and with what (face recognition is one example.)

3. That material and intelligence value of transactions be disclosed, including the values that contribute to publications organizations.

4. That the choices and the transactions based on these choices are irreversible and on line traces are removed.

Grergory and Halff claim that such a scrutiny of a public relations has by now been well overdue and that social costs must be understood as society wide externalities. That brings the discussion to the validity of *Building Belief Model* that can only be implemented in the context of big data-driven public relations if the authenticity and trust imperatives are fulfilled, and agency not lost by the crucial stakeholders.

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