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Article

Ethical communication in a connected world

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This special issue presents a range of articles dedicated to the analysis of strategic communication and public relations, with an important focus on ethics. A selection of the articles were amongst the best papers presented at the annual congress of the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA), held on the 11-13 October 2014 in Brussels, Belgium. The local organiser of the congress was the LASCO laboratory, which is a Belgian research group on public relations and organisational communication that puts together researchers of Université Catholique de Louvain and IHECS institute (Brussels). The main congress theme was "Communication Ethics in a Connected World". A number of other papers presented at the congress were recently published in a book (Catellani *et al.*, 2015).

The 2012 edition of the European Communication Monitor (**Erreur ! Référence de lien hypertexte non valide.** shows that a majority of European communication professionals have been confronted with one or more ethical challenges, and that these experiences are increasing. Significant reasons for this increase include the growing importance of social media and intercultural issues. In our interconnected world, different visions and practices are increasingly closer to each other, creating more ethical challenges. Different social actors, like NGOs and grassroots movements, scrutinise actively the behaviour of businesses and governments, and can criticise them in a very fast and effective way (not forgetting that criticism is also a form of strategic communication).

St Thomas Aquinas stated: "moral acts and human acts are the same" (*idem sunt actus morales et actus humani*). This means that a moral dimension is included in all types of human activities, including PR and communication, which are not purely technical and neutral practices. Instead, they are inherently ethical and political, given their links with the construction of capitals, of relations among groups, of power and/or empowerment and resistance. However, the awareness of this dimension is not equally spread among communication professionals. Additionally, ethical references and skills can vary. According to the European Communication Monitor, ethical codes, proposed over many years by different professional associations, are not always known and used, and they are even considered as outdated by some. The reputation of reputations professionals is at stake, as it has been since the beginning of the twentieth century. Globally, the improvement of ethical levels is an important aspect of the professionalisation process of communication practitioners.

Ethics of communication and PR is present as a central theme in a number of the articles in this issue, which includes five papers; the first three articles are from the EUPRERA congress.

The first paper, "Public Relations interactions with Wikipedia", is an interdisciplinary research, which uses the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework as an enrichment to the analysis of communication. It is a contribution to the understanding and practice of the crucial relationship between common-pool online media, on one hand, and public relations and strategic communication activities, on the other. The approach of IAD is applied to the analysis of two recent cases of illicit editing of Wikipedia's entries by PR professionals from the UK, with clear ethical implications.

The second paper, “Datafication: threat or opportunity for communication in the public sphere?”, focuses on the threats and potential of, what is today called, “Big Data” as a new ensemble of resources for strategic communicators. It underlines the fact that Big Data analysis is not a neutral tool, and that a discourse analysis can help in revealing how it can be involved in power strategies, also in order to develop resistance. The paper also deepens the ethical responsibility of communicators in relation to the defence and improvement of the public sphere, of its openness and transparency.

The third paper, “Managing CEO communication and positioning: a cross-national study among corporate communication leaders”, is the first large-scale study on how communication professionals act in order to position Chief Executive Officers and other top executives, in order to manage their presence in the public sphere. The study, which refers to a neo-institutional theoretical framework, involves 21 countries in Europe, and is based on a quantitative online survey.

The fourth paper, “Australian talkback radio prank strategy: a media-made crisis”, concerns an Australian radio show’s use of a prank as a strategy to create scoops. The study, made using textual analysis, focuses on a specific, tragic, episode, instigated by a hoax call, supposedly made by the British Royal family, and explores the subsequent crisis. The paper presents an analysis of news stories and social conversation in three countries, and applies an issue and crisis management approach, not avoiding ethical considerations on the role of media in the public sphere in relation to the common good.

The last paper, “Communication in the heart of policy and the conduct of conduct: government communication in the Netherlands”, focuses on governmental communication in the Netherlands. It is a study on the blurring separation between political communication and governmental communication, in a context of increasing pressure by politicians on professional communicators in the Dutch public service. The study is based on a series of qualitative interviews.

The high-quality papers of this special issue will allow the readers to see the importance of ethics as a crucial variable in the field of strategic communication and PR analysis today.

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Reference

Catellani, A., Zerfass, A. and Tench, R. (Eds) (2015), *Communication Ethics in a Connected World. Research in Public Relations and Organisational Communication*, Peter Lang, Brussels, p. 432