Public relations and the rise of hypermodern values: Exploring the profession in Europe☆

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ABSTRACT

This article raises the question of whether European public relations (PR) and communications professionals perceive a cultural transformation in the direction of hypermodernity, and if so, attempts to assess how this influences their organizations and their work. Questions were asked in the European Communication Monitor 2017, an annual survey among communications professionals, and 3387 respondents from 50 European countries filled in the questionnaire. The results indicate that European professionals recognize a cultural transformation in the direction of hyper consumption, hyper modernization and hyper narcissism that influences the communication between their organizations and their stakeholders. A cluster analysis shows that less than half of the respondents perceive a transformation of their organization in the direction of hypermodern characteristics and values. Organizations with post/hypermodern characteristics have superior communications departments compared to modern organizations. Post/hypermodern organizations and excellent communications departments also engage more often in societal debates than other types of organizations and departments.

1. Introduction

Organizations and their PR activities are a major force in today's global society. Organizations are expected to continuously reflect on their behavior, the role they play for their stakeholders and society at large and their environment (Roberts & Armitage, 2006). Communications professionals are helping organizations to adapt to the changing circumstances that they constantly face (Tench, Verčič, Zerfass, Moreno & Verhoeven, 2017). Theoretically, the current global society can be labeled a hypermodern society. Hypermodernity is a concept introduced by the French social theorist Lipovetsky (2005), who differentiates it from modernity (based on rationality and division of labor as a key source of competitiveness) and postmodernity (characterized by innovativeness and knowledge competition). A hypermodern society is a society in overdrive, characterized by a culture of hyper consumption, hyper change, hyper narcissism and paradoxes (Charles, 2005; Lipovetsky, 2005). In hypermodern culture, an increasingly large part of life is characterized by consumption, and a majority of people have become turbo-consumers. Modernity is also in overdrive; continuous

change and flexibility are key. Furthermore, postmodern individualization shifts to hyper narcissism. The public has become more critical, and all are expected to behave responsibly automatically, organizations included (Roberts & Armitage, 2006). However, hypermodern culture is not straightforward, since it is also full of paradoxes that make life difficult, especially for organizations and their communicators. For example, organizations are expected to be open and flexible while at the same time managing and controlling their internal and external environment in order to reach their goals. To succeed in this, they have to be both authentic and strategic at the same time. Moreover, organizations must simultaneously be ethical and make as much profit as possible. These paradoxes raise serious questions about how to run an organization today and how to communicate on its behalf. Value driven management, corporate social responsibility and ethical business practices are important organizational responses to the hypermodern challenges (Gupta, Briscoe & Hambrick, 2017; Rendtorff, 2014) along with the increased attention devoted to human rights by organizations (Stohl & Stohl, 2017).

The hypermodern paradoxes create communication problems: organizations are confronted with many different interests and opinions and need to react effectively and responsibly. How should organizations communicate in light of this double sidedness with stakeholders and the global audience? Virtually nothing is known about how organizations do this and how PR professionals respond to these hypermodern challenges. The purpose of this study is to determine whether PR professionals recognize a cultural transformation in the direction of hypermodernity, and if so, how their organizations address this hypermodern environment. This study is the first to empirically explore the perception of hypermodernity from the perspectives of PR professionals in Europe and to determine how this influences their organization(s) and their work. The following overarching research question (RQ) is therefore addressed: do European PR professionals recognize a cultural transformation in the direction of hypermodernity, and if so, how does it influence the organization they work for and its strategic communication?

2. Theoretical background

Organizations have to adapt to their environment continuously and vice versa. The identities of organizations are fluid and dynamic (e.g., Hatch & Schultz, 2002) and influenced by stakeholders (e.g., Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1994) or a more specified combination of stakeholders (constituencies like the management of the organization, employees and customers), stake watchers (pressure groups) and stake keepers (regulators) (Fassin, 2009). The interplay of organizations and stakeholders can lead to organizational adaptation (e.g., Dutton & Dukerich, 1991) to its environment. PR and communication professionals play an important role in facilitating and managing this process of mutual adaptation. Much attention has been paid to this on the organization level or the meso level of analysis, not so much on the macro level of analysis: society.

The most important meso-level PR theory is of course Grunig's excellence theory (Grunig, 2002; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). The final contingency model of this theory accommodates both two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical communication as types of communication practices between organizations and the public. Negotiation and collaboration between organizations and the public make it possible to find "common ground in the win-win zone" (Grunig et al., 2002, p. 357) that is acceptable for both parties. In theory, the organizations' environment is represented by the members of the public that have an interest in the organization. Under the influence of excellence theory, PR theory and research shifted focus to a two-way relational communication model, with an emphasis on dialogue and ethical practice (Kent & Taylor, 2002). At the same time, scholars continued to point out that persuasion and one-way monologs are also an important part of relationships and therefore of PR practice (see e.g., Brown, 2012; Theunissen & Noordin, 2012).

In PR theories of excellence, dialogs and relationship management on the meso level, the larger cultural context of the society that an organization is part of is only taken into account indirectly through the public and the internal culture of the organization. The broader macro societal level is taken into account more explicitly through the comparison of the intersubjective (or ethical, normative) paradigm of PR and the social systemic (or functional, cognitive) paradigm of PR (Holmström, 1997). In the intersubjective paradigm, PR is tasked with solving conflicts in society by reaching a consensus between different rationales in society. In the social systemic paradigm, PR becomes a question of reflecting on conflicts between different logics in society (Holmström, 1997), e.g., between the economic and the political social system: "The objective is mutual self-regulation and adjustment in a society of continuous conflicts and disagreement." (Holmström, 1997, p.16) This reflective role for PR has been developed into the reflective paradigm for PR to achieve organizational legitimation (Holmström, 2005, 2009). The broader societal context and the idea of a public view on the organization was also taken into account in the Bled Manifesto on PR, where viewing the organization from the public's perspective (the public sphere) was suggested as an extra characteristic of PR, in addition to the relational and communicative approaches of PR, especially in Europe (Van Ruler & Verčič, 2002). The managerial consequences of this idea were further developed into a reflective model of communications management (Van Ruler & Verčič, 2005). Reflection on the organization from the outside perspective of the public sphere also fits the concept of issue arenas, where issues and discussions are at the center of communication and the organization itself is not. In this complex media landscape, traditional and social media organizations are no longer in control of communication and have to monitor issue arenas carefully (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010) to decide whether or not it is necessary and desirable to join a debate. By joining social debates, e.g., about the environment, organizations also bring in their own values rather than simply responding to the demands of the critical public, thereby influencing societal values as well. This has been labeled a post-reflective approach to corporate communication (Johansen & Valentini, 2013).

For both meso and macro PR theories, the societal context is important. Today, this context is a global context where the modernization and postmodernization of values is the underlying mechanism of development worldwide (Welzel, 2013).