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Silence and invisibility in public relations



Roumen Dimitrov*

School of the Arts and Media, University of New South Wales, Robert Webster, R. 122, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Public relations practitioners and academics are often silent on silence because the stigma on silence threatens to become a stigma on public relations. Journalists and communicators work in professional exchange and strive. The public relations practitioners are fully visible for the journalists; invisible are they only for the public. Silence has become a “code word” journalists use to pressure information sources not to shut up. This paper discusses public relations responses to that stigma, which include strategies of silence. I draw ideas from Aristotle’s “apophatic” silence, Michel Foucault’s “exhaustive representation”, Frances Sendbuehler’s “profound communication silence” and John Cage’s “sound of silence”. I suggest borrowing from those ideas and the development of silence and invisibility as central categories in public relations. Both are carriers of meaning. Both are ontological, neutral phenomena – neither good nor bad. I show possible applications in the areas of resistance, framing and change.

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Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An introduction, Volume 1*, p. 27)

1. Introduction

Through this paper, I would like to provoke a discussion about the role of silence and invisibility¹ in public relations. How can we explain the obvious puzzle: Practitioners resort to silence and invisibility all the time. Academics, however, shy from giving them the deserved place in public relations theory – the place they have in practice.

Scott Cutlip named his classic about the history of the US public relations *The Unseen Power*. The title refers to the root of the “influential role of public relations in our society” (Cutlip, 1994, p. xi). In *Public Relations Democracy*, Aeron Davis

* Tel.: +61 2 9385 8535; fax: +61 2 93856812.

E-mail address: r.dimitrov@unsw.edu.au

URL: <http://unsw.academia.edu/RoumenDimitrov>.

¹ The meanings of “silence” and “invisibility” partly overlap, especially in their everyday and journalistic metaphorical use. In places where their difference is not important, I will use “silence” to also represent “invisibility” and avoid repetition and clutter. There are other instances, however, where their more precise use as categories requires not only their separation but also very different conceptualisation.

testifies, “Within the industry, public relations is considered to be most effective when acting invisibly”. He cites a Director of Corporate Affairs: “Over the year, it’s 50:50. 50 percent of the jobs is keeping stuff out of the press. I had ten years in Whitehall, and 70 percent of press relations there was keeping stuff out of the papers” (Davis, 2002, p. 13). Most of the public relations consultants I have interviewed have roughly confirmed those parts.

How then to explain the clear absence of this important topic in public relations textbooks, for example? (I have used in my teaching Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1999; Heath, 2001a; Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth, & Van Leuven, 2012; L’Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Powell & Cowart, 2003; Smith, 2005; Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, & Agee, 2005). I mean not the rushed association of silence and invisibility with forms of their abuse. “Deception”, “hiding” and “silencing” are important topics. Silence and invisibility are, before all, ontological, neutral categories. They are neither ethical nor unethical. They can carry meaning. Conversely, speaking and visibility could make no sense. “The family barbeque where the recently divorced father-in-law is not there speaks volumes” (Interview with GB).

Why is public relations silent on silence?

My aim is twofold: critique and adoption. First, I will deconstruct silence as a code word. How do journalists use it to stigmatise sources, which may choose not to give information? And how public relations practitioners, who are main information sources, answer the pressure through various strategies, including techniques of silence? What relations of exchange and strive do lie behind the stigma? Second, I will discuss ideas about silence and invisibility from authors as diverse as Aristotle, Michelle Foucault and John Cage. Can they play a more central role in public relations theory? What would be the benefits from their adaptation?

In my research, I used the method of a qualitative semi-standardised interview (Henderson & Kreps, 2001). I have conducted eleven interviews with public relations practitioners in 2010–2013. Two research questions organised the conversations: (1) types and degrees of silence practitioners use for their work and (2) types and degrees of responses to journalists’ pressure, when silence is their choice of action. I have also conducted a content analysis of Google Alerts, which findings I will discuss in Section 2.4.

In the first part of the text (Sections 2 and 3), I will examine conditions, which make public relations theory reluctant to debunk the stigma of silence. I will argue the stigmatising pressure is a “normal” part of the symbiotic relations between journalism and public relations. I will show the roles of silence, through collaboration and conflict, in storytelling.

In the second part (Sections 4 and 5), I will review definitions of silence in various paradigms. Then I will show possible applications of silence and invisibility in public relations. I will suggest four types of silence: absolute, defensive, preserving and anticipating silence. Then I will interrogate the role of silence and invisibility in resistance, framing and discursive change.

2. Stigma

2.1. Goffman’s concept

Ervin Goffman defines stigma as a label, which attaches a set of discrediting characteristics to someone’s identity. A discrediting feature is effective, when it is a part of a whole discourse. “A language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed” (Goffman, 1990, p. 13) Stigmatising affects the behaviour, beliefs, emotions, and the self-consciousness of the stigmatised.

Power is important (Link & Phelan, 2001). Depending on how persuasive the “wise” is in defining the stigmatised as morally inferior to the reference group of the “normal” (both in Goffman’s terminology), the stigmatised may respond in various ways. Goffman discusses at length the “double perspective” of the “discredited” and “discreditable” (1990, p. 14). Is the discrediting mark already known, obvious on the spot (that is the literal stigma, the sign ancient Greeks burnt into the body of a slave, criminal or traitor)? Is the stigma, on the contrary, covered, not directly noticeable? Can the stigmatised pretend he is normal, still human (that is the jobless, who goes to work everyday to hide his unemployment from the neighbours)?

Depending on which side one is, stigma *communication* involves strategies of visibility or invisibility. Imposing and resisting stigma is part of the bigger game of discourse expansion or change (Smith, 2007a). Researchers have adopted Goffman’s idea to analyse social struggles such as dehumanisation of refugees (Geschke, Sassenberg, Ruhrmann, & Sommer, 2010) and stereotypes in public and mental health (Brown, Macintyre, & Trujillo, 2003; Smith, 2007b).

Goffman’s notion of stigma is static and passive; the stigmatised do not go beyond avoiding “spoilt identity” by social mimicry – by “passing” into the normal. Newer approaches sketch a more dialectical and active model of stigma resistance. The “allure of stigma”, for example, unexpectedly gives the stigmatised their political authenticity (Hughey, 2012). They cannot resist those who are more powerful to define who they are. They can, however, change the valence of their imposed identity. “Yes, we are such, but this is a blessing, not a disgrace”. Skinheads, for example, respond that way to accusations by older generations of being fascists.

This is already resistance. This is not far from taking responsibility – from turning into a moral subject. A stigma may achieve unintended, sometimes opposite results. It may spur defiance and reverse agent–patient relations. It may help fringes become mainstream.

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