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The transparent communicative organization and new hybrid forms of content

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ABSTRACT

Building on the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management's Melbourne Mandate's understanding of a communicative organization consisting of organizational character, responsibility and listening and engagement, this paper explores these principles in the context of new hybrid forms of online content. This study asks about the role of transparency in the context of commercial hybrid content. Through theoretical consideration as well as interviews of representatives of public relations and marketing communication associations and agencies in Finland, the article presents the practitioners' perceptions and experiences using the literature on transparency. To better understand the communicative organization of today in the context of hybrid content creation, we propose the concept of the "transparent communicative organization." We suggest four new propositions for the practice of hybrid forms of engaging publics to support the transparent communicative organization: (1) source identification to enable trust, (2) two-way transparency inviting user feedback, (3) stakeholder-centric arenas to enable engagement, and (4) content on organizational expertise to build long-term engagement. We invite further public relations research to improve and test these preliminary propositions as the use of hybrid content increases.

1. The era of new hybrid forms of content

As traditional brand-centered communication and marketing efforts have become ineffective in the online environment (DuMars, Sitkiewicz, & Fogel, 2010; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010), brands and organizations are moving their messages to issue-centered discussions in arenas chosen by the social consumers (Kliatchko, 2008). This implies a move from the push environment of traditional influence toward the searchable, customizable, (Seabra, Abrantes, & Lages, 2007), and relevance-driven pull environment, where the value comes from informative, entertaining and less irritating content (Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012).

The central idea in this pull environment is "engagement:" Brands and organizations are increasingly engaging stakeholders online by providing relevant content outside their main product or service. When content produced by brands or organizations is interesting enough to engage stakeholders, it builds direct interaction between the brand or organization and the individual consuming the content (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In aiming to engage stakeholders, the lines between

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editorial content, advertising and edited content are blurred (Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2005) and online content takes a hybrid form (Balasubramanian, 1994). Examples of such hybrid content include sponsored content (Sonderman & Tran, 2013), native advertising (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2013), content marketing (Pulizzi, 2012) and brand journalism (Brito, 2013; Cole & Greer, 2013). What they all have in common is their attempt to create value by offering relevant and useful content for stakeholders (Cole & Greer, 2013; Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2013; Pulizzi, 2012) and building credibility through brand and organizational identification.

The move toward engagement has sparked the interest of several disciplines such as public relations (PR), marketing, journalism and advertising. The new focus on engagement has narrowed the previously apparent differences between the aforementioned disciplines (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Michaelson & Stacks, 2007; Pulizzi, 2012), imposing an "identity crisis" with new ethical challenges for PR professionals. Previous studies have suggested combining, not separating, PR and marketing to get the best out of the engagement enabled by the online environment and social media (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Hensel & Deis, 2010; Pulizzi, 2012). Some believe that the hybrid forms of online content may indicate a change for the entire PR industry toward more marketing-oriented methods. Concern has arisen over replacing traditional PR with pure advertising and branding objectives (Hallahan, 2014). As the industry practice of providing online content spreads, there is emerging concern that brand and organization-generated content may deceive publics, may be one-sided or misleading and may be in need of regulation. For hybrid content, the transparency of the source, aim and origin is often lacking. In fact, hybrid content is often disguised. According to Balasubramanian (1994, p. 30), there is a need to address

> "... all paid attempts to influence audiences for commercial benefit using communications that project a non-commercial character ... [because] under these circumstances, audiences are likely to be unaware of the commercial influence attempt and/or to process the content of such communications differently than they process commercial messages."

Despite the timeliness and importance of commercial hybrid content, little research has focused on what could be done to maintain credibility and legitimacy related to the phenomena. The authors argue that new forms of hybrid content without transparency may jeopardize "the communicative organization" (The Melbourne Mandate, 2012) and hinder the legitimacy of the communication profession as well as the media outlets they depend on.

We propose that transparency take center stage in the discussion on the engagement and future of PR. This study asks what the role of transparency is in commercial hybrid forms of online content. We use The Melbourne Mandate's (2012) principles of a communicative organization (organizational character, responsibility, and listening and engagement) to propose different aspects of transparency that need to be addressed in the context of hybrid content. To better understand the contextual nature of today's brands and organizations, the authors propose the concept of "transparent communicative organization" in the context of commercial hybrid content. Through theoretical consideration as well as interviews of representatives of PR and marketing communication associations and media agencies in Finland in the spring of 2014, we suggest four propositions for the ethical practice of hybrid forms of engaging publics to support the transparent communicative organization.

2. Transparency in the context of the communicative organization

To develop an understanding of the processes of transparency related to commercial hybrid online content, the aims of transparent actions should first be clearly understood. Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, (1992) stated that for organizations, PR increases mutual understanding and satisfaction and builds on the openness, credibility, trust and legitimacy of an organization. Moreover, The Melbourne Mandate (2012) acknowledges that to secure legitimacy, an organization must transparently and responsibly communicate the value that it can create for stakeholders.

Whenever media, brands and organizations cooperate, trust is brokered and ethical aspects require consideration. Hybrid content, if used carelessly, may jeopardize the communicative organization's credibility and reputation, and further hinder the legitimacy of the PR profession and the media outlets uon which the profession depends. As credibility is directly related to the executed communication effort (Verčič, Verčič, & Laco, 2008), the trustworthiness of the organization is the key to effective communication (Miller & Sinclair, 2009). Whereas the traditional focus of businesses is to pursue their own interests (Kaler, 2000), transparent communication balances the organizational objectives with common societal interests and may thus help publics and stakeholders accept the organization (Jahansoozi, 2006; Milne, Rohm, & Bahl, 2009). From this perspective, transparency relates to stakeholder perceptions of mutual respect between an organization and its stakeholders as well as to the openness of communication (Rawlins, 2009).

The definitions of transparency in the communication literature vary and are often oversimplified (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014; Sisco & McCorkindale, 2013). While there is no universal definition of transparency (Sisco & McCorkindale, 2013), scholars agree that it is related to openness, truthfulness, public information needs (Baker, 2008; Rawlins, 2009), credibility (Miller & Sinclair, 2009; Plaisance, 2007; Sisco & McCorkindale, 2013) and trust (Miller & Sinclair, 2009; Plaisance, 2007; Rawlins, 2009). Some disagreement is also apparent as to whether transparency is an umbrella concept or merely a vital part of another concept such as authenticity or ethics (Gilpin, Palazzolo, & Brody, 2010).