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The present state of integrated communication in Russia



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ABSTRACT

Integrated communication that incorporates public relations, management, advertising, marketing, political communication, media relations, and social media platforms, as reflected at all communicative levels, from corporate to personal, is a product of a capitalist consumer society with a stake in personal communication consumption choices. Integrated communication in Russia is a relatively new phenomenon, still highly influenced by the intuitive communication practices and posing conceptual questions on its development vectors among the researchers and professionals in the field. Furthermore, integrated communication in Russia is currently undergoing the process of changing into a social phenomenon with the potential to replace existing social institutions. This article examines the state and features of integrated communication development in Russia using the method of key informant interviews with the leaders on the Russian public relations and communication market.

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1. Introduction

As global markets are expanding and digital technology is transforming the way organizations communicate with their clients, the importance of communication integration is impossible to ignore. The development of digital technology, the increase of the role of stakeholders in an organization, the growth of competition in the global marketplace, as well as globalization itself, has created a new communication environment not only within organizations but in the society as a whole (Einwillera & Boenigk, 2012). In recent years understanding and practice of integrated communication has moved far beyond the integration of marketing and public relations departments within the organization, making the term integrated communication an enabling channel or even a social context of strategic communication. According to Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic, and Sriramesh (2007) strategic communication is the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission (p.3), in which two-way communication, including public relations, plays an essential part. However, unlike in the traditional understanding of public relations functions, strategic communication drives organizational success and builds organizational legitimacy both inside and outside the organization (Falkheimer, 2014; Zerfass & Huck, 2007). Integrated communication, incorporating public relations, management, marketing, advertising, political communication, media relations, and social media platforms, as reflected at all communicative levels, from corporate to personal, has moved beyond the mere managerial principle into the structural part of modern society becoming a social phenomenon.

In spite of the increasing academic attention to the concept of strategic and integrated communication (Barker, 2013; Fähnrich, 2013; Falkheimer, 2014; Smith, 2012), defining integrated or strategic communication as not just an organizational

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but also a social phenomenon calls for regional qualitative studies on the issue since the concept is still underdeveloped in communication research literature (Barker, 2013; Kitchen & Schultz, 2000; Niemann-Struweg, 2014; Smith, 2010, 2012). Tindall and Holtzhausen (2012) also pointed to the importance of examining strategic or integrated communication in international setting on the material of particular countries. This article attempts to conceptualize the pragmatic and discursive parts of integrated communication and to investigate these concepts from the regional perspective by interviewing the top managers of Russian communication market.

2. Theoretical perspectives on integrated communication

Niemann-Struweg (2014) argued for rethinking the traditional approach to strategic integrated communication in the post-2000 communication space. The researcher (Niemann-Struweg, 2014) stated that in the age of globalization business needs to adapt their marketing and public relations strategies for the needs of new markets and the increasing presence of social media and instant communication. Additionally, the research on strategic and integrated communication is scarce, especially from the public relations perspective (Tindall & Holtzhausen, 2012; Smith, 2013; Smith & Place, 2013). Integrated communication is a term that gathers all strategic communications of an organization under one umbrella (Kerr, Schultz, Patti, & Kim, 2008; Niemann-Struweg, 2014; Smith, 2013; Smith, 2013). Therefore, the pragmatic concept of integrated communication is a strategically developed and coordinated complex of an organization's internal and external communications aimed at the achievement of its goals and at the advancement of its values. The pragmatic understanding of integrated communication can be referred as integrated communications since it refers to the integration of communication channels employed by organizations. The discursive concept of integrated communication has emerged from a cocreational perspective (Botan & Taylor, 2004) on public relations theory and practice as well as research tradition that regards public relations as strategic management function (Grunig, 2006, 1999). The discursive side of public relations appears as "networks of people, groups, and organizations create systems that comprise society and we see that different dependencies occur" (Yang & Taylor, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, the investigation of both discursive and practical concepts of integrated communication sheds further light on the role of strategic communication in social construction. Integrated communication as a societal phenomenon emerges from the ubiquitous relationship building and negotiation between organizations and their publics existing in a dynamic cultural ecology (Yang & Taylor, 2014) and, at the same time, becoming a driving force for transforming both publics and organizations. Smith's (2013) study has shown that integration of communication can be based on "meaning interpretation activities that occur on the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels" (p.76). According to Smith (2012, 2013), the functional and media management side of integrated communications has been widely outlined in the research literature, while its philosophical and cultural dimensions have yet to be thought through. Smith (2012, 2013) stated that the integration of communication is a naturally occurring phenomenon, largely depending on the role of employees in the organization, cultural context and social structure, which shape the process and spirit of integration. The two-sided nature of integrated communication can be stated as a pragmatic concept of integrated communications with communication integration around organizational goals and a discursive concept of integrated communication with communication integration within a larger social structure built on the values and structural specifics of a capitalist consumer society with the help of digitalized information flow and individual consumer choices. Evstafyev (2013) even argued that, from a philosophical standpoint, the paradigm of a global consumer society is transforming into the paradigm of a global communication society, replacing actions with communication acts.

The early concepts of integrated communication started to be developed in the 1980s (Duncan & Caywood, 1996; Gronstedt, 2000; Grunig & Grunig, 2008; Kitchen & Schultz, 2000; Kliatchko, 2008) and has aroused from the research on integrated marketing communication (IMC), meaning employing multiple types of communication in such a fashion that each option that reflects the other options employed (Keller, 2001; Kitchen, Brignell, Li, & Spickett-Jones, 2011; Smith and Place, 2013; Smith & Place, 2013). However, the research on IMC has not widely used the PR-agency oriented perspective: it has mostly dealt with the advertising value of IMC (Kitchen, Brignell, Li, & Spickett-Jones, 2011; Kitchen, Kim & Schultz, 2008; Smith & Place, 2013). Finne and Grönroos (2009) proposed a relationship communication approach to integrated marketing communications claiming that most of the research on IMC is sender-centric while it is important to study the perspective, where it is the consumer who integrates the messages. The need to focus on consumers goes along with the need to not only analyze agency control, receiver-oriented planning, strategic consistency, and message perception, but also to analyze the mix of communication alternatives and the effect of these concepts on both PR and advertising agencies considering that public relations role has been largely absent from the research (Kitchen et al., 2008). Researchers pointed out the weaknesses of IMC research, suggesting the study of integrated communication rather than integrated marketing communication as a newly emerging organizational form that is gaining strength (Barker, 2013; Christensen, Firat, & Torp, 2008; Duncan & Caywood, 1996; Kitchen et al., 2008).

Smith (2010) was one of the first to conceptualize the role and place of public relations integration into the company's marketing communications. Calling for further investigation into the phenomenon of integrated communication and integrated marketing communication, Smith (2010) cited:

...the term Integrated Marketing Communications may be too narrow to define the process because it fails to include nonpromotional public relations activities in such marketing-focused terminology. Rather, I advocate the use of the term integrated communications (IC) because it recognizes both marketing's role as well as public relations' dual roles in the integration of communication. (p.56)

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