

PR COLONISATION - A NEW PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *Too many journalists are passively or actively accepting colonisation by PR. Discuss and critically evaluate. (Kevin Moloney, Rethinking Public Relations: The Spin and the Substance, Routledge, 2000, p. 122). In 2010, a group of Romanian journalists paid a visit to New Zealand, to see an open-pit, cyanide-based exploitation of gold. The visit, organized by the PR firm hired by a Canadian-Australian company (Rosia Montana Gold Corporation - RMGC), might have passed unnoticed if one independent journalist did not have the courage to publish a short story on "deep background". While these journalists - important opinion leaders, managers of national news rooms and respected figures of Romanian media - were having a great time in New Zealand, an important part of the Romanian society was openly against RMGC and the project of exploiting gold using cyanide technologies, in a historical and green area of Western Romania - Rosia Montana (Avadani, 2016, p. 29, Bucurenci, 2010). Between 2008 and 2015, tens of thousands of people protested against RMGC on the streets, on different occasions. The protests - held under the slogan "United we save Rosia Montana" - outburst with every political decision in the favour of that controversial company. The protests became a turning point for the Romanian society, and they determined the government to cancel the contract with RMGC in 2015. Currently, RMGC sues the Romanian government at an international court of law (Ciobanu, 2016).*

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I. INTRODUCTION

"Too many journalists are passively - or actively accepting colonisation by PR. They are so content to accept 'newszak', news designed for a market and delivered in small bits for easy consumption, from their PR suppliers. For journalism as public gossip and as entertainment, this colonisation is entrenched. (...) PR colonisation, however, is immediately destructive of journalism as scrutiny..." (Moloney, 2000, p. 122).

In what consists of this phenomenon coined as "PR colonisation"? According to Moloney, it refers to several situations such as: (1) PR practitioners deliver press releases (news) to media outlets on a daily basis, and these press releases are published by media without professional scrutiny. Journalists accept them in many cases, at the expense of objective information of their readers and viewers on companies, products or services. (2) Journalists get involved in PR practitioners' training. They train the PR practitioners and they teach them how to "beat" the journalistic vigilance or prudence (3). Spinning is an increasing phenomenon among reputed journalists. They get involved in electoral campaign, or they support political figures in their efforts to distort the truth about their actions (Clinton's case). (4) Tabloidization of media is encouraged by PR content that focus on celebrity news. (Moloney, 2000, pp. 122-129).

This study has gone from Moloney's negative theories just to bring in this critical study the opposite positive opinions of other specialists in the field. For example, L'Etang (2008) suggests that persuasion is a dangerous weapon in the hands of those authorized, but this does not prevent their duty to present the truth without damaging its basic meaning. Thinking divergently can help our creativity is a facility much prized in public relations by forcing the pathways in our brains to work in unusual ways. PR transforming from a service activity to

journalism into a pervasive commercial communication, as Moloney (2000) explains "PR is partisan, persuasive communications. This partisan characteristic marks off it from uncolonised journalism which transforms PR material by its scrutiny. Such journalism is persuasive in assessment of the validity of interests by its scrutiny and is not a priori committed to an interest. Where journalism is partisan to a media owner or a political owner, it diminishes itself. The intensely persuasive quality of PR is hidden when the PR media system works vicariously through journalistic forms without the latter declaring or amending that quality", argues Moloney (2000, p. 130) and explains that journalists have their share of blame in this situation, too. Moloney acknowledges the difficult financial status of media outlets and journalists in the last decades, status that opened the "gates" of news rooms to soft news, and PR-driven stories, but underlines that journalists have been also "complicit" to the PR colonization of journalism. Journalists should have treated PR practitioners with scepticism and, even, hostility, explains Moloney (2000, p. 131).

II. PR&Journalism - A PR PERSPECTIVE

In Moloney's term, public relations and journalism have a "love-hate relationship" (Moloney, 2000, p. 121), in which the definition of persuasion is important. For public relations, persuasion (understood as: "responsible advocacy", Bivins, 2006) is a legitimate course of action, when used in the benefit of the company and of the public, at the same time ("it involves a dialogue where an organization and its various publics (...) listen to each other", Gregory, 2015, p. 5).

"Used correctly, media is an invaluable tool for the public relations practitioner", argues Bland, Theaker&Wragg (2005, p. 139). Indeed, media audience is still very important for public relations, even in the era of digital revolution. Classic and contemporary books and textbooks on

PR emphasize the role of media in PR campaigns (Gregory, 2015, L'Etang, 2008, Morris & Goldsworthy, 2012).

PR practitioners need media because journalistic pieces of news seem unbiased for the audience: "Editorial coverage carries an implicit endorsement of information and is consequently held to more believable than advertising, which is paid for and expected to be biased. By using media relations effectively, public relations practitioners will not only enhance the reputation of their clients or employers, but also themselves, and establish good working relationships with the journalists that will serve them well in the future" (Bland, Theaker & Wragg (2005, p. 1-2).

Gregory also signals the need for an audit in public relations campaigns. It is a third part of the communication process and contrary to Moloney's trusts, it shows that there is a solution to the danger of being subjective, after a love pattern. In the same way, it identifies communication gaps and unexploited opportunities, as well as the information needs of all the key publics.

It also looks ahead by "examining future information requirements and new methods of communication that should be used" (Gregory, 2015). At least in PR theory there are solutions to the danger of being influential and to make hasty and wrong decisions at the same time. Morris & Goldsworthy also shows that no matter how organized the PR methods, there may be a doubt in their application in practice. The public tend to trust the media for documenting and writing the stories in a professional way.

Therefore, it is the PR's aim to reach the media and journalists with well-written messages about the companies, products or services. The most important tools of PR practitioners are press releases, VNRs, press conferences, mediating interviews, press trips etc. "The balance of power between journalists and public relations professionals has shifted, leaving many understaffed and financially strapped newspapers, radio and television stations, and Internet news and

entertainment sites dependent on low-cost public relations materials" (Bronstein, 2006, 74).

As Bronstein writes, the journalists need more editorial content easy to produce, ready on time, and foremost cheap. The PR practitioners are tempted to take advantage of this opportunity by producing more content (text, images, and videos) about the companies they represent. This content produced by PR was, according to the figures presented by Bronstein (2006, p. 76), between 25% and 40% of a daily newspaper or a TV news bulletin. Even the PR practitioners who work for non-profit organization, and that were in past insignificant for journalists, manage to take advantage of poor condition of journalists and media. In the condition of a low public trust on important companies, these practitioners had been considered by journalists to be "less self-interested" and "candid" (Bronstein, 2006, p. 77) and that also led to dangers and ethical slips, too.

To solve this delicate problem, Bronstein (2006) argues for PR practices that encourage fair reporting, truth respecting and responsible advocacy. In this context, I think it is still important to underline that it is not the public relations firms, companies or practitioners' fault for the poor economic condition of journalism (decreasing number of journalism jobs, closure of newspapers, radio and TV outlets, decline in advertising revenues).

PR vs. Journalism - The journalists' perspective In 1971, Jeremy Tunstall published a book, *Journalists at Work* that will turn out to be a cornerstone on research on journalists in UK and globally. Tunstall did the research on 200 specialists newsgathering journalists, employed by 23 national news organizations from UK (Tunstall, 1971, p. 1).

The most accepted PR was this one conducted by non-commercial and non-government organization. But, as Tunstall argues, journalists preferred to work with companies that had an active PR department and that employed practitioners with

journalism experience. When it comes to PR content, Tunstall wrote that journalists considered the public relations material as "junk" (Tunstall, 1971, p. 181). Out of 15 or 20 materials delivered by only one or two were used as "a basis for a story" (Tunstall, 1971, p. 181). If we compare these figures with the ones presented by Bronstein (2000, 76), and above-mentioned in this paper, 25%-40% of the present-day media content rely on PR, then we get a serious question mark related to the PR-journalism relationship.

What were the conditions for this disastrous situation for journalism? Tunstall wrote back in 1971: "By helping specialists to cover 'all' the news, to work at speed, to meet deadlines, and to present lively material briefly, public relations has much success. However, with every success there goes an element of failure. Although specialists use much public relations material, they tend to see anything that emerges in this form as devalued; moreover the speed and efficiency of public relations activity allows specialists time to continue looking for other stories" (Tunstall, 1971, p. 181). It looks like journalism and PR figured out a way of living together, and doing their duty to the public.

PR practitioners prepared press releases or press conference, while journalists decided to use them as source of information if they identified the newsworthiness. "Journalists in search of quick, easy stories are vulnerable to (...) pseudo-news, contrived by specialists who understand the rules of production in the news factory".

Davies (2000, p. 130-131) also speaks of pseudo-events, pseudo-experts, pseudo-evidence, pseudo-leaks, pseudo-illnesses, pseudo-world, all created by PR. It looks like PR managed to colonise the journalists who are unable to counter-attack this industry. It looks like the innocent face of PR from the professional codes of ethics and the devious face of PR from accounts like Davies' are far from being entirely correct.

II. CONCLUSION

I presented in the introduction paragraph of this paper the case of Romanian journalists who accepted a press trip in New Zealand. The value of this press trip was 10.000 euros/person (Avadani, 2016, p. 29). The journalists were important media figures, and we may assume that they knew exactly how much a press trip cost, what the implication of accepting such a gift from a company were, and how the public distrusted the company RMGC. A report on corruption in Romania concluded that the whole Romanian media system acted as a "corrupted actor and a collaboration in a corruption act" (Avadani, 2016, pp. 29-30) in dealing with RMGC. It is also true that in the effort of attracting public's approval on open-pit, cyanide-based gold exploitation at Rosia Montana, RMGC used all the PR tools. It also invested 12 million Euro in advertising, between 2007 and 2010, in the Romanian media; it became one of the major advertising players in a difficult period of economic crisis (Avadani, 2016, p. 26). Nevertheless, media chose to be colonised the PR practitioners that designed that campaign. This colonisation implied press trips (apparently there were several press trip, not just one), positive coverage, silencing of the critics, partial reporting etc. (for the full description, see Avadani, 2016, p. 27-28). This example and the opinions of the academics or journalists above-presented lead to the argument of accepting "Journalism's colonisation by PR" as a trend of the nowadays public communication. However, several accents should be inserted. This colonisation is not a forced or imposed one. It is, as argue the cited authors, accepted by journalists. This acceptance is driven by economic reasons, for which, as I said before, PR cannot be blamed.

The decreasing number of journalism jobs, the closure of newspapers, radio and TV outlets, or the decline in advertising

revenues for media are triggered by economic and societal factors, and these events have a negative influence on the PR industry, too. The PR industry is still very tightly closed of journalism industry. To diminish the PR's negative influence on journalistic scrutiny, Moloney (2000) argues that PR should define itself as a persuasive media system, doing commercial communication.

However, Moloney (2000) does not touch the issue of ethics in PR. From this point of view, I think that the contribution of Bronstein (2006) about the responsible advocacy offers a better answer to the problem of journalism's colonisation of PR. Both PR and journalism industry should strengthen their codes of practice, and should apply the professional ethics more carefully.

This "love-hate" relationship should transform into a mature and normal one, taking into consideration that the public is at stake, and also the good image of two communication professions: journalism and public relations. Contrary to this theory, as Thekler & Yaxley say, "psychologists, therefore, study the formation of attitudes (learned evaluations), beliefs (subjective expectations) and values (guiding principles) and their relationship to behaviour." Social learning theories suggest that people acquire mental rules relating to positive or negative outcomes which reinforce behavioural responses. These and other relevant cognitive aspects can be researched within the PR planning process (Theaker & Yaxley, 2012).

In conclusion, current practices recognize that PR practitioners face significant challenges from fragmented audiences, greater access to uncontrolled media, a more aggressive media, frequent challenges to government policies and to the principles active. People of integrity are most highly regarded; it is one of the keys to having a good reputation. "For an individual of reputation to be in charge of an organisation's most precious asset the

relationships on which its own reputation." (Tench & Yeomans, 2017).

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