

## PUBLIC COMMUNICATION AND MORAL VALUES IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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### Abstract

The paper focuses on public communication and moral values, discussing the strategies of public communication characteristic to the new socio-cultural context, which assume a utilitarian operationalization of both morality and promotional legitimacy. Marketization of public communication involves enormous risks for the society. The marketing approach covered all spheres of public communication, which led to an extended promotion of non-values in the society. In our opinion, the lack of moral references in public communication denotes that Moldavian society faces an already generalized moral crisis, so that social responsibility remains as a main goal, while transformation of the public sphere in the era of technologies requires a new approach of the moral values, and building up of a new ethics for public communication.

**Keywords:** *moral values, public sphere, public communication, social responsibility.*

The assertion that we are living in a society of communication is by now a common place. Public communication is not possible without minimum discussion and associated rights of citizens, granted for the first time in ancient Greece and then by the English, French and German societies, during the Enlightenment. According to Jürgen Habermas<sup>1</sup>, the public sphere was born against the background of a modern market economy, when a “zone situated between civil society and state, in which critical discussions on the issues of general interest are institutionally guaranteed”, has been established. Thus, the liberal public sphere has replaced the one in which citizens were represented by the “power of master”. For the first time in history – as the German philosopher asserted, state authority came to be publicly controlled by citizens, by means of critical-informative tools. Capitalism provided legitimation of the domination which no longer descends from cultural tradition, but can be established on the

basis of social work. In modern societies, an organization cannot be legitimated if it does not serve the general interest, in one form or another. The person recognized as serving the public interest enjoys maximum reputation.

In the modern society, shaped by a liberal democratic form of government - seen by the same Jürgen Habermas as a complex network of communication situations and determinations - agreements and disagreements acquire the legitimacy to be expressed in public. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Eastern European countries, assuming the political model of liberal democracy in the transition from a closed totalitarian type of society to an open one, are going through a difficult period of restructuring of the public sphere, accompanied by numerous challenges and problems: the moral values of the communist past are subject to criticism, whereas new values have not been fully established. Such a relativism of values becomes a fertile ground for vicious communicative practice.

Moral crisis now manifested in modern Western societies leaves its mark on the processes taking place in the public sphere of the Republic of Moldova, as well, where functional public communication based on a free flow of information, on the practice of healthy communication, on deliberation and debate, are fragile realities. In the new socio-cultural context of transition to post-modernity, the communication strategies in the public sphere are radically modified. Nobody can claim his affiliation to a great ideology, or even to certain moral principles. On the new stage of a world facing globalization, the main actors are neither nations nor social classes: actually, the main

character of contemporary history is the transnational corporation.

Under these circumstances, one can talk about the "utilitarian operationalization of morality", best illustrated by the new communication strategies of corporations. In this respect, Jilles Lipovetsky<sup>2</sup> describes this great change and its consequences in the following way: "Although the free enterprise becomes unsurpassable horizon of the economy, it is constrained to define, to create the criteria of legitimacy itself; era in which big enterprise could be considered as a pure trader passed, it is no longer limited to sell products but need to manage public relations, to conquer and to promote its institutional legitimacy.

The ethical flow goes hand in hand with the rise of the company that communicates, interested to demonstrate that has the sense of social and moral responsibilities. The classical system based on natural right to property and on 'invisible hand' of the market has been replaced by an open system of legitimation, problematical and communicational. Currently, the legitimacy of company is no longer given and neither contested, it is built and sold, we live in the era of valuable marketing and promotional legitimacy, the final stage of postmoralist secularization".

Today, replacement of "top down" legitimacy with the "bottom-up" one has been generalized, exceeding the limits of the political system and affecting all subsystems. People, organizations and states are legitimized by the image of the management they practise. To serve the task of managing social representations, a whole system of social engineering, called Public Relations, was created in the XIXth century. Public relations have become the "binding agent" of the economic, political and social environment, an instrument of mediation between different levels of the social body, the ultimate goal being to induce "the balance between social forces"<sup>3</sup>. PR specialists promote neither goods nor services, they build reputation, the most valuable of them improving the legitimacy of the subject they deal with (institution or public person, political party or civic organization, state or nation). The essence of Public Relations is marketization of communication in the public sphere, as an

element of generalized marketization. The essence of the marketing approach is to design the product - goods, materials, services or messages - from the perspective of the consumer.

Therefore, "focus on the product" is replaced by "focusing on consumer". Along with the marketing approach, everything becomes possible in the name of the principle "That's what the public wants!", which has two functions: on the one hand, it allows the use of any means (including unethical communication) to increase sales; on the other, it allows manufacturers to give up inventiveness and responsibility (typical for commercial media). It should be noted that PR activity in the Republic of Moldova is still poor, still in the process of institutionalization, so that, in this stage, ethical concerns of communication can help to prevent unethical practices and promote awareness on the use of communication activities for manipulation.

However, "focusing on consumer" involves huge risks in the real economy, as seen in 2008 during the U.S. mortgage crisis and the bankruptcy of investment funds. Anna Schwartz (coauthor, together with Milton Friedman, of the famous book *Monetary History of the United States 1867 - 1960*), estimated, in an interview published in *Wall Street Journal*, that it was a crisis of confidence. In these cases, greed and corruption have been accompanied by a lie, i.e. tricky communication both within the respective organizations and in the public sphere<sup>4</sup>. Extremely serious is that marketization of communication has invaded the political life in advanced democracies and rapidly expanded in the emerging ones, as the Moldavian one is. The so-called "populism" is nothing more than a political communication strategy which may be expressed exhaustively in terms of marketing. The novelty of the latest marketing approach is called „focusing on the needs." Thus, the final consumer need becomes the unsurpassable horizon of the marketing approach. And, if it is the need of hope or need to dream, we are in front of a populism form defined by Guy Hermet as "systematic exploitation of dream."<sup>5</sup>

In fact, political ideology is replaced by political psychology, which operates with illusions, desires, hopes, stereotypes. Political communication is substituted by a non-political

one, which does not promote political values and has no moral author. Replacing the political message with various forms of bribery of voters on the eve of elections (bags of oil, sugar, rice, etc.), practised over the last decades in the Republic of Moldova, is the empirical result of the marketing approach: "That's what the public wants", whose vicious character is discussed in the public sphere. However, one should recognize that the marketing approach does not exclude compliance with ethical standards, accountability and integrity of social actors. In the public sphere of the Republic of Moldova, social responsibility is still only a desideratum.

Therefore, one should accept the idea that we are living in a time of crisis. An acute symptom of the contemporary crisis is of moral nature. The categories that make up the subject of morality: good and evil, virtue and vice, right and duty, considered as immutable, are now under debate. Morality no longer deserved ranks and tends to renew itself completely, science invents other means to happiness, the approach towards progress and modernity has changed our habits and perceptions on ourselves and on our lives, no one seems concerned about compliance with moral and social order; the theory of rights and duties tends to establish milestones in a completely independent way, with no moral support, observing, quite vaguely, only certain professional obligations. The ethical debates are concerned with the freedom of the individual or group and civic responsibility. Such approaches are embraced by renowned authors of contemporary Western moral philosophy, such as John Rawls, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor.

In numerous cases, relying on the research conducted by media, and following the processes taking place in the public sphere, one may notice the lack of landmark values in politicians or businessmen of the first line. They demonstrate arrogance, indifference, limited moral and spiritual efforts. Such attitudes lead to deviant and antisocial behaviors, such as lying, violence, corruption, tax evasion, crime in any form, etc. The case of hunting in the "Padurea Domneasca" („Royal Forest") natural reservation in December 2012, having involved important state officials in Moldova and resulting in the death of a person

- a case kept secret -, defied all moral norms of a society striving to become modern.

The models of ethics and behavior that society offers to young people today, especially through mass media, are poor and superficial. Commercial broadcasters PRO TV, CTC Moldova and others often promote shallowness, facile glory, win without work, rich overnight, violence, etc. Young people unconsciously imitate these behaviors, due to lack of something better.

The Romanian philosopher Andrei Plesu sketches a picture of Romanian transition in the collection suggestively entitled "Public Obscenity", saying that: "[...] today, the mottling local realities have an irritating obscene dimension, namely a close affinity with psychology impudence: impudence in politics, impudence in journalism, impudence in morals, public behavior, in speech, in the way of (not) thinking. [...]. It is an insouciance without basis of aggressive exhibitionism, a generalized suspension of values and decency. It's about the dissolution of shyness, of scruples, of any internal censorship. The result is hilarious and dramatic at the same time"<sup>6</sup>.

The volume analyzes the moral crisis manifested in the public sphere in East European countries during the transition period, when no distinction operates between the communist moral of the past and the liberal one of the present.

Western society experienced the decline of morality during the first half of the XXth century, when it seemed that the avatars of modernism triumphed. With the arrival of the post-industrial era, the old social order was destroyed, and a dangerous breach occurred between the traditional and contemporary social values. "Are we really doomed to slide downhill some levels, ever higher, of social and moral disorder, or have we reasons to believe that the rupture is only a temporary phenomenon and that the U.S. and other societies which faced it, will be able to remodel themselves?" If remodeling will occur, what form will it take? Will it happen spontaneously or will it need governmental intervention and public policies? Or, perhaps, should we expect some kind of religious revival - unpredictable and probably uncontrollable - that would restore the social values? asks Francis

Fukuyama in his book "The Great Disruption"<sup>7</sup>. Analyzing the evolution of the Western society in the XXI century, the author concludes that social order tends to recover, and moral rules tend to consolidate communities. In other words, public space is looking for moral reference not only in the new democracies, but also in the Western countries with traditions in public communication.

Public communication of today faces a series of challenges related to an amazingly extended public space, by means of Internet and social networks. If one adds to this the moral vacuum in which humanity finds itself in front of the technological civilization of the future, and the relativism of values that characterizes our time, one will find out that we are confronted with the emergency of substantiating a new ethics of communication for the technological era. This is a real emergency because, more than ever, future is being built today and, more than ever, it is threatened by the present. Such ethics can no

longer support the Kantian imperative, but rather resort to some acceptable compromises for assuring harmony in public life. The moral responsibility for the future of society is transformed into a principle of the present.

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