

FUNCTIONS OF VISUAL PUBLIC RELATIONS. ON VISUAL MEANING-MAKING IN PR PRACTICE

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Abstract

The paper presents the functions of public relations from visual communication standpoint. The argument for iconic turn application into public relations theory is provided. Next, the paper describes three main functions of images in PR: informative, persuasive and aesthetic. The essay is a theoretical realisation of socio-cultural paradigm in a public relations theory. Contemporary public's interactions with visuals are dynamic. The constructivist approach stresses the role of knowledge in perception and therefore it is against the simplistic nativist approach to perceptual activity. It allows recipients' behaviour to be generally appropriate also to non-sensed object characteristics. The publics remaining in the dialogue with an organization, learn specific aesthetics and perceive specific institutional visual stimuli. The paper indicates the need for interdisciplinary research in both visual and organizational communication domains. Such application of PR encompasses constant researching, conducting and evaluating communication programs to achieve the informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organization's aims.

Key words: visual communication, PR theory, organizational communication, aesthetics

Introduction

Contemporary professional organizational communication is managed by public relations (PR) practitioners. It encompasses constant researching, conducting and evaluating communication programs to achieve the informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organization's aims (Pieczka, 2010; Roberts-Bowman, 2020). The bulk of contemporary content in media sphere is being created through public relations agency (Zerfass, Verčič, & Wiesenberg, 2016; Young, 2020). Media are being treated by the PR practitioners as the useful bridge, influential channel to reach the recipients. Such actions shouldn't be misunderstood and treated as equal with companies' marketing activities (Fawkes, 2018). PR adapts and it's in the move with its publics, it's much more than marketing-orientated communication, e.g. advertising or other marketing tools used in order to sell product or service. It is described as dynamic organizational communication interrelated not only with economic interest of the institution, but also cultural and societal dimensions underpinning market and its communication industry (Edwards, 2018; Ihlen & Fredriksson, 2018). Empirical investigations have revealed PR as a "contingent, cultural activity that forms part of the communicative process by which

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society constructs its symbolic and material “reality” (Edwards & Hodges, 2011:3). Relationship between PR and pictorial society (Mirzoeff, 2016) is mutually transformative (Kohrs, 2018). Wiesenberg & Verčič (2021) proved that after iconic turn even though visual studies in communication research are increasing in general, public relations and strategic communication researchers have only emerged. “Understanding how visual meaning-making works, is therefore, fundamental to understanding and engaging with stakeholders in Public Relations” (Kohrs, 2018, p. 13). Nowadays, organizations use visual, interactive media as main channels to reach the recipients in their constant flow. But after the pictorial turn in the era of design, illustrations, and digital photography (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020), too little attention has been paid to the visual in the theory of public relations. “Public relations and strategic communication have always used visualization for their agents’ purpose(s) to create a specific meaning that supports their agents’ goals” (Wiesenberg & Verčič, 2020: 230). Compelling narratives, articulated by PR practitioners, need to be accompanied with engaging images. “The power of a visual image is an eye-grabbing hook for the audience, which connects them through human interest and episodic frames by personalizing the subject” (Dhanesh & Rahman, 2021: 9). The visual messages are more and more important part of institution’s communication activities (Collister & Roberts-Bowman, 2018). This conceptual paper advocates for integration of visual communication into PR theorising. The three functions of such PR are described: information, persuasion and aesthetics. The article contributes to the PR research stage described as critical and cultural approach (Fawkes, 2018, p. 163) still insufficiently discussed in public relations academic field.

PR publics visually informed and persuaded

Rudolf Arnheim, a classic theorist for visual communication argues that “one must establish what people are looking at before one can hope to understand why, under the conditions peculiar to them, they see what they see” (Arnheim, 1977: 4). From the 90s’ of the 20th century, when the term “iconic turn” started to conquer the academia (Mitchell, 2006); its march through subsequent scientific disciplines has started. Now reaching also organizational communication (Boxenbaum, Meyer & Svejenova, 2018) and public relations (Roessler, 2014) (Collister & Roberts-Bowman, 2018). This emerging approach focuses on the interweaving visual channels of organizational communication activities. PR seeks to explore the notion of stakeholders’ encounters with various images as the functional “pre-communicative context” (Collister & Roberts-Bowman, 2018: 4). Nowadays, both visual and organizational messages play a vital role in media reception, decoding campaigns and various media effects e.g. protest and activism movements (Rovisco & Veneti, 2017). As Thelander (2018, p. 1722) shows the study of visual communication traditionally includes “different visual objects as well as their consumption and production”, and it covers “material objects as well as acts of seeing, perception, and production. This processes might be seen within institutional range. Karina Goransson and Anna-Sara Fagerholm (2018) define visual strategic communication as a purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission using visual channels. To do so, the public needs to be informed and engaged (Waszkiewicz-Raviv, 2020). Visual domain is the field of constructed truths, issues and communicated ideas defined in favour of an institution. Symbolic properties are being attributed within and through images to the visually orientated audiences. Organizational intention aims at building understanding of specific problems, important for the recipient through associations with visual stimuli chosen by the sender. The institutionally rooted visual messages bear strong persuasive potential (Messaris, 1997; Petrova & Cialdini, 2008). Media recipients, especially submerged in online environment, do browse and identify driven by image stimuli, more than the verbal ones (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020). The firm position of Instagram as PR visual tool in the online community is unquestionable (Bergström & Bäckman, 2013), as it is the fastest growing social network site globally (Sheldon &

Bryant, 2016). Nowadays, the digital message more and more often equals the visual messages (Leaver, Highfield, & Abidin, 2020). Big Data phenomenon enhanced the need for visualisation of data, depicting information. The trend called visual journalism is developing (Franchi, 2013; Errea, 2017). Journalists increasingly create images and infographics. The public is visually orientated (Holsanova, 2014). Not objectivity, but transparency and independence are vital for journalism to be credible in the 21st century and the elusive characteristic of image provides that impression. Zantides (2017) proved how powerful the visual metaphors can be. When a comment is given in words, when interpretation is provided in textual form, then the feeling of imposed cognitive framework seems stronger, than when it is presented through images (Stöckl, Caple, & Pflaeging, 2020). Caple and Knox (2015: 292) have argued that “we have witnessed a fundamental shift in visual toward visual story-telling”. Photography, drawing, cartoon, video appear to be more “impartial”, “real” and “personal” for the recipients (Becker, 2017). On the other hand, “there has been intense debate around diminishing authority of the image, and especially its truth-value when it comes to documenting social reality” (Aiello & Parry, 2020, p. 3). Due to manipulative practices with photography or data visualisation, the image making activities require deeper understanding and researching. Visual reporting, visual storytelling are broadcasters’ attempts to create reports actual and accessible through the visual representations. Online cameras, 3D self-steering reports provided by BBC and CNN are already important part of media sphere. The victorious march of images through media getting fiercer (Aiello & Parry, 2020). Pictures are transforming, getting more comprehensive, appealing, images becoming more engaging for the publics. Nowadays, trending information has to be anticipated and understood well in advance. Media are getting ready for the virtual reality revolution (Reis & Coelho, 2018). Slowly the immersive journalism is developing (Sánchez Laws, 2020). Van der Haak, Parks and Castells (2012:2932) accentuate that “it involves the creation of virtual realms based on factual reporting to do interactive storytelling with a point of view”. The PR specialist might literally indicate this point of view e.g. the journalists might be invited to participate in a computer generated re-creation of a factually reported news story. The story covering the company’s interests may be presented through images, sometimes using even a visual avatar to enhance the empathy toward organisation, enrich it with human factor. Company’s effort to stand out in the media noise is much more successful when using strategic visual communication tools, by no means in a strategically designed and coordinated way. Human vision is active (Marr, 2002). Immersive media relations include professional company’s interactions with editors, reporters, journalists and influencers providing newsworthy and engaging visual message, a personalised pictorial story or visual information using the appropriate images and virtual reality outlets in the service of organizational issues and interest. As the vision is active and it is socially constructed (Mitchell, 2006), therefore, it might be influenced by the PR-related media. In other words, specific phenomenal space, media-sphere seen as perception field is being co-created by institutional agents. The behaviourist approach is not sufficient to apprehend PR interventions. As it is no longer enough to describe the visual communication through simple model of stimulus (picture) - response on the retina) e.g. big billboards attract visual attention of a viewer). David Marr wrote: „What does it mean, to see? An ordinary man’s answer (and Aristotle’s too) would be, to know what is where by looking. In other words, vision is the process of discovering from images what is present in the world, and where it is” (Marr, 2002, p. 229). This non-constructivist, mechanic-like David Marr’s (2002) description, represents both common-sensed and mechanic-like understanding of vision process. Images inform, disseminate data, propagate knowledge, but images also persuade, influence the attitudes of the audience, change the emotional attitude of the public, generate behaviours etc. The issue of visual persuasion in the context of public relations theory should not be underestimated. The exemplary application might be the theory of priority features of images (Waszkiewicz-Raviv, 2020, p.142-146).

Persuasiveness of visual messages in PR context

This part of the essay focuses on what constitutes the persuasiveness of visual messages also in the context of PR. Suh and Biernatzki (1999) identified three main features that make the images persuasive within a communication process. These are: criterion of resemblance, quickness and ambiguity. Such line of categorisation may differentiate the visuals from the verbal messages. In the case of resemblance, Messaris (1999) proved that it is built upon characteristics of signs used in visual messages. These are: iconicity, indexicality and syntactic indeterminacy. Lisowska-Magdziarz (2019, p.74) also described, in detail, how a recipient can be an animal significans, and engage himself or herself into polysemic decoding of pictorial representations. Iconicity as semantic property of images is referred to as likeness to a representational object. Thanks to this property images, adjacent replica of the objects appearance, can be used by global corporations across the cultures (Suh& Biernatzki, 1999, p. 4). For example, the photography of the campaign ambassador reflects someone's appearance, the look of the ambassador that is indicated through picture. Indexicality, as a second visual feature constituting resemblance, is the property if the pictures as physical trace the object, as a proof. So the same photographic image can serve as documentary for the event where the ambassador supported the company that he or she cooperates with. Indexicality allows the usage of images as evidences, emblems that prove that the described event happened. Another feature of images is syntactic indeterminacy, in comparison to verbal language; this feature of visual signs underpins the lack of causality or analogy in decoding. The recipient has much more freedom in "reading" the images than the text that is linear and strongly dependant on grammatical rules. Seeing is a process that can be "freely" constructed by the viewer. Habrajska (2020) describes these semiotic phenomena further. Icons and symbols in visual message denote reality, but complex combinations of learned pictorial schema are much less "aware" for the viewer, than the oral code. Conventionality is predominant in deciphering the images but less "structured" than in verbal codes. To sum up, it is easier to spot a mistake in the text written in the native language of a recipient, than to be able to define, what is wrong with a composition or the content of the image presenting the same situation as a written text (with a grammar mistake). Suh and Biernatzki (1999) also identify that persuasive function of images as being constituted by their quickness and ambiguity. Visual imaging serves as a mediating factor in decoding images in PR message. This process works faster due to a holistic nature of the picture. It makes interpretation immediate, intuitive and less cognitively absorbing than words used in the message (Szymura& Horbaczewski, 2005). And ambiguity means that in a persuasive message the arguments are better transmitted through words but cues are provided through visuals. The non-central, peripheral route of persuasion is being attributed more to images (Petrova& Cialdini, 2008; Habrajska, 2020, p. 93). When PR visual message is deciphered, it provides the content faster but it also leaves more field for free interpretation and is considered less imposing as images suggest polysemy in deciphering signs. To sum up, a following example may clarify this framework. Let us compare a written biography of the new CEO, a biography prepared and shared within internal communication by the PR department, alongside with a corporate photography of the CEO. The text provides facts, dates, identifies professionalism and experience. On the other hand, the shared professional corporate photo identifies a CEO person (resemblance through indexicality, iconicity). It also demonstrates professionalism, creativity (when the pose of the person and background are well-designed), but these features are not imposed, they are suggested through visual signs (dress code, face mimics, gestures). What is more such a corporate portrait may identify organizational culture (CEO posing if front of the factory building, machines used in company, architecture etc), and facilitate internal communication (viewer may recognise the new boss). It may suggest transparency of the new CEO, as this person openly shares his/her image.() It may also indicate professionalism and creativity through pictures that are

more intuitive in decoding, they may be considered less imposing.

The image economy and the aesthetic trends in the PR strategy agenda.

In order to identify and reveal the mechanisms of the influence of signs used in visual institutional messages, this paper proposes also a third function for visual public relations. The aesthetic function is proposed, as public relations might also co-create and promote beauty within organizational communication practice. Public relations, defined as strategic, institutional communication management is an organizational function. Therefore, it needs to take under consideration changes in the market environment that it operates within to ensure engagement (Dhanesh, 2017). "Engagement is an affective, cognitive, and behavioral state wherein publics and organizations who share mutual interests in salient topics interact along continua that range from passive to active and from control to collaboration, and is aimed at goal attainment, adjustment, and adaptation for both publics and organizations" (Dhanesh, 2017, p. 925). Aesthetic categories are a part of salient antecedents in situational theory of PR publics. The literature proves that dominant business and cultural paradigm of a particular time has impact on the practice and outlook of public relations (Verwey 2000). Hypermodern times are pre-occupied with aesthetic trends (Lipovetsky, 2004). Professionals must comprehend the major issues and trends confronting business, and be able to effectively demonstrate their long-term implications to management. Term "image economy" (Shroeder, 2004) might be valuable here. Material differentiation between goods and services is not any more the arena to compete for organizations. It is the image attributed to the traded offer that matters. The PR, especially the one with stronger marketing orientation (product PR), might find visual approach to understanding consumer behaviour rewarding. The market competes with images. The classic, modernist, rational, physical product based view of the offer and demand activities, seems to be outdated, or at least less efficient. Scholars advocate that design strategy and the system of images that it relies upon, do construct the brand image on the market (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). PR, with its image creation purpose, is incontestably necessary and influential. These days the form matters more than the content, or maybe it was like that before the globalized, digital times, but now it is just more visual. Some organizations might be powerful enough to create international representational systems, one of them is Disney corporation. From the twenties of the 20th century this company has been distributing aesthetic codes and meaning through "glittering images". Disney sells entertainment in a very specific aesthetic form, where all heroes' eyes and faces have similar form. In their visual stories beauty equals happiness. Deceptively pluralistic (new productions almost every half a year), originally refers to a themed visual coherence (Berleant, 1994). Spectacular in scale and brilliant in consistent execution, for almost 100 years American entertainment trans-national corporation dissolves worldwide specific aesthetic pattern that shapes the taste of millions viewers all around the globe. It signifies childhood beauty and turns it into money. Valuable licenses for commodity goods, starting from furniture and clothes ending up on diapers, enrich the product image and its price; they are targeted not only at young consumers (e.g. male socks with Mickey Mouse pattern). The Disney form, the external appearance under the trade mark, provides the basis for both decision and action of the consumers. Nowadays, organization perception and its offered image, rely on the visual strategies within the market field. More specifically, currently, the way organization signifies and defines the category of beauty, and where it takes a stand in the classification of market attractiveness is conducted through visual communication processes. In regard to such processes, numerous developing academic field busts with theories standing under the term: organizational aesthetics. According to Taylor (2013:30) it's the use of "arts-based methods in organizations" dealing with theoretical accounts of aesthetic phenomena in institutions. It's applying art in the transformational potential of an embodied aesthetics in organization (both people and objects) and beyond in its

broad environment. Such environment is often defined as postmodern and critical. If organizational aesthetics is to be seen through more pragmatic lenses, then mainly worth attention are practices through institutional visual channels. Those aesthetic practices are managed by PR specialists. Artistic organizational information design, corporate museums (e.g. House of Bols in Amsterdam), public space design (e.g. memorial parks of the corporation founders), art branding campaigns (e.g. BMW Guggenheim LAB), street art (Dulux Global Street Art campaign) are already part of public relations special events, where applying aesthetic into relations with stakeholders seem to be enjoyable for audience and fruitful for the company. Image transformation is not only linear, but creates 'meaningful groups' with specifically applied values. Due to PR activities in the long run, it is the company that might define what is beautiful or ugly, worth to see and rather ignored. Company's image is not a static construct, but on the contrary; it is a dynamic phenomenon, changing under the influence of environmental stimuli seen socially.

Conclusions on visual public relations functions

Contemporary organizations are dynamic entities. "The use of the visual mode is not the same now as it was even 50 years ago in Western societies; it is not even the same from one society to another; and it is not the same from one social group or institution to another" (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2021: 19). Institutions manage their communication processes in a strategic and holistic way to counterbalance the changeable environment. James Grunig (2011) broadened the functional perspective in PR, he expanded and elaborated segments like environmental scanning, stakeholders and publics, cultivating and evaluating relationships, tracing the effect of relationships on reputation, planning and evaluating communication programs strategically. In all of them, the visual channels are important means of communication. The PR plays an important role in the contemporary organizational functioning. But new paradigms in PR theory emphasise the role of social environment in organizational communication (Edwards, 2018; Fawkes, 2018). Collective vision theory (Mirzoeff, 2016) suggests that we learn how to see and not just simply observe the world through the sense of sight. What differs us from other creatures (e.g. animals that are predominantly born ready to act visually in the environment), is that humans need to developmentally learn, how to use their eyes, how to see the surrounding, and by that to create a bond with it. Primarily in visually driven relationship the individual learns how to perform socially, how to achieve specific position and power. When organization conducts PR strategically, it may influence the way people perceive reality. Visual public relations both informs and persuades, but it may also anesthetize. Aesthetic stimuli is capable of triggering aesthetic experience of beauty "during a sensory, cognitive, affective, interactive and valuation process observing or even communicating with an object or event which leads to a pleasurable, enjoyable and meaningful state of mind" (De Groot 2014, p.157). This paper showed how visual public relations is entangled with visual journalism, how persuasive PR images can be and what potential lays in aestheticizing organizational dialogue with engaged publics. The issue of both ethical and pictorial dilemmas of such practices still awaits its theoretical underpinning. This paper proposal tries to seek out in visual realm answers for modern PR challenges. It indicates and reveals areas for incorporation of visual communication and image theory for public relations theory, even PR as developing area in pictorial times. The paper summons conditions and attempts to point out, where visual public relations start. Visual PR is seen as the non-artistic, mediated experience of visual stimuli, as dialogue conducted through images, pictures created by the organizational sender in attempt to shape visual thinking of the stakeholders. The applicability of the model still needs to be discussed and further research and theoretical analysis conducted. These results provide a theoretical rejoinder to claims that visual communication field might be encapsulated in PR theory.

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