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PUBLIC RELATIONS AND JOURNALISM: THE QUESTION OF ETHICS

Abstract: In this paper the authors use the comparative method to analyze differences and similarities between basic ethical principles of the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics and the Code of Professional Ethics of the Serbian Public Relations Association. The authors examine whether the interests of PR and journalist professions have to conflict as is usually thought, or they can be both used as a means of informing the citizens, as Philip Patterson believes. In this paper, the theoretical perspectives of Denis Everett and John Merrill are also taken into account. They state that the media is guided by profit, while the public interest, true information and ethics are secondary.

Key words: Code of Ethics, Journalism, Public relations, Ethical principles.

Introduction

The interrelationship of journalism and public relations is known to be complex, even paradoxical, and through new media practice it becomes even more perplexing. The main issue is raised by the fact that journalism is a profession that aims to serve public interest, whereas public relations are responsible for serving the interests of a client. Journalism and PR are among the most important factors in the field of mass communication, and as such, they create and transfer values and influence the creation and bracing of numerous recipients' moral components, both at individual and mass levels. Furthermore, both have the goal of informing the public and consequently they are intertwined. Some authors (Macnamara 2014) even claim that up to 75% of mass media content is sourced from or significantly influenced by PR. "However, despite a long history of dealing with each other, the interrelationship between journalism and PR has been and remains a strained bed-fellowship, with a number of studies showing that journalists hold highly negative perceptions of PR" (Macnamara 2016: 2).

Inevitably, the question of ethics of these interconnected professions is raised, and even though it is not new, it requires rethinking and reanalysis, keeping in mind that social media, new media platforms and tools nowadays enable institutions and organizations to become creators and transmitters of messages and to publish and broadcast on their own, which also affects and influences journalistic practice.

Ethics and morality are fundamental journalistic values about which John Merrill (1974) says that they are the only acceptable restrictions of journalistic freedom. "PR is about presenting the client to the public. The rest of journalism mediates that message", states Jempson (2005: 8). He also points out that journalism ethics should be driven by the journalist's relationship with the public. "A 'good journalist' adds value by verifying the information, and looking around the corners to find an angle that will place the story in context for the public" (Jempson 2005: 8). Another issue that requires clarifying is that "society expects journalists to publish everything that is relevant, objectively, however they do not expect that from the public relations

managers and advertising agencies” (Stojanović Prelević 2012: 401). Does this entail greater responsibility for journalists and higher demands in the context of respecting the Code of Ethics?

Theoretical Perspectives of Denis Everett and John Merrill

The concept of audience trust is equated with credibility, truth, and belief. (Stojanović Prelević 2012: 408). But it is also a common belief that media cannot survive in the market if they do not have the audience’s trust. Therefore, Merrill states that the only reason for the media to be trustworthy is to gain profit. According to him, public interest is secondary (Dennis, Merrill 2006). “The media are guided by earnings, Merrill believes, while public interest, accurate information and ethics occupy the backbone” (Stojanović Prelević 2012: 408). He goes even further by stating that journalists and other media workers are essentially unethical.

On the other hand, Denis Everett states that the media serve the public interest, and that they have two goals – one concerning gaining credibility and the other one concerning profit (Dennis, Merrill 2006). However, he believes that even though trust and credibility are necessary for the media to gain profit, profit itself is secondary. Unlike Merrill, Everett thinks that journalists and other media workers are ethical. “Merrill and Everett agree that education is of great importance for ethical journalists. However, they do not agree on the primary interest of journalists. While for Everett interest is the acquisition of credibility, Merrill sees credibility as an instrument” (Stojanović Prelević 2012: 409).

When we are talking about journalism’s goal, we can say that it is primarily to serve the public interest. But with the emergence of commercial media, the primary goal becomes making profit. This changes the media landscape and media’s professional relation to ethics; that is one of the reasons why media ethics becomes questionable. The other reason is compromising ethical principles. Nowadays, media workers recognize the bad consequences of unethical behavior and organize ethical trainings. Nevertheless, ethics is still problematic.

Dennis’s and Merrill’s opinions on ethics of public relations are divided, too. Dennis thinks that public relations manipulate the news. “A company’s public relations department is not charged with reporting bad news. Instead, the mandate is to put the best face on the situation, to explain and rationalize it. This can be done positively in a fashion beneficial to the public but often is not, because the client, not the public, is paying the bill” (Dennis, Merrill 2006: 215).

On the other hand, Merrill thinks that public relations provide an essential news service. “It has been said that public relation is manipulative force in news presentation. Perhaps it is, to some extent. So what? Many manipulative forces impinge on the news: editor’s fears, reporter’s biases, advertising pressures. Public relations in spite of normal manipulative aspects, is a valuable – even essential - adjunct to the news dissemination activities of journalism” (Dennis, Merrill 2006: 217).

Public relations managers work primarily for their clients. On the other hand, the media use them as sources of information. The most represented public relations are media public relations. But public relations communicate with the internal public, market, local community, public institutions, business community and so on (Skoko 2011). The organizations and the public both have the benefit of public relations. Public relations influence responsible business and behavior. Ethics is fundamental to public relations in order to be professional. The characteristics of public relations are educative and informative. When public relations start using explanations without arguments and exaggerate the facts, then they break ethical principles and turn into propaganda, explains Skoko (Skoko 2011: 318).

The Relation between Journalism and Public Relations

In this paper the authors examine whether the interests of PR and the journalist professions have to conflict, or they can both inform citizens responsibly. Opinions are divided.

PR managers advocate particular interest and for that reason, journalists believe they have greater influence on journalism. But this is just one among different opinions. Many theorists try to explain the relation between journalism and PR by using the determinism hypothesis (Baerns, Davis 2009, Russ-Mohl). Barbara Baerns thinks that PR determine themes, the ways and time of reporting in the media. If the power of PR grows, the power of journalism decreases. On the other hand, Stephan Russ-Mohl has a different opinion. According to him, journalism has a decisive influence. PR are more successful if managed by the media.

Philip Patterson advocates a symbiotic view. “No news organization is large enough to gather all daily news without several public relations sources. Business pages are full of press releases on earnings, new

product lines, and personnel changes all supplied by writers not paid by the media. Travel, entertainment, and food sections of newspapers would be virtually nonexistent if not for press releases. On the other hand, media provide the all-important audience for an institution that wants the publicity” (Patterson, Willkins 1996: 61). The real problem between journalists and public relations practitioners is that the latter perceive their job in terms of quantity and quality of (favorable) exposure they can get for their clients, and the former need the final story, usually in a manner unfavorable to the public relations practitioners’ clients, explain Patterson and Willkins. Also, many problems appear from different ways of defining news. “To the public relations professional, the lack of breaking news is newsworthy” (Patterson, Willkins 1996: 61). On the other hand “...to the journalists, news is a change in status quo – a plant that leaks, employees who embezzle, firms that go bankrupt are all worthwhile news stories” (Patterson, Willkins 1996: 61).

Skoko (2011) thinks that journalists cannot do their work properly without public relations practice. PR could be their support only if it was ethical. The problem is commercialization of the media and it changes when it comes to journalism’s primarily goal.

Serbian Journalists’ Code of Ethics and Code of Professional Ethics of the Serbian Public Relations Association

For the purpose of establishing whether the ethics of PR and journalism have to conflict, the authors use the comparative method because it implies a systematic analysis and controlled testing of similarities and differences of the subjects of research, in this case ethics codes of different yet interconnected professions – the Serbian Journalists’ Code of Ethics and the Code of Professional Ethics of the Serbian Public Relations Association. However, before the analysis itself, both codes are described below.

Codes of ethics are self-regulating guides of different norms and principles designed to direct professionals so they can conduct affairs honestly and with integrity. They are very important, especially when it comes to professions which affect the public in the way journalism and public relations do. Having in mind that these two spheres of social action operate in the field of mass communication, where inevitably different perspectives and interests are present, ethical dilemmas are frequent, hence guidelines for moral behavior are more than necessary.

The most challenging ethical dilemmas are those in situations in which there are two right answers, and media workers need to choose the better one. In those situations the Press Council and the Journalists’ Code of Ethics could be helpful. The Serbian Journalists’ Code of Ethics¹ articulates the standards that professional journalists should follow in their work; the aim is, as stated in the Code, to improve the reputation of the journalistic profession, promote commitment to freedom of thought, speech and expression, as well as media independence. It has ten chapters which explicitly define how journalists should act in different situations: (1) authenticity of reporting, (2) independence from pressure, (3) prevention of corruption and conflicts of interest, (4) journalists’ responsibilities, (5) journalists’ attention, (6) relation to the sources of information, (7) respect for privacy, (8) utilization of honorable means, (9) respect for the authorship and (10) the protection of journalists.

When it comes to the Code of Professional Ethics of the Serbian Public Relations Association², which was adopted in 2017, it contains principles of conduct and ethical standards of the best practice in public relations. The goal is for everyone who practices this profession on the territory of the Republic of Serbia to respect the rules of fair and ethical relations. This Code consists of general conditions, guidelines in relation to colleagues – other members, in relation to clients, guidelines on confidential information, standards on spreading false information, guidelines on digital communications, and the last paragraph is on the violation of the Code. It is important to explain that business morals are different from business ethics. In business ethics we use ethical principles and theories and apply them in practice. Professional codes are codified rules made by organizations to fix internal relations and communications.

The rules stated in the codes often refer to general situations, which can lead to different interpretations. It is preferable for professionals to have ethical education since that knowledge could help them become more ethical. Of course, a professional’s decisions depend on his or her personal ethics, but that does not exclude ethical education.

¹ Available at: <http://www.savetzastampu.rs/english/serbian-journalists-code-of-ethics>

² Available at: <http://pr.org.rs/kodeks/>

Comparative Analysis of the Journalism and PR Codes of Conduct

After a cursory examination of both codes, it is evident that the journalistic code is much longer and that all the guidelines are explained in more detail. Unlike the Code regarding public relations, the journalistic Code has articles in each section.

At first glance, by comparing the codes, it can be estimated that in the ethical sense there is no reason for these two professions to conflict with each other. For example, the Code regarding public relations states that any attempt to deceive the public or its representatives is forbidden, and the journalistic code states that truthful informing is one of the things that the media are obligated to place above all other interests.

Intentional false information spreading in the process of communication is strictly forbidden by both codes. Also, the Code of Professional Ethics in PR prescribes that "In carrying out his/her work, a member shall be obliged, to the extent possible, to verify the truthfulness of the oral and written communications provided by the employer for whom he is working or the client", and the Journalists' Code of Ethics states that "a journalist is obliged to consult at least two independent sources of information that will confirm or deny the given information". When it comes to the prevention of corruption and conflict of interest, the PR Code prescribes:

"A member strives to maintain autonomy in relation to the client. A member may not represent the conflicting or competing interests of different clients without the express consent of those concerned, given after presenting the facts and must not be in the position that his interests conflict with his obligations to the client without fully acquainting all which are concerned with such interests. A public relations expert whose interests might be in conflict with the interests of his clients or employers must inform them as soon as possible. In the provision of services to a client or an employer, a member will not accept a fee, a percentage expressed in cash or another valuable reward for his services from anyone other than his / her client or employer, except with their expressed consent given after learning about all the facts. In performing public relations work, a member will not support corruption of any kind" (The Code of Professional Ethics of the Serbian Public Relations Association, Paragraph in relation to clients).

On the other hand, the Journalists' Code states the following:

"A journalist must not receive or request financial or any other benefit for collecting, publishing, postponing or preventing the gathering or publishing of information. A journalist is obliged to refuse a gift if it can be reasonably assumed that the gift is connected with the exercise of their profession and that it could affect the objectivity of their work. A journalist is obliged to report to the editorial staff if they are offered or have received gifts in connection with performing their journalistic duty. If an individual or an organization pays for the journalist / an editor / editorial staff their travel expenses, they are obliged to indicate this fact in the text / report. A journalist does not report on issues in which they have private (personal or group) interest. A journalist should do everything possible to avoid situations that could lead to a conflict of interest, real or apparent, and that could lead them to compromise their reputation or the reputation of the profession. A journalist who cannot avoid a conflict of interest is obliged to notify the editor without delay. Work in PR and marketing agencies, lobbying agencies, public bodies and institutions, and political parties, is incompatible with the profession. A journalist must not be in any kind of a business relationship with the subjects whose activities they cover" (the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics, 12).

Each of these paragraphs has its guidelines, which is not the case when it comes to the Code of Professional Ethics of the Serbian Public Relations Association.

As it is expected when it comes to pressures, it is natural that journalists will have more detailed guidelines, because of the greater pressures they may be under. In journalism there are a lot more interest groups and powerful players who attempt to impose attitudes and influence editorial policies. This comes from the nature of journalism itself, which is to uncover things that people in power and decision makers want to hide from the public. There are also pressures in the public relation communication sphere, but they are not as frequent as those in journalism.

The Code of Professional Ethics of the Serbian Public Relations Association has positive and negative rules. The positive ones are: respecting the freedom of speech, acting in the public interest, being honest with clients and employers, both former and current ones. Furthermore, members of the Association need to save their independence; if conflict of interest exists professionals need to inform their clients, they need to

save confidential information and have an obligation to save the identity of secret sources. Members of the Association need to check and verify information and to act responsibly. The negative rules are: members of the Association cannot be in a dishonest relationship with associates in the public relation sphere, members of the Association cannot represent competitive or conflicted interests, they cannot accept a fee or other valuables awards from other people except their clients, professionals will not tolerate any kind of corruption, they will not intentionally publish false information, and they cannot disturb other users of digital communication.

Comparing these two Codes we can conclude that the Code regarding public relations does not have principles on independence from pressure and respecting the authorship. This could mean that public relations enjoy a greater degree of freedom in finding information and also in presenting and publishing it. The non-existence of the second principle shows that this Code needs an addition in the context of new guidelines.

In both Codes the following ethical theories are presented as the sources of certain ethical principles: Immanuel Kant's deontology theory and Judeo-Christian ethics. However, there is also utilitarianism as a present ethic theory in the background.

"Kant's ethical theory is based on the notion that it is the act itself, rather than person who acts, in which moral force resides" (Patterson, Willkins 1996: 8). That means that people could act morally out of a sense of duty. Kant's categorical imperative asserts that an individual should act in the way which could become a universal principle. Also, the theory of deontology treats people as having intrinsic value, not as instruments. That means that both journalists and PR managers need to respect human dignity and autonomy, as it is explicitly stated in the journalistic code.

Christian ethics can simply be determined as the way of life appropriate for those who accept the Christian faith (Preston 1993: 1). In business ethics, the principles of Judeo-Christian ethics are recognized in the situation when we choose to treat other people the way we want to be treated by others. In journalism and public relations professions these are the principles on the respect of privacy in relation to the sources of information, and the principles on the journalistic attention.

According to utilitarianism, "the consequences of actions are important in deciding whether they are ethical" (Patterson, Willkins 1996: 9). In some way for a utilitarian it is not important how the goal is reached. In some way the definition of the profession determines our perception of its ethics. However, this is wrong, and journalism might serve as an example here.

However, utilitarianism might not be opposed to the truth principle. 'Rule utilitarianism' illustrates this – the action is correct if it meets the rule of law, and wrong if it violates the rule. Rule utilitarianism will accept the truth principle in contrast to other kinds of utilitarianism theories (Radović, StojanovićPrelević 2015).

Conclusion

This paper focuses on comparing and analyzing the differences and similarities between the basic ethical principles of the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics and The Code of Professional Ethics of the Serbian Public Relations Association, in order to determine if PR and journalist professions have to conflict, or they can both be used in the public interest, as indicated by the theory of Philip Patterson, who thinks that the relationship of these two professions is symbiotic, as PR delivers a large amount of news and journalists provide audience for those who want the publicity.

Comparing the two codes, the authors have determined that in theory there is no reason why these professions would conflict, as both codes rely mainly on Immanuel Kant's deontology theory and on Judeo-Christian ethics, with utilization of utilitarianism to a greater or lesser degree. However, the authors also conclude that the PR Code does not have principles related to the independence from pressure and respect for the authorship, which points to potentially greater freedom in finding, presenting and publishing information. However, respecting the authorship is an important sphere when it comes to work ethics, so one of the conclusions is that in this regard the PR Code needs new guidelines.

In practice particular interests can often represent a great pressure and construct ethical dilemmas because of commercialization and the media market, but this is what the reality is when it comes to both PR and journalism, and, in that sense, it could not be stated with certainty that public relations professionals could be more heavily influenced than journalists. In the end, when it comes to a professional's decisions, they tend to depend on the personal ethics of the individual, which is why ethical education is of the utmost importance.

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