Making Sense of Public Relations as Culture Policy

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Culture is a process in which meaning is produced, distributed, consumed, materialised, re-produced infinitely and discussed with society. As meanings generally disperse extensively in different social groups through different associations, they display certain changes in time depending on their usage. Meanwhile, it is hard to define the public relations concept, because it may refer to different meanings even in the same culture. According to the assumptions pertaining to the public relations practices shaping the dominant discourse of the USA, language which produces certain cultural meanings also shapes the way we think and act. Thus, due to its ideological and discursive nature, public relations functions as a culture policy. Being an integral communication management configuring and directing the social sphere and the practices related to it, public relations refers to the concept of habitus introduced by Bourdieu inasmuch as habitus resides in the situations formed by actions that individuals learn throughout their lives. Culture policy; on the other hand, purports the effective participation of people in cultural life, their development in social, economic and cultural areas as well as the creation of convenient conditions to sustain it, which can be achieved with public relations practices. Public relations determines the culture policies in a society with regard to the structured discourses and actions and also acts as the mouthpiece of these policies. The purpose of public communication that is necessary for development and sustainability is to inform the public objectively in cultural, social, political and economic senses by obtaining feedback form them. For the purpose of administering sound public communication strategies in a society, public relations should direct the forms of public discourse. The purpose of this study is to put forth a critical evaluation based on the idea that for the realisation of effective and sensible communication policies in a society, the perception and practice public relations in that society should be regarded as a culture policy. According, this study focuses on whether or not public relations as culture policy serve the development of democracy and public sphere.

Keywords: culture, public relations, culture policy

Public Relations Profession

Practising the public relations profession with a functionalist and integrative approach puts forth the culture of this profession as well as its perspective towards target groups. Why and for whom are we practising public relations and with which means are we realizing it? Through the implementation process of the profession, usually answers are not sought to these questions. During the execution of daily routine tasks, it is not usually questioned which approach is held. This way of thinking can be obtained during the education...
process pertaining to public relations profession. In other words, a corporate logic related to the profession is developed.

Generally speaking, public relations is a way of discourse and an ideology. It is the generator needs as it is aimed at needs. The factors influencing the formation of public relations culture as well as why and how the profession is practiced are as follows: socio-economic conditions of a society, political situation and social values, being mass or public society, the way of using the media, culture of public relations practitioners, the roles and models adopted in public relations practices.

According to Vos (2011), corporate logic advises individuals to act according to the given routines or similar behavioural patterns. On the other hand, logical evaluations of individuals are limited to their corporate positions. In addition, corporate approach emphasizes that the asymmetry of power is related to the development and operations of corporations. It should also be noted that corporations transform power relations. Public relations practitioners could take the culturally legitimised practices and employ them for the benefit of their stakeholders. For the formulation of public relations, a definition can be made in narrow sense within the context of cultural behaviour or tradition. According to the logic of cultural explication, the founders of public relations used the meaning systems that they adapted from their cultures. Incorporating cultural values, attitudes and ideas, these meaning systems and instruments have offered both the opportunities and the limitations to public relations practitioners. In this sense, culture is a means for individuals to interpret reality as well as a way of perception. Therefore, the working styles of public relations practitioners differ according to their ways of perception (Vos, 2011, p. 132).

Generally speaking, the concept of profession gets abstracted of its previous meaning and begins to display a new denotation focused on consumption and personal interest. The most important requisite for a practice to be considered as a profession is public service. It is thought that such an approach, which is supposed to form the cultural basis of all professions, has gradually been diminishing.

With respect to new capitalism culture, the concept of “profession” gets more and more instrumental. The relationship between individuals and professions are now determined by the benefits of these professions. The fact that profits have become the principal link between individuals and professions leads to considering professions with regard to what they offer only, which in turn erode the reputation of professions. Although the system of socio-cultural values and the social functionality of a profession had priority in the past for specifying its social reputation, today it is observed that particularly economic benefits, generally individual functionality of a profession has gained importance. Professional prestige is gained not on the basis of filling vital social needs, but meeting individual expectations. Hence, a profession is now meaningful as long as it satisfies individual requirements, not social. (İlhan, 2008, pp. 324-325)

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**Public Relations Culture**

Culture is a style and a way of approaching the issues and activities. With regard to various social, cultural, political and economic structures, public relations has different cultural characteristics depending on the way it is perceived and practiced.
Public relations culture changes according to the way the functions and objectives of public relations is perceived and practiced. Due to being a profession, public relations is responsible for introducing different ideas to each other, emancipating individuals and societies and putting forward the real needs. Thus, the perspective towards public relations should be redefined. Public relations culture not only shapes the society it is practised along with certain rules and values, attributes various meanings to them and develops discourses, but also it is influenced by them and transformed accordingly.

For practising consistent public communication strategies in a society, public relations should direct the forms of public discourse. The purpose of this study is to introduce a critical evaluation based on the idea that in order to launch effective and rational communication policies in a society, the ways that public relations is perceived and practised in that society should be considered as a culture policy.

Therefore, this study centres upon whether or not public relations as a culture policy may contribute to the development of democracy and the public sphere. It is seen that in developed countries the indicators of the respective issue are defined according to economic, social and cultural development of a country and public relations is regarded as a cultural policy. However, in underdeveloped and developing countries, this profession is not considered as a culture policy. It should be noted that the level of development is measured according to the welfare level of individuals as well as democratic factors. In fact, public relations can be used as a means of manipulation and consumption in some developed countries.

While public relations is exercised to meet the needs of societies, it is also practised to create these needs. Therefore, the needs are defined more realistically to provide welfare in developed countries, which in turn shapes the perspective of a society towards politics, economy, culture and the life itself. Hence, we can utilize public relations within context of the culture policies of a society according to the kind of society we want to create.

The role of public relations is to provide corporate service, increase mutual understanding between a corporation and its target group(s) and enable dialogue and discussion. According to Vercic and Van Ruler, there is a difference between the US and Europe oriented definitions along with the dimensions of public relations. In fact, the difference between culture and language has a considerable influence on it. In this sense, there has already been an attempt to form a common basis determining the public relations concept in literature. The terminological differences between two continents influence how “public” is perceived, the meanings of “communication” and “relation”, the way of practising public relations as well as the roles assumed. Oeckle and Van der Meiden assert that.

While the relationship between corporations and their target groups is understood in the USA, the conception in Europe consists of the relations with the public and for the public in “public sphere”. Thus, “public opinion” does not indicate the combination of individual votes. Here, public opinion denotes a kind of political authority providing a standard for public relations (Vercic, Van Ruler, Bütschi, & Flodin, 2001, p. 376). Is public relations a democratic function maintaining the free circulation of information and the development of public sphere or just representing a corporation for a fee? Erdogan (2006) discusses that in the definition of public in public relations, human factor is taken away from the centre and it is replaced with a structure representing organized subjective interests. The “public” in public relations can be grouped in different ways according to its function and position, such as internal and external, active and passive, high and low participatory. However, in each case, “public” for public relations is the body that can be known, recognized, important and reachable for an organization. In her article, Changing Business and Public
Relations Paradigms, Steyn (2011) states that a few of the public relations practitioners in Turkey perform the strategist role and this situation provide no contribution to the development of social (enterprise) strategy and the realization of the objectives.

Different Approaches to Public Relations

Public relations activities of corporations are determined by activist groups and the differentiating expectations as well as values of stakeholders. The changes in the social and economic structures of corporations also bring about some differences in practices. As a result, the cultural structure of public relations undergoes a transformation. Different approaches that corporations adopt are as follows:

In functional, semantic and postmodern approaches, the aim and objective of public relations is re-defined. These approaches have different views towards internal and external target groups from either mass or public perspectives. The reflections of corporate approach are seen in the function and quality of public relations practices. Thus, the role that a business or an institution has assumed in a society is reflected in public relation role and culture.

In social enterprise strategy, the relationship that a corporation has established with the public is in the foreground. This strategy asserts the social responsibility of that corporation, its stakeholders and communicative approach towards them as well as the values and standards pertaining to actions. Moreover, it comes into prominence through corporate mission, vision, behaviour, ethical rules, value and public orientations. Another corporate approach is sustainability. Here, nature, society and business are inter-related by decision makers. For this purpose, not only the financial performances, but also how environment together with national and international communities are influenced should be taken into consideration. According to this approach, ecological and social capital should be managed together. In addition to all these, corporate governance and reputation management approaches should also be mentioned in this context. In King 2 Report (IOD, 2002), Steyn has defined corporate governance as maintaining the balance between economic and social purposes in order to bring the interest of individuals, institutions and the public closer to each other.

For some authors; on the other hand, public relations has increasingly been a means of structuring the public and encouraging public discussion. Therefore, it is playing an active role in shaping societies and cultures. During communication processes public relations suggests the targets groups being a part of social world in a particular context as a cultural action. Hence, public relations is cultural as it strengthens existence and shapes the beliefs related to public communication. Some studies on international public relations have emphasized that public relations should encourage organization to take more active role in social transformation (Molleda et al., 2003; Molleda & Ferguson, 2004; Holshausen, 2000, 2002; Signitzer & Coombs, 1992 qtd. in Hodges, 2006). According to this perspective, public relations contributes a great deal to the development of civil society (Hodges, 2006, p. 83). Some studies; on the other hand, present perspectives that public relations practitioners are agents in the cultures they function. According to Hodges (2006), public relations industry should be regenerated and the role of public relations in the development of culture should not be neglected.

As social actors, public relations practitioners are susceptible to influences in socio-cultural and global sense. In their communication with the public, they operate within the context of meanings, values, principles and norms that are an indispensable part of their professional culture. In addition, Hodges (2006) has pointed out that regarding the understanding professional culture, the culture of public relations practitioners can make a great contribution to the development of national culture.
The culture of public relations practitioners consists of their lifeworld as a whole including their thoughts, concepts, values and assumptions pertaining to their profession, which collectively refer to the concept of *habitus*. Moreover, the identities guiding their professional experiences and performances are also incorporated into the scope of culture. These elements will spread with broader social and cultural effects through professional socialization.

Motion and Leitch (2007) have inferred that public relations professionals pave the way to socio-cultural objectives and thus, change the socio-cultural practices through the transformation of discourse. Likewise, they have also employed a Foucauldian perspective for the purpose of criticizing the attempts of governments to transform the national economic discourse and the public relations activities to include the stakeholders into the processes, the results of which are already known. Thus, he has concluded that “the attempts to minimize uncertain results are just a new and more superficial way of domination” (Motion & Leitch, 2007, p. 8).

Public relations shapes the way that power relations are balanced and regulate the proper medium and means accordingly. “The words denoting power depend on the logic of a society or relationship. In this context, such explanatory terms can be used: institutions (government institutions and other types framed with socio-political and socio-economic terminology), culture, religion, businesses, trade, public policy, competition, co-operation, avoidance, reconciliation, truce, agreement (formal, semi-formal, legal or social), association, structures and functions, nature of relationship, symmetry/asymmetry, dialogue/monologue, service, education, production, origin, public health, walls and bridges (symbolic or real), hierarchy, infrastructures, confidence (organization, within the frame of a legal instrument or relationship), corporate social responsibility, public health/security, community, partnership, isolated, reaction to an emergency, health system, agriculture industry, an effective commercial market, legislation, regulation, adjudication, capitalism, free market, local, national, independent, dependent, mutual dependency, trade restrictions, destructive competition, socialism, financial fundamentalism, improvability, taxation, representation, subvention, stimulating power, regressive, mutual efficiency and benefit” (Motion & Leitch, 2007). Being both intellectual and application-oriented, the view of Habermas about corporate responsibility; on the other hand, is totally instrumental rather than emancipating and streamlining public discussions or the expressions of public sphere. The implementation of positivist methods to measure public opinion strengthens not the publics, but customers. As believed by Habermas, public relations expedites the relationship between the business and media worlds; thus, contributes to the erosion of the public sphere. Although public relations itself cannot be held responsible for that, it has hidden the contributions to the dominant and determinative market powers.

In fact, public relations should contribute to the re-creation of the public sphere devoid of commercial concerns. Execution of public communication practices and the adoption of the due culture accordingly would be an effective method at this point. “From a critical perspective, examining the ‘definite’ conception of public raises such questions: How local publics are conceptualized by global organizations? How do certain conceptualizations related to publics serve the interests of dominant social actors? How do the strategies and tactics of global public relations help maintain the dominance and control over the local actors? The efforts of local actors to secure local identities probably serve the role of public relations to justify the communicative control of elite actors” (Motion & Leitch, 2007, p. 174). Therefore, it should be asked if the factors that are predicated upon in public relations activities are national or international, and what kind of culture policy is adopted.
Culture policy is the creation of the appropriate conditions in order to enable people to participate in cultural life. The steps taken, the organizations established and the conveniences provided to encourage individuals in a society to put forth their creativity is within the context of cultural policy… Maheu states that “one day human beings will understand that real democratic policies depend on culture and culture has superiority in development” (Topuz, 1998, pp. 8-10).

Culture democracy is vital for everyone to have an access to culture and freedom of communication. Noteworthy, it can be achieved through the democratization of a society. According to Topuz (1998), cultural democracy is to empower people to participate into the generation process of cultural products as well as enable them to benefit from those products. Thus, the degree of meeting our needs also indicates how free we are. One of the five elements of universal ethics is democracy and civil society.

Although Williams thinks that participation of each individual into culture is impossible, diversity in a common culture is the result of the fact that it comprises so many agents. The sophisticated system of professionalized developments constitutes the culture as a whole; however this system can be comprehended totally by the individuals or groups in it. While discussing the meanings of community, Williams refers to the social institutions necessitating common beliefs, dependences and practices. In the same way, a real cultural pluralism requires collective social action. Therefore, according to Williams, the most important thing is not cultural policies, but culture policy. The situation, the result of which is culture, is policy. Inherently, culture is not political. According to Williams, signing a Breton love song, opening an exhibition on Afro-American art or explaining that one is a lesbian are not political by nature. All of these have become as they are through a dominance and resistance process in certain historical conditions. Although these issues are harmless, they turn out to be reasons for war due to some reasons. The main purpose of a culture policy is to transform such issues to their harmless states. Hence, you can do what you want without getting into a political struggle (Eagleton, 2005, pp. 142-144).

Public relations does not only determine the methods with regard to expectations, but the expectations themselves. Similarly, public relations helps public to recognize itself by providing an awareness about expectations and needs.

Notably, the expectations should not be illusory, but real. Individuals get involved in democratic discourse by recognizing themselves along with their real expectations, needs, and rights. When the citizens of a country consider public problems out of the scope of their own interests, they will not have any reasons to deal with those issues. According to Touraine, citizens acquiesce to pressure and accept the relations of favouritism easily. “Being a citizen is to hold oneself responsible for the effective functioning of the institutions that are respectful to human rights and enable the representation of ideas and interests” (Touraine, 2000, p. 364). Therefore, the activities related to the implementation of public relations practices in government institutions should be given more weight. Needless to say, a democratic system, in which the majority cannot discuss the questions necessitating immediate action among themselves before political decisions are made, is doomed to be “an oligarchy” in practice.

Public relations culture identifies the power and status relations in a society as well as their effects on institutions and individuals. Perceiving a society as a mass or a public, the priority given to the interests of institutions and target groups, the roles and models adopted in practices and the discourses to structured etc., are the actions defining the way public relations utilizes power and knowledge. These action types explain the assumed values and considered principles and norms, in short, culture itself.
The discourse strategies developed by public relations professionals may lead to the formation of hegemony. “For instance, public relations played a significant role during the transformation from the Keynesian approach neo-liberal hegemony along with the change in western countries in the last quarter of the 20th century. Hegemony is a macro-level concept applied to the thought systems arisen as a result of particular social regulations pertaining to power/knowledge relations” (Motion & Leitch, 2007, p. 11).

According to socio-structuralist approach regarding public relations profession, the values, visions, achievements and perceptions of public relations practitioners are directly reflected in their activities. In fact, public relations creates the discourse in culture. Therefore, the values we have determine the actions we take in the name of public relations. Hodges discusses that apart from the facets of practitioners, the meanings, values and assumptions have a significant function within the process of reaching publics and developing relations with them. The concept that can be defined as the culture of public relations practitioners can help us understand their contribution to the development of national culture.

The perspective of society towards public relations and the way it is considered to be a profession affect both the educational activities and the employment policies. “Dr. Becerikli features that course books incorporating the examples related to the conditions of Turkey as well as suggestions for probable solutions, and adds that most of the books consist of information about the history of public relations activities and case studies in the USA. In this respect, the course books should be evaluated by the Interuniversity Council in Turkey as in the USA and the curricula for the graduate, master’s and doctorate programmes should revised in accordance with real requirement” (Becerikli, 2004, p. 203 qtd. in Görpe & Mengü, 2009, p. 105).

According to Ihlen, Van Ruler, and Fredriksson (2009), the concept of “field” can be considered as a way of an organization’s employing various resources that it possesses. The advantage of regarding Bourdieu as a basis is the emphasis on the dynamic and relational features. The positions of actors are viewed with respect to their relations among each other. In addition, the functions of the capital in different types and amounts are explained in accordance with appraising these capital types intrinsic to the field as well as the efforts to obtain, keep or transform the capital.

Conclusion

How the concepts are perceived determines how they are known and attributed meanings. Likewise, what is known about them determines how they are perceived. What we perceive and internalize engender our social practices. In Bourdieu’s terms, power struggles waged for transforming or protecting the social world are carried out to protect the categories enabling the perception of this world. Such factors are spread through the media by being transferred into public discourses. The public sphere is the name of the struggle put up for this categorization. Hence, the process of making sense is also very important. Being one of the most effective categories in arranging and configuring societies, public communication should be examined with respect to culture, globalization and democracy. Whether or not public relations practices are for the benefit of the public again refers to a policy pertaining to public relations culture.

Defining public relations culture is incumbent upon the practitioners and academics. Such a responsibility entails ethical consciousness. “The important question about professionalization is that to what extent an occupation can solve the real problems and meet the demands of people. Traditionally, a profession purports to serve society” (Brien, 1998; Stevens, 1998; Fitzgerald & Teal, 2003 qtd. in Hodges, 2006, p. 82).
21st century is a period in which popular culture has gone beyond national borders and multinationalism has come to fruition. Contrary to Huntington’s view, fundamental assumptions about the human relations that hold societies together and the beliefs and values related to in different cultural contexts are also influenced by that. Hodges discusses that in order to understand the potential of public relations “to serve the society” in different parts of the world, the industry has to develop a theoretical frame to analyse the duality between public relations and culture.

When the democratic discourse of public relations is used for social benefit to protect, pursue observe the rights of individuals rather than the interests of the capital, its real meaning can be construed. The public relations practices aiming to build and develop a nation indicate that public relations and strategic communication is not in the domain of profit-oriented organizations only. On contrary, public relations can be executed by any groups or organizations that intend to establish relations with the target groups, to make changes in these relations and sustain them as well. Getting through the continuous interest shown to the structure of the profession, public relations should focus on who does what along with for whom and how.

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