

## **Are the PR People the Spin Doctors of Democracy?**

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### **Synopsis**

PR practices are gaining an increasing higher impact due to mediacracy and a more and more PR dependant politics that requires public legitimacy in the process. Ethical business attitude becomes so crucial both in countries with a developed institutional democracy and other younger democratic societies.

The question raises: is PR profession facing the risk to be publicly de-legitimized while trying to ground the legitimacy of others? And the answer is YES.

Remain legally correct is not sufficient anymore for any player. It's our duty in the first place to show respect for the public and its member individuals.

It is due to them and their attitude that clients hire us, that governments need us, that the market makes room for us. And it is in this process that we gain our legitimacy by remaining loyal to our first and foremost stakeholders: the public itself.

Since PR reflects the level of respect that a society nourishes towards its individual members, I am confident that PR development remains a key benchmarking tool to measure the level of democracy evolved in a country.

Same time PR can serve as an instrument to establish a new extended environment where democracy flourishes encouraging a stronger public ownership.

It is part of all our Mediterranean cultures to respect individuals, to embrace their aspirations and to express them properly. We should not change the foundations of our civilizations in order to gain a similar approach on that objective. We just have to dig deeper into these foundations because there we can find a sustainable, authentic answer.

Our public has all the answers. It is us who sometime misses them or simply misinterpret them.

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Ladies and Gentleman,  
Dear Colleagues,  
Honorable Guests,

The famous movie of Barry Levinson “Wag the Dog” caused a big laughter in Tirana as Robert De Niro and Dustin Hoffman decide to fabricate a war in Albania- in order to cover up a sexual scandal at the White House. Unexpectedly few months after the movie was launched, indeed Albania plundered in a blind civil unrest that involved many parties in a “Wag the Dog” style.

At this movie, while questioned by Dustin Hoffman “Why Albania?”, the spin doctor of the US President Robert De Niro cynically replies: “Why Not?”.

I am not saying that Albania civil unrest of 1997 was somehow linked to Monika Lewinski. All I am saying is that “Why not?” is not the first answer PR people are allowed to give. Irresponsible answers are a forbidden path of escape to us.

The PR factor – which till few years earlier- was mentioned only in some advanced marketing studies- is currently influencing all our civilizations, none of them excluded.

There are decades that the PR impact is being considered and has made its way to the market. But the lack of capability to turn it into a precisely measurable indicator has maintained it under a forced humble relativity.

I am confident that it’s about time that all the parties consider much more attentively the PR impact. It is our duty to find the ways to quantify our product as much as possible. The PR factor can build a system or even destroy it. In any case it shall spoil it by making it dependant of something new: approach to information, new public habits, and new beliefs.

Because the PR factor is not a neutral one. It’s a bias one, in all the cases it has to show up.

I don’t believe a spin-doctor and a Hollywood producer is all you need to take the public attention where it better fits your interest. Although Media shall always follow you... convinced to be leading the process.

But if media is paid to make the watch dog, what kind of dog is the PR supposed to do? The Guide Dog for Blind people may be?!

Turning back to the “Wag the Dog” phenomenon, I need to stress that if we accept this practice as a normal PR practice, than the definition of normal ought to be changed. Otherwise, we have to admit that the normality does not exist anymore.

Redefining normality I have to make reference to the theory of John Locke and to a range of political fundamental processes that took us where we stand today. The natural rights

theory represents a unified vision capable to support our joint efforts to building a common understanding, which assumes that all human individuals are rationale and good and their mission is a social mission. This basic transcendental foundation is the ethical ring putting together all our civilizations in one single mission: Have human individual Move Ahead, Move Forward.

Is due to this vision that the public can have a voice in the decision making process while enjoying the basic human rights, all sanctioned from the English Bill of Rights (1689), to the American Declaration of Independence (1776), the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789), the first 10 amendments to the Constitution of the United States (known as the Bill of Rights, 1791), and completed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations (1948). We all stick to this progress and admit that “Yes, by far we have sanctioned all these rights in paper and it’s time we engage to implement them fully in the field”; with a new spirit and within a new cooperation framework- aiming a higher profile for ourselves and better results for the world.

I am fully convinced that the PR development in each and every society remains also a key benchmarking tool to measure the level of democracy evolved in this country. PR has served and still can be an effective instrument to encourage a stronger public ownership on the national progress, establishing a new extended comprehensive environment where democracy flourishes through participation.

It is part of all our Mediterranean cultures to respect individuals, to embrace their aspirations and to express them properly. We should not change the foundations of our civilizations in order to gain a similar approach on that objective. We just have to dig deeper into these foundations because there we can find a sustainable, authentic answer. Our public has all the answers. It is us who sometime misses them or simply misinterpret them.

As a matter of fact we come here from very unlikely realities. We strive to speak to strongly diverse audiences, which beyond the common instruments used to gain information, share very little similarities with each other. A village community in North Africa is extremely different from a village community in Croatia or Albania. A Muslim religious community in Bosnia or Kosovo is far different from a jemaat in Algeria or Marocco.

In most of cases previous generations were discouraged to unify visions in their aim to produce a joint communication for this area. The stubborn awareness on these differences was further enhanced by the different political speeds adopted by individual countries in their efforts to establish a new post-colonial, post-imperial or simply a new nation state reality. I believe that it was the knowledge of history that discouraged us mostly. The same reason regarding a common future can urge us today to accomplish this goal.

In all the cases we have to respect the local values, traditions and habits. Mediterranean region is the cradle of famous civilizations and represents the route these civilizations ran to build world ownership.

We are here today for we commit to serve our civilizations and want to help them grow hand in hand toward a safer future.

Therefore we should not reject the basis of our civilizations just hinting to gain global acceptance for our national perspectives. We need to highlight the ways which foster co-existence, cooperation and a more vivid interchange based on respect and mutual prosperity interests between our nations.

I am forced to claim that a foreign policy approach to export democracy- as a finished product, almost failed in all these cases where internal traditions and customs were neglected in the implementation phase of a new legal reform. In their fight for legitimacy, many governments aspiring for better integration and global acceptance have had a hard choice between a domestic moral legitimacy and an international political legitimacy. In many cases this dilemma has produced semi-dictatorship democracies, where administrations suffer a dire need to produce voters for their laws, but not laws for their voters.

PR people are often involved to rehabilitate the moral legitimacy, while the Governments act to be granted the political one, mostly on international level. Such a perception on integration processes not only hinders integration. It deeply disintegrates the single societies supposed to be the first beneficiaries of these processes.

The top down approach adopted so far in most of the cases has produced little progress and a highly questioned methodology.

To my opinion, the Mediterranean Initiative is in this context a new geo-political approach that highlights the importance and role that individual states need to play in a new European Scenario.

I strongly believe that the quality of life of the Albanians, Egyptians, Italians or Lebanese will be not be better just because the vision of the process of Barcelona was proved to be successful. We shall live better when we as individuals shall have a voice heard and institutional guarantees to make this happen. The public attitude never loses moral legitimacy, while not requesting for any other recognition. The institutions that meet these expectations also benefit from this legitimacy.

There are these institutions to guarantee that any reform affecting the legal progress towards a joint agenda, will not lose the moral legitimacy and the public support. PR institutions are the only ones who can bring into life this national necessity.

I am strongly convinced that we can not integrate our countries and communities into a new larger regional and continental agenda, before we integrate the individual member into his national agenda in accordance with what Jürgen Habermas calls a “vorgegeben realität”. We have to recognize the background and history boundaries, adopt some cultural tools and endorse some aspirations before defining a message that aims to take “the new integration as a reality to the people”.

While acting in an environment of pure cultural relativism we need to produce a pragmatic rationale communication process based on critical evaluation criteria in order to promote a comprehensive recognition process where all are welcomed.

This is the best promising way we have to push further the economic relations among companies, institutions, associations of the Med Area.

This is our sustainable solution.

But please note that we don't speak to communities, although we strive to sell this continuously as our strength. We do speak to individuals, in case we reach them.

We all are aware that PR reflects the level of respect that a society entitles to its individual member. This is why in developed countries PR practices enjoy a greater role and a higher formal appreciation, based on the public will to share responsibility and to legitimate in action all the decisions made, failures included.

In other countries with a younger democracy the public aspires for the same rights. But the lack of respect that society structures show to its members, make the public eager to identify those gaps that de-legitimate the system. Besides, it's more sexy to turn things down, isn't it?! And since this approach is not a constitutional based action, it takes place in the coffee shops only. The real parliament in many countries like my own is the semi-rural coffee shop.

The marginalization of the largest audiences and the lack of need for a public consensus are the main features distinguishing developed democracies from the aspiring ones. Here the PR practitioners input becomes crucial.

Against this picture another phenomenon appears to be dominating, especially in the west: there is no longer any politics out of the scope of public legitimacy, either domestically or at an international scale.

Nowadays to be right is not enough anymore. One needs to legitimate its actions. As *Zbigniew Brzezinski* puts it in his "Out of Control" fundamental analysis, "there is no more a clear distinction between right and wrong. All we can discuss now is the difference between legal and illegal".

In this job aiming to legitimize the decisions of the clients, the PR practitioners very much risk to loose their own legitimacy. We and our actions are legitimate when we and our clients show respect for the public and its member individuals.

It is due to the public and its multi-faceted attitude that our clients hire us, that governments need us, that the market makes room for us in a professional way. We revalidate our legitimacy in a communication process by remaining loyal to our first and foremost stakeholder: the public itself.

Yes it's true, we have become extremely important recently. Any new intruder with a good PR back up and a strong media budget can be crowned as a leader. Beyond the aspirations even of Edward Louis Bernays, PR practices enjoy today the highest impact ever. And these expectations are still growing. This is becoming frightening.

Most governments act today for the sake of their PR, not for the sake of the public satisfaction. Populism is the ideology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And its successful introduction requires a new social surgery approach.

Social cohesion and public interest is built by the reduction of the common ground, not by expanding it. The most recent world leaders' decision on the climate challenges, make a clear example to that. You pick my choice, for you have no other choice left.

But democracy is built through multiple opportunities and we all love democracy, isn't it? In fact what we love is the freedom to choose, even the freedom to turn down all choices.

Besides, there is no democracy without individuals embracing it, without open minded personalities who live it responsibly as a freedom-ruled state of things.

You see, in many countries organizations and even governments don't really look after gaining the hearts of single individuals anymore. We as PR people are called in arms to win through a top-down approach, possibly cheap, the support of the social crowds where these individuals are supposed to be found.

The Interest groups are quietly disappearing due to the unequal wealth distribution while the middle class – the basis of our societies, is sliding slowly to a deeper relative poverty. The individuals that the interest' groups leave behind are either marginalized, or isolated.

We have to adopt a new approach that enhances the respect for the individual personality as our best methodology to reach out to communities with sustainable solutions. Any way around is not efficient.

We have to reiterate the need for a new enhanced focus on our business ethics, which can not be violated for any reason. The public can be told twice the same lie, but does not accept to listen twice to the same liar.

We safeguard on the quality of life not just of those who are living today, but on the way how the children of tomorrow shall be taught their history, shall make use of their rights and accomplish their obligations, shall inherit their living standards and shall plan their future.

We have the vitality to succeed in promoting our core values in a similar approach using the same instruments and ruled by a Mediterranean love for our next.

If we are not acting as responsible individuals, there is no choice left for those who need to have more than one option.