

Public Opinion as the Basic Structural Element of Public Relations

Anatoly S. Krapivensky

Volgograd branch of Moscow University of Finance and Law, Volgograd, Russia

Abstract: The phenomenon of Public Opinion is analyzed by author in the context of the structure of Public Relations as a communicational process. This phenomenon, as it is proved in the article, is strongly depends on two components: mass consciousness and stereotypes, prevalent in society in the concrete time interval (stereotypes of thinking; stereotypes of perception and evaluation; stereotypes of response). The author gives the practical recommendations for manipulation of Public Opinion (impacting on mass consciousness and social stereotypes), according to the interests of basic actor of PR communication.

Key words: Public Relations % Public Opinion % Mass consciousness % Social stereotype % PR communication

INTRODUCTION

Public Opinion is averaged and supported by the majority of definite social group viewpoint on certain issue or subject, interested for members of the given social group.

In any field of public life (political, socio-economic, spiritual, cultural, etc.) Public Opinion determines the nature of its existence and development processes (evolutionary and revolutionary) to a great extent.

Public opinion governs the conduct of social group, individuals - members of this social group and also (indirectly and depending on the social importance of the given social group, inside which circulates this opinion) existence and actual principles of various social institutions, functioning in society.

Public Opinion holds the special place in the structure of Public Relations, as it is the structural element, on control or change of which is directed management influence of PR communication's basic actor. This process is carried out through the specific channels of social (first of all - mass and impersonal) communication.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The method of comparative analysis was used in the given study in distinction of structural elements of Public Relations, also as in distinction of varieties of stereotypes, circulating in society.

Functional analysis as a method of scientific research was applied by the author in order to reveal the essence of the structure of Public Opinion, mass communication and Public Relations.

The method of qualitative analysis of scientific sources and literature was also used in the given study, as well as scientific method of system analysis.

Corresponding Author: Anatoly S. Krapivensky, Volgograd branch of Moscow University of Finance and Law, P.O. Box: 3185, Volgograd, 400087, Russia. Tel: +7 905 333 44 60.

RESULTS

Structurally, the public opinion in the system of PR-impact can be represented as follows (see Picture 1 below).

PO-1 on the Picture 1 - existed Public Opinion of object of communicational management on some issue (before provision of information impact by subject of PR-communication).

PO-2 – planned by basic actor of PR-communication changes of Public Opinion on the given issue.

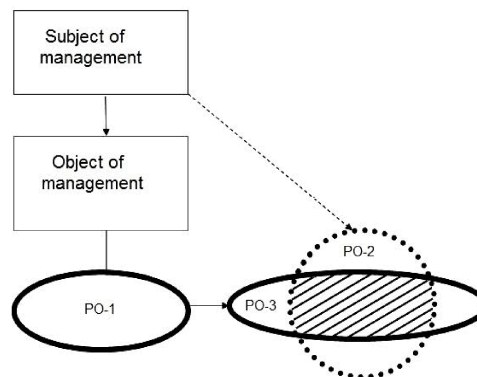
PO-3 – Public Opinion which was really exist as a result of PR-communication (informational impact).

As we can see on the scheme above, subject of management provides informational impact on the object of management (some targeted social group, which had relatively stable Public Opinion on the concrete issue before the informational impact). Of course, the sense of PR-communication is directly in changes of this Public Opinion by the subject of management, which should take 3 steps for this purpose:

- C Prior research of Public Opinion of interested social group on the concrete issue and obtain the objective data.
- C Planning changes of the given Public Opinion as a result of informational impact (what specific results of Public Opinion should be obtained after informational influencing).
- C Comparing initial state of Public Opinion and it's planning state (in order to select the most effective newsworthy and channel of social communication for informational influencing using methods of modeling and forecasting).

In practice, the aim of basic actor of PR-communication may be not only in the changes of Public Opinion, but also in it's fixation in the consciousness of the targeted social group (if the parameters of this Public Opinion initially liked by the manager of PR-communication). Even if parameters of Public Opinion are good for PR-manager, it is necessary to keep it at such a certain level using new informational events, because Public Opinion is very unstable substance – the interest of target social group to any issue will decrease with time and, accordingly, the attitude of this group members to the given issue will change (in undesired for PR-manager side) without new recharge.

Also the practice of PR communication demonstrates that absolute indicators of Public Opinion's conditions, obtained as a result of informational impact in the PR-campaign (PO-3), never exactly coincides with indicators of Public Opinion, existed before the provision informational impact (PO-1), because any impact does not pass absolutely without any traces in Public Opinion and also never exactly coincides with indicators, initially planned by PR-manager (PO-2). Even if parameters of Public Opinion were measured quite accurately, there are a lot of factors, which may render adverse effects on the perception of the given impact from the target social group (number of different external irritants). Finally, according to the size of segment (see the hatched area on Picture 1), obtained from the intersection of expected results of Public Opinion's changes (PO-2) with the actual results of these changes (PO-3), we can see – the efficiency of PR communication: did the PR-management or not achieve the planned objectives.



Pic. 1: Public Opinion in the PR-impact system

In order to properly impact on Public Opinion and achieve the necessary results in it's changing, Public Opinion could not be regarded as simple arithmetic sum of all the opinions of members of the given social group. There is so-called "effect of mass consciousness" - based on the features of perception and processing of information not by a separate individual, but by group(s), located in the social environment. This takes into account the mutual influence of individual opinions on mass and the reverse process, i.e. influence of mass opinion on the individual.

In the modern sense the effect of mass consciousness is formulaic, impersonal consciousness of members of a social group, formed under the massive impact of mass media and mass communications, stereotypes of mass culture and opinions of leader of the social group - opinion leaders (more tangible for the formation of the mass consciousness than the opinion of ordinary members - therefore it is incorrect to reduce public opinion for the simple sum of the views of all its members).

The leaders of Public Opinion have two features: 1) these people are informal leaders (absence of a formal post adds credibility to them by the members of a social group); 2) They constantly adopt new social ideas, comprehend new information from mass media, mass communication and other sources and then "translate" messages into the "language" of their social stratum. Activity of leaders reduces time of other members of social group for information searching and reduces their risks.

According to the statistics, the number of opinion leaders is from 2 to 12% in different social groups. This fact shows the importance of processes of search for opinion leaders and their further using as "repeaters" of PR-messages.

Mass consciousness arises spontaneously as an objective result of human aspiration to order heterogeneous event-life material, to fold of the contradictory elements of everyday experience relatively complete picture of the world.

The main components of mass consciousness: 1) practically oriented situational program activities (tacit knowledge directly woven into practice); 2) casual everyday settings, summarizing the everyday household and professional experience in the form of a set of private statements and recommendations; 3) more or less complete picture of the world, based on data beyond the immediate experience.

Dynamics of mass consciousness (changes, occurring in it), is determined by the evolution of forms of spiritual and practical development of the world, development of social relations, deformation of the social structure and only then - transformations in the field of scientific knowledge.

Mass consciousness generates the phenomenon of social behavioral stereotype. Walter Lippmann in his famous scientific work "Public Opinion" (New York, 1922), defined stereotype as simplistic view on anything, taken in advance and provoking behavior, not based on own experience [1].

Also there is another viewpoint in sociology: in the basis of social stereotype there is a real psychological phenomenon, one of the components of the installation of perception, which accumulates the previous experience of individual in the specific algorithm of relation to the corresponding object.

We can sum these two formulations: social stereotype is simplified and adopted in advance installation of individual or social group in relation to any social phenomenon [2].

Stereotype, certainly, may be based on the own experience of individual or social group and also on two additional sources. First of all, on the "bringing" experience, obtained from alternative informational sources in the communicational process [3]. And, secondly, based on the existence of the unconscious, including the collective unconscious, relying on Carl Gustav Jung's archetypes, which captures the experience of previous generations and which are transmitted through dreams, beliefs, etc.

Social stereotypes - the essential elements of individual and mass consciousness. Thanks to them we can see required reduction of processes perception in the mind, both positive and negative experiences of people is fixed. There are two reasons that influence the formation of stereotypes: 1) using the principle of economy of effort, typical daily human thinking; 2) protection of existing group values.

All variety of stereotypes can be divided into three broad categories: - stereotypes of thinking; - stereotypes of perception and evaluation; - stereotypes of response.

Stereotypes of each of the three categories are interrelated and influence each other. Obviously, that the perception and evaluation related to the process of thinking and response related to the perception and evaluation [4].

The totality of the above three categories stereotypes forms a so-called "habitus" of the individual (term by Pierre Bourdieu). Habitus is a structured system of individual dispositions – system of activity, perception, thought and expression evaluation. As such, habitus produces and structures and individual practices and representations (they are adapted to the system of social relations and habitus, in its turn, is a product of this system). The effect of its hysteresis (lag) is based on this fact: some time after the changes of social attitudes (or individual took another social position), he still reproduces old social relations, product of which is his habitus [5]. It maintains constancy in change, thereby giving practices properties of continuity and ordering. Concept of habitus is important for understanding the general principles of establishment and functioning of stereotypes, because habitus consolidates social stereotypes, existing within the boundaries of a certain social group in a certain historical period, on the base on individual practices.

Thus, the reaction of a social group to any social event can be predicted, thanks to the fact that the representatives of this group have social behavioral stereotypes. Obviously, that the representatives of any social group have a large number of stereotypes, in their interconnection forming the formula of Public Opinion, whereby more complex structures are formed - complexes of Public Opinion.

Nevertheless, in order to effectively provide Impact on public opinion, should be studied not only complexes of Public Opinion on relevant issues, but also specific complexes stable social stereotypes, cycling which we can change Public Opinion, which will develop within the given social group on some issue after the provision of information influence.

Consequently, for successful implementation of PR-activity, PR-manager must have clear understanding of existing of social stereotypes and Public Opinion in the framework of the target group, informational impact on which PR-manager is going to have.

In general terms, the use of stereotypes comes down to two areas:

- C Exclusive using stereotypes from members of targeted social groups, existing before providing the informational impact: amplifying or, conversely, loosening them depending on purposes and targets of PR-strategy. In particular, such technologies of using the stereotypes include NLP - neuro linguistic programming (founders – American scientists John Grinder and Richard Wayne Bandler). For example, this technology operates meta-programs “to something / from something” and “opportunity-action”. At the same time, the desire to "To" something - is the motivation to succeed, the desire to "From" something - motivation of avoiding failure [6].
- C “Mythodesign” technology, which is not limited in using existing behaviors initially targeted members of a social group and deliberately provides them with new ones. The founder of this theory is modern Russian advertologist Andrew Ulianovsky. The main idea of this technology: a new myth about the PR-object is created on existing stereotypes, then this new myth generates new social behavioral stereotype.

CONCLUSIONS

- C Public Opinion is the most valuable element in the structure of Public Relations, as it is a structural element, to control or change of which is directed the informational impact.
- C Public Opinion is based on mass consciousness, which main components are: practically oriented situational program activities (tacit knowledge directly woven into practice); casual everyday settings, summarizing the everyday household and professional experience in the form of a set of private statements and recommendations; more or less complete picture of the world, based on data beyond the immediate experience.

- C Mass consciousness generates the phenomenon of social behavioral stereotype. Social stereotypes - the essential elements of individual and mass consciousness. Thanks to them we can see required reduction of processes perception in the mind, both positive and negative experiences of people is fixed. There are two reasons that influence the formation of stereotypes: 1) using the principle of economy of effort, typical daily human thinking; 2) protection of existing group values.
- C All variety of stereotypes can be divided into three broad categories: - stereotypes of thinking; - stereotypes of perception and evaluation; - stereotypes of response.
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