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About the pure and simple truth

*Motto: The pure and simple truth is rarely pure and never simple
Oscar Wilde*

By the nature of the strategic vision on which the academic construction I belong to is founded, the person teaching Public Relations is situated somewhere on the border, between the orientation towards the "privileged" profession – the journalism – and the orientation towards the profession belonging to the journalists' incontrovertible partners, the PR. This strategy allows the graduate choosing a career in the field of journalism to understand who the privileged partner, the PR person, is, wants and how this one "operates"; this strategy also provides the person choosing a career in PR with important knowledge on his/her privileged partner, the journalist. Throughout their studies, our students find out that the representatives of these two professions are condemned to cooperation, although their "menage" is an extremely difficult one. We hear all the time the expression of the same fear – "They manipulate us!" – stirred by the journalists and the PR persons. What matters is obviously their relation to the truth. The future journalist learns that he/she must not accept any compromises, while the future PR person is told straight out that we do not have access to the absolute truth, that we make our life by negotiating the truths we need (the dialectic truth remains the only truth available!), that extreme rigidity, that is the refuse to compromise, makes life impossible, and thus, one needs to accept to make compromises, without compromising oneself (to know with whom, when, on what subject, up to where one can evolve in this kind of negotiation).

I teach PR.

The major difficulty encountered by the person in such a situation comes from the necessary repositioning against the truth, thing that he/she has to propose to the students. This is the source of a constant interest for studying this issue (see Stoica, 2006). I am glad – at a spiritual level, of course – to find among my reading notes confirmations coming from important names in the field of communication sciences. I am sad – though not excessively – when I see that I am labelled as "*ce grand immoraliste*" ("*this great immoralist*") by my colleagues immobilised in static visions, acquired by framing without a perspective in the present political correctness. To keep an optimistic note, I will mention here only one of the positions that support my own position: preparing a presentation on the concept of *mediation*, Jean-Marie Klinkenberg brings into discussion

the semiotic model with four terms. Starting from the logic square, he proposes the semiotic square, as a model for studying the semiotic oppositions. The semiotic square is described as a universal and dynamic model, capable to permit the sensitive refinement of fast and/or static descriptions of the different semiotic universes. Thus, in an axiologic plan, we will no longer have only the opposition *truth* vs. *lie*, because we will equally find the concept of *non-truth*, such as error, and also that of *non-lie*, as in the case of jokes (Cf. Klinkenberg, 2004: p.151).

I would like to use here another example proposed by the author invoked above, namely the one starting from the social system of prescriptions and prohibitions. Klinkenberg says that in the ante-conciliar catechism the opposition was clear and fixed: *permitted* vs. *strictly prohibited*. The semiotic square, situated at a higher level of abstractisation, manages to illustrate complex, and more importantly, concrete phenomena, situated at a discursive level: thus, we will find – along with *permitted* and *strictly prohibited* – *non-permitted* and *non-prohibited*. From such a perspective, the social interaction is stuck in the sphere of breathable.

Other positions face to the truth

“I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!” – this is pretty much the oath taken by the persons called in front of the judges. It sounds constraining if we situate ourselves in the more general plan of society as a whole.

There are also some reflections – from various cultures – treating this subject: they all draw the same conclusion: social existence would be impossible if we were to reveal all the truths to one another, without hiding anything of what we know... How do we avoid social chaos? By avoiding to tell the entire truth. There is a saying that it takes man two years to learn how to speak, and a lifetime to learn how to remain silent. Not to mention the ironic apostrophizing “Had you kept silent you would have passed for a wise man”. All these sayings refer to a social behaviour meant to ensure a good living with our fellows. I have heard lots of people saying “I know I have that flaw, but I don’t like being told I have it”! I could, at this point in the evolution of the present study, dare the listener/reader with the following question: “What wouldn’t you like to hear about yourself now and here?”.

It is certain that, in the societies pertaining to the European civilization, a well educated individual is a person capable of refraining from saying everything he/she knows, irrespective of the context. There are of course the others, who burst into with truths which no one needs, and who would rather create embarrassing situations than give up saying what they know, those people that question everything and everyone, anytime, often causing stupefaction, irritation, embarassement, rebellion, for the simple reason that they have got far away from the rules of the social game. Let us remember from the theory of the dramaturgic perspective on communication (Cf. N.Goodman, who invokes Goffman) the fact that the person plays his/her role – in a good or not such a good performance – in a given situation, assuming a certain status, for which he/she is certain

to be assigned the respective role, the “behind the scenes” rules being protected. If the curtains are removed, with everything happening in there, the game is compromised. Between the public and the private space there is a delimitation line – a conventional one – that everyone should notice and respect. In the private space the individual finds resources to interpret correctly the roles he/she receives in the public space. If the private space is transgressed or at least diminished, preparing the roles for the public space will be precarious and everybody will have something to lose.

In fact, resorting to another theory, we discover that not even what is presented as conversation maxims is a very strict prohibition. When describing the *cooperative principle*, Grice (Cf. Grice, 1989: pp.22-40) says something like this: one should act in such a way that his/her contribution be appropriate to the context. Following similar categories to the Kantian categories, Paul Grice refines the discussion on quantity, quality, modality and relation. But, the issue that concerns us – the truth – is related to the category of quality. In the same reference paper we find out that some maxims may be followed more strictly, and some others may not, with the ultimate aim of adapting the discourse to the context in which it is produced. Applied to our problem, the indication – interpreted in the relaxed spirit of Grice’s work – would be to act in such a way that your intervention be as true as the context requires¹. And I would add: not TRUER than that! A proper encyclopedic knowledge, including a correct perception of the “interaction rituals” (in Goffman’s words) of the culture in which the discourse is produced gives place to a convenient choice (that is “which is related to convenience”) between what can be said and what should be avoided.

Thus, in nowadays societies, we encounter people ready to make the heroic sacrifice of saying also what is not appropriate, when it is inappropriate, to whom is inappropriate, sometimes in a manner that is inappropriate. These are, in most cases, the journalists. By the very nature of his/her profession, the journalist is the hero that sacrifices his/her social image by the highly repeated gesture of “publishing”² everything he/she finds out. It seems that the American slogan, according to which “a well informed individual is one step closer to democracy” is valid, and the journalist has no means of escaping the essential commandment of his/her profession.

Let us see the position of the PR person from this point of view. I will start – as I always do – from an event. I was reading, in France, in a local newspaper, about the history of a former journalist, extremely well-known and appreciated among his fellow colleagues. I found out that, after over 30 years of journalism, that man wanted to change his career and passed on “the other side of the barricade”, becoming a PR person (*communicant en relations publiques*, as the French say). On this occasion he was interviewed, and the questions aimed at finding out some details concerning the change of depth in the former journalist. His answer was: „Je dois maintenant me former au secret” (in English: “Now I need to learn how to keep a secret”). I told myself that it wasn’t easy at all for him to

¹ „Make your conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged”, op. cit., p. 26.

² I have chosen this pun in order to go back to an old saying of mine, that of rebelling against the uninspired translation of the English word *publicity* by *publicitate*.

make such a radical change of attitude. If for more than 30 years he had made public everything he knew, now, as a PR person, the first thing he had to do was to keep silent. It must be really overwhelming!...

We will find here another opposition setting aside the professionals from the two fields of the public discourse by means of a virtual barrier: the journalist immediately reveals everything to all the members of his/her audience, while the PR person keeps silent. This time, we will analyse the issue of relating to the truth known by means of the mechanisms of social responsibility, as they act within each of the two professions. The social responsibility of the journalist is built on the principle of the continual search of the truth, with the aim of revealing it, of sharing it with the members of the community. What the individual will do with the revealed truth is his/her business, but access to the truth is a democratic right and the journalist has the responsibility to provide it equally to everybody. The social responsibility of the PR person is that of keeping a balance and harmony within the space he/she controls discursively, to the benefit – before everything! – of the organisation he/she is under contract with, but having always in mind the welfare of the community in which the respective organisation activates. Thus, for him/her, there will be necessary truths (that have to be said), unnecessary truths (that might as well be told or not) and useless truths (that are better left unknown). This is why the French former journalist had to learn how to keep a secret. The secret of this profession is based on...secrecy.

The PR person keeps a secret in order to operate the necessary changes to the information received. And when I say “necessary changes”, I mean the analysis of the discourse perceived (bearing the new information) and the restless simulation work that he/she keeps doing. By contextualizing the information received, the PR person takes out all the meanings borne by the discourse. Certainly, in such an analysis, it is equally important what is said, how is said, as well as the context in which it was said. Equally important is the verbal (subjected to a rigorous pragma-linguistic and pragma-stylistic analysis), or the paraverbal and the nonverbal. Once the semantic information is extracted (in a broad sense), the following step is determining the target audiences. According to the theory (especially that of pertinence!), the keywords, the central ideas can be of interest for various audiences, or the segmentation of the target audiences will be done just from what matters in relation to the theme and what we can determine as being characteristic to groups belonging to the entire population we have access to. Bearing in mind these determinations, the PR person passes on to simulation, meaning building scenarios, in which he/she appears revealing (something or everything) to a target audience. On the basis of simulation, he/she will be able to make an idea on how the new information will be perceived and what kind of effect it will have on the receiver. If following this exercise it results that the effect is fatal for the welfare of the partner organization, the PR person will revise the scenario: maybe it is better not to tell everything, not to begin with the start, not to begin with the start anyway, not to tell everything from the start to whomever, however, etc. Always having in view the idea of promoting and protecting the image of the organization he/she works for, the relationist will thoughtfully consider what, when, how, to whom revealing what he/she knows, without altering the community welfare. The corporate social responsibility (the well-known CSR!) remains the

specialist's imperative duty. It is often proved that the things the relationist decides not to reveal (or not to say whenever, to whomever, however, etc.) are not part of the vital information for the community the organization activates in. The social responsibility of the PR person, as a specialist, is obviously quasi-entirely coextensive with the corporate social responsibility (CSR), and for that reason the interests aimed by the PR discourse shouldn't coincide with those undermining the interests of the community. However, we all know that total transparency is neither in very good taste, nor of any use to those of good faith. The relationist will be able to choose not to reveal useless truths and decide to whom, when, how and the amount of unnecessary truths he/she may reveal (in case he/she decides to do so). I was writing somewhere (Stoica, 2004) that the PR activity must be performed with a well faked transparency. Four years later, in her book, *The Voices of Power*, Adriana Săftoiu – who hadn't read my books – was answering to the question: "How transparent can the speaker be?". And the answer was – "As much as the job allows him/her" (Săftoiu, 2007). I had the independent confirmation of an incontestable professional in the field.

„It takes two to tango”

Not to let you under the impression of a *pro domo* presentation in which journalism is seen as being worse than PR communication, I reiterate a theory vaguely mentioned above. I am talking about the social face theory, created by Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1974). I will quote from memory some passages from Goffman's book. It will not be really quoting, but I will stick with the quotation marks, to make clear that the passages bellow are not from my creative thinking:

“The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value actually claimed by a person by means of the action line that the others consider as being adopted by that person during a contact. The *face* is an image of the self, shaped according to some social attributes proved by someone, and that the others share altogether”.

And:

“An individual *saves face* when the action line he/she follows shows a consistent image of the self, based on the judgements and indications provided by the other participants, and confirmed by the facts revealed by the impersonal elements of the situation. It's now obvious that the *face* doesn't reside inside or at the surface of its possessor, but that it is spread in the flow of the meeting events, manifesting itself only when the participants are trying to decipher in those events the appreciations expressed on this occasion.

The action line of a person towards other persons has in general a legitimate and institutionalized nature. During a contact, any individual who interacts, and whose personal attributes are familiar or visible, may believe that, from a moral point of view, it is normal and justified to be helped to *save a certain face*.

Having in mind his/her attributes and the conventional nature of the meeting, the action lines, thus the *faces* he/she may choose from, are just a few”.

But:

“Moreover, by possessing some familiar attributes, the individual is able to have many other faces. The other participants are rarely aware of the nature of these attributes, except that situation in which their alleged possessor somehow discards himself/herself openly through his/her acts. In that moment, the others become aware and realize that this person has consciously feigned to possess those attributes.

Consequently, even when the concern of *saving face* concentrates the attention on the unrolling activity, in order to succeed we need to take into account the place we have in the social world in general. A person who succeeds to *save face* in the unrolling situation is someone who in the past had refrained from some actions that would have been difficult to deal with later on. [...] In our society, as in some others, the expression “lose face” apparently means to make a bad, lauzy move or to bend one’s head. The expression “save face” seems to describe the process in which a person succeeds to let the impression that he/se hasn’t lost his/her face.

[...] In any place of the society, it is expected that the social code contain an agreement on the limits a person can attain in order to *save face*. When someone is assuming an image of the self expressed by the *face* he/she presents, the person is supposed to comply with that face. In different ways and in different societies, the person must prove self-respect, refuse certain actions which are above or under his/her condition, and strive to perform some other actions, even though this might cost him/her a lot. From the moment he/she finds himself/herself in a situation in which he/she receives a certain *face* that must be preserved, a person commits to supervise the flow of events taking place in that situation. He/she must assure the existence of a certain *expressive order*, which regulates the flow of events, important or minor, in a way that everything that seems to express these events be compatible with the *face* presented by the person in that situation”.

As you can see, there are defined social objects and situations. If we pay attention to the definitions provided by Goffman, we realize that, on their account, we can recognize in our concrete existence different moments in which some persons lose face. We have seen, for example, that someone who wants to follow a certain pattern in life must assume the project in due time and refrain from a certain behavior and certain actions that might contradict with the face he/she is about to claim later on. And we know that this fact is often neglected exactly by those who claim to have an honorable face.

This is where the journalist comes in: he/she brings into discussion the cases of those persons who do not succeed to comply with the face they want the others to believe they

have. It's sometimes about events from the past, some other times about present behavior, but it's always about the incompatibility between the person and the face this one claims to have in the assumed public role.

Thus, we can see that it's not the journalist's fault when embarrassing truths about a public person are being published. It's rather the person's fault: the fault of having assumed a role for which he/she is not prepared, or which doesn't suit him/her. We certainly have in view here only the cases in which the revelation is correctly documented and professionally carried out. In these situations, it's obvious that the world has to be informed, and the responsibility for invading the private space no longer belongs to the journalist, but to the person who loses face, for trying to draw a line between private and public life somewhere else than where this line naturally was placed. Thus, we can see that doubtful situations are those which draw the professional journalists' attention. They investigate and reveal truths most of the times inconvenient, resulting in the loss of face by those in question. Where ordinary people, belonging to other professions, may feign not to see some things in order to spare the guilty person of losing his/her face, the journalist is the one on whom everybody else is counting: he/she will leave the delicacy aside and reveal inconvenient truths, running risks on both sides. It's more like a necessary evil: we destroy the balance, the peace and harmony, but at the same time we clean the place and give a chance to fair approaches, widely accepted by the community. Attention please! The journalist doesn't dance alone. He/she always needs a guilty person!

Partial conclusion

I think that I might reiterate the problem of the position the representatives of both professions adopt towards the truth, that's why I take my time in drawing one or some final conclusions.

After proving that the journalist is seeking the truth of deeds, while the PR person is preoccupied with the truth negotiated through discourse (Stoica 2006), we can also spot the existence of another opposition: the journalist possessing the truth hurries to publish it, while the relationist begins by keeping silent. His/her work begins by keeping secrets and continues with classifying the truths he/she knows and the audiences he/she will eventually decide to approach in some way or another, at a given point. . . . The journalist's imperative precept is to keep the community informed. The PR specialist's imperative precept is to adapt the discourse to the target audience, in view of maintaining the general harmony.

At a closer look, we realize that the representatives of the two professions situate themselves, from a social point of view, in a situation of complementarity, as revealed by the way the teaching plans according to which I operate as a trainer are created. It's all about equilibrium.

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