

COMMUNICATION UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES: BETWEEN THE SEARCH FOR EXCELLENCE, THE CONCEPTUAL AMBIGUITY AND THE MARKET DICTATORSHIP

*GRADOS EN COMUNICACIÓN: ENTRE LA BÚSQUEDA
DE LA EXCELENCIA, LA AMBIGUIDAD CONCEPTUAL Y
LA DICTADURA DE MERCADO*

Guest Editorial

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ABSTRACT

We'll argument in this paper that the area of undergraduate studies that we can consider as belonging to the great area of the communication sciences and, in particular, those areas that have as one of their purposes also the professional training in Corporate Communications / Public Relations, seem to be navigating in a blurriness of both theoretical constructs and purposes, as well as a lack of public recognition. Moreover, it will be argued that the main purpose underlying all definitions should be the old idea from the Enlightenment that the mission of undergraduate studies is, before and above all, the shaping of rational and responsible citizens.

KEYWORDS

communication, public relations, teaching, citizenship

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RESUMEN

En este trabajo argumentaremos que el área de estudios de grado que podemos considerar como perteneciente a la gran área de las ciencias de la comunicación y, en particular, aquellas áreas que tienen como una de sus finalidades también la formación profesional en Comunicación Corporativa / Relaciones Públicas, parecen estar navegando en una borrosidad tanto de los constructos teóricos como de los propósitos, así como una falta de reconocimiento público. Además, se argumentará que el propósito principal que subyace a todas las definiciones debería ser la vieja idea de la Ilustración de que la misión de los estudios de grado es, ante y sobre todo, la formación de ciudadanos racionales y responsables.

PALABRAS CLAVE

comunicación, relaciones públicas, docencia, ciudadanía

INTRODUCTION

A year ago doing justice to his well known irreverence, Bernard Henri-Levy (2020) denounced the way European governments were dealing with their citizens in what concerned the SARS- Cov 2 issue. He was not the only one calling our attention to the way governments seemed to be struggling with basic assumptions concerning democracy or private data, as well as the incapacity (that we may say still goes on) to communicate with their citizens (Morin, 2020). Maybe this is one of the main concepts to take under consideration. What does it mean to communicate with and not just “communicating to” (Falconi, 2004) But we would rather say that all what has been done can not even be equationated as communication but simply as a transmission of information in a very basic and broadcasting framed way: put your mask on, wash your hands, do this, don’t do that. On the other side of the Atlantic things were even a lot worse. As Timothy Snyder has put it “most of our country is now a news desert. News desert kill us by depriving us of the information we need in our daily lives (...) when we need to protect our health and freedom” (2020, 105).

Seen from a political point of view, questions concerning the role of the Mass Media and other actors as Google or Facebook related to the public dissemination of information (or desinformation) as well as the role of governments and the political class in general emerged from all sectors of the European and North American think tanks and other research institutions. From the point of view of the risk and crisis communication researchers, the conclusions seemed to be not much more positive. Moreover, we can say that, as it has been pointed out by Euprera, some areas of research and professional expertise were not taken in account as powerful sources of knowledge in dealing with different publics in complex and even more uncertain times. The question of the under-recognition of the area of the communication sciences as a new area of knowledge became once again clear in the way its experts were not taken into account in Portugal and I would dare to say in so many other European countries over these months. Wolton(2013,2020) summarises these questions asking

precisely why there seems to be an incapacity of intellectuals and political personalities to consider communication as the great revolution of the last century. Maybe we should go deeper and consider the specific area that deals specifically with the relationships between institutions and their publics or stakeholders and that has been perspectivated as promoting understanding and trust but seems to be constantly downplayed by the public actors. Both in the already mentioned countries and in the Portuguese speaking ones, as well as in the extensive bibliography in English we must also consider other concepts such as those of Corporate Communications and Public Relations. I won't discuss the concepts or its similarities /differences (Eiró-Gomes and Nunes, 2014) here as the point is just trying to express the difficulty in navigating in such a conceptual fog.

COMMUNICATION SCIENCES

At the turn of the century a small article was published under the title "If Communication matters so much, why don't we get the attention we deserve?" (Daly, 1998). It has been one of the mandatory readings in my classes since then as all the empirical research that we've been promoting in the last years especially in Portugal tends to offer many examples of its accuracy. One of the main arguments developed by Daly focused itself on the idea that either communication researchers or practitioners haven't done much to show the outcomes of their work, especially they have not been able to show their societal value. The area keeps on struggling both at a theoretical level as well as an empirical/professional one as if the communication revolution was not the non-reivindicated revolution of the 20th century as Wolton (2013) has put it. The truth is that we cannot recall among the most relevant books written in the last century half a dozen that we can say have had this revolution as its epicentre. Considering the two major dimensions proposed by Wolton to look at communication during the last hundred years, the technical and the political/cultural one, it seems that even if nowadays, one of its dimensions seems more or less seen as important, the technical one, the political and cultural dimensions still have not gained its space. Moreover, during the last years we've watched the emergence of what has been called fake news or dissemination of misinformation. The power of technology has enabled human beings to disseminate lies and manipulate others in our public spheres as never seen before. It might be difficult to understand today the value of the Scientific Revolution as we promote online tales concerning health or other conspiracies. The struggle between reason and "magic thinking" is a forever struggle. "The ideals of the Enlightenment are products of human reason, but they always struggle with other strands of human nature: loyalty to tribe, deference to authority, magical thinking, the blaming of misfortune on evildoers". (Pinker, 2018, 70)

Many of the philosophers and scientists of the Enlightenment defended, *avant la lettre*, many of the sciences (that we could call sciences of the human) that would emerge only in the last century. Some prior consideration seems necessary if we want to perceive what is really being questioned when we talk about "sciences". For Searle (1984), the concept of "science", instead of being considered as data, is a problem - concept. The concept of "science" is not explanatory. Just look at its multiple uses, some we would say are not very

consensual – military sciences, religious sciences – and some doubts arise on the suitability of this notion. Nevertheless, one proposal is suggested. All intellectual disciplines, mathematics, literature, philosophy, or physics, share the same goal: knowledge and understanding. However, for those which present a much higher level of systematization one could, maybe, and this is his suggestion, reserve the concept of “science”. If allowed, in this text we will use the light notion of “sciences” even though we agree with the opinion expressed by the Berkeley philosopher and may I add, beyond the uttered disciplines all the others we consider in our daily contexts as being part of the communication “sciences”, and in particular, Institutional Communication, Corporate Communication or “Public Relations”. The discontinuity between said behavioural sciences (often designated by the author as mental sciences) and natural sciences is related with some substantial differences between the phenomena studied by natural sciences and the human behaviour because social and psychological phenomena are intrinsically intentional. Behavioural sciences deal with several aspects of intentionality. What in some ways offers unity to the different objects of these different sciences – communication, economics, history, or linguistics, for example – is human intentionality. For Searle, what behavioural sciences can offer us at their best are theories of intentionality, both pure and applied.

Maybe the incapacity to fully promote this area of knowledge, as it has been done with other pluridisciplinary subject matters as the health sciences, or the environmental sciences, has precisely to do with the fact that the concepts we use, the basic sciences we call upon to understand and consolidate the communication area are also themselves “soft” sciences or even worse, we need concepts borrowed from other areas or new concepts without consensual definition or understandings. It goes without saying that the experts and researchers seem incapable of a global dialogue among themselves in the sense of defining half a dozen structural areas that could help promote the essential theoretical knowledge where to leverage future research. Treadwell and Davis (2019) highlighted precisely this aspect when noting the almost infinite and plural ways the different research associations, the academia and professional consortia listed multiple areas of speciality from advertising to political communication, from journalism to gender issues or from philosophy of communication to public relations or, more recently, computing. Under the “communication umbrella” researchers seem to diverge not only in the ways they look at their objects but also in the theoretical constructs they use as their lenses. In this article the main area will be the area of the undergraduate degrees in applied communication, in public relations in corporate or organizational communication or in its connection with the professional practices in the area that has been called in Latin America, Spain and France as *Dircom*. I believe this definition, as proposed by Lesly, remotes at least to 1971, even though his main ideas were already quite well defined since the first edition of his first Handbook in the early fifties. According to him ‘public relations can be defined as the activity that helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other’ (Lesly, 1998, 5). I hope that this idea might help to configure in a more comprehensive way this area of knowledge and professional practice that has always been struggling for a “name”. This struggle has invaded also all our colleges and faculties and the intensity of designations that all Europe are called to entitle

degrees in Mass Communication Institutes, Human or Social Sciences Universities, Business Schools and so on.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION / CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS / PUBLIC RELATIONS

Quoting in a quite a free way Guy Jucquois (2004, 97) “diversity” is, before being an object of study, a reality that we constat and live with. In natural sciences it is a common place to speak about diversity, it seems possible to state that diversity is the normal, the ordinary in the natural world. Exceptions exist but the common is for multicellular organisms to be unique, even if when the genetic code is similar or even equal, the environment will take care of the introduction of the differences. Wolton (2019) has written extensively about the question of the otherness and how the great difficulty with the concept of communication is precisely that in communication what we are always facing is the “diversity” or as he has put it, we try to find the same and we are always confronted with the other, the different. Because we are all similar in so many ways, Wittgenstein called it our human form of life, and our human forms of life, but we are all always diverse in our uniqueness. This explains also why it is so much easier to deal with the “information” with just the “message” that seems to be what it is, or nowadays, with the technical aspects of communication. Human communication is much more complex, it is to be able to understand and to negotiate with someone that must be available to do the same. From a professional point of view no others as the Public Relations / Organizational Communicators / Communication practitioners have more responsibility in promoting the core business of communication: the human understanding. The great challenge for the communication professionals (Public Relations / Corporate Communications) is precisely how to be able to fulfill their missions to inform, to share and negotiate ideas, and above all to avoid all forms of misunderstandings and, to use Wolton (2014, 2020) concept, “acomunication”. If we read the major reports on this specific area, and especially due to the latest health / social constraints, we find the need to promote a better comprehension of all the technical aspects concerning the communication practices. From algorithms to artificial intelligence, from discussions concerning the efficacy of the “community managers”, that must be read as “digital community managers”, to the great challenges concerning efficacy, return on investment and so many other concepts that seem to be clearly marketing oriented, we seem to be navigating a new era. Of course that we all, as different local societies and as a globalized world (with so many other societies that are being kept outside of this notion of global) are confronted with an enormous crisis and transformation of work and society (Lépine, Martin-Juchat, Miller-Fourrier, 2014). What we cannot forget is that these professionals are dealing with much more than technical aspects: today, as a hundred years ago, all these working in or on behalf of organizations, and that are responsible for the sharing of information, the negotiation and the construction of productive relationships between those organizations and different stakeholders, or if we prefer the society understood as a whole, cannot fulfill their missions without a deep understanding of the social, economical, cultural and political contexts. It is not easy to understand in one of the most amazing summaries of the profession what to say, what to do and always having the public interest as the aim, what to

silence (Cossette, 2013, Loc4858). As Porto Simões (1995) has put it during the nineties, these professional practices are supported by three scientific pillars, the political sciences, the management sciences and the central one, the communication sciences. This is a quite important aspect when reflecting about our degrees, that seem to be maybe now as never, equationed to the technical aspects of the communicative platforms in some cases or, in others to the marketing aspects of the business degrees. Communication sciences undergraduate degrees must be understood in their uniqueness and being themselves promoters of new theoretical approaches that will facilitate not only the construction of a new body of knowledge but also of a better social recognition of the communication experts.

THE ROLE OF ACADEMIA

In the last days of the last century, one of the most important humanist of our times, he himself a centennial in July 2021, published first a book on the main aspects to consider for the secondary schools programmes, *La Tête bien faite* (1999), and afterwards, already in the third millennium, answering a request from Unesco, *Les 7 Savoirs nécessaires à l'éducation du futur* (2000). We'd say that our generation of teachers have been struggling with his ideas and principles all along and I'm not quite positive that we have won the challenge. Maybe one of the most important aspects that humanity has been confronted with in this last year and a half has been the difficulty in dealing with the unexpected and the uncertain. These aspects have underlined not only these two books but all the extensive work of Morin along his 80-year career as a researcher at CNRS. What were those seven pillars? In a very abbreviated way and quoting Morin (2001) they are: detecting error and illusion, principles of pertinent knowledge, teaching the human condition, earth identity, confronting uncertainties, understanding each other and ethics for the human genre. We know that they have been proposed as the basic fundamentals for the mandatory system of education, that is, before entering the undergraduate studies. The question, however, that might be important to keep in mind is if at the academia these issues are being taken into account or if the market dictatorship that has been imposing its perspectives has mined all that seems not to be "attractive". More and more often study programmes are seen as "products" to be sold in a very competitive market, the one of the public and private colleges and faculties.

In this same journal, Diez-Martin (2018) has highlighted the difficulties that the degrees in management and the schools of management have been dealing with and we cannot agree more with his conclusions in the area of the communication studies. The areas that try simultaneously to impose themselves in the academia without losing its relationship with the society their students will be called to serve, are struggling on different fronts, some of them clearly in conflicting areas. How do we deal with concepts such as those of "utility" of what is being taught in a world that needs to be remembered of the "*L'utilità dell'inutile*" (Ordine, 2013)? What is it important to teach in order for our students to be well classified when applying for a job? How do we fight against the new ideology of treating the students as clients? How to keep the balance as if we were acrobatic jugglers between the search for excellence and what I cannot avoid calling the market dictatorship? How to improve the way we teach in order to enable the professional excellence of our students as well as citizens that "accept responsibility for one's

self, as someone who can engage in open, undominated dialogue with others about a common life and accept shared responsibility for the group's life" (Strike and Soltis, 2009, Loc2902). Echoing Woot (2013, 2014) we will only be able to understand and assume a free and responsible citizenship if we link information, knowledge and wisdom; and that must be our main purpose as professors.

FINAL REMARKS

Nowadays, I come to the conclusion that there are other aspects besides the ethnic, religious, national or cultural differences that make communication quite difficult or, in a more accurate way, understanding almost impossible. Understanding is theoretically considered as the other face of communication. It is even possible to define "effective communication" as one which is understood. But, in a certain sense, "diversity" challenges this view: effective communication must be thought, first and above all, as the outcome of an effective understanding. And here we must see diversity in its broadest sense and, as in so many cases, as simply meaning "the other", the one I have to make understand not what I say but what I intend my words to mean, or as Grice (loosely) has put it, to be able to recognize my communicative intention (Grice, 1989). All these issues might have been highlighted by the struggle different international associations and national governments have made during these last months to be understood by the populations all over the world and the lack of participation of those, that we may call experts (or that have at least studied for 3, 5 or 8 years in our universities) in Corporate Communications/Governmental Public Relations/Communication in the Public Interest, undergraduate or PhD degrees, in many of these processes: those that have studied in order to be able to communicate, on behalf of their institutions/organizations, "with" the different publics of those institutions. I believe that if as Communication professionals we cannot improve the human knowledge in the sense of the hard sciences, we must fulfill our mission that is to promote understanding and to see communication, first and above all, as the coroloray of understanding and not as it seems to be so commonly understood as just "information" or "interaction". But, I also believe that in any area of knowledge the first mission of colleges and universities must be improving our knowledge, both the scientific knowledge of our subject matters and our knowledge of how to be human, how to improve our way of life, democratic and tolerant.

Last, but not least, and because reflections are always a continuous process, only artificially interrupted for reasons of space and time, allow me to make Wolton's words my own, to take care of the perplexity that overwhelms us after at least 50 years of Public Relations/Corporate Communications undergraduate degrees in Portugal, by the incapacity we had - academy, researchers in communication, scientific societies in the field of communication, and, of course, communication/PR professionals, and its more or less non-existent professional associations -, to change the inherited status quo, on the issues of informational and communicational flows in the multiple and fragmented public spheres of our contemporaneity. "Quand les élites, les médias, les bien-pensants arrêteront-ils de caricaturer la communication (...)? Quand y aura-t-il enfin cette prise de conscience que les questions d'information et de communication sont parmi les plus complexes de l'espace public? Revaloriser ce trio toujours essentiel: la

recherche de l'intercompréhension, le poids de l'incommunication, les risques de l'acomunication." (Wolton, 2020:35)

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