The transparent communicative organization and new hybrid forms of content

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ABSTRACT

Building on the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management's Melbourne Mandate's understanding of a communicative organization consisting of organizational character, responsibility and listening and engagement, this paper explores these principles in the context of new hybrid forms of online content. This study asks about the role of transparency in the context of commercial hybrid content. Through theoretical consideration as well as interviews of representatives of public relations and marketing communication associations and agencies in Finland, the article presents the practitioners' perceptions and experiences using the literature on transparency. To better understand the communicative organization of today in the context of hybrid content creation, we propose the concept of the "transparent communicative organization." We suggest four new propositions for the practice of hybrid forms of engaging publics to support the transparent communicative organization: (1) source identification to enable trust, (2) two-way transparency inviting user feedback, (3) stakeholder-centric arenas to enable engagement, and (4) content on organizational expertise to build long-term engagement. We invite further public relations research to improve and test these preliminary propositions as the use of hybrid content increases.

1. The era of new hybrid forms of content

As traditional brand-centered communication and marketing efforts have become ineffective in the online environment (DuMars, Sitkiewicz, & Fogel, 2010; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010), brands and organizations are moving their messages to issue-centered discussions in arenas chosen by the social consumers (Kliatchko, 2008). This implies a move from the push environment of traditional influence toward the searchable, customizable, (Seabra, Abrantes, & Lages, 2007), and relevance-driven pull environment, where the value comes from informative, entertaining and less irritating content (Tutaj & van Reijmersdal, 2012).

The central idea in this pull environment is "engagement:" Brands and organizations are increasingly engaging stakeholders online by providing relevant content outside their main product or service. When content produced by brands or organizations is interesting enough to engage stakeholders, it builds direct interaction between the brand or organization and the individual consuming the content (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). In aiming to engage stakeholders, the lines between

editorial content, advertising and edited content are blurred (Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2005) and online content takes a hybrid form (Balasubramanian, 1994). Examples of such hybrid content include sponsored content (Sonderman & Tran, 2013), native advertising (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2013), content marketing (Pulizzi, 2012) and brand journalism (Brito, 2013; Cole & Greer, 2013). What they all have in common is their attempt to create value by offering relevant and useful content for stakeholders (Cole & Greer, 2013; Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2013; Pulizzi, 2012) and building credibility through brand and organizational identification.

The move toward engagement has sparked the interest of several disciplines such as public relations (PR), marketing, journalism and advertising. The new focus on engagement has narrowed the previously apparent differences between the aforementioned disciplines (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Michaelson & Stacks, 2007; Pulizzi, 2012), imposing an "identity crisis" with new ethical challenges for PR professionals. Previous studies have suggested combining, not separating, PR and marketing to get the best out of the engagement enabled by the online environment and social media (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Hensel & Deis, 2010; Pulizzi, 2012). Some believe that the hybrid forms of online content may indicate a change for the entire PR industry toward more marketing-oriented methods. Concern has arisen over replacing traditional PR with pure advertising and branding objectives (Hallahan, 2014). As the industry practice of providing online content spreads, there is emerging concern that brand and organization-generated content may deceive publics, may be one-sided or misleading and may be in need of regulation. For hybrid content, the transparency of the source, aim and origin is often lacking. In fact, hybrid content is often disguised. According to Balasubramanian (1994, p. 30), there is a need to address

> ". . . all paid attempts to influence audiences for commercial benefit using communications that project a non-commercial character . . . [because] under these circumstances, audiences are likely to be unaware of the commercial influence attempt and/or to process the content of such communications differently than they process commercial messages."

Despite the timeliness and importance of commercial hybrid content, little research has focused on what could be done to maintain credibility and legitimacy related to the phenomena. The authors argue that new forms of hybrid content without transparency may jeopardize "the communicative organization" (The Melbourne Mandate, 2012) and hinder the legitimacy of the communication profession as well as the media outlets they depend on.

We propose that transparency take center stage in the discussion on the engagement and future of PR. This study asks what the role of transparency is in commercial hybrid forms of online content. We use The Melbourne Mandate's (2012) principles of a communicative organization (organizational character, responsibility, and listening and engagement) to propose different aspects of transparency that need to be addressed in the context of hybrid content. To better understand the contextual nature of today's brands and organizations, the authors propose the concept of "transparent communicative organization" in the context of commercial hybrid content. Through theoretical consideration as well as interviews of representatives of PR and marketing communication associations and media agencies in Finland in the spring of 2014, we suggest four propositions for the ethical practice of hybrid forms of engaging publics to support the transparent communicative organization.

2. Transparency in the context of the communicative organization

To develop an understanding of the processes of transparency related to commercial hybrid online content, the aims of transparent actions should first be clearly understood. Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, (1992) stated that for organizations, PR increases mutual understanding and satisfaction and builds on the openness, credibility, trust and legitimacy of an organization. Moreover, The Melbourne Mandate (2012) acknowledges that to secure legitimacy, an organization must transparently and responsibly communicate the value that it can create for stakeholders.

Whenever media, brands and organizations cooperate, trust is brokered and ethical aspects require consideration. Hybrid content, if used carelessly, may jeopardize the communicative organization's credibility and reputation, and further hinder the legitimacy of the PR profession and the media outlets uon which the profession depends. As credibility is directly related to the executed communication effort (Verčič, Verčič, & Laco, 2008), the trustworthiness of the organization is the key to effective communication (Miller & Sinclair, 2009). Whereas the traditional focus of businesses is to pursue their own interests (Kaler, 2000), transparent communication balances the organizational objectives with common societal interests and may thus help publics and stakeholders accept the organization (Jahansoozi, 2006; Milne, Rohm, & Bahl, 2009). From this perspective, transparency relates to stakeholder perceptions of mutual respect between an organization and its stakeholders as well as to the openness of communication (Rawlins, 2009).

The definitions of transparency in the communication literature vary and are often oversimplified (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014; Sisco & McCorkindale, 2013). While there is no universal definition of transparency (Sisco & McCorkindale, 2013), scholars agree that it is related to openness, truthfulness, public information needs (Baker, 2008; Rawlins, 2009), credibility (Miller & Sinclair, 2009; Plaisance, 2007; Sisco & McCorkindale, 2013) and trust (Miller & Sinclair, 2009; Plaisance, 2007; Rawlins, 2009). Some disagreement is also apparent as to whether transparency is an umbrella concept or merely a vital part of another concept such as authenticity or ethics (Gilpin, Palazzolo, & Brody, 2010).

Although The Melbourne Mandate (2012) equates transparency with openness, honesty and accessibility, these concepts differ from transparency. Thus, the construct should not be understood in such a simple manner. Rawlins (2009, p. 75) defined transparency in organizations as

> "the deliberate attempt to make available all legally releasable information—whether positive or negative in nature—in a manner that is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal, for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of publics and holding organizations accountable for their actions, policies, and practices."

Hence, for communication to be transparent, relevant information must be made available for stakeholder reasoning, and organizations need to be accountable for their actions.

Accountability is therefore one important dimension of transparency (Rawlins, 2009). It is related to organizations' actions of offering their information for public scrutiny (Gilpin et al., 2010) as well as to organizational responsibility to provide the necessary information to make informed decisions (Rawlins, 2009). Thus, accountability relates to organizational responsibility for actions, initiated by social norms or regulations (Miller & Sinclair, 2009). However, in the absence of regulations, practitioners' morality and ethics determine the course of action. While accountability and a responsible "mindset" form the basis of transparent communication, transparency should become visible within the process of communication.

Gilpin et al. (2010) related transparency to enabling publics to know what is happening and making it possible to confirm the provided information. Thus, transparent processes require the disclosure of information (Baker, 2008; Rawlins, 2009). However, openness and disclosure of information are not enough to build transparency (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014; Baker, 2008; Rawlins, 2008). Organizations should seek to deliver relevant information (Rawlins, 2009), as transparency is more related to the "quality of openness" than to openness per se (Baker, 2008, p. 243). The quality of information is more important than all-inclusive information delivery.

To guarantee the delivery and transparency of relevant, quality information, a critical element to consider is how the available information resonates with stakeholder understanding (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014; Rawlins, 2008). Thus, transparency also forces organizations to "build a culture of listening and engagement" (The Melbourne Mandate, 2012). For example, Christensen and Langer (2009, as cited in Albu & Wehmeier, 2014, p. 118) noted, "The requirements of transparency tend to produce information without reception, and openness without trust, because they are not bound to the interpretive and sense-making capabilities of the publics." It is not the organization's perception of transparency that matters but the level of transparency perceived by stakeholders (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014). Therefore, the central point to consider is how stakeholders perceive the organization's transparency in specific touch points.

Allowing stakeholder participation and committing to dialogue about stakeholder information needs are critical aspects of transparent communication. Dialogue aims for relationships based on "mutual trust, compromise, cooperation, and whenever possible, win–win situations" (Hutton, 1999, p. 208). Using dialogic communication (Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008), PR can manage stakeholder relationships by enabling mutual understanding and clarity of communication (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014; Moody, 2012; Shen & Kim, 2012). On the other hand, lack of organizational engagement and listening may lead to underestimating stakeholders' expectations and depreciating their needs and wants, therefore endangering the organization's reputation, credibility and trust. Transparency ideally makes it possible for stakeholders to participate in the discussion of their information needs (Rawlins, 2009), which should correlate with the relevant information given to the publics (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014; Baker, 2008; Rawlins, 2009; Shen & Kim, 2012).

3. Transparency and authenticity

The authentic character of an organization supports the effectiveness of PR in terms of public responses and behavior (The Melbourne Mandate, 2012; Molleda, 2010). Stakeholders demand more transparency, openness and responsibility from organizations (Molleda, 2010). As organizations are accountable to stakeholders, stakeholder demands should be met. Authentic organizations are true to themselves; hence, authentic actions are genuine, truthful and consistent (Shen & Kim, 2012). Transparency relates closely to authenticity, as authentic character involves transparent actions of making authenticity visible (Baker, 2008; Gilpin et al., 2010; Rawlins, 2009; Shen & Kim, 2012). Stakeholder perception of authenticity enabled by transparent communication could determine the quality of organization-public relationships (Molleda, 2010; Shen & Kim, 2012).

Transparency must be understood in its context and therefore, the relationship between an organization's authenticity and transparency needs examination. Gilpin et al. (2010) proposed four dimensions of socially mediated authenticity in public relations: authority, identity, transparency and engagement. While in their model transparency is considered as one dimension of authenticity, transparency also creates authenticity as transparent activities support other dimensions of authenticity (Gilpin et al., 2010). The following sections examine how the transparent communication may link with other dimensions of socially mediated authenticity to supports an authentic organizational character in the context of commercial hybrid content creation.

3.1. Mirroring an organization's identity through transparent communication

Authentic presentation of an organization's identity is vital to a company's credibility and here transparency is necessary to guarantee the legitimacy of an action (Gurău, 2008). Identity is one of the dimensions of socially mediated authenticity,

relating to sincerity or how genuine the organization's actions are perceived (Gilpin et al., 2010). While various viewpoints exist regarding an organization's identity, these are often related either to identity as a self-presentation and projection to stakeholders or to the self-perception of the organization by its members (Hatch & Schultz, 2000, p. 15). However, building identity through organizational self-interest, performativity, authenticity and genuineness cannot be achieved in the long run (Theunissen, 2014) because authenticity reflects stakeholder perceptions of the organization's reliability (Gilpin et al., 2010).

Genuine identity may be sustained through transparent communication (Gilpin et al., 2010). With regard to commercial hybrid content creation, genuine identity may become apparent in the organization's knowledge related to the topic, but involvement in the topic might legitimize participation in the discussion about it (Hallahan, 2001). Therefore, the way the company is integrated into the thematic content should be taken into account (Buijzen, van Reijmersdal, & Owen, 2010). While revealing source identity is important (Miller & Sinclair, 2009), Theunissen (2014) noted that the public perception of the organization's identity is still influenced by the communicated and "packaged" identity. As the company sends a variety of messages presenting different viewpoints of marketing, advertising or PR, these messages may be a threat to a consistent corporate image (Gurău, 2008). The organization needs to be presented in a consistent way (Shen & Kim, 2012), and genuine identity should be pursued trough consistent messages (Gilpin et al., 2010).

The commercial hybrid forms of online content are often implemented by or for marketers and advertisers and are thus driven by marketing objectives. To guarantee integrated communication to all stakeholders, a common understanding must exist inside the company about the messages sent outside the organization (Gurău, 2008). While genuine actions also create an authentic view from the organization, communication actions should still be coordinated through awareness of the organization's real identity.

Therefore, PR should highlight the genuineness of the organization's identity as a basis for all communication. However, one's identity must also correlate with authentic knowledge and involvement on the specific subject (Gilpin et al., 2010), as well as reveal one's identity to enhance stakeholder reasoning abilities (Rawlins, 2009). Hence, systematically coordinating media content is an important objective for PR to sustain corporate legitimacy (Jo, 2004) by creating understanding, building trust (Moody, 2012) and credibility (Jo, 2004), maintaining transparency (Molleda, 2010) and establishing a good reputation (Hutton, 1999; Jo, 2004).

3.2. Building authority through transparency of commercial hybrid content

Authority is the second dimension of an organization's socially mediated authenticity (Gilpin et al., 2010). While managing expectations, PR must acknowledge the media behavior of publics (Olkkonen & Luoma-aho, 2014). Organizations should acknowledge that communication is no longer organization-centric, but rather covers issues and topics on broader phenomena (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). PR practitioners must consider whether they should focus to a great extent on "issues" and "stakes," which are seen as a reason for involvement in the organization's sphere of authority. An organization's participation in a certain issue or discussion may be considered in terms of the knowledge related to the topic (Hallahan, 2001). Knowledge refers to beliefs, attitudes and expertise on the topic. Providing knowledge is an important element of positive organization-public relationships (Hutton, 1999; Jo, 2004). Thus, PR should determine the issues and topics on which the organization has knowledge.

Authority relates to contextual expertise (Gilpin et al., 2010). Organizations should evaluate the content carefully because the source's expertise influences the perceived credibility of the message (Cole & Greer, 2013), which in turn affects the credibility of an organization's actions (Gilpin et al., 2010). For PR practitioners to legitimize hybrid forms of online content in the media, they must ensure authority on the themes presented in the content. Authority guarantees increased attention, appreciation and acceptance (van Reijmersdal et al., 2005) toward the organization's activities. According to persuasion knowledge theory, the persuasiveness of the message is related to the public's perceived knowledge of the topic, it's understanding of the objectives and purposes of the message provider and the perceptions of the respondents' own goals and opportunities to manage the persuasion attempt (Miller & Sinclair, 2009).

Cole and Greer (2013) noted that the perceived trustworthiness of the content affects the public perception of the message credibility. Therefore, the quality of the argument in the message should be evaluated comprehensively (Jo, 2004). As stakeholder engagement through commercial hybrid content focuses on relevant, quality content delivery to publics, transparency in the context of journalism also should be considered. Karlsson (2010) noted that transparency in editorial processes relates to the disclosure of statements about how information is selected and produced and how the news content is verified. This notion should be taken into account to guarantee legitimate media cooperation and credible content creation forms in social media.

Marketers, advertisers and PR specialists also should keep in mind that purposely disguising promotional messages (Tomažic, Boras, Jurišic, & Lesjak, 2014) does not support the present consumer-value orientation in the new hybrid forms of content. Cole and Greer (2013), Hallahan (1999), Jo (2004) and Reijmersdal, Neijens, and Smit (2010) identified promotional messages and the content's persuasive intent as among the most important aspects affecting public perception of message credibility by lessening the authority of the source. Miller and Sinclair (2009) also noted that the transparency of planned action mediates the effect of message intent on trust toward the advertiser.

While mimicking the news article style and form may be useful in generating more credibility for the publisher compared to advertising (Cole & Greer 2013; van Reijmersdal et al., 2005), the intent behind the content should be revealed to increase

understanding (Rawlins, 2009) and enable publics to know what is happening (Gilpin et al., 2010). Transparency increases the credibility of the content by offering opportunities to verify it (Karlsson, 2010), and well-written expert content increases credibility through knowledge sharing. Authority cannot be attained through promotion and persuasion; thus, hybrid forms of online content should be considered different from advertorials, as advertorials are often product-related and sales-focused (van Reijmersdal et al., 2005).

3.3. Ensuring transparency by enabling stakeholder participation

Symmetrical relationships (Shen & Kim, 2012) and engagement (Gilpin et al., 2010) are essential to building authentic organizations. Participation also is considered a dimension of transparency (Karlsson, 2010; Rawlins, 2009). Moreover, control mutuality is an important aspect of organization-public relationships (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), and creating an environment of listening and engagement by ensuring common understanding and dialogue with stakeholders are at the center of the communicative organization (The Melbourne Mandate, 2012). Genuine identity should form the basis of this dialogue (Theunissen, 2014), where transparency involves making a certain level of interaction possible (Gilpin et al., 2010; Karlsson, 2010; Rawlins, 2009). This engagement or interaction with stakeholders can be seen as a willingness to risk dialogue-enabling interaction between the organization and the stakeholders (Gilpin et al., 2010). Without willingness, the organization may not be genuinely engaged in real dialogue (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). An organization may also build authority and legitimacy through engagement, as enabling interaction may create more acceptance and more open relationships with stakeholders (Gilpin et al., 2010). As meanings are co-created (Theunissen, 2014), organizations should not presume to know stakeholders' needs and wants. Instead, organizations should create shared meanings through dialogic communication with stakeholders.

More generally, the dialogic aspect of transparency is related to the need for engagement in authentic online communication, where participants expect to be involved (Gilpin et al., 2010). Dialogical transparency also may support the authentic organizational character because it makes interaction possible for participants (Gilpin et al., 2010) and might help publics express their opinions and give feedback (Shen & Kim, 2012). Participatory transparency in the journalistic context refers to involving publics in news processes by allowing them to influence, scrutinize and monitor the content (Deuze, 2005; Karlsson, 2010). In this way, the organization can enhance opportunities to influence and evaluate content, such as through commenting and contributing to the discussions.

4. Methodology

While numerous forms of hybrid content exist online, this study focuses on the commercial or paid hybrid content activities (e.g., native advertising, sponsored journalism), which are presented in the media context outside the organization-owned platforms and have become a popular form of stakeholder engagement. This study explores the role of commercial hybrid content and its transparency through theoretical consideration as well as interviews of 10 representatives of PR and marketing communication associations and media agencies in Finland in the spring of 2014.

In the interview process, a snowball sampling technique was used, since the topic is novel and professional listings do not yet specify which agencies and practitioners are specializing in this area. The first association and agency were chosen based on the research group's perception of their relevance to the study. Interviewees were also asked whether they perceived themselves as involved in the phenomenon and qualified to participate. All the other representatives were chosen based on the previous interviewees' suggestions about who could contribute to the discussion. In all cases, the person involved in executive management was approached and asked to suggest the most capable person in the organization to interview.

Semi-structured interviews were used to ensure that all the interviews covered the relevant aspects of the studied phenomenon without being too rigid. The first part of the interview focused on general perceptions about the phenomenon of commercial hybrid content activities, its credibility, benefits, disadvantages and appropriate/inappropriate use. The second part focused on the transparency elements of commercial hybrid forms of content. Questions in this part were developed based on themes found from existing theory, namely disclosure of information, responsibilities and participatory elements (e.g., Rawlins, 2009) of hybrid content processes.

The collected data were inductively analyzed by question. Different subthemes and aspects related to the questions (e.g., benefits of hybrid content activities) were identified and grouped into categories. To enhance understanding of the most common perceptions of transparency and the issues on which practitioners lack knowledge, the categories also were examined in terms of frequency of occurrence.

5. Practitioner perceptions of the transparency of commercial hybrid content

The results reflect the practitioners' perceptions, experiences and understanding of commercial hybrid forms of online content and their transparency. The results first show the practitioner perceptions about actors that benefit from the phenomenon of engagement and their perceptions of who the new hybrid forms of online content might harm and how. Then, the results focus more closely on the transparency of these commercial hybrid forms in terms of the responsibilities of the different actors involved, the needs of the actors involved and participatory ways enabling the transparent actions.

5.1. Practitioner perceptions related to authenticity of the hybrid online content

As this is a developing field, most of the interviewees preferred to use the term "content marketing" when discussing commercial hybrid forms of online content. Others focused on paid media content, suggesting terms such as "rented media space" and "sponsored content." Two interviewees felt that broader terms such as "online communication" or "content creation" were more suitable. However, from this point on, we primarily use the term "commercial hybrid forms of online content," which includes all the different forms mentioned by the interviewees.

5.1.1. The benefits and disadvantages of commercial hybrid online content

All the interviewees agreed that hybrid forms of online content mainly benefit the brand and the advertiser. The reasons given included promoting the brand, enhancing goodwill toward the organization, having a relatively "secure" and guaranteed way to get the message to the media and increasing the brand's media visibility in a credible way. Brands were also seen to benefit from sharable content, which broadens the content reach. Media houses were also seen to benefit from the phenomenon; the interviewees frequently mentioned that the media could benefit by earning revenue from advertisers. Relaying more relevant content to the media and establishing more long-term relationships with advertisers also were seen as benefits.

Most of the interviewees stated that commercial hybrid content should ideally benefit the reader, viewer or user. Several emphasized that readers/viewers should find the content functional, informative and/or entertaining in order for them to get value from it. Two interviewees also noted that content providers can benefit from offering sharable content while providing added social value for consumers.

The new developments of hybrid forms of online content were seen as an opportunity for agencies and new actors in the communication field who have special knowledge in online communication and social media, as well as for small actors who could serve brands relatively quickly in their content creation efforts.

Most of the interviewees stated that commercial hybrid content creation might harm the users of original online content. In general, all the interviewees highlighted the possibility of commercial hybrid content being seen as editorial even though it was paid content, which might confuse the reader. They stated that this confusion could produce credibility and reputation problems for both the organization and the media. In addition, the hype of commercial hybrid content creation was considered a threat to traditional advertising agencies because copywriters were seen as incapable of responding to the need for quality editorial content like PR agencies can.

5.1.2. Commercial hybrid content affecting the credibility of different actors

When asked how the hybrid forms affect the credibility of the different parties involved, the interviewees said that the content could both strengthen and reduce the credibility of the medium and the brand. First, if implemented with the proper level of transparency and with quality content, the credibility of both parties may increase. The number of recommendations and sharing of the content by consumers can also raise the credibility of the content and enhance the brand's status as a credible thought leader in a specific theme or issue, encouraging readers and users to revert to the brand and its content in the future. In addition, the relevant and effective commercial hybrid content may attract other advertisers to join the same media space, thus benefiting the medium in terms of revenue.

The biggest risk for brand credibility was considered to be hiding the brand or promoting it too much without relevant content for the public. The interviewees suggested that the media should not hide behind the claim of objectivity but sincerely disclose their relationships with brands.

5.1.3. Appropriate/inappropriate use of commercial hybrid content

When asked about the inappropriate use of commercial hybrid online content that might harm the actors involved, the interviewees mostly considered it from the brand point of view. The interviewees mentioned the following aspects that could affect stakeholders' evaluation of the brand or media: inauthenticity, irritation, content unsuitable to the medium on which it is published, underlining the brand, talking only about the brand or themes and/or issues not related to the brand and not taking into account the target group. The interviewees also stated that freelancers or journalists who are hired to create hybrid content in paid contexts should not work directly for the brand while working with the media house, or should at least disclose this conflict of interest. Online content executed as an advertorial is not enough; the content sponsor and the purpose of the content should also be revealed.

When asked about the appropriate use of commercial hybrid forms of content, all the interviewees suggested that the most important factor in creating commercial hybrid content is to consider the target groups' interests and make the content as relevant and useful for them as possible. The content should create value for the consumer by offering interesting stories and information. The content also should be found in the right media context and separated somehow from the original content. The interviewees suggested many times that the content should be well produced in pursuit of journalistic quality content and truthfulness. Moreover, hybrid content should not irritate the reader by producing the perception of commerciality, promotion and excessively underlining the brand.

5.1.4. Issues in the context of commercial hybrid content

When asked about the issues and standpoints that are not sufficiently understood in the context of commercial hybrid content, the interviewees focused on the viewpoints of the media and the brand. As media cooperation with brands increases, from the media point of view this development might be seen as a threat to objective newswriting. The interviewees voiced concern over media adhering to journalistic principles. Despite believing in journalists' professionalism, the interviewees considered economic pressures a threat to media principles. In addition, making content labeling identifiable enough was seen as an important aspect to consider.

On the other hand, for the brands and the companies, the interviewees stated that interest in content marketing has decreased the focus of other forms of communication but that those should not be forgotten. At the same time, there is concern that the effectiveness of hybrid content creation will decline without increased efforts to make commercial hybrid forms more credible and relevant for target groups. The use of resources to produce hybrid forms of content also was seen as a threat. As one interviewee explained, "A large amount of money is put into the content, and this money is taken from product and service development."

5.2. Practitioner perceptions of transparency of commercial hybrid content

When asked to define the transparency of hybrid forms of online content, some of the interviewees defined transparency broadly, whereas others named more specific aspects related to the concept. For example, in one interview, transparency was defined as "offering the possibility to know everything that can be known." The same interviewee suggested that there is no need to make everything visible, but that it is more important to provide opportunities to find all information relevant to content production and the content producer's intentions in order to guarantee the truthfulness of content. Hence, truthfulness is one aspect that defines transparency, as suggested by most of the interviewees.

Another interviewee suggested that "there should be a possibility for all the parties involved to know what is happening and why." Most of the interviewees suggested that the reader should know the content provider, who paid for placing the content and the original author of the content. This ensures that the reader can evaluate the motives behind the content. The content provider and payer should be visible via disclaimers and notifications, and there should be a writer byline. In addition, one interviewee stressed that references to other possible sources should always be added.

5.2.1. Perceptions of the transparent process of commercial hybrid content

When discussing the responsibilities of different actors in the process of commercial hybrid content, the interviewees suggested that media have the main responsibility for the content, as it is published in their media space. The interviewees stated that the media must serve the public and allow them to see which content is promotional and paid. The cooperation between the brand and the media should be visible through notifications and disclaimers. The disclaimers should clearly explain what the content is all about. Media should also indicate whether the content is produced by the media house or by the brand. Moreover, the ethical principles and standards of the media house should be made available for public scrutiny.

According to the interviewees, brand responsibilities include being honest and visible as the content provider. The brand also should clarify that commercial content may not be objective in all cases. The brand, in cooperation with the media, also is responsible for providing the right content in the right channel and for the right public. This notion relates to the relevance of content.

Regarding the role of online content users, all the interviewees noted it was the users' responsibility to maintain the basic ability to critically read the media. Users of online content should be critical of the source when sharing the content to their peers as truth. One interviewee suggested that "in the transparent, open world, where the consumer has become the king who can really affect things, the possibilities to influence should also include responsibilities." Relative to this notion, another interviewee said that consumers should make their claims visible. Furthermore, it was noted that consumers should act ethically and use appropriate language when commenting on the content and giving feedback.

The interviewees stated that consumers should be allowed to participate in the process of creating/providing transparency by providing feedback, commenting and taking a stand. Participation in the transparency process also enables engagement in the theme by continuing the discussion. Consumers of content, regardless of its scope or source, should be able to give feedback. However, consumer participation without listening is useless. Hence, it was suggested that both the media and the brand have the responsibility to listen and follow the active public and even ask for their comments and feedback. Nevertheless, it was noted that the moderation of comments is a risky act. Test groups and enlightened consumers may be used to gather the voice of the public in ensuring the ethical process of commercial hybrid content creation.

6. Conclusions

Transparency is an important concept in communicating with publics. In the context of commercial hybrid content, we propose that PR should take the lead in highlighting the importance of transparency. The act of transparent communication in the context of commercial hybrid content can be divided into two different viewpoints: First, transparency is directly related to the content and its presentation. Second, transparency concerns the processes of creating commercial hybrid content.

In the literature, transparency is understood in terms of relevant information disclosure to support public understanding (Gilpin et al., 2010; Rawlins, 2009), taking responsibility for one's actions and being accountable to stakeholders (Rawlins, 2009), as well as involving and engaging stakeholders in building control mutuality and ensuring the understanding of stakeholder points of view (Gilpin et al., 2010; Rawlins, 2009; Shen & Kim, 2012). In the interviews, however, transparency was mostly defined in terms of the truthfulness and visibility of the information. Transparency was largely seen as disclosure of information and having some degree of responsibility for one's actions. Without understanding transparency relating to control mutuality and dialogic aspects, the organization's actions may be transparent only in terms of its own perception but not that of the public. It is important to highlight this point for practitioners.

However, as Gilpin et al. (2010) noted, transparency by itself is not enough to guarantee authentic organizational character. Transparency must be understood in relation to its purpose. The Melbourne Mandate (2012, p. 1) states that "an organization must understand its character and responsibility to have meaningful engagement with its stakeholders." Identity may affect authenticity negatively (Gilpin et al., 2010) if the presentation is covert and the organization's identity is hidden (Balasubramanian, 1994; Miller & Sinclair, 2009), if the organization's messaging is inconsistent (Shen & Kim, 2012) or if the organization is not genuinely involved in the thematic content areas (Hallahan, 2001). The interviewees suggested that brands are responsible for honest messages and revealing themselves. They claimed that the most important aspect in maintaining transparency was the identification of the content provider. It was frequently mentioned that hybrid content creation should be built on truthfulness and that the content provider should be revealed at least through some kind of disclaimer to enhance stakeholder reasoning.

Authority is another aspect related to authentic organizational character (Gilpin et al., 2010). It helps create acceptance of the executed actions (van Reijmersdal et al., 2005), which affects the perceived trustworthiness and credibility of the organization. All the interviewees agreed that the commercial hybrid content might mislead the reader when placed in a paid context, which could also create credibility and reputation problems for the brand and the media. To support organizational authority in commercial hybrid content, several aspects should be highlighted through transparent communication.

Transparent communication should be pursued in terms of revealing the content provider and the intent behind the content; otherwise, the public may feel persuaded by the content provider (Balasubramanian, 1994; Cole & Greer, 2013; Hallahan, 1999; Jo, 2004; van Reijmersdal et al., 2010). Building authority also is related to content providers' expertise on the information given, as well as to participants' accountability for sustaining more credible hybrid content creation activities by enhancing the publics' reasoning abilities (Gilpin et al., 2010). The organization's expertise on a specific theme should be made visible. Several interviewees brought up the importance of expertise on relevant themes as well as thought leadership, but much room remains for fully integrating the idea of authority into the practice of commercial hybrid content. In particular, the question of how to recognize and take control of the relevant themes has not been fully answered. This is where PR practitioners with wide knowledge on stakeholder needs and expectations can play a vital role. Transparency here relates to openly revealing why the organization is involved in the topic and how its expertise can benefit the publics.

In addition, to guarantee the authority of the content, more editorial-like and less commercial-like content should be used (van Reijmersdal et al., 2005). Interviewees also suggested that by creating quality content, organizations or brands might even strengthen their credibility. On the other hand, the biggest credibility risk was perceived to be when the brand tries to hide or promote itself too much. Credibility related to the content includes aspects such as promotional and commercial content delivery. Hence, the authority to provide hybrid content related to certain issues or topics arises from the value delivery to the public and the cooperation between the media and the organization to support quality content creation.

The interviewees stated that the media have more responsibility compared with other parties, as the hybrid content is in the media space. While there may be different perceptions of the created content, whether it is of sponsor origin or editorial origin (Cole & Greer, 2013; van Reijmersdal et al., 2005), PR should support the editorial responsibility and the right to claim journalistic quality for the content shown in the context of the media. Journalists have a responsibility to serve the public (Deuze, 2005; Plaisance, 2007) and act as autonomous and objective watchdogs of the society (Deuze, 2005). It also is crucial for media editors to consider whether the content affects the credibility of the media itself (van Reijmersdal et al., 2005). Hence, emphasis should be placed on the openness of information, the information-gathering process and content verification (Karlsson, 2010). Similarly, for some hybrid forms in media outlets, the editing and fact checking of the content remain crucial to maintaining the credibility of the content and ensuring the transparent content creation process.

This is how hybrid forms of online content can be used in cooperation with the media while ensuring the legitimate action and real value creation for the public. Erjavec (2005) stated that PR information in press releases is passed on to the public in the media through hybrid forms of PR and journalism practice, in which parts of the persuasion attempts still penetrate the journalistic filter and are presented to the public. However, this new cooperation between the media and brands in the creation of commercial hybrid forms also could be a route to more transparent and authentic content, compared to traditional press releases as a PR tactic.

An organization must guarantee relevant information delivery to the public by involving them in the discussion about their needs (Rawlins, 2009). The interviewees stated that the public has a responsibility to give feedback when necessary, with both the media and the brand responsible for listening to the public feedback on the hybrid content. Supporting dialogue and engagement can help publics express their opinions and give feedback (Shen & Kim, 2012) about the communication activities. Thus, control mutuality (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) relates closely to the idea of transparency where publics are seen as actively involved parties. Since participation enables transparency (Karlsson, 2010; Rawlins, 2009) in the context

of commercial hybrid content, an organization may also build transparency and authentic character by enabling public commenting.

Based on the authors' analysis of both the literature and the interviews, they propose the following four propositions for transparent hybrid content creation to support the authentic organizational character in the online environment:

1. *The source and processes should be identifiable and understandable to enable trust*

The transparency of all commercial hybrid content requires clear disclaimers or author bylines identifying the source. These should describe all relevant information on the content provider and its relation to the media outlet to enhance credibility and stakeholder trust. The new hybrid content should be understood and distinguished from advertorials. The role of PR professionals is to make sure hybrid content is identified at least in terms of content labeling and that publics have sufficient understanding of the phenomenon, as a lack of understanding could lead to reputational damage in the long term. PR practitioners also should involve the media in content creation and share mutual accountability in hybrid content delivery.

2. *Transparency should be two-way, inviting user feedback and participation*

All stakeholders should have the opportunity to give feedback on commercial hybrid content and an organization's production methods and disclaimers to ensure stakeholder understanding. The role of PR professionals is to leverage control of the content, initiate and monitor these discussions and evaluate and apply stakeholder expectations to corporate practices related to hybrid content production.

3. *Arenas for content should be stakeholder-centric, not organization-centric*

When providing content to engage stakeholders online, organizations must follow their stakeholders' needs and preferences and ensure that this hybrid content creates stakeholder value. The role of the PR professional is to monitor the environment to identify and understand the dynamics among different stakeholder groups. Thus, understanding stakeholders involves supporting relevant content delivery for public needs as well as listening to their experiences and expectations regarding the phenomenon.

4. *Content creation should focus on areas of organizational expertise*

Content created by organizations is most often beneficial when it results from the organization's area of expertise. PR practitioners should openly suggest and share relevant knowledge and information for stakeholders to gain authority for the organization through quality content. This means not only delivering content that benefits the organization, but also possessing knowledge and being involved in a specific theme. If the content is related to the organization's area of expertise, the organization does not need to use promotional content. This relates to organizations' transparency in showing genuine organizational identity by understanding who they are and how they can create value. Understanding one's identity also enables consistency in delivering value.

These propositions are merely preliminary and limited to the literature examined as well as the small sample of practitioners interviewed. Since this is a preliminary study, several overlapping concepts were used to describe the phenomena; further studies should choose the most representative and accurate concepts. PR will certainly play a role in the process of commercial hybrid content creation; as one of the interviewees noted, PR practitioners, not advertisers and copywriters, have the special skills to understand and produce this kind of content. Therefore, as the trend becomes more popular, the role of PR practitioners in commercial hybrid content creation, as well as the interplay between the different disciplines involved, should be studied further. We hope these propositions can serve as a starting point for further larger-scale studies in different cultural settings.

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