**Media: The Curse of The Communication Literacy**

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Josef Pallas is not convinced about the PR-industry’s alleged merits. Instead he tries to answer the question: when is it time to fire the PR-consultant?

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Political and economic systems are often deemed as fiascos, but when are we going to make a similar evaluation of financial capitalism, asks Göran Nilsson.

The essence of sensemaking occupies Henrik Bäckström’s mind.

Ivo Zander paints a picture of the future of the well-established multinational corporation.

Staffan Movin calls for cooperation between society, academia and business.

Göran Nilsson explains why financial incentives sometimes fail.

Frank G. H. Hartmann draws on experimental studies to increase our understanding of controllers’ conflict of interest.
Does the world need Superman? This was the title of The Pulitzer winner article in the DC Comics movie Superman Returns. The article questioned the role of a superhero as necessary for securing and enabling tranquil development and functioning of a society. Paraphrasing this title I’ll try to in the following lines briefly elaborate on the existence and relevance of PR-consultants’ as the indispensable heroes of contemporary world.

Let us start with the taken-for-granted assumption about the necessity of PR-consultancy as based in providing its customers – i.e. politicians, companies, NGOs, universities, hospitals, kindergartens or celebrity couples – with knowledge about how to relate to and deal with different aspects of their public appearance, branding, marketing, media relations and other communication activities. This knowledge is - in turn - derived from the notion on communication literacy and communication professionalism as a cornerstone of the foundation upon which social actors have to build their identities and organizations. On top of that, the PR-consultancies also assume that each customer’s communication needs (and solutions) are specific and unique.

... we appreciate that each case is unique and requires a customized solution.
One of JKL’s distinguishing characteristics is the ability of our exceptionally talented consultants to understand the unique quality of each situation and provide insights, strategies, ideas and recommendations based on this.”

There are a number of arguments not only to question reliability of such a claim, but also to regard similar promises as directly motivating healthy skepticism toward the major part of the consultancy industry. First of all, if the PR-agencies are serious about their ability to provide you with unique solutions to your exclusive communication challenges one might start to worry. Study after study shows clearly that both the advices provided and the factual outcomes are generic and hallow to such a degree that their value is highly questionable. You can just simply go through corporate communication and PR-strategies at randomly picked organizations, their press releases, annual reports, campaigns or their websites, to conclude that these communication products (commonly produced by PR-agencies or under their supervision) suffer from being each other’s copies, following same templates and recipes.

Secondly and relatedly, the PR-consultants are at large rather insensitive to differences between different sectors. Hospitals, universities, schools, political parties are all treated according to the same ’corporate model’. Such a model is presented and defended with an argument that similar (read: business) values, priorities and relations are valid in (almost) all contexts. Not only that the ’professionalization’ - i.e. the introduction and implementation of the private sector’s communication solutions across different parts of a society – tend to lead to dilution and disparagement of core activities of organizations that operate under different rationales. The newly required and acquired ’media and communication literacy’ – once again frequently introduced and proliferated by specialized PR-agencies – might lead organizations to break with and disregard some of their most fundamental
The role and relevance of the PR-industry is unquestionable – but perhaps not in the way we usually think. Just hiring a renowned consultant is most probably not improving your organization name or reputation to any substantial or even measurable lasting extent.

More than often, you as a customer are directed to use intuitive, simplified and rough indicators such as number of Facebook’s likes, op-eds and letters to editors, preference and attitudes surveys or different ranking lists. And that’s when you are lucky. Or as the first page of Prime Communications’ website teaches us – PR-agencies’ major concern seems to be the level of industry recognition expressed in prizes, awards and nominations, rather than a more serious reflection on the value of services offered to their customers.

But is it all as bad as it makes it sound? Yes and no I would argue. The role and relevance of the PR-industry is unquestionable – but perhaps not in the way we usually think. Just hiring a renowned consultant is most probably not improving your organization name or reputation to any substantial or even measurable lasting extent. Neither are there any clear connections between a more pronounced communication focus and the improved ability of an organization to conduct their primary responsibilities (in the case of public sector organizations the effects might be quite the opposite). Of course communication is inherent and essential for all organizational processes – but these processes are subjected to and influenced by many other mechanisms and dynamics than those traditionally dominating the models and ideas recognized and used by the PR-consultancies. So why do we not fire the PR-consultant the very moment she or he shows up at our doorstep? Twisting professor Nils Brunsson’s argument on organized hypocrisy (i.e. the necessity of post-rationalizing and accepting that talk is not always followed by corresponding decision, and that decisions are not always followed by corresponding action) – we simply have to believe that PR-consultants actually matter. Not only that paying invoices for PR-services requires extensive rationalization – we have to convince ourselves that the money spent make a difference. We also know that the PR-industry operates in a context where displaying and demonstrating communication competencies represent an activity that in its own right is used for evaluation of contemporary organizations. That is to say, to employ a PR-agency is regarded as proof of an effective, responsible, transparent, legitimate and overall successful organization. And that argument is very hard to get past. So, if we return to our rhetorical question - if you are about to hire or fire a PR-consultant – make sure that you are doing it for the right reason.