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DISCUSSIONS
ДИСКУСІЇ ТА ОБГОВОРЕННЯ

The War in Ukraine: Rethinking Values in Communications

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ABSTRACT

This material is submitted for discussion on the pages of the journal. It has the status of a working version, a draft of a possible article, a preprint. Anyone can participate in the discussion by submitting their materials with a link to this material in the "Discussions" section of the following issues. The author of the same material, in the case of writing a scientific article, must make a reference to his material, which he submitted for discussion. The draft article is devoted to the online speech by the author at The 29th International Public Relations Research Symposium (BledCom) (Slovenia) on July 1, 2022 (<https://www.bledcom.com/com/copy-of-bledcom-2022-to-introduce-hybrid-conference-access>). Speaking on the topic the author expounded on the various dimensions of communication evident at various venues and among various stakeholders since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24th.

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АНОТАЦІЯ

Цей матеріал подано до обговорення на сторінках журналу. Він має статус робочого варіанта, чернетки можливої статті, препринту. Участь в обговоренні може брати будь-хто, по-даючи у розділ "Дискусії та обговорення" наступних випусків свої матеріали з покликанням на цей матеріал. Автор цього ж матеріалу, у випадку написання наукової статті, повинен обов'язково зробити покликання на свій матеріал, який він подавав на обговорення. Проект статті присвячено онлайн-виступу автора на 29-му Міжнародному дослідницькому симпозіумі зі з'язків з громадськістю (BledCom) (Slovenia) 1 червня 2022 року (<https://www.bledcom.com/com/copy-of-bledcom-2022-to-introduce-hybrid-conference-access>). Виступаючи на тему, автор пояснив різні виміри комунікації, які стали очевидними в різних місцях і між різними зацікавленими сторонами після російського вторгнення в Україну 24 лютого.

КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА: Росія, війна, фатальна помилка Путіна, професійні комунікатори.

Dear colleagues!

My name is Dmytro Oltarzhevskyi. I'm from Ukraine.

First of all, I would like to express my deep gratitude to the organizers of BledCom for the invitation. And especially to Dr Dejan Vercic, who supported my country, my family and me since the first days of the war. Great writer Erik Maria Remarque said that *dark times always reveal people*. Today, I am pleased to be among professionals and bright people.

On February 24, my daughter and I had to fly to Norway. It was our dream to see the northern lights. The taxi was supposed to pick us up at the airport at 6 a.m. But my scared wife woke me up at 4.30 and said, "The war has begun." I browsed Facebook. People all over the country wrote about explosions and destruction. In an instant, air-raid sirens screamed, and air defence shots rang out beside us. Russian missiles attacked my peaceful country. They brought death and ruined houses. Millions of Ukrainians woke up that morning in a new brutal reality called the war.

I still can't forget the beginning of this endless nightmare. No one believed that all this could happen in the 21st century. The war was a real mind earthquake for each of us. It has changed our looks at fundamental things.

The majority of human values are simple and familiar to us from childhood. They originate from our mother's fairy tales – peace, love, kindness, justice. As adults, we rarely use these paramount words. Everyday worries push them out of our lexicon. However, being with my family in a bomb shelter, I realized that all the vital things fit in one backpack. And the most loved people are the ones you can hug at the moment that seems to be the last in your life. The same is about moral values. There aren't many of them. And they are uncovered, crystallized, and come to the fore during a war.

This explosion checked eternal human values for durability. The main one of these is freedom. Putin's fatal mistake was to send slaves to battle with free people. He never recognised that freedom is the sense of our lives. This is what each of us is ready to stand for to the end. The desire for freedom and the support of people of goodwill worldwide have given us unbeatable strength.

Events in Ukraine also force us to take a new look at our profession and the communications field in general. And now, I would like to share my thoughts on this with you.

1. Unfortunately, humanity is still not fully aware of the strong dual power of communications as well their potential and threats. It's like nuclear energy that can heat and light homes or demolish. Communications can be a tool for creating, and vice versa, a weapon that kills.

Actually, it was not Putin's missiles that started the war in Ukraine, but so-called "ordinary Russian journalists." They were streaming nonsense into the citizens' ears every day for many

years. They sculpted myths about "Ukrainian Nazis" and "secret chemical labs." Most Russians have been zombied and infected with hate by ongoing lies. They supported their dictator and his pathological need for so-called "military operations" in Chechnya, Georgia, Syria. The apotheosis of this madness was the genocide of the Ukrainian people. Under the guise of "liberation", Russian soldiers killed civilians. They raped women, tortured children in Bucha, Hostomel', Irpin' near my home city Kyiv. They destroyed the peaceful cities of Mariupol, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Sumy. That is why the blood of thousands of innocent people is on propagandists' hands, who legitimized the war in the minds of Russians. However, we all understand that propaganda is a bubble. It can be inflated to incredible size, but sooner or later, it bursts. Similarly, any dictator is always doomed to inevitable defeat.

2. Now, let's look again closely at the principles and consequences of our work. Communications are like X-rays. They change society's behaviour at the cellular level. But their impact is much more complex and unpredictable than one can imagine.

Communications' purposes are not just to manage an information circulation and create a favourable image. They have a higher mission: to formulate meanings, bind a framework of values, and pave the way for human conduct. Given this, each of us is responsible to society for results of communications.

Unfortunately, you won't find a truth index among key performance indicators of communications. But it is the moral base of such activities. The truth is not always convenient. It may not permanently be enjoyable for our stakeholders. The truth can disturb, disappoint or offend. However, when you tell even the most painful truth, it can destroy one time what is restorable. Instead, the habit of lying is a systemic error that leads to a profound disaster. Thus, each of us, working in large and small communications, in government, corporations or third sector, has no right to lie and manipulate because it breeds destructive evil.

3. Professional communicators should be not just repeaters but co-authors and reviewers of ideas. It is no coincidence that Arthur Page, one of the fathers of PR, called himself an adviser, not a communicator. He emphasized that 90% of effective public relations consisted of what we actually done and only 10% of what we said. Actions are always more eloquent than words. Of course, we need to be even more confident in using communications as a decision-making lever and a strategic function.

But the question is, are we ready to sacrifice careers, money and other personal interests for general values? In my opinion, every PR professional should be a checkpoint of conscience in their organization. He must have the will, principle and strength to veto chiefs' decisions counter to common sense and human morality. Such steadiness must be a strong core within us. It must determine our choices and influence a stakeholders' solutions. After all, it is about our personal responsibility and professional reputation.

4. We focused on finding and cultivating tales about celebrities and brands. But in fact, ordinary people can complete the most authentic and incredible stories. When exposed to extreme situations, they reveal their best features. A grey-haired postman from Chernihiv knocked down a Russian fighter plane. A fragile girl volunteer from Irpin' evacuated disabled dogs under fire... These individuals are becoming our time heroes. And they deserve stories to be dedicated to them. This again proves that storytelling and communications, in general, must be *human-centred*. That is, focused primarily on ordinary people and their needs. Not on contrived values, wealth, and even revolutionary innovations that can change the world. But for citizens who live among us. About whom we, unfortunately, know not enough and talk so little.

Human-centred is also about a dialogues tone of voice. Earlier, we could make sure how the inevitable global problem of Covid-19 has united people. A communications tonality has changed since then. Paphos, insincerity, and hypocrisy are out of fashion. Conversely, empathy, humanity, and trust are sound more clearly. Nowadays, the war changed us and made us genuine. We focused even more on our true here and now feelings. In conditions of fear and uncertainty, we seek salvation in the present. We strive to live every moment. Surprisingly, such terrible crises become

catalysts for cleansing and resetting human relations. And this, of course, changes the style of communications. It makes them more friendly, sincere and emotional, as it should be in normal human life.

5. Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi suggested "*A man is the product of his thoughts. What he (or she) thinks, he (or she) becomes.*" Thoughts materialize in words. We have to pay great attention to what and how we say.

Recent studies demonstrated an informational oversaturation as a negative trend. Today we live in a social networks world that has no limits. It's like a choir that has no conductor and notes. On the other hand, organizations and corporations strive to be present in this communication environment with all their might. They speak in digital space so often and loudly that they drown each other out. It is terrible when powerful, persuasive words are wasted for hype, cheap popularity, and self-affirmation at the expense of others. But it is even worse when vital ideas that should determine the future of humanity are lost in an excessive number of empty phrases.

What's the way out? In my opinion, the PR community should think about new ethical standards. It would encourage professionals to have self-control in disseminating information. It is similar to issues of environmental protection and waste management. The principles of self-limitation should also prevail here. There is a pearl of Chinese wisdom: "*Don't say if it doesn't change the silence for the better.*" The practicality of communication should be governed by a personal question: what useful things do my messages bring to people? Will a post on social media solve other somebody's current problem? In other words, communications must make sense. They must help, involve, and inspire.

6. True values have another peculiarity. They are like a magnet that can bring people together. We must constantly remind ourselves that the communications groundwork is the search for mutual understanding and harmonization. Edward Bernays named this approach *the engineering of consent*. It enables people to cooperate, implement win-win strategies, and prevent wars.

The power of mutual understanding is a willingness to come to aid those in need immediately. When Russian shells hit my neighbours' house, we, along with other caring people, stood side by side and started to put out the fire without waiting for fireman. It was not time to express concern as the United Nations and other respected international institutions do in such situations. Sorry, war has no halftones. When danger arises, we need to act quickly and decisively. In this way, citizens and countries around the world self-organized and helped Ukraine in the fight against rushists. And this is the best illustration of the proverb: "*A friend in need is a friend indeed*".

Mutual understanding is also a capital value in relationships between professionals. From the wars first days, Ukrainian TV channels merged, despite being fierce competitors in peacetime. They founded the non-stop informational marathon, "United News", creating media content together and distributing it on all TV channels, FM radio, and digital platforms. Due to this, Ukrainians had constant access to news about the fight against aggression. It also helped to withstand massive information Russian attacks and did not allow to break us psychologically.

Respected Ukrainian scientist Anatoliy Moskalenko, quoting his student Yuriy Daragan, stated that *journalists have one blood type*. His words apply to all of us working in communications. We have shared values that join us. We should be in touch, strengthen mutual understanding, exchange views, projecting the future of our industry and the world.

What does this mean for us, scientists, educators and professionals?

On the one hand, the war in Ukraine is an occasion to rethink values and set new priorities. We need to pay more attention to moral and ethical aspects in our lectures and textbooks to make communication more responsible. On the other hand, we need to carefully analyze what happened and how it changed the game's rules. How to communicate with different groups of stakeholders in such situations? What can be said and what not? How should the information be disseminated? All this may be a new page in crisis communications research. Our scientific work must prevent such crises and provide a credible plan B to minimize their negative impact.

In the first days of the war, during the storming of Hostomel' airport, the occupiers destroyed the only world's largest cargo plane, made in Ukraine. It was called *Mriya*, which means *Dream*. Russian barbarians shot the aircraft. But they couldn't kill our dream of living in a free country. We will wipe away tears, heal wounds and rebuild ruins. And we all together, the whole civilized world, will do everything possible so that no one can destroy our lives, values and dreams.