



Intercom: Revista Brasileira de Ciências da Comunicação

ISSN: 1809-5844

ISSN: 1980-3508

Sociedade Brasileira de Estudos Interdisciplinares da Comunicação (INTERCOM)

Paraventi, Ágatha Eugênio Franco de Camargo; Farias, Luiz Alberto de
Relações Públicas e influenciadores: dependência,
simulação de espontaneidade e o Guia Conar de Publicidade
Intercom: Revista Brasileira de Ciências da Comunicação, vol. 46, e2023141, 2023
Sociedade Brasileira de Estudos Interdisciplinares da Comunicação (INTERCOM)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1809-58442023141pt>

Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=69876423041>

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Public Relations and influencers: dependence, spontaneity simulation and the Conar Advertising Guide

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/1809-58442023141en>

Ágatha Eugênio Franco de Camargo Paraventiⁱ

📧 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9545-6216>

Luiz Alberto de Fariasⁱⁱ

📧 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3642-4780>

ⁱ (Faculdade Cásper Líbero, Departamento de Relações Públicas. São Paulo – SP, Brazil).

ⁱⁱ (Universidade de São Paulo, Escola de Comunicações e Artes, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências da Comunicação. São Paulo – SP, Brazil).

Abstract

This article discusses professional responsibility in public relations activities in the development of communication strategies that involve the relationship with influencers. Shares part of the results of empirical research Grounded Theory (PARAVENTI, 2020) on ethics in public relations and confronts them with the guidelines of the Conar Guide to Advertising by Influencers (CONAR, 2021). There is a demand to expand the professional and academic discussion about the effects of sponsored and conflicting influence on the public sphere.

Keywords: Public relations. Communication. Influence. Professional ethics. Public opinion.

Introduction

Public relations is based on influencing opinion. Edward Bernays' work "Crystalizing Public Opinion", which in 1923 named the activity, highlights the intentionality and process that aims "through information, persuasion and adjustment, to build public support for an activity, cause, movement or institution" (BERNAYS, 1952, p. 3). The correct practice of the

profession would be based on “the perception that public and private interests coincide [...] good public relations depended not only on words, but on action that deserves public support and on educating the public to familiarize it with such actions” (BERNAYS, 1952, p. 4), which therefore, would differ from publicity, advertising, promotion and similar activities.

This article includes part of the results of the Grounded Theory research on ethics in public relations in Brazil (PARAVENTI, 2020), which aimed to understand the perception of moral dilemmas and damage caused by the activity, on the part of practitioners and impacted audiences. One of the theoretical categories highlighted practical and conceptual conflicts regarding the contemporary context of opinion formation, characterized by the crisis of the traditional press, information consumption and relationships in the digital environment, mediated by digital social media platforms. These challenges are being experienced by professionals, and based on heterogeneous readings on the function of public relations, the question arises: What are the consequences of an action that moves from the influence of relationships and information to a conflicted mediation by sponsorships that alter positions and roles of socially recognized social actors in the public sphere? Regarding the influence of opinion by influencers, the National Advertising Self-Regulation Council (Conar), published on 12/12/2020 the Advertising Guide by Digital Influencers, which classifies types of interaction and relationships between influencers and advertising or mentioned organizations, regulating the form of expression of these typologies. The guide was the result of discussions with experts in working groups and aimed “responsible and transparent advertising in these environments”, taking into account the “organic nature of the content produced by each of them, the basis of the relationship of trust between influencers and their followers” (CONAR, 2021, p. 15). This was an urgent regulation, as in 2019, 69.5% of ethical representations to the Ethics Council were related to advertisements with influencers; in 2020, 73.5% of cases.

The results of Grounded Theory, especially the concerns and possibility of damage arising from the relationship process with influencers will be discussed considering the Guide’s recommendations, in a reflection on the moral consequences, democracy and the distinctiveness of the public relations function itself, based on the impacts on the “marketplace of ideas” discussed by Katy Fitzpatrick (2006).

Methodology

The aim of the research was to contribute to reflection on moral responsibility in public relations by understanding the processes of moral decision-making, dilemmas and harm. The emergence of the professional habits that build the identity of the field focused on understanding the moral dilemmas when they are perceived by practitioners and impacted audiences. Thus, it did not aim to answer whether or not the activity is morally responsible or to statistically represent the behavior of practitioners, but to unveil these contexts of dilemmas and challenges of moral decision-making and their consequences.

Grounded Theory (GT) (GLASER; STRAUSS, 1967) was selected with the aim of carefully respecting an investigated reality in order to be able to grasp it, and because it proposes the construction of a scientific theory anchored in the data. The theoretical sample included public relations practitioners, in agencies providing services and in organizations from various sectors; and publics impacted by the activity (journalists, activists, public authorities, communities, community leaders). To preserve¹ the anonymity of the participants, in accordance with the research ethics protocol, the interviewees were given fictitious names. Agency practitioners were given pseudonyms beginning with the letter “A”, contracting organization practitioners with the letter “O” and impacted audiences with the letter “I”. After the name, the acronyms refer to the profile: agencies AG, organizations ORG and impacted audiences PI, followed by the size description GP, MP and PP and finally, the position, being COR - Coordinator, DIR - Director, VP - Vice President or CEO - Chief Executive Officer.

The methodological steps included data documentation and description; interpretation; initial/open categorization; focused categories and, finally, eight theoretical categories that converged in the core category on ethics in public relations and power relations.

The theoretical category described in the article is related to the public space of action that involves relations with the press and the context of the digital environment. The Guide to Advertising by Digital Influencers was observed through documentary analysis, comparing the aspects of the theoretical category of the thesis with the recommendations.

Public Relations, public interest and democratic representation

Although there is the defense that the activity must seek the public interest (GONÇALVES, 2007; BOWEN, 2008; BRUNNER, 2016), for the authors of this article, the search for public interest or neutrality of public relations is not recognized (PERUZZO, 1982; HOLTZHAUZEN, 2015; FAWKES, 2012; EDWARDS, 2012). Farias (2011) highlights that the activity, in a three-dimensional model guided by relationship policies with the media, government and other audiences, is not an impartial process as “it is clear that it is a search for positive dissemination”, assuming no possibility of complete transparency as it would exclude the possibility of strategic choices (FARIAS, 2016).

In this way, the risks of opinion formation through processes that are aware of human fragility and opportunities for control reside in the effects that can influence social behaviors that are dissonant with the legitimate interests of the public. Matheus (2012) discusses the use of “public opinions”, in their fragile construction, to defend points that change social behavior. “Public opinion does not always have the capacity to reveal the truth, but it is the source that everyone turns to when they want to find a reference for the truths they want to affirm. Being

¹ Research submitted to and approved by the Committee for Ethics in Research Involving Human Beings of USP's School of Arts, Sciences and Humanities.

more than a simple source of controversy and less than a way of proving the truth” (MATHEUS, 2012, p. 16). Lippmann (1965) already discussed the role of press agents in their influence on newspapers. In order to guarantee or avoid the publicity of those they represent, even in a context of censorship, they assume responsibility only to their employers and to the truths that converge with the conception of their own interests through events and facts of social interest.

The advocacy approach in public relations (FITZPATRICK, 2006), which takes a more asymmetrical approach and recognizes persuasion as a rhetorical and democratic process, was evident as predominant among Brazilian professionals in GT. This perspective understands that the activity promotes information and defends the points of view of those represented in the “marketplace of ideas”. This space is related to the North American context of political, commercial and social “market” theory, through which society benefits from debate and the multiplicity of voices, because truth emerges from people’s rational capacity to interpret different interests (FITZPATRICK, 2006).

The emission of voices to discuss topics needs to be based on democratic freedom and principles of ethical advocacy, among which the following stand out: 1) access for speakers and listeners to the “marketplace of ideas” that allows them to make informed decisions, with care to the imbalance of power in the market generated by the economic context of those represented; 2) the process of how advocacy is conducted, so that it does not interfere with “market” processes by stifling public debate through unfair information and conflicts of interest between practitioners and influencers; 3) truth as a fundamental value to the market of ideas, through the recognition that there are limits in the selection of information favorable to those represented, and they need to be defined based on respect for information needs and the harm that may result from communication; and 4) principle of disclosure, by ensuring understanding and offering sufficient information for conscious and informed deliberation.

By influencing opinionated phenomena, public relations impact models of deliberation and social construction that affect individuals. In a democratic regime, this context reflects the need for legitimacy in this decision-making process of social groups.

For a decision made by individuals (one, a few, many, all) to be accepted as a collective decision, it must be taken based on rules (no matter whether written or customary) that establish which individuals are authorized to make the decisions. binding for all members of the group, and based on which procedures (BOBBIO, 2000, p. 31).

A democratic regime “primarily means a set of procedural rules for the formation of collective decisions, in which the broadest possible participation of interested parties is foreseen and facilitated” (BOBBIO, 2000, p. 22). This conception of democracy, classified as a “minimum definition”, involves three aspects, the first being the high number of citizens participating in collective decision-making; the second, the existence of rules of procedure for

this decision, and a third condition: “it is necessary that those who are called upon to decide or to elect those who must decide are placed before real alternatives and put in a position to be able to choose between one and another” (BOBBIO, 2000, p. 32). To achieve this condition, Bobbio defends as fundamental the guarantee of the rights of freedom, opinion, expression, assembly and association.

Bobbio’s description brings a direct relationship to the processes of interaction, relationships, dialogue and information promoted by public relations activities in the digital context. Are audiences being transparently presented with real alternatives?

Dependence on influence per influencer

The crisis in the national press was cited by the majority of interviewees in its developments in the context of relationships between represented parties, practitioners and news outlets. Added to the context of the digital revolution, which brought new habits of information consumption and interactions, relevant implications for public relations activity were perceived.

The drop-in audience in the press is proportional to the growth in audience on social networks. Audiences that were not consumers of news in the press are regular consumers of social networks. Of the 211.6 million inhabitants, 140 million Brazilians are active users of social media, and of these, 85% surf the web every day². The number of subscribers to the 10 main daily newspapers with large circulation in the country was just over 1.46 million in 2019³.

In the new digital environment, the challenge of spreading organic information drives the volume of sponsored content skyrocketing. On the social network Facebook, for example, in 2012, content offered had an estimated organic reach (content available on followers’ profile pages) of 16%; in 2014, it fell to 6.5%, and in 2016, a drop of around 52% in organic reach was estimated. It is currently estimated that between 1 and 2% of content circulated on the social network is organic.

All practitioners of this GT stated that they use sponsorships for influencers to promote their representatives. The audience potential, the expressive and “incredible” results in visibility and business are seen as the main motivators. And they are divided in their understanding of whether or not it is advertising, whether or not it is a public relations strategy, and whether or not this practice has any negative impact on the public.

This theoretical category reflected how the press crisis and the increase in sponsored public relations strategies through influencers impacts the activity and society in general. The data from the GT relate to the context of pressure on practitioners which prevents neutrality,

² Digital Report of We Are Social e Hootsuite. 2019. Available on: <<https://www.pagbrasil.com/pt-br/insights/relatorio-digital-in-2019-brasil/>>. Access: 10 dec. 2019.

³ Official data from the Communication Verifier Institute – IVC. Available on: <<https://www.poder360.com.br/midia/jornais-no-brasil-perdem-tiragem-impressa-e-venda-digital-ainda-e-modesta/>>. Access: 10 dec. 2019.

the characteristics of this scenario of crisis in the press and in the new digital environment and the way practitioners act.

Relationship with influencers and meanings for practitioners

The criteria for operating in the new digital environment with the management of social networks' own algorithms, which provide between 1 and 2% of the organic content offered, brings new challenges to public relations practitioners. In search of an audience and results, they deal in a complex way with the relationship of dependence and superlative strength of economic capital. The narratives of public relations, individuals, groups and organizations as content producers are interfered by algorithms, and "are destined to move through restricted spaces" (FARIAS, 2019, p. 61).

All the practitioners reported that they had included, taken advantage of or promoted digital communication strategies on social networks with the promotion and hiring of influencers, in search of the social and symbolic capital of these actors. The main motivators are audience, results and "ease" of applying the strategy. One practitioner points out that

"Influencers have millions of audiences. So it's impossible for a consumer company not to work with influencers" (Athena - AG MP CEO, 2019)⁴, and another reinforces that if "you want a macro reach, you have to go for one or two macro-influencers" (Ana - AG GP - DIR, 2019)⁵. The comparison with traditional media is what makes the actions "cheap". "These people have become institutions. They are channels, which often have greater potential than a traditional vehicle. [...] how is one post sometimes worth 10 ads in Veja? This is very complex" (Alice - AG GP DIR, 2019)⁶. According to statements taken from GT:

Digital influencers have a much greater direct reach. You talk to a niche, which is why the idea of talking directly to the influencer is very seductive. You talk to them and you don't have to talk to an institution. You talk to a person who will talk to thousands of others and it ends up being very easy to measure. [...] This

4 ATHENA, Pseudônimo: interview [Feb. 2019]. Interviewer: Ágatha Eugênio Franco de Camargo Paraventi. São Paulo: 2019 Oral interview in person. Interview granted for the PhD Thesis *Relações Públicas, Ética e Relações de Poder: um estudo Grounded Theory sobre danos e limites morais*.

5 ANA, Pseudônimo: interview [Feb. 2019]. Interviewer: Ágatha Eugênio Franco de Camargo Paraventi. São Paulo: 2019 Oral interview in person. Interview granted for the PhD Thesis *Relações Públicas, Ética e Relações de Poder: um estudo Grounded Theory sobre danos e limites morais*.

6 ALICE, Pseudônimo: interview [Feb. 2019]. Interviewer: Ágatha Eugênio Franco de Camargo Paraventi. São Paulo: 2019 Oral interview in person. Interview granted for the PhD Thesis *Relações Públicas, Ética e Relações de Poder: um estudo Grounded Theory sobre danos e limites morais*.

reality is here to stay, we need to deal with this audience. This audience is just as important as journalists (Alfredo - AG PP DIR, 2019)⁷.

Sometimes this guy has more impact and engagement than me working on a note in the main health outlet. The organic note, and then the influencer, usually paid. Is there still spontaneous engagement when it comes to health and causes? Yes, but there's also a lot of commercial bias" (Alice - AG GP DIR, 2019).

However, the way in which they observe this phenomenon is different, and results not only in the treatment given to conducting the relationship with the influencer, but also the way in which this capital is being "explained" to the market and to those represented. They recognize future implications, given that the practitioners themselves say that their clients "don't understand" the activity of public relations. Although there are perceptions of conflict when hiring sponsored influencers, as exemplified by the following statement from an agency professional

It's getting harder and harder [...] In the old days, you used to work as a press officer [...] and it was up to the market, the consumer and the journalist to discuss and publicize what they thought. It wasn't paid media. Before, you held a press conference and called in journalists. Today you call 3 journalists and 20 influencers. And from the moment that the great mass of information is in the hands of influencers, you don't really know what's coming, do you? Because many of them are paid, many of them have interests behind them" (Ana - AG GP - DIR, 2019).

There is convergence on the part of practitioners: payment is not a dilemma or a risk to the activity of public relations. There is a perception that the activity has a commitment, even if it is paid, to transform this information into relevant, useful and interesting information for the public. And it differs precisely because it doesn't treat the influencer as an advertisement, and its role is an approach that aims for awareness, reputation and not just sales, even if it is paid content, as can be seen in the statements resulting from the GT study.

And it's clear that certain posts and content are paid for. Hiding the fact that they are paid for is a great stupidity that everyone realizes. Our role is to make it so interesting, so relevant, so fun, that people will want to read it, even if they know it's paid for (Abigail - AG GP - CEO, 2019)⁸.

7 ALFREDO, Pseudônimo: interview [Feb. 2019]. Interviewer: Ágatha Eugênio Franco de Camargo Paraventi. São Paulo: 2019 Oral interview in person. Interview granted for the PhD Thesis *Relações Públicas, Ética e Relações de Poder: um estudo Grounded Theory sobre danos e limites morais*.

8 ABIGAIL, Pseudônimo: interview [Feb. 2019]. Interviewer: Ágatha Eugênio Franco de Camargo Paraventi. São Paulo: 2019 Oral interview in person. Interview granted for the PhD Thesis *Relações Públicas, Ética e Relações de Poder: um estudo Grounded Theory sobre danos e limites morais*.

PR is bringing the publicity deal to her. Thank goodness! Why are we bringing it in? Because the influencer is not like an ad. In the case of an ad, you go there, pay and I can write anything. The influencer is concerned about their followers (Athena - AG MP CEO, 2019).

There is this discussion about what is advertising and what is PR, but I think it's out of date. There is an old premise that what is paid for is advertising, and what is organic is public relations. That's wrong. Because I can do organic advertising and I can do paid PR. What I think changes is the care taken with the content, whether it's branded content or digital influencers. We want it to be something extremely organic for the influencer, for their base, that makes sense for the brand, that doesn't hurt values... it's much more reputational, much more about awareness, than "I want to sell this". Advertising is tied to generating leads, we are tied to generating awareness, generating reputation. Of course, there is a need to generate sales, but that's not the main focus of public relations work (Armando - AG MP VP, 2019)⁹.

The aspects observed as a risk in hiring influencers lie in why they need to be hired and how this content is offered. Both have sensitive aspects of concealing interests and simulating unmediated public discussion spaces.

The need to hire influencers or experts to propose and dialogue about content lies in the confirmation that the voices of organizations would not have the legitimacy to initiate these conversations. The influencers or experts hired occupy positions of credibility and visibility in the social context that are sometimes "borrowed" by relationships that may conflict with their interests and those of society. For practitioners in private organizations, experts and opinion formers are involved in order to respond legitimately to pressure from society, because industries in general are seen as villains: "it's very difficult in this era for companies to position themselves: they're always going to be seen as the villains who want to make a profit [...] the moment they show their face a little bit more, they're automatically villains" (Alice - AG GP DIR, 2019).

In this "age of storytellers", only technical information that counters is not very convincing: "We always try to provide honest, well-founded information. We need to look for ambassadors, subsidies, evidence, numbers, to bring a figure that the public believes in. And of course, that person only does it (the sponsored promotion) because they believe in what we're delivering." (Alice - AG GP DIR, 2019).

Regarding content management, the aspect of seeking relevance, which would represent the distinctiveness of public relations in the digital environment in the opinion of some

9 ARMANDO, Pseudônimo: interview [Feb. 2019]. Interviewer: Ágatha Eugênio Franco de Camargo Paraventi. São Paulo: 2019 Oral interview in person. Interview granted for the PhD Thesis *Relações Públicas, Ética e Relações de Poder: um estudo Grounded Theory sobre danos e limites morais*.

practitioners, appears in a way that simulates spontaneous exposure. The premises considered important involve: assessing the alignment of influencers' profiles and values using sophisticated methodologies; promoting "real" engagement beyond paying for the post, in order to promote added value to the influencer's reputation; and engaging influencers simultaneously with other audiences. However, there is a risk in the approach: even if the sponsored post is not a problem "because the strategic thing is the content", there is an increased focus on how the construction of the content will reduce the perception of the ad.

The exclusively positive speech of an influencer is perceived as the wrong approach. One organizational practitioner recounted an example of a contract in which the influencer "got lost", precisely because of the positive excess that led to the perception that it was sponsored: "she wanted to please us so much that there was no point in her post. She wanted to help, to be nice, but she got lost." (Oliver - ORG GP DIR, 2019)¹⁰. Another practitioner agrees that "the great difficulty is to have less 'look, I'm using this here, and it's very good'", and that it's positive if the influencer talks about other sides, because "it ensures greater transparency, even when they talk about aspects that aren't legal". He understands the need to move forward "I think we still need to make this line less blurred, and be clearer, [...] that it's the same thing as sending a review to a magazine or newspaper, that a journalist will evaluate the positive and negative points" (Alfredo - AG PP DIR, 2019).

This perception of the inefficiency of communication that looks like a paid advertisement (and indeed it is), as if it were a magazine editorial, added to the hiring of influencers who communicate and dialog on digital social networks with the various publics, completes the sensitive point of public relations in the digital context.

Although there is the reading that "it's hard for a guy like that to say anything for free" (Ana - AG GP DIR, 2019), there is also the understanding that good content doesn't require payment. A public relations agency practitioner who pursues strategies based primarily on organic content argues that

The exchange will be more valuable if your content is more valuable. We were an agency for a very relevant organization and at the events we put all the most expensive influencers, without paying anything, because **they were interested in the relevance of the content**. The better your content, the less it is subject to "technical" impasses. They do exist. Today people understand that you need money to promote, it's not just a relationship (Adriana - AG PP DIR, emphasis added, 2019)¹¹.

10 OLIVER, Pseudônimo: interview [Feb. 2019]. Interviewer: Ágatha Eugênio Franco de Camargo Paraventi. São Paulo: 2019 Oral interview in person. Interview granted for the PhD Thesis *Relações Públicas, Ética e Relações de Poder: um estudo Grounded Theory sobre danos e limites morais*.

11 ADRIANA, Pseudônimo: interview [Feb. 2019]. Interviewer: Ágatha Eugênio Franco de Camargo Paraventi. São Paulo: 2019 Oral interview in person. Interview granted for the PhD Thesis *Relações Públicas, Ética e Relações de Poder: um estudo Grounded Theory sobre danos e limites morais*.

Practitioners explain that the challenge of engaging organically is related to the “model that these people have identified to make money, to sell their influence to other people” (Alfredo - AG PP DIR, 2019) and, because of this, “this market is already so biased, commercial, that it is very difficult to approach and genuinely achieve engagement [. ...] even on public health issues, if you invite a very influential diabetes patient, who has a blog, to take part in an event, they will charge - something minimal, but they will charge” (Alice - AG GP DIR, 2019).

For Farias (2019, p. 61) “influencers are not public relations agents, as their actions are motivated by economic stimuli in favor of the discourse of the institutions for which they can be hired”. This understanding is in line with Archer and Harrigan’s (2016) research, a GT with digital influencers and public relations practitioners on the influence of sponsored relations on the activity. They argue that there is an urgent need to revise the old discourse that PR was outside of payment contexts and that relationships in the age of social media are relationship-based. The research with influencers revealed that financial motivation is a determining factor in accepting the work, even though this may not have been the intention at the beginning of the blog/page/profile/channel; that a small proportion do not accept payments in order to maintain freedom of production; that although they stated that the condition for accepting sponsorship was belief in the information, they wrote about brands that they did not necessarily believe in; and that contact with public relations practitioners is more about payments than relationships.

On the practitioners’ side, the study showed a strong expectation of “control” over the influencers’ content: that the interesting thing about working with influencers was the predictability and possibility of management compared to the press - because for the latter, any immediate event could take precedence over agendas that were under negotiation; that they perceived a movement among bloggers “so that no one would do anything for free”; and they felt that clients were beginning to question paying for the PR service, since they had to pay the influencer. In other words, a comparison of offering an advertisement, as in advertising.

It is understood that this dependence on paid content stems from the very actions of organizations interested in this social and symbolic capital, which, due to the “seduction” of direct contact with “someone who speaks to millions”, who costs “less than 10 ads in Veja” and who “has the potential of an ordinary person’s recommendation”, practitioners are continually recommending sponsorships to influencers to those they represent. One practitioner even addressed the concern of the vicious cycle: “They are little monsters created by the companies themselves” (Alice - AG GP DIR, 2019). There is therefore an urgent need to discuss the influence sponsored by the PR area, because

while traditional ‘advertising’, unlike PR, was seen as a way of paying third parties for influencing target audiences and was framed as only persuasive, PR theory mostly pretended that payment should not be part of the relationship equation” (ARCHER; HARRIGAN, 2016, p. 74, own translation).

The CONAR guide

The justification for the guide, in addition to the significant increase in notifications reported to the Ethics Council, highlights the “organic nature of the content produced by each of them, the basis of the relationship of trust between Influencers and their followers” (CONAR, 2021, p. 15), aiming to promote “responsible and transparent advertising in these environments” and “the best performance of roles by its participants”. In this sense, it is noteworthy that the process of discussions with experts and parties involved¹² in working groups without the participation of bodies representing public relations activity. Although public relations agencies and the Brazilian Association of Communication Agencies (Abracom) have participated in the Code of Conduct of the Brazilian Association of Digital Agents (Abradi), published in 2017, until the closing of this article no public relations or communication representative body organization had publicly spoken out about the CONAR Guide.

The 22-page guide is divided into five parts: 1) Definitions and Recommendations; 2) References; 3) Explanation of reasons; 4) Practical Table and 5) Form of presentation of advertising identification. The organization that hires, whether mediated or not by an agency, is described as an advertiser and the influencers are named as users.

The “Advertising by Influencer” classification involves three characteristics: 1) the dissemination of a product, service or cause; 2) commercial compensation, even if it is not financial, and 3) interference (control) by the advertiser over the content of the message, called editorial control. The “activated message” classification applies when a user refers to a product, service, cause or other characteristic sign associated with having received some type of non-remunerated benefit (gift, product, experiences, trip, invitation), without editorial control on the part of the advertiser or agency. It describes, in this sense, that it does not constitute advertising when a user mentions a product, service, cause or characteristic sign spontaneously (without having been preceded by any interaction, communication or contact with the advertiser). However, if the advertiser or agency shares the message on their official profiles and channels, new content will be created, which will be of an advertising nature subject to applicable rules. There is also the classification of engagement actions, through promotional initiatives, contests, challenges, or the like that encourage posts, but this typology is recommended to comply with the regulation of free distribution of prizes (Law no. 5768/1971 and other decrees that regulate raffles and cultural competitions).

The Guide recommends adequate clarification of the relationship between a post and advertisers and agencies, so that there is no lack of essential data that could damage the consumer’s assessment of the purchasing decision. It recommends the use of specific hashtags

12 Working Group at CONAR with the participation of representatives from the Interactive Advertising Bureau Brazil (IAB); the Brazilian Association of Advertisers (ABA); the Brazilian Association of Advertising Agencies (ABAP); the Brazilian Association of Radio and TV Broadcasters (ABERT); representatives of civil society, the Ethics Council and CONAR technical staff, and a hearing was also held with Influencer Agencies.

for advertising by influencers and for activated messages, describing hashtags or non-clarifying messages and the forms of presentation in different formats (video, text, photo, stories, among others). In item 1.1.1, on how to present the indication, there is a recommendation of “explicit mention of the terms, in an obvious and prominent way...[...] without, however, harming the advertising message” (CONAR, 2021, p. 04).

The results of the GT show that the mention of sponsored content, as recommended by the CONAR Guide, does not represent a challenge to the activity carried out by public relations practitioners. There is a convergence of this need. Challenges are identified in understanding what constitutes “editorial control”, as a criterion for identifying advertising by influencer, in a context observed in GT, of influencer involvement mechanisms to increase spontaneity in content through detailed strategic control. Another aspect not clarified in the Guide are actions to engage causes or challenges that do not involve raffles or benefits.

From the documentary analysis, the gap related to the main problem is verified, which impacts not only public relations or advertising activities, but the conception of the public sphere and the role of social actors in the digital platformed context. The construction of engagement and content strategies that may appear spontaneous, or the simulated construction of participation by conflicting legitimate actors when combined with the recommendation to indicate advertising by an influencer “without harming the advertising message” (CONAR, 2021, p. 04) maintains the risk of damage to the process of forming public opinion and democracy.

Public Relations as a simulator of the advertising “market of ideas”

Richard Edelman, in 2013, published the text “Paid Media: A chance of Heart”, in which he presents insights into the role of public relations in paid content. He explains that although he “was one of the hardliners who opposed any blurring of the lines between advertising and public relations”, given that “the previously sharp distinction between paid and earned media has become blurred. Sponsored content, native advertising and long-term aggregation agreements are being discussed.” He argued that “we in PR need to change the game. I still believe that we have the main task of pitching stories to journalists and bloggers. But there is a vital emerging business to be made in creating content for brands.” And he proposed “why not take advantage of the chance to make content the basis of advertising? Ads are inherently more effective when you have something to say”, proposing that PR fill this space, “given the experience gained in media and editorial knowledge honed by years of creating and co-producing stories, PR is best suited to partnership with paid media”. The way he closes the text highlights the challenge and risk of this change of position, quoting former president Teddy Roosevelt “At any point in your decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the right thing. Wrong and the worst thing you can do is nothing.” (EDELMAN, 2013), expressing that Edelman, in an attempt to point to the right thing, was not afraid to point to the wrong thing.

The crisis in the press and the commercialization of influence in the network society change the configuration of the space for public debate. Even though public relations have always maintained positions of dependence, power and conflicts, it is observed that the payment that permeates current “relationship strategies, content and social conversations” includes a strong interest in non-distinction between paid and unpaid content and intensification in the imbalance of contradictory information necessary for public debate based on informed decisions. Practitioners have taken on the role of hiring influencers, and investment recommendations to those represented further reduce investment in advertisements and mass media outlets, on which they are still dependent to promote content that is clearly of “public interest”. With the strength of economic power, the practitioner may be submitting the advocacy of approach’s logic of the “marketplace of ideas” (FITZPATRICK, 2006), or “market of ideas”, translated in this article as “public sphere”, into a “market of ideas” sponsorships.”

The strategies of information and promotion of relationships in their intentions of disguise and simulation reinforce control in the digital environment and weaken the public discussion that promotes democratic deliberation. The reduction in participation on platforms in the contemporary digital environment, in information bubbles (PARISER, 2011) is reinforced by public relations activity, by promoting conversations mediated by influencers that simulate the conversation circle of Lippmann’s (2010) social landmarks. Practitioners recognize that “when the agenda is good it does not require sponsorship” and that influencers are “little monsters created by the companies themselves” who are summoned precisely because of the legitimacy they have in being able to talk about topics that their representatives would not have. Concealing sponsorship characterizes censorship: it reduces the possibility of searching for contradictory information essential to forming an opinion. Added to the challenge of a lack of interpretative capacity on the part of the public, it prevents the delivery of the minimum definition of democracy (BOBBIO, 2000), which would include the space for expression of interests, participation in collective decisions and the understanding of the public sphere for social construction.

Final considerations

The simulation of sponsored public discussions puts democratic society and public relations activity itself at risk. A journalist interviewed at GT reflects that if:

it is better to pay 50 thousand to a blogger with 1 million followers on Instagram than to advertise in a vehicle; this undermines the press. Society loses an important entity to monitor how things happen. Because it’s not the Instagram blogger who will uncover the government’s, PSL’s, orange grove. It’s not the Instagram blogger who will reveal that Abdelmassih was raping his patients. They will not fulfill this role. And if you don’t have this agent, which is a fourth power, society becomes

more vulnerable. Is it good for the company? It's good at first, but ultimately it undermines society as a whole (Iago – PI JOR, 2019)¹³.

Transformations in the public sphere encourage an important review of professional responsibility. Relationships based on “organic” or “unpaid” influences by public relations practitioners are now deconstructed by the predominance of sponsored influences, both on the part of media outlets and on the part of the actors in this debate. Due to pressure, “non-alternative” or “intentional” use of this system of influence, power relations point to imbalance and impacts on topics historically protected by public relations such as democratic space, conscious decision-making and free will.

Advertising publicly demonstrates its concern with the transparency necessary for the decision-making process, ahead of the public relations activity, which has historically defended its distinctiveness linked to its value. In addition to taking advantage of the opportunity to speak to millions with an “incredible” return, it is seen as urgent for the activity to reflect the question asked by some practitioners: “where did the transparency, information, ethics, and especially the spontaneity of the training go?” (Ana - AG GP - DIR, 2019). The perception of public relations by some of the publics affected shows that there is a significant risk of the activity losing its identity.

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About the authors

Ágatha Eugênio Franco de Camargo Paraventi

PhD and Master in Communication Sciences, specialist in Strategic Management of Organizational Communication and Public Relations from the School of Communications and Arts of the University of São Paulo. Graduated in Public Relations from Faculdade Cásper Líbero. Professor of the undergraduate and postgraduate courses at Faculdade Cásper Líbero and of the Postgraduate Lato Sensu Strategic Management in Organizational Communication and Public Relations courses at ECA-USP and MBA Aberje. Researcher at the Center for Organizational Communication and Public Relations Studies - CECORP ECA/USP. Fiscal Advisor at the Brazilian Federation of Scientific and Academic Communication Associations - SOCICOM (2022-2024). E-mail: agathaamargo@yahoo.com.br.

Luiz Alberto de Farias

Associate Professor in Public Opinion (ECA-USP); post-doctorate in Communication and Advertising (University of Málaga-ES); doctor in communication and culture (Prolam-USP); master, specialist and bachelor in public relations (Cásper Líbero); journalist (Cruzeiro do Sul University). Associate Professor at the School of Communications and Arts at the University of São Paulo and permanent professor at PPGCOM-ECA-USP. Full Professor of the Postgraduate Program in Social Communication at the Methodist University of São Paulo. Former director of Intercom, former president and advisor of Abrapcorp. Author and co-author of several works, including Volatile Opinions; Public opinion, communication and organizations; Strategic public relations. E-mail: lafarias@usp.br.

Data availability

The data supporting this study are available upon request from the authors.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Editorial data

Received on: 05/20/2021

Accepted on: 10/25/2023

Editorial assistant: Aluzimara Nogueira Diniz, Julia Quemel Matta, Suelen Miyuki A. Guedes and Weverton Raiol

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