

Review Article | Derleme Makale

Revisiting the Oxymoron: A Theoretical Discussion on Public Interest and Public Relations

Oksimoronu Yeniden Ele Almak: Kamu Çıkarı ve Halkla İlişkiler Üzerine Teorik Bir Tartışma



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Abstract

The concept of public interest, which is used as a way for public relations to differentiate itself from propaganda or other negative connotations, is among the basic concepts utilized by public relations practitioners and academics working in the field of public relations. Compliments or criticisms of public relations are generally shaped by the discussion on whether public relations serve the public interest, although there is no direct reference to the concept. While mainstream approaches in public relations claim that public relations serve the public interest and the public interest is the *raison d'être* of public relations, critical approaches underline that public relations serve the market interest instead of the public interest. This study, which focuses on the public interest debates in the public relations literature with a theoretical discussion over the tobacco, alcohol, gambling, and confectionery industries, aims to examine the relation between public interest and public relations by opening the discussion on the axis of the concepts of dialogue, ethics, and democracy. In this context, the study claims that public relations cannot work the common good due to examples of the aforementioned industries that do not comply with the concept of public interest; however, public relations is a rhetorical instrument that makes corporations appear as if they serve the public interest.

Keywords: Public Relations, Public Interest, Ethics.

Öz

Halkla ilişkilerin kendini propagandadan ya da diğer olumsuz çağrışımlardan farklılaştırmasının bir yolu olarak kullanılagelen kamu çıkarı kavramı, halkla ilişkiler uygulayıcıları ve halkla ilişkiler alanında çalışan akademisyenlerin başvurduğu temel kavramlar arasında yer almaktadır. Halkla ilişkilere yönelik övgü ya da yergiler genellikle kavrama direkt olarak gönderme yapılmasa da halkla ilişkilerin kamu çıkarına hizmet edip etmemesi üzerinden şekillenmektedir. Öyle ki, halkla ilişkilerdeki anaakım yaklaşımlar, halkla ilişkilerin kamu çıkarına hizmet ettiğini ve hatta kamu çıkarının halkla ilişkilerin varlık nedeni olduğunu iddia ederken, eleştirel yaklaşımlar halkla ilişkilerin kamu çıkarına değil pazar çıkarına hizmet ettiğinin altını çizmektedir. Tütün, alkol, kumar ve şekerleme endüstrileri örnekleri üzerinden teorik tartışmanın yürütüldüğü bu çalışma, halkla ilişkiler literatüründeki kamu çıkarı tartışmalarını; diyalog, etik ve demokrasi kavramları ekseninde tartışmaya açarak halkla ilişkiler ve kamu çıkarı kavramları arasındaki ilişkiyi, irdelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çerçevede çalışmada, adı geçen endüstrilerin kamu çıkarı kavramıyla uyumsuz örneklerinden dolayı, halkla ilişkilerin kamu çıkarına hizmet edemeyeceği ancak halkla ilişkilerin şirketlerin kamu çıkarına hizmet ediyormuş gibi görünmelerini sağlayan retorik bir araç olduğu iddia edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Halkla İlişkiler, Kamu Çıkarı, Etik.



Introduction

Discussions that public relations serves or harms the public interest continue to be the agenda of public relations research. The dominant approach in public relations argues that public relations serves the public interest by balancing both the public and private interests while working for the client. On the other hand, critical approaches, including postmodern theory, postcolonial theory, feminist theory, and political economy, argue that public relations disregards and harms the public interest and leads to the erosion of the public sphere. In short, there are some researchers who think that public relations is against the public interest by its nature, and there are also researchers who argue that public relations can be used for public issues such as human rights, justice, environment, and public health (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012, p. 325).

In public relations literature, the relation between public interest and public relations is knitted with a dichotomy of ideas whether public relations serves the public interest or not. One side of the dichotomy reads public interest as a strategy of the field's self-justification. As a self-justification tactic, public relations is regarded as a fair practice that balances public interest by listening to marginalized people, by bringing up and putting forward societal issues in public agenda and by taking a stand in political issues. Indeed, public relations is used for societal issues by non-governmental organizations or activists, which is defined as "activist public relations"; however, the same cannot be said about the big corporations targeting profit maximization. The other side of the dichotomy positions the public interest as one of most important the principles of public relations but the public interest cannot be reached. This side of the dichotomy is grounded in the critical paradigm claiming that corporations harm public interest and block public discussions.

The discussions on the relation between public interest and public relations has a close link to the discussions of activist public relations, which can be defined as the activist use of public relations by the activist organizations or activist publics. The literature on activist public relations claims that activists also use public relations to bring up public issues (Heath & Waymer, 2009; Moloney et al., 2013; L'Etang, 2016; Toledano, 2016; Thompson, 2016; Wolf, 2019; Ciszek et al., 2021). For example, Thompson (2016, p. 213) differentiates activist public relations from corporate public relations in terms of benefiting society by providing dialogue rather than "corporate promotion". Likewise, Heath & Waymer (2009, p. 213) define activist public relations as "non-profit PR". Therefore, activist public relations literature sees the potential of public relations in serving public interest providing that public relations is used for non-profit. By discussing the potential of deep canvassing to be regarded as activist public relations Demetrious (2022) formulates theoretical discussion around the concepts of dialogue, ethics, and democracy. In other words, Demetrious (2022) discusses public relations' potential by its relations to dialogue, ethics, and democracy.

Within this context, this study aims to examine the relation between public relations and public interest by tracing the concept of public interest in public relations literature to question the claim that public relations serves the public interest. For tracing the place of concept, the concept of public interest and its place in public relations literature will be discussed. By following Demetrious (2022), the relation between the public interest and public relations will be examined by locating the discussion around the concepts of dialogue, ethics, and democracy. In the last part of the study, the claim that public relations serves public interest will be challenged with the examples from four industries including alcohol, tobacco, gambling and confectionary, which are defined as "Triumvirate of Sin"

(Trinks & Scholtens, 2015, p. 194), “controversial industries” (Sanchez et al., 2022, p. 9) or “risk industries” (Pietracatella & Brady, 2016, p. 54).

The Conceptualization of Public Interest

Different claims about the form, application and existence of public interest have always been discussed but the concept has started to come to the fore again in recent years as different disciplines have started to deal with this concept (Johnston, 2017, p. 6). What constitutes the public interest is discussed in the literature and it is emphasized that the meaning of the concept changes according to the context (Weaver et al., 2006, p. 15). For instance, the concept of public interest is used and perceived in different ways in politics, law, and public administration. While Sorauf (1957) rejects the concept as vague and utopian; Cassinelli (1958), Benditt (1973), Cochran (1974) and Flathman (1966) argue that the public interest is discussed in political thought. The writers agree that public interest is more than private interest (as cited in Messina, 2007, p. 35) and according to these authors, public interest cannot be defined easily. In fact, according to Cassinelli (1958) and Sorauf (1957) the public interest is “undiscoverable” (as cited in Messina, 2007, p. 36).

Like Cassinelli (1958), Sorauf (1957) and Benditt (1973) are persistent in arguing that the public interest is an ideal that is hard to reach. However, according to Flathman (1966) the situation is not so bleak, the author proposes criteria that can be applied to pursue the public interest, which should be universal. At this point, it can be said that Flathman’s approach bears resemblance to Kant’s understanding of ethics. However, unlike Kant, Flathman (1966) argues that whether the public interest is universal or not depends on the results of that action, and the action claiming to serve the public interest has to justify itself with evidence.

Cochran (1974, p. 329) divides different approaches to the public interest into four categories in the political science literature: *normative*, *absolutist*, *process*, and *consensualist*. While the *normative approach* states that the public interest is the supreme ethical principle in political matters, the *absolutist approach* argues that the ideal of public interest will never be achieved because the public interest is an ambiguous concept. While the *process approach* claims that there is more than one public, the *consensualist approach* finds the concept of public interest productive because it is a concept in which the general interest of the society, not a small segment, is considered (Cochran, 1974, p. 329-331).

If one follows Coombs & Holladay (2007, p. 40), who states that the public interest cannot be monolithic, then the question how the public interest will be observed becomes important. The postmodern approach continues this discussion by asserting that the public interest is a negotiated area (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 45). According to the postmodern approach, *publics* (not the public) and the public interest are discursively constructed concepts. Considering that the society consists of social groups with different interests, it does not seem possible to talk about a homogeneous public and a single public interest. In this case, it seems more possible to talk about the interests of the various publics’ interests rather than a single public interest. Besides, when describing public interest, the question of who decides whose interests are dispensable become important. In other words, deciding what constitutes the public interest is a critical point when discussing the concept.

Today, publics demand organizations to involve and to take a stand in public issues and act in public interest even more. In such an environment, organizations do not perform their traditional roles and become involved in social issues (Edwards, 2006, p. 843). That is to say, organizations cannot ignore and stay silent on public issues whether the problem is related to the results of their activities or not. Actually, publics have always demanded organizations to act in public interest, to be transparent or to account for their acts since the beginning of modern public relations. Modern public relations is said to be born in 20th century in the USA in such an environment that publics demanded for corporations accountability. For instance, Ivy Lee, who is known as the representative of “Public Information” Model, sent “Declaration of Principles” to editors in 1905, when the strikes increased and “public and government expectations of the corporation” grew (Russell & Bishop, 2009, p. 99). In “Declaration of Principles”, Ivy Lee stated that they aimed to provide true information (Russell & Bishop, 2009, p. 92). Therefore, unlike “Press Agency/Publicity” Model, in which telling the truth is not the main objective, “Public Information” Model was based on the public disclosure and transparency and was an outcome of a historical period.

Today, technological developments and especially social media platforms allow publics and especially activist publics to push organizations for being transparent and for serving public interest. Social media platforms provide publics to mobilize against any public interest issue, which forces organizations to give account to the publics. For example, activists can express public outrage on social media immediately about the organizations which do not commit themselves to the public interest and the organization feel obliged to act in the public interest. This tendency brings the relationship of public relations with the concept of public interest back to discussion because organizations are forced to use public relations to show that they serve the public interest through corporate social responsibility campaigns, sponsorships, or issue management. That is why, the connection of public relations with society has attracted the attention of public relations researchers in recent years. As a part of society, organizations are also actors who influence and are influenced by the public issues in social ecosystem. And that is why, public relations per se should be studied as a social phenomenon (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012). However, Ihlen & van Ruler (2009) argue that the social dimension of public relations is ignored by emphasizing that public relations is a societal phenomenon.

In this context, the question whether public relations can be beneficial to society or not waits to be answered. Coombs & Holladay (2007) answer the question by stating that public relations is not inherently good or bad, and in fact, public relations was born to be beneficial to society and has the potential to transform society by influencing social values. In other words, whether public relations is a good or bad practice for the society depends on the purpose for which it is used. According to Coombs & Holladay (2007, pp. 2–3) the argument that all public relations activities are good or bad is deficient because public relations can be used for both social good and evil. On the other hand, critical theory in public relations argues that public relations cannot serve any good value such as democracy, equality, or human rights; rather, it causes the erosion of democracy and civil society. Within this context, public relations is studied with its relation to society. For instance, Heath (2009, p. 17) asks about the way public relations functions in society. The inquiry about the societal role of public relations, its place in civil society and its relationship with public interest have become one of the topics discussed in public relations in recent years (Pendleton, 2013, p. 1). For this reason, it is necessary to trace

the concept of public interest in the public relations literature. To uncover how the concept of public interest is discussed in related research (Bivins, 1993; Weaver et al., 2006; Messina, 2007; Stoker & Stoker, 2012; Pendleton, 2013; Johnston, 2016; Johnston, 2017), the concept of public interest and its relation to the discussion of dialogue, ethics and democracy in public relations should be examined.

The Concept of Public Interest in Public Relations Literature

The concept of public interest is a vital for public relations (Gower, 2009, p. 40); however, neither the professionals nor the academic circles have been able to decide on what the public interest is discussed in public relations. We see the first traces of the concept of the public interest in the dominant public relations historiography. There is a consensus in the literature that public relations emerged as a response to the proliferation of public interest groups and public relations emerged in the USA in the first years of the twentieth century as a response to muckrakers (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2009, p. 324). The practices developed in response to the activities of muckrakers such as Ida Tarbell and Upton Sinclair are accepted as the beginning of modern public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 66).

Leading names and the “fathers” of public relations have also emphasized the public interest in public relations. For example, as one of the important names of public relations, John Hill establishes the relation between public relations and the public interest by saying that the task of public relations is to help the management in associating its own interests with the public interest (1958, as cited in Pendleton, 2013, p. 24). However, what the public interest meant in the early days of public relations should be explained. In this respect, the ideas of Walter Lippmann, Harold Lasswell and Edward Bernays can illuminate the subject. According to Lippmann (1995), Lasswell (1995), and Bernays (1923), public interest is determined not by the public, but by the elite (as cited in Weaver et al., 2006, p. 9). Indeed, Lippmann, Lasswell and Bernays argue that irrational publics should be ruled and guided by the elite; therefore, propaganda is necessary for (representative) democracy. The dominant public relations literature, which is based on such a framework and historical background, which also influences the way public relations is defined.

As emphasized above, one of the basic assumptions of the public relations conceptualization of the dominant public relations literature is that public relations works for the common good. Grunig & White’s (1992, p. 57) definition of public relations also claims that public relations serves the public interest. Similarly, Cutlip et al. (1994, as cited in L’Etang, 2002, p. 83) define public relations with its potential in enabling everyone’s voice to be heard, contributing to accurate information, gaining public approval on public issues, and increasing community well-being. Likewise, Rex Harlow (1977) examines 472 public relations definitions and reaches a comprehensive definition of public relations in which the responsibility of the organization in serving public interest is emphasized.

As Harlow (1977) emphasizes, public interest is one of the areas of responsibility of the management, which comes to mean that organizations are responsible for serving the public interest. To discharge this responsibility, organizations use symmetry and dialogue. According to Grunig (2000, p. 34) symmetry is actualized when public relations professionals balance private and public interests. Indeed, Grunig (2000, p. 43) states that “symmetry involves two-way advocacy of both organizational and public interests.” This point of view imposes responsibilities on public relations professionals by emphasizing

that public relations professionals have the duty of balancing public and private interests as a part of their *boundary spanning* role. This task requires public relations professionals to observe the needs of their clients and society; and to tread a fine line between them at once. This perspective also imposes some duties on public relations per se. That is, public relations should span boundaries between the organization's interest and public interest in a way that win-win situation is ensured.

As can be seen, balancing private interests and public interests is the *raison d'être* of public relations. That is why, working for common good is among the functions of public relations (Fitzpatrick, 1996; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Newsom et al., 2004). Those asserting that public relations serves the public interest argue that public relations not only helps the organization to become effective but also contributes to the society (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012, pp. 168-169). These assumptions underline that it is possible to benefit society and serve public interest only by increasing the dialogue between organizations and publics.

The Relation between Dialogue and Public Interest

For researchers in the dominant paradigm, dialogue means ethical and effective management of relations between organizations and their publics (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 2). For instance, Kent & Taylor (2002) underline that the concept of dialogue is a crucial in public relations to create a structure that will serve the interests of the organization and the public at the same time. Kent & Taylor (2002, p. 26) state that there is a theoretical transformation from symmetry to dialogue in public relations and list five features of the concept of dialogue including mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment. The literature's emphasis on symmetry, consensus, relationship, and transparency can be regarded as indicators that public relations has a potential to work for common good.

It can be deduced that organizations should empathize and establish dialogue with the members of the society and establish relations with them based on reciprocity, affinity, and loyalty if they want to serve the public interest. Apart from those concepts, one more concept can be added to Kent and Taylor's principles: transparency. Transparency, which is embedded in Grunig's "symmetry", Burkart's "consensus-oriented public relations" and Ledigham and Bruning's "relationship management" approaches, is based on the idea that companies should be more open and responsible to their publics (Wehmeier & Raaz, 2012, pp. 338-339). Unless the organizations are transparent and accountable, they cannot claim that they act in public interest because publics and stakeholders have the right to know the activities of the organizations that have an enormous effect in people's lives and society as a whole. That is why, the transparency is also followed by watchdog organizations and NGOs (Wehmeier & Raaz, 2012, p. 39). Besides, how the public relations professionals in the dominant coalition could serve the public interest is the biggest criticism of public relations. The underlying reason of the criticism stems from the fact that public relations practitioners cannot act against the corporation's interest while there receive salaries from them.

Vujnovic and Kruckeberg (2016), who claim that the concept of transparency is not examined from a critical paradigm in the literature, argue that public relations experts should come first in solving ethical issues related to transparency. Therefore, concepts such as public interest, transparency, and dialogue in public relations are also relevant to discussions of whether ethical public relations is possible. Because

the concept of ethics in public relations points to a process requiring dialogue (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 31).

Public Relations Ethics and Public Interest

Ivy Lee's "Declaration of Principles" defines organizational transparency as the basic tenets of public relations (Wehmeier & Raaz, 2012, p. 339). Therefore, it can be said that the declaration started the ethical discussions in public relations. Grunig and Hunt, on the other hand, state that the two-way symmetrical model, is a model for ethical public relations (Weaver et al., 2006, p. 14). Gaither et al. (2018, p. 47) emphasize that the contribution of the company to social change can increase with a society-oriented orientation rather than a company-oriented one, and that ethics should be the driving force of the company rather than eliminating negative reputation.

At this point, the relation between ethic and public interest becomes important. What ethics means is also a hard question to answer. Different approaches define ethics in different ways. For example, while *deontological approach* focuses on the rightness or wrongness of an action, *teleological approach* cares about the result of that action rather than the action itself. In other words, while the results of an action are important in the teleological approach and laws can be broken for this purpose, in the deontological approach, rules and laws are important, that is, what is ethical is decided by looking at the laws and rules (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 31). *The utilitarian approach*, which is a form of the teleological approach, evaluates whether an action is an ethical one based on whether that action brings the best results to many people. The idea that public relations professionals should work for the common good also seems to be compatible with utilitarian ethical philosophy. *The situational ethics* approach differs from these two approaches and assumes that an ethical decision is situation dependent. *Individual relativism*, on the other hand, argues that there is no objective ethical principle and claims that people should do what they believe is right (Day et al., 2001, p. 404).

Like the discussion about what ethics is and what it should be, the ethics in the public relations is controversial issue. Fawkes (2012), who divides public relations theory into four as excellence theories, advocacy theories, relationship management theories and critical theories, states that each theory approaches ethics differently. The excellence theory claims that public relations focuses on ethical codes, ideals and excellent behavior in the context of PR professionals' duties to customers and society (Fawkes, 2012, p. 120). Advocacy theories emphasize that public relations includes more than a bridge-building role and its role in persuasion. In this sense, Heath states that ethical advocacy requires equal access to the discussion by both parties (2007, as cited in Fawkes, 2012, p. 122). Relationship management theory sees public relations professionals as mediators between companies and their publics, and argues that ethics is sought in mutual trust, commitment, and relationship. The critical theory, which includes postmodernism and political economy, is more skeptical about the role of public relations (Fawkes, 2012, p. 123). The critical theory in public relations challenges the claim that public relations is an ethical practice or public relations practitioners behave ethically. For example, by conducting focus group to public relations practitioners in 13 organizations, Tilley (2015, p. 95) finds out that PR experts are aware of the unethical activities and unequal power relations do not allow them to act in an ethical way.

Writers who write from a critical perspective are also skeptical of the relationship of public relations with democracy. Researchers who oppose the claim that public relations

are ethical, state that it is idealistic and normative to argue that there is always a tension between public interest and private interests and that a balance will be established between these interests.

Democracy Debates in Public Relations Literature

According to Stoker and Stoker (2012, p. 39), working in the public interest of public relations is only possible with democratic processes, public discussions, and negotiations. Because when these processes are violated, the public interest is also violated. For this reason, public relations experts serve the common good if they enact the interests that will ensure the development of the society (Stoker & Stoker, 2012, p. 41). However, claims that public relations contribute to democracy seem to have risen to protect public relations from the accusation of propaganda (L'Etang, 2002, p. 84). That is, the public relations, striving to separate itself from propaganda, achieves this goal by claiming that public relations serve the public interest. This claim implies that public relations is a prerequisite, even necessary, for democratic processes. However, there are also researchers who assert that public relations undermines democratic processes.

Authors such as Sommerfeldt (2013) and Heath et al. (2013) think that public relations can contribute to democracy because it enables collective decision-making processes. Heath et al. (2013) who define democracy as a multi-vocal, multi-interested environment, claims that dialogue is important for democracy because public relations mediates the process in which all voices are allowed to be heard. Whether public relations will contribute to society can be determined by what public relations does to democracy (Heath et al., 2013). On the other hand, Sommerfeldt (2013) regards public relations as a tool for acquiring social capital by focusing on the importance of it for civil society and the public sphere. Seeing civil society as a prerequisite for democracy, Sommerfeldt (2013) states that the greatest contribution of public relations to society lies in enabling the society to function by allowing different views. According to Coombs & Holladay (2007, p. 27), who define public relations as the "megaphone for ideas" public relations allow different voices to be heard. Therefore, public relations can be a means of making all voices heard in the society and can make great contributions to the society.

However, Ewen (1996) states that public relations disregards public discourse and pose a threat to democracy. Likewise, Dutta-Bergman (2005) argues that public relations does not contribute to democracy by saying that it has colonial aims, and Stauber and Rampton (1995) states public relations is used to deceive people, thus it harms democratic processes. While defending public relations as a form of public communication, Moloney (2002) also objects to the idea of presenting public relations as a prerequisite for democracy. Finding this idea idealistic, Moloney (2002) believes that there is no conceptual equality between democracy and public relations. In other words, public relations does not guarantee democracy. In this context, Gower (2009, p. 41) alleges that anti-democratic potential of public relations is ignored and public relations is regarded as a defender of democracy. L'Etang (2002) on the other hand, explains that this link between democracy and public relations is dangerous for the public interest. Again, according to L'Etang (2002, p. 84) the link between public relations and democracy can be questioned and is exaggerated because of the use of public relations by the elite. To corroborate her ideas, she asks who will speak openly on behalf of the unemployed. Therefore, the critical approach in public relations contends that public relations serves the market interest, not the public interest.

Public Interest or Market Interest?

As discussed above, while the dominant paradigm states that public relations works for common good, the concept of public interest has not been addressed “as a theoretical and practical concern” in the public relations literature, although those who write from a critical approach criticize this stance (Johnston, 2017, p. 6). According to Messina (2007), the public relations literature ignores the role of the concept of public interest in public relations. Johnston (2017, p. 6) states that it is time for public relations to revise the concept of public interest and considers the concept to have the potential to create “continued and sustained engagement” to the field.

The lack of interest in the concept of public interest in public relations is due to the incompatibility of the empirical and positivist veins in the efforts to be accepted as the field of expertise (Johnston, 2017, p. 9). According to Johnston (2017) who argues that public relations should benefit from a deep understanding of the concept of public interest, the concept of public interest in public relations has “polarized” researchers and this has led to the “marginalization” of the concept in the literature.

However, the concept of public relations is not ignored completely in the field. In recent years, there have been studies that have placed the concept of public interest in public relations at the center of research and have begun to evaluate the conceptualization of public interest as one of the new ways of thinking and criticizing public relations. Those studies explore the relationship of public interest and the professionalization of the profession (Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995; Messina, 2007), examine the relation between ethics and public interest (Bivins, 1993; Versailles, 2013), emphasize the importance of effective communication in protecting the public interest in organizations (Versailles, 2013), propose public interest as a new concept to think about public relations (Johnston, 2017) open the discussion of what public interest means for the field of public relations (Johnston, 2016), use the concept of public interest to understand and discuss the societal role of public relations (Pendleton, 2013), focus on what public relations professionals should do to serve the public interest (Stoker & Stoker, 2012), examine the concept of public interest as a part of the public sector and government (L'Etang, 2004) and propose a new concept of “public interest relations” (Brunner & Smallwood, 2019).

Bivins (1993, p. 126) starts his work by asking whether public relations can serve the public interest considering its roles such as mediation and advocacy, and that public relations has potential to participate in and encourage public debate, but in order to realize this potential, public issues are determined and presented to the public, and he concludes by saying that legal mechanisms are needed. However, Bivins (1993, p. 118) states that *Public Relations Society of America* (PRSA) does not impose any sanctions on its members despite its ethical codes, therefore PRSA's ethical codes cannot provide “ideological or conceptual guidance” (Bivins, 1993, p. 119). In addition, according to Bivins (1993, p. 126) the answer to the question of what constitutes serving the public interest can be found in the answer to what public relations really is. It is impossible to serve the public interest unless there is a viable definition of the concept. Seib and Fitzpatrick (1995) agree with Bivins by arguing that public relations professionals can determine what is in the public interest. According to Bivins (1993) public interest should not be the criterion of specialization but should be among the main assets of public relations. Likewise, Brunner and Smallwood (2019, pp. 250–254) also argue that “public interest relations” could only be possible if organizations build relationships with all stakeholders,

provide dialogue and diversity, and pursue organizational interest and public interest at the same time.

Messina (2007, p. 29), who looks at public interest and public relations from an ethical perspective and proposes the concept of “ethical persuasion”, emphasizes that the concept of public interest in public relations is related to ethics, and states that public interest is a difficult concept to guide public relations experts. In other words, the public interest is not a concept that public relations experts can decide on; and the concept cannot be regarded as a standard through which ethical practice is evaluated. If the standard of ethical behavior in public relations is the public interest, then public relations experts must know how to define the public interest (Heath, 2001, p. 5; Messina, 2007, p. 35).

Those claims also raise a debate about who should protect the public interest in organizations. The answers to that question vary. First view argues that public relations is conducted by organizations and that the society gives the task of protecting the public interest to these organizations and that organizations are obliged to comply with the public interest (Pendleton, 2013, pp. 38-39). The second view claims that public relations specialists should serve the public interest independently of the organization they work for (Pendleton, 2013, p. 39). For example, Brunner and Smallwood (2019, p. 256) claims that practitioners should recognize the importance of “public interest relations” and encourage their managers to take “public interest relations” seriously.

Those who advocate that the public interest should be pursued by organizations, conceptualize public relations as the “conscience of the organization”. In this regard, L’Etang (2002) interprets public relations’ being the “conscience of the organization” as an idealistic stance because companies work for corporate benefits, not for societal benefits. According to Weaver et al. (2006, p. 14), who use the concept of public interest to analyze and criticize power relations, if propagandists are defined as those who use persuasion to serve their own interests, we can claim that symmetrical communication is something different from propaganda. Because two-way symmetrical communication means connecting with the public to make decisions for the organization and the public categories (Weaver et al., 2006, p. 14). However, although it is called symmetrical communication, there are also examples where organizations do not work for common good. According to Stoker and Stoker (2012, pp. 31-32) public relations has been one of the most vigorous advocates of social responsibility but public relations’ having role in in the public interest means more than doing good in society. Acting in the public interest means being a good member of society. However, there are examples where public relations practitioners violate the public interest by preventing the free flow of ideas for the sake of private interests, framing public discussion, events, issues, and policies (Stoker & Stoker, 2012, p. 39). For example, organizations’ corporate social responsibility do not always act in public interest (Brunner & Smallwood, 2019, p. 247). If the principle of public relations of an organization is based on the organizational interest (not the public interest), public interest cannot be served. Therefore, based on these discussions in the literature, it would not be wrong to say that public relations work for the benefit of the organization, namely the market interests (L’Etang, 2002, p. 90). And this claim is crystallized in “controversial industries” (Sanchez et al., 2022, p. 9), which contradict with public interest per se.

The Public Interest in “Triumvirate of Sin” and “Risk Industries”

The sectors such as tobacco, alcohol, and gambling are titled as the “Triumvirate of Sin”(Trinks & Scholtens, 2015, p. 194). Pietracatella and Brady (2016, p. 54) adds sugar industry to that list by stating that *World Health Organization* regards sugar, gambling, and tobacco as “risk industries”. Indeed, it is said that gambling, alcohol, and confectionary are industries “where responsibility for the misuse of its products and services, is critical” (Grayson, 2006, as cited Hancock et al., 2008, p. 65). Alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and confectionary are also associated with addiction and severely criticized for being harmful for public health. Those four industries use public relations strategies to answer public criticism.

First, tobacco industry uses strategic frames to overcome criticism. Tobacco industry creates arguments against public criticism by framing smoking as a “freedom of choice”, which means people have freedom to choose not to smoke (Friedman et al., 2015, p. 252). Friedman et al. (2015, p. 252) claims that the industry also uses frame of “blame” by implying smokers are to blame, which serves tobacco industries’ interests. Therefore, it can be said that tobacco industry abdicates its responsibility on “selling deadly product”s and creating harm on public health by using freedom of choice and blame rhetoric (Friedman et al., 2015, p. 258). Tobacco companies also use responsibility rhetoric in a strategic way. Freidman (2009, p. 821) argues that tobacco industry noticed that they should seem like they are socially responsible “even if in reality they changed nothing substantively”. International tobacco company *Philip Morris International* is an exemplary in this case. That is, *Philip Morris* claims that it delivers “a smoke-free future transformation” and conducts “Unsmoke Your World” campaign to make people quit smoking. On its website *Philip Morris* states that it produces smoke-free products for smokers.¹ At first glance, it might seem as if *Philip Morris* serves public interest and especially public health by fighting against smoking; however, it can be said that *Philip Morris* tries to gain anti-tobacco market share, too. In this vein, it can be said that by using public relations *Philip Morris* wishes to look like it serves public interest.

When it comes to alcohol industry, it is seen that the industry launches corporate social responsibility campaigns in five areas including informing about the alcohol, preventing drunk driving, research on alcohol, policy making, and societal roles of the companies(Mialon & McCambridge, 2018, p. 670). According to Yoon and Lam (2013, pp. 3-6) alcohol industry frames problems related to alcohol as individual problems, represents themselves as self-regulatory and associates its initiatives with “sustainable development and humanitarian endeavours” by using corporate social responsibility. Therefore, Yoon and Lam (2013, p. 7) concludes that alcohol industry’s corporate social responsibility is based on industry’s own corporate interests.

Not only profit-oriented organizations but also NGOs may harm public interest. For example, as a non-profit organization, *DrinkWise*, founded in 2005 in Australia, aims “to help bring about a healthier and safer drinking culture in Australia” (DrinkWise, n.d.). Pietracatella and Brady (2016, p. 59) argues that *DrinkWise* frames alcohol issue in a way that parents are held responsible for children’s drinking attitudes. Also, *DrinkWise* divides the publics into two: “responsible and irresponsible drinkers” and ignores the industry’s role in promoting alcohol (Pietracatella & Brady, 2016, pp. 62-63). Pietracatella and Brady (2016, p. 62) claims that the way that *DrinkWise* frames the issue supports alcohol industry’s interests.

Like alcohol and tobacco industry, gambling industry also alleges that people who gamble are irresponsible (Dow Schüll, 2012). Jones et al. (2009, p. 198) put forth that the gambling companies' (in the UK) corporate social responsibility reports involve both public interests and private interests. That is, gambling companies wish to run their business in a transparent way, which eliminates the risk of defining gambling as crime. At the same time, gambling companies also aim to gain a place in gambling industry (Jones et al., 2009, pp. 198-199). In another research, the writers (Griffiths et al., 2009, pp. 420-421), who conduct survey with gamblers, find out that the gamblers choose the online gambling companies which provide them responsible gambling. In other words, gambling companies' being socially responsible can serve for the company itself.

Like "Triumvirate of Sin", confectionary industry also faces lawsuits on public health and especially obesity. In the face of such criticism, sugar companies launch campaigns on public health to look like promoting health with their products, which ends up with the products titled "vitamin-enriched candy, whole-grain chocolate cereals, and trans fat-free salty snacks"(Nestle, 2006, p. 2529). The recent example of this is "the world's largest food and beverage company" *Nestlé* claims that it produces healthy foods with its slogan "Good Food, Good Life".² However, *Nestlé* faces criticism from activists asserting that *Nestlé's* corporate behaviors are not compatible with the public interests. In recent years, *Nestlé* has come to the fore for worsening the drought in the region by abusing the water resources in California. In addition, *Nestlé* faced heavy criticism of Greenpeace's because of using palm oil used in *KitKat* in 2010 and faced child labor lawsuits in 2012. *Nestlé* has been boycotted because of its harming public interests. The best known of these boycotts is the "Nestlé Boycott", which started in the USA in 1977, claimed that *Nestlé's* infant food threatened child health. The "Nestlé Boycott" has been associated with "corporate accountability" (Post, 1985, p. 113) and exemplifies "how human rights and commercial interests are traded off" (Post, 1985, p. 128). Critics allege that the industry's public relations efforts are cover-ups if they do not make regulations (Post, 1985, p. 114). Today, boycotts and reactions against *Nestlé* are carried out by the "International Nestlé Boycott Committee", and *Nestlé* has to respond to the criticism of environmentalists and non-governmental organizations by using public relations.

The examples from tobacco, alcohol, gambling, and confectionery sectors indicate that public relations, as a discursive and rhetorical tool, help organizations to claim they serve public interest. Knowing public outrage increase day by day, those sectors rely on the rhetorical power of public relations to respond to public criticism. Under these circumstances, public relations becomes a tool not for serving public interest but for pretending as if the industry prioritize public health and public interest over the market interest.

Conclusion

The relation between public relations and public interests has always been on the agenda of public relations. Mainstream approaches argue that public relations serves the public interests; however, critical approaches claim that public relations should serve the public interests by stating that the reality is the opposite. According to the critical approach, balancing public interests and private interest is an ideal which is impossible to reach. In fact, the claim that the public relations practitioners serve public interest while working in the dominant coalition seems like a counsel of perfection. In reality, the balancing of the interests of their clients and the public interest by public relations professionals creates a "social dilemma" (Pendleton, 2013, p. 53). That is, public relations experts, who are

supposed to protect their client's benefits, cannot act against their clients' will. Therefore, public relations practitioners hover between the organization's interest and the common good (Brunner & Smallwood, 2019, p. 256).

The claim that public relations is public relations was born to serve the public interest in the first-place functions as a self-justification because stating that public relations serves public interest implies that public relations differs from propaganda. In order to strengthen their argument, mainstream approaches set forth that public relations can establish engagement between organizations and their publics, public relations practitioners can behave ethically in terms of societal issues and public relations can support democratic process. However, all those claims create an illusion about public relations. Such that corporations use public relations strategies to demonstrate themselves as if they are serving the public interest while they are actually standing up for themselves.

As the examples from "Triumvirate of Sin", "controversial industries" and "risk industries" show, it does not seem possible to say that public relations serves the public interest. Instead, it would not be wrong to claim that corporations use public relations strategies to pretend as if they do not harm the public health or public interest. It is not surprising for corporations serving their industry's interest; however, the way that those organizations claim they serve public interest "at the expense of the public interest" is not ethical (Pietracatella & Brady, 2016, p. 62).

In a nutshell, public relations strategies provide rhetorical tools for such industries to evade responsibility for the harm they bring to the publics. In fact, the claim that those industries, which harm public health and act against public interest by their nature, serve the public interest seems like an oxymoron. The debate on whether public relations serves the public interest is here to stay. Nevertheless, new questions on the relation between public relations and public interest should be formulated. Future studies may focus on how different industries use public relations strategies to look like they are acting in the public interest. In this way, public relations literature can get out of this vicious circle and start more realistic discussions.

Notes

1 (Transforming Our Company | PMI - Philip Morris International, n.d.)

2 (Nestlé: Good Food, Good Life | Nestlé Global, n.d.)

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Oksimoronu Yeniden Ele Almak: Kamu Çıkarı ve Halkla İlişkiler Üzerine Teorik Bir Tartışma

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Genişletilmiş Özet

Kamu çıkarı, halkla ilişkilerin tanımlamalarında sıkça karşılaşılan ve halkla ilişkileri propagandadan ayırtmaya yarayan bir kavramdır. Halkla ilişkilerin kamu çıkarına hizmet ettiği yönündeki fikirler, halkla ilişkiler literatüründe kendine sıklıkla yer bulurken, halkla ilişkilerin kamu çıkarını zedelediğine yönelik iddialar da bulunmaktadır. Bu açıdan, halkla ilişkiler literatüründe halkla ilişkilerin kamu çıkarını gözetip gözetmediği yönünde bir fikir ayrılığı bulunmakta, bu fikir ayrılığı halkla ilişkilere olan yaklaşımla belirlenmektedir. Halkla ilişkilerdeki anaakım yaklaşımlar halkla ilişkilerin kamu çıkarını gözetmediğini ileri sürerken, postmodern teori, postkolonyal teori, feminist teori ve politik ekonomi gibi eleştirel yaklaşımlar halkla ilişkilerin kurum çıkarına ve pazarın çıkarına hizmet ettiğini iddia etmektedir. Eleştirel yaklaşımlara göre, halkla ilişkiler pratiğinin kamu çıkarı ile özel çıkarları dengelemesi mümkün değildir çünkü kurumlar için çalışan halkla ilişkiler uygulayıcılarının kamu yararına hizmet ettikleri iddiası gerçekçi görünmemektedir. Bu nedenle, eleştirel araştırmacılara göre halkla ilişkilerin kamu çıkarına hizmet ettiği yönündeki iddialar idealisttir ve gerçeklikten uzak bir değerlendirme sunmaktadır. Buna karşılık, halkla ilişkiler pratiğinin insan hakları, adalet, çevre, halk sağlığı, sürdürülebilirlik gibi alanlarda kullanılabileceğini ve kamu çıkarına hizmet edebileceğini savunan araştırmacılar da bulunmaktadır. Bu noktada, anaakım yaklaşım halkla ilişkilerin kamu yararına hizmet ettiğini söylerken, halkla ilişkilerin propagandadan farklı olduğunu da ima eder. İddiaları farklı olduğu halde, halkla ilişkiler literatüründeki bu ikiliğin her iki kutbu da kamu yararını halkla ilişkilerin en önemli ilkelerinden biri olarak işaretlemektedir.

Halkla ilişkiler ve kamu çıkarı kavramlarının arasındaki ilişkiyi teorik olarak tartışmaya açan bu çalışmada, halkla ilişkiler literatüründeki söz konusu tartışmaların ortaya konması amaçlanmaktadır. Bu çerçevede, çalışmada diyalog, etik ve demokrasi kavramları, halkla ilişkiler ve kamu çıkarı kavramları arasındaki ilişkiyi irdelemek üzere tartışmaya açılmaktadır. Diyalog ve kamu çıkarı arasındaki ilişki, kamu yararına hizmet etmek isteyen örgütlerin kamularıyla empati kurmaları, diyalog geliştirmeleri ve onlarla karşılıklı güven ve etkileşim temelinde ilişkiler kurmaları gerekliliği üzerinden tartışılmaktadır. Etik ve kamu çıkarı arasında ilişki, halkla ilişkilerin bizatihi kendisinin etik bir pratik olup olmadığı ve kamu çıkarı ile özel çıkarlar arasında bir dengenin kurulup kurulamayacağı tartışması çerçevesinde değerlendirilmektedir. Demokrasi ve kamu çıkarı arasındaki ilişki ise, halkla ilişkilerin demokrasiyi garanti edip etmeyeceği, halkla ilişkilerin anti-demokratik potansiyelinin olup olmadığı ve halkla ilişkilerin demokrasinin savunucusu olarak görülüp görülemeyeceği tartışmasıyla bağlantılandırılmaktadır.

Halkla ilişkilerin kamu çıkarına mı yoksa özel çıkarlara mı hizmet ettiği yönündeki tartışma; tütün, alkol, kumar ve şekerleme endüstrilerinin halkla ilişkiler faaliyetleri üzerinden örneklendirilmiştir. Tütün endüstrisi, kendisine yöneltilen eleştirileri bertaraf etmek için sigara içme eylemini “seçme özgürlüğü” ve “suçlama” retoriği ile çerçevelemekte ve insanların sigara içmeme hakkı olduğuna vurgu yapmaktadır. Böylelikle, tütün endüstrisi sigaranın sağlığa olan zararları konusundaki sorumluluğunu

üzerinden atmakta ve sigara içmeyi tercih edenleri suçlayarak bu konudaki sorumluluğu sigara içen kişilerin omuzlarına yüklemektedir. Tütün sektörü aynı zamanda, sosyal sorumluluk sahibi olarak görülmesi gerektiği fikrine de sıcak bakmakta ve bunun en güncel örneğini dünyanın önde gelen uluslararası tütün şirketi Philip Morris International vermektedir. *Philip Morris*'in insanları sigara bırakmaya teşvik etmek için başlattığı “Unsmoke Your World” kampanyası, ilk bakışta şirketin sigarayla mücadele ederek kamu çıkarına hizmet ediyormuş gibi görünmesine neden olmaktadır.

Alkol endüstrisinde ise gerçekleştirilen sosyal sorumluluk kampanyaları aracılığıyla, alkol sorunu bireysel bir sorun olarak çerçevelenmekte ve özellikle çocuklarda ve gençlerdeki alkol sorunlarının sorumlusu olarak aileler gösterilmektedir. Alkol endüstrisi bu sayede alkolün yarattığı sorunlara ilişkin sorumluluğunu kendi üzerinden bireylere atmaktadır. Kumar endüstrisi de benzer şekilde, kumar oynayan insanları sorumsuz insanlar olarak tanımlamaktadır. Özellikle, sorumlu bir şekilde kumar oynama retorliğini öne süren kumar endüstrisi, sosyal sorumluluğunu yerine getirdiği gibi bir illüzyon da yaratmaktadır. Son olarak, şekerleme endüstrisi de kamu sağlığı ve özellikle obeziteyle ilgili eleştirilere kamu sağlığına yönelik yaptığı kampanyalarla yanıt vermektedir. Bu sayede, ürünlerinin sağlığa yararlı olduğunu iddia eden şekerleme endüstrisi de retorik araçları kullanmaktadır. Örneğin, dünyanın en büyük yiyecek ve içecek şirketi olan Nestlé'nin “İyi Beslen, İyi Yaşa” sloganı, bugün ve gelecek nesiller için herkesin yaşam kalitesini artırdığını ve gıdanın gücünü açığa çıkardığını iddia etmektedir. Kurumsal davranışlarının kamu çıkarlarıyla uyumlu olmadığı yönünde aktivistlerden gelen eleştirilerle karşı karşıya olan Nestlé'nin son yıllarda Kaliforniya'daki su kaynaklarını tüketerek bölgedeki kuraklığı körüklediği, ürünlerinde palm yağı kullandığı ve çocuk işçi çalıştırdığı da tartışılmaktadır.

Söz konusu örnekler aracılığıyla, halkla ilişkilerin kamu çıkarına hizmet ettiğini söylemenin pek mümkün görünmediği söylenebilir. Bunun yerine, şirketlerin halkla ilişkileri kamu çıkarına hizmet ettiklerini iddia etmek üzere retorik bir araç olarak kullandıkları söylenebilir. Bu çerçevede çalışmada, tütün, alkol, kumar ve şekerleme sektörlerinin kamu çıkarı kavramıyla uyuşmayan örneklerinden dolayı, halkla ilişkilerin kamu çıkarına hizmet edemeyeceği ancak halkla ilişkilerin şirketlerin kamu çıkarına hizmet ediyormuş gibi görünmelerini sağlayan bir stratejik bir iletişim aracı olduğu iddia edilmektedir. Bu açıdan, gelecek çalışmalar farklı sektörlerin kamu çıkarına yönelik söylemleri hangi pratikler ve retorik araçlar aracılığıyla dolaşıma soktuğunu irdeleyebilir. Nitekim, bir yandan halkla ilişkilerin kamu yararına hizmet edip etmediği konusundaki tartışma güncelliğini korumaktayken, diğer yandan halkla ilişkiler ve kamu çıkarı arasındaki ilişkiye dair güncel sorular ve sorunlar yanıtlanmayı beklemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Halkla İlişkiler, Kamu Çıkarı, Etik.

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