

Socially responsive communication (very short introduction)

Oliver Vodeb

Socially responsive communication consists of different approaches and works on the level of activism as well as on the level of business. They were created mostly in the field of conflict between the dominant - marketing and the challenging - critical discourse, in the field of constant friction, innovation, change and practical testing of communication concepts. This communication approaches operate on different social fields and are in productive conflict with each other. The concept overcomes the usual hermetic discourses of critique, while not falling in the trap of cooptation. The four approaches are:

Culture jamming

Participatory communication

Socially responsive social communication

Socially responsive advertising

This different communication concepts and practices are supplementing each other, although they may also act independently. They match the following characteristics, where each concept and practice shall have beside characteristic 4, 5, 6 and 7 also the characteristics of at least one of the first three.

1. It shows hidden relationships of power in society
2. It establishes communities of cooperation
3. It opens a new communication channel
4. It participates actively in social-cultural processes
5. It pays attention to its own effects of communication on society and culture with the purpose to communicate in a socially responsible manner
6. It self deconstructs in the communication processes with the purpose to establish a critical distance of the public to the communicator
7. It establishes dialogue and/or conditions for the dialogue

Culture jamming is communication practice of establishing constructive conflict on the semiotic level. Since its action is on the level of an image, it is the more vulnerable to the mechanisms of cooption. Most of culture jamming is inefficient at its best, big portions fall in to trap of cooption and are therefore counter effective. Culture jamming is efficient only when it is in the very beginning of its conceptualisation as well as in the implementation phase understood as part of a continuous process of establishing conditions for dialog, and not as a final result and (visual) product. Culture jamming is basically a self-educational practice of critical media literacy, thinking and practicing possible worlds in the spirit of critical pedagogics. Educational practice of Culture jamming proves that communication in public space should not be separated from its (non)pedagogical dimensions, which partially compensates for the missing CJ by not actively including wider public into the communication processes and into the formulation of messages.

Participative communication derives from the concept of creating contents and meanings in communication practices within a community. In this respect it completes CJ. It is efficiently manifested only within specific contexts of its communication, and not by itself. Only when its pillars are initiatives, as living organisms, it can generate meaning. Communication tools within living initiatives build context that they belong to based on a dialogue. At the same time they tend towards social edges of initiatives with the purpose to scrutinise and include them. Instead of one-way communication or communication that does not (from the technical point-of-view) allow return loop, participative communication has a characteristic of dialogue in the sense of (also technologically represented) common rearticulation of social reality in the process where image surrenders its place to discussion, and its medium is free association through intimate communication channels.

Socially responsive social communication is a critique of social marketing. It is a communication practice of legal institutions, while creators of campaigns of social communication are as a rule communication professionals, i.e. mainly advertising agencies. The fact revealed by the analysis studying the mechanisms of the criteria defining the quality of professional communication in public space arouses the doubt on the nature of communication approaches used for institutionally introduced purposes of social welfare. This fact is additionally confirmed by the analysis of the marketing theory. Social marketing using social advertising basically reproduces the existing social relations

of power by not actively intervening into the ideologically reproduced social matrix, but rather by considering it a *natural fact*, and at the same time it does not scrutinise it explicitly. It *sells* ideas as *product*. Socially responsive social communication, on the other hand, understands reality as social construct that can in certain cases be modified through communicating the needs. Social responsibility is built into the concept of social communication in critical communication activity in the public space of communication, which is the subject of analysing socially conditioned backgrounds of social problems.

Socially responsive advertising is a critique of commercial advertising. It does not work on the level of declarative violation of norms, creating with the image of a rebel apparently critical and counter-cultural comments, while actually manipulating with the laws of distinction. Social advertising combines products and services it advertises with specific communication surplus, i.e. cognitive gift, that works as cognitive quality inherent to a product or service, having at the same time the potential for a wider social commentary. Socially responsive advertising actively cooperates in partial deconstruction of cultural patterns, which is to a large extent the result of commodification of culture as social engineering of market communication. Communication surplus – cognitive gift – is in oscillating relationship with the advertised product, service and, most importantly, with the signed advertiser. Since socially responsive advertising manifests itself in public space, it is because of the different ways of reading the advertisement as text by different publics that the communication gift oscillates. There are for the moment very few optimum situations where the advertised image overlaps with real business practices used by companies. For this reason socially responsive advertising shall in the context of campaigns create informative and dialogue-based environments for the public scrutiny of business practices, and shall work towards the union of communication gift and economic practices in companies.

Communication approaches of *socially responsive communication* complete each other in their structural opposition. Socially responsive communication works where self-reference and autistics of dominant communication practices in public space of communication stop. Different communication approaches of socially responsive communication act individually, and they are connected to each other mainly through symbolic capital created with individual approaches, and institutional cuts as the result of public re-articulation of socially fabricated

reality. However, the latter is not the result of commodified (visual) communication, enforced subjectivity and images or interpersonal relationships mediated by spectacle, but a result of socially responsive communication processes generating through specific (theoretic) practice sensibility and insight into the complexity of communication in public space. Critical analysis based on interdisciplinary foundations as well as actions connecting theory and practice are important for the progress of (visual) communication profession, as well as for the research and implementation of (visual) communication approaches in practice, thus creating principles of activities that shall not separate ethics from professionalism and efficiency from responsibility. Such understanding of (visual) communication works towards better understanding of media and communication environment, and consequently also towards (visual) communication practices much more appropriate and efficient for the media and communication environment typical of the present time.