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Ethical values and norms in the communication systems of public institutions

Abstract

Objectives: This article aims to provide a theoretical analysis of communication in public institutions with regard to ethical values and norms. More specifically, the objective is to try to understand how ethics is anchored in communication systems in organizations acting on behalf and for the community.

Research Design & Methods: The paradigm which the authors refer to is the social communication theory, theories of professional ethics and writings of management specialists who work in the field of organisational communication.

Findings: While exploring the literature in the said fields, the authors draw analytical conclusions regarding values and norms which should (normative approach) characterise the system of internal and external communication in public institutions, undertaking an attempt to build a theoretical model at the same time.

Implications / Recommendations: The analysis shows that the values and norms necessary for public institutions to operate properly are connected primarily with the need for all groups of stakeholders focused around this process to co-operate.

Contribution / Value Added: The authors try to organise the values and norms typical for communication systems in public institutions into a model.

Article classification: theoretical article: conceptual article

Keywords: ethics, communication, morality, norms, values, public institution

JEL classification: M140

Introduction

Communicating and communication[1] are key terms existing nowadays and analysed both in studies of social sciences and humanities and in daily life of individuals, groups and organisations. Many scientific articles have been written, numerous studies carried out, and textbooks and handbooks written on this topic, even though it is only about 45 years old (Watzlawick et al., 1967; Habermas,

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[1] Many languages do not distinguish between those two terms, e.g. in English there is only one term: *communication*. For the purposes of this article a distinction has made between these two terms: communicating is understood as a process of interaction between entities (people and/or groups, organisations), which consists of creating and negotiating meanings through symbolic, verbal and non-verbal interaction (Cheney et al., 2011, p. xii; Mumby, 2013, p. 14); and communication is a term underlining the existence of a system within the meaning of a set of elements which are in a mutual relationship (Bertalanffy, 1984, p. 86).

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1981a, 1981b; Johannesen, 1990; Graber, 2003; Huang, 2004; Welch & Jackson, 2007; Stewart, 2011; Maigret, 2012). Nevertheless, there are many areas requiring investigation, expert evaluations, analyses or discussions (Donsbach, 2006). The topic which has so far been examined poorly seems to be the issue of ethics in the communication process and communication system. Probably the first, and definitely the first comprehensive, book discussing this issue is a handbook titled *The Handbook of Communication Ethics,* published in 2011 (Cheney et al., 2011).

The etymology of the word "communicating" itself shows implicit values and ethical norms. It is derived from Latin word *communicare* and originally meant participating and connecting rather than passing on content. Today it combines both these elements, because it means both the participation of the sender and the receiver in the same process and the act of exchange which takes place between them as with the help of various techniques, a symbolic transaction occurs between the sender and the receiver of the message (Maigret, 2012, p. 35). A significant contribution to the understanding of this process has been made by research carried out by culture anthropologists and developmental psychologists, who not so much want to learn the ways and forms of communicating but rather understand the reasons for the occurrence of communication as a process that takes place between people (Tomasello, 2015). Their research shows that communication evolved as part of group ventures (Tomasello, 2015, p. 75); for example, children communicate with each other by informing and interpreting in such way as to encourage co-operation at the same time (idem, p. 39). This means that co-operation was a norm which contributed to the establishing of relationships between people using intentional information. This is why the analysis of relations between communication and ethics seems to be a topic enabling one to understand the nature of the communication process better.

The connection between communicating and ethics can be studied at least in four areas. The first one is the interpretation of the placement of ethics in the very process of communicating (Johannesen, 1990); the second is the topic of ethical communicating; the third is the practical issue, meaning how to communicate ethical behaviours; and the fourth is the ethics of communicating in individual fields, such as management, marketing, public relations, human resources, media, linguistics and everyday social practice, with particular emphasis put on cultural diversity. Communicating and ethics are thus strongly connected with each other through humans, because they are the communicators (Johannesen, 2001, p. 126) and because it is the entity that is the bearer of ethical values and norms. As many researchers in this field underline, humans are moral agents, rational subjects and communicators who make choices (Stewart, 2011, p.18).

One of the important questions those researching the communicating process and communication systems pose relates to an alternative choice: research should be a description and/or explanation free of normative assumptions or should have a clear normative goal of indicating norms and rules that people should follow at all levels of communicating, from interpersonal to social (Donsbach, 2006, p. 446). That is why the goal of this article is a theoretical analysis of communicating in public institutions with regard to ethical values and norms. In more detail, the goal is an attempt to understand the anchoring of ethics in communication systems in organisations operating on behalf of society and for its benefit.

One of today's particularly appreciated systems in every organisation is the communication system, because all organisations generate, receive, use and manage information (Graber, 2003). Communication is considered a factor preceding trust (Grudzewski et al., 2007, p. 113). Organisations are thus communication structures constituted by the communicating process, so they exist because people communicate and make structural associations as a result (Mumby, 2013, p. 14). What also applies to people is the issue of the ethicality of their actions. Ethics is a primaeval afterthought

tackled by people since the very beginning of their existence both in a scientific and casual way. In the most basic sense, ethics is a science dealing with discerning what is good and what is bad. Ethics is divided into two basic branches: descriptive ethics and normative ethics. It is this division that has particular significance in the analysis of processes and systems of communication typical for public institutions, because the following question comes up: which branch of ethics should examine these systems? The descriptive one, which means recreating the values and norms that the entities follow in communicating processes, or the normative one, which means determining what should characterise these values and norms?

Communicating as a process of interaction taking place between people is one of the oldest processes known to man. Due to the meaning and role of communicating in the lives of entities and social life, today it is tackled by researchers from various scientific fields, who try to understand what influences behaviours, attitudes, emotions, decision-making process, tasks performed by people, changes taking place in the world and many other issues which are still not recognised sufficiently and which we simply want to understand. The prevalence of various forms of communicating and functions performed by this process makes people form real communication communities (Apel, 1973, p. 431 after Borowicz-Sierocka, 2016, p. 195). If only on the basis of the fact that both ethics and communicating accompany people from the very beginning, ethics can be regarded as an integral part of communicating. However, this does not mean that every instance of communicating and every communication system are ethical. Therefore, since the ancient times the philosophers for whom morality was significant tried to indicate the norms and rules allowing people to communicate in an ethical way. Communication also became a subject of consideration by philosophers and some of them talk directly about the philosophy of communication (Apel, 1990). As Borowicz-Sierocka underlines, "It is our communication competence, the specific human capacity for communicative co-operation,

that decides (one would like to say, in the final instance) about the specific nature of the highest ethical duty, its universal dimension and timeless character." (Borowicz-Sierocka, 2016, p. 189). That author, summarising the considerations of Michael Tomasello (Tomasello, 2002), states that communication is characterised by the following: co-operation in the scope of culturally determined co-creation of knowledge, intentionality hidden in symbols via which communication takes place, joint participation and joint intentionality (Sierocka, 2012). These features result from the understanding of communication as a concept wider than just message conveyance. This is so as communication is "Symbolically mediated and co-intentionally shaped cooperation in the field of information conveyance, expression of sensations and emotions, regulation of behaviours and co-shaping of norms, knowledge and social institutions" (Borowicz-Sierocka, 2016, p. 190).

The multitude of approaches to the issue of communicating and numerous perspectives analysing the role and meaning of ethics make it difficult to expressly define what communicating/communication means when described with the adjective by "ethical". Generally, it is specified through the following issues: (a) utilitarianism, in the sense of communication as a means to do moral good; (b) openness and access to information, as a foundation for forming relationships between people; and (c) social responsibility, as a moral interpretation of the communicating process because two parties are involved the process, so both are jointly responsible for the result (Huang, 2004, p. 335).

The following ethics values and norms resulting from the co-creation of a communication community can be identified from a brief analysis of the relationships between communicating and ethics.

a. Values: (1) openness, because the condition for this process to be successful is transparency of information; (2) honesty, because access to information is necessary in order to communicate; (3) trust, because in order to achieve

goals (pragmatism and utilitarianism in pursuit of moral good) communicating is necessary, as it is the immanent feature of human communities.

b. Norms: (1) the co-responsibility of the sender and the receiver for the communicating process in order to ensure the possibility of maintaining the communication community (Borowicz-Sierocka, 2016, p. 195); (2) co-operation between the sender and the receiver, because without that there is no option to implement the communicating process; (3) engagement of the sender and the receiver, without which it is not possible to form any relationship between them.

Public institutions: characteristics and functions

Public institutions are organisations, operating in a legally regulated public space, the primary task of which is to protect the public interest. Under Polish law they are equated with public organisations such as: government administration authorities, state control and legal protection authorities, courts, prosecutor's office organisational units, local government entities and their bodies, budgetary entities, local government budgetary institutions, target funds, health care centres, the National Health Fund, and other state or local government legal entities. Their activity primarily consists of offering and providing social services. Social services can be defined in many ways. For the purposes of the analysis, the term presented by Szarfenberg is adopted, which emphasises that those are services offered by the state via welfare benefits (monetary, material and service-based) meeting the needs of people, contributing to their well-being and levelling out differences (Szarfenberg, 2011). Social services are provided by various entities, including social institutions, which address social problems in this way (Grewiński, 2013, p. 29).

Therefore public institutions providing specific services serve specific functions (Grewiński, 2013, p. 31):

a. they satisfy the vital needs of people, primarily of the weaker groups in the society;
b. they ensure protection against various threats and crises;
c. they support families;
d. they protect human rights;
e. they integrate the members of the population;
f. they combat expressions of discrimination.

All tasks performed by public institutions result from goals which are to be achieved and are based on rules of co-operation established earlier. Tomasello, continuing his considerations regarding the co-operation between people, states, with reference to numerous studies and experiments, that people had to develop institutional practices covering public social norms and determining the scope of responsibilities of individual social roles (Tomasello, 2002, p. 64). People live in an institutional and cultural world, which they have created themselves. They use two main norms: co-operation (including moral norms) and adjustment (including constitutive principles). Tomasello's further considerations show how important norms are in the functioning of societies. He emphasises that the strength of norms derives from the mutually recognised correlation and reaction to setbacks (Tomasello, 2002, p. 88). The social practices on which people co-operate in order to achieve goals creates mutual expectations which in turn lead to subjectively normative judgments.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned tasks which are expected to be performed by public institutions, specific values and ethical norms that result from them can be indicated. Therefore the overarching values will be solidarity, family, human rights, integrity, equality, human dignity and responsibility. The ethical norms resulting from the function of public institutions will be as follows: subsidiarity, protection of the weak against threats, support for the weak, support for families, protection of those in need, social integrity and active participation in social life through the resolution of problems which occur.

Literature review: communication systems in public institutions

Organisational communicating is a process of creating and negotiating a certain collective, co-ordinating systems of meaning through symbolic practices oriented towards the achievement of organisational goals (Mumby, 2013, p. 15). There are numerous models of communicating, which shows the diversity of communication systems operating in the practice of social life (van Ruler, 2004).

Public institutions are required by law to communicate with the social environment through appropriate conveyance of information and receipt of information coming from society. The need to inform the community about planned and performed actions of public institutions results from Polish law. The Act of 6 September 2001 on access to public information (Journal of Laws No. 112, item 1198, as amended) provides for general principles of citizens' access to public information in the possession of public authorities and other entities performing public tasks. Obligations in the scope of sharing information differ depending on the entity which is in possession of such information, in particular with regard to the necessity to publish information in the Public Information Bulletin.

Article 4 of the aforementioned Act states that public authorities and other entities performing public tasks are required to disclose public information, including, but not limited to, the following:

1. public authorities;
2. authorities of economic and professional self-government;
3. entities representing the State Treasury under separate regulations;
4. entities representing state legal persons or local government legal persons and entities representing other state organisational entities or local government organisational entities;
5. entities representing other persons or organisational entities which perform public tasks or dispose of public assets as well as legal persons

in which the State Treasury, local government entities, economic local government entities and professional local government entities which have a dominant position as per regulations on competition and consumer protection.

Despite the concept of new public management and the approaching of operation of public institutions to commercial organisations, what should be emphasised are the differences and specific nature of each, resulting primarily from the characteristics of the environment in which these entities operate. Researchers studying the process of public institutions' communicating after the terrorist attacks on 9 September 2001 noted eight factors influencing one of forms of communication – or rather of organisational communication management – which is public relations: politics, common welfare, legal restrictions, meaning of communication lesser than in business, negative public opinion, low level of professional development and simultaneous dependence on central and local authorities (Liu & Horsley, 2007; Adamus-Matuszyńska & Austen, 2011, p. 28–29). Other authors add to those factors even more complex ones, such as non-stable environment of the public sector, numerous rigid procedures and very diverse products (Gelders et al., 2007, p. 334). The number and meaning of factors determining the communication system of public institutions results in the fact that such communication must be burdened with additional properties of the system in order to meet the expectations of the stakeholders they represent and have to co-operate with to satisfy those needs. What is more, public institutions are legally defined and determined, which means that all of their functions, tasks, measures, procedures, relationships with the environment and other factors are limited by legal and ethical norms.

The literature regarding the possibilities to transfer some management models from the private sector to public institution management, including communication management, is relatively rich, but at the same time it does not provide any clear-cut findings (Gelders et al., 2007, p. 327). A significant factor determining the communication

of public institutions is the need for potency and effectiveness, but most important is the pursuit of adherence to democratic values (Gelders et al., 2007, p. 334).

Public institutions convey information and encourage certain behaviours (e.g. during a crisis), but they are also carriers of some meanings in the process of policy formation, e.g. the need to explain a waste sorting policy to the local community (Gelders et al., 2007, p. 334). Therefore they are not just passive entities performing tasks and meeting responsibilities imposed on them. Treating both the internal and external communication of those institutions as a process of information conveyance is an understatement of its significance. Public institutions, due to their functions and social expectations, participate in the process of co-responsibility for the community for which they operate. The anthropological communication model examining the human being as a *homo communicativus* (Borowicz-Sierocka, 2016) allows one to investigate the relationship between communicating and ethics in a manner different than in management sciences traditionally analysing the communicating process in organisations. Communication in a public institution concerns the following:

- communicating policies of the social surroundings the problems of which the institution solves and has impact on;
- strategies for building the image of the institution and social groups represented by the given institution;
- interpersonal communication, both at the level of internal communication (personnel management) and external communication (direct and indirect contact with specific people);
- organisational communication as part of which activities related to public relations or marketing can be indicated;
- communicating with the local or regional community for which the institution operates;
- intercultural communication and – in the era of globalisation – international communication.

Each of the above-mentioned tasks of communicating of public institutions with the environment – the internal one and the external one – is characterised by specific rules and values. What is more, message receivers have specific expectations with regard to each such task, often not crystallised but burdened with ethical and legal responsibility.

Discussion 1: Ethical values and communicating process of public institutions with the environment

The communicating process always has a bi-directional nature, from the sender to the receiver and the vice versa, it is sometimes intentional and sometimes not, but, as a result, the sender always has some effect on the receiver and vice versa (Griffin, 2003). This basic pattern shows the significance of ethicality because de facto every instance of communicating determines behaviours, attitudes, opinions, knowledge and experience of both parties involved. This is why both sender and receiver should acknowledge the dignity and independence of the other party of the process (Jaska & Pritchard 1988; Nilsen 1974).

The public zone, in which public institutions play a special role, according to the theory of Jurgen Habermas, creates the space of mutual, public interest and transparency is a fundamental value but also a rule (Habermas, 2007). Thus the values significant in the communication system of public institutions are as follows:

a. adequacy of information;
b. correctness of information;
c. timeliness of information;
d. accuracy of information;
e. confidentiality of some information.

However, as emphasised above, the communication of public institutions is not merely the conveyance and receipt of information it: is a responsible process of co-creation of communication community. This is why the values of openness (transparency) and integrity (honesty) entail the result of bi-directional communication

between the public institution and the citizen. Subsequently, this bi-directionality of communicating determines the level of trust between participants of this process (Maeda; Miyahara, 2003). The need to convey and receive information also results from the value of tolerance, which contributes to pro-social behaviours (Tomasello, 2002, p. 85).

The internal communication of public institutions determines the attitudes and behaviours of their employees (Wright, 2004; Organ 1988, Pandey, Garnett, 2006; Garnett et al., 2008) and has a direct impact on the level of trust in the organisation (Porumbescu et al., 2013). The external communication of public institutions plays a part in the creation of the local or regional community, thus being co-responsible for its achievements and failures (Adamus-Matuszyńska & Austen, 2009). Therefore the communication of public institutions is a system which actively participates in the formation of the community and in the building of its identity.

Nowadays, many organisations – wishing to organise their norms and values, which are, as Edgar Schein (1985) observed, a partially invisible and unconscious element of the organisational culture – compile ethical codes consisting of a set of values professed by the organisation and the ethical norms postulated to be adhered to. These are documents in which the organisation refers to basic values such as integrity, trust, honesty and solidarity (Murphy, 2005). Apart from that, organisations define specific rules the adherence to which is expected from all entities included in them.

Rest (1986) proposed a theoretical framework for moral decisions in organisations: (1) identification of the moral nature of a given issue; (2) moral evaluation; (3) establishing of moral intent; and (4) engagement in moral action. This model is useful and determines the expectations of ethical behaviours in organisations (Ki & Kim, 2010, p. 268). Research shows that there is a positive correlation between ethical codes and ethical behaviours (Adam & Rachman-Moore, 2004; Boo & Koh, 2001; Ki & Kim, 2010). Research also shows that employees of public institutions, for example municipal offices, have full awareness of the magnitude of ethical codes in their professional work (Kapias et al., 2011, p. 182). Every organisation has a lot of freedom when defining the content of its ethical code, hence the codes are so diverse. The majority of them inform about and recommend certain norms rather than set out detailed rules and regulations (Tomczyk-Tołkacz, 1994; Kapias et al., 2011).

Analysis of preferred ethical values in institutions such as municipal, regional and provincial offices shows that the basic value is honesty, followed by impartiality, responsibility, respect and lawfulness (Kapias et al., 2011, p. 186). Because one of the basic functions of public institutions is the promotion of law, this surely impacts the value system used in the communication practice. Values such as lawfulness, truthfulness or fairness should be characteristic for the communication systems used by public institutions. Research conducted in Polish offices shows that they are really preferred and values appealing to relations between people are not valued that much (Kapias et al., 2011).

Discussion 2: Ethical norms and the communication of public institutions with the environment

Taking into consideration Tomasello's work regarding the mechanism of the formation of public institutions, it should be noted that such institutions are created and operate on the foundation of specific norms contributing to the co-operation of people undertaking joint activities contributing to the fulfilment of goals. Co-operation is inscribed in the structure of their mutual relationship. However, in the case of complex social references resulting from cultural or moral-and-ethical diversity, for example, there is a need to indicate common norms shaping the human conduct and integrating it. Such norms usually appear in different types of ethical codes, i.e. in documents containing a collection of rules and principles

of conduct both for co-workers and the entire external environment (Kryk, 2001, pp. 341–342).

Those types of ethical codes are a record of performance standards for the management and for the other employees. In this case it is difficult to speak of any kind of Decalogue: the norms of which are inviolable, permanent and indisputable. Though the fundamental principles included in them should be essentially undeniable and timeless. As a rule, greater modifiability concerns more detailed issues, which may change depending on the occurrence of new situations or the specification of existing regulations for better understanding of them and compliance with them.

Declaration of legalism is something which in particular characterises ethical codes. This way the assumption suggesting the need to comply with the law is made at the very foundations. There stands another condition behind this one, equally universal, suggesting the necessity for a given institution to satisfy various moral obligations towards all stakeholders.

Very often, the principles presented in such codes are the result of patterns of behaviour already existing in a given environment, adopted due to historical conditions or on the basis of artificially created ideals necessary for joint and efficient operation of a given organisation. What is important is to pay attention to the required procedures, if possible, to be rooted in the axiological systems of the employees and in the culture of a given organisation (Zbiegień-Maciąg, 1996, p. 105). Creation of a common position of conduct in this way largely favours the acceptability of such action by the environment and, in turn, better mutual communication.

Norms empowered in these types of codes aim to support the employees in ethical conduct, because they contain various types of indication, in what way general moral rules can be applied in specific problematic cases which occur in the array of public institutions in relation with the environment. These type of activities can also come forward in the form of a series of ethical programs that, in addition to moral instructions, also cover the main principles

that an institution uses, such as action strategy, mission, behavioural norms, and even ethical ways of evaluating employees' activities (Szulczewski 2003, p. 622). The aforementioned mission of an institution is a crucial element because, in general, it should be visionary, meaning it looks far ahead. Thanks to this, its influence will not be limited to a given target group, but it will have vistas for development, allowing it to influence next generations to a significant extent.

One should note that shaping ethical attitudes of employees in various institutions very much translates to how the society existing around them behaves. After all, the norms are a reflection of the axiological system adopted in a particular community. Unification of this system translates into a greater acceptance of these norms, and thus a more efficient and insightful process of mutual communication between entities with each other.

Finally, it needs to be highlighted that if codes of ethics are used in an organisation, due to their public nature, one may hope to convey significant ethical attitudes to external stakeholders. Thus, one can notice a specific process of shaping the desirable attitudes in society, a specific "upbringing towards morality" (how those attitudes are communicated and shaped is, of course, an entirely different issue). At the same time, one should also take into account that the environment itself may have an effect the formation of particular normative systems in the aforementioned institutions.

Conclusions

The phenomenon of communication is closely related to mutual interpersonal and intergroup relationships. It can also take a macro scale, which is particularly evident when contacting compact groups, i.e. all kinds of organisations along with their stakeholders. Therefore the existing methods of communication have a huge impact on their participants. Those methods not only shape the mutual image but also strengthen bonds, support integration processes and, last but not least, form desirable attitudes.

A whole set of axionormative activities plays a significant role in this process. It is difficult to build lasting communication bonds without establishing, accepting and implementing common values. Their perception and emphasis significantly facilitate appropriate communication between the institution and the environment. However, the values themselves are not enough. Their acceptance should translate into proper operation. It, in turn, should be shaped through a correct system of norms and principles. In other words, moral responsibility, shaped among employees of various types of social institutions, translates into a better and more dignified approach to the entire environment in a complex communication process.

To sum up the theoretical analysis of the relationship between communicating and communication with ethical values and norms, one can indicate four levels of communication activity of public institutions: the micro level, i.e. relationships between individuals; the meso level, i.e. internal relationships in the institution; the level of the relationships between institutions and the local or regional community; and the macro level, i.e. the relationship with society. Those levels each have their specific nature resulting from the characteristics of entities co-creating the communication community. In turn the values and norms prevailing at each of these levels result from the characteristics of these entities. An attempt
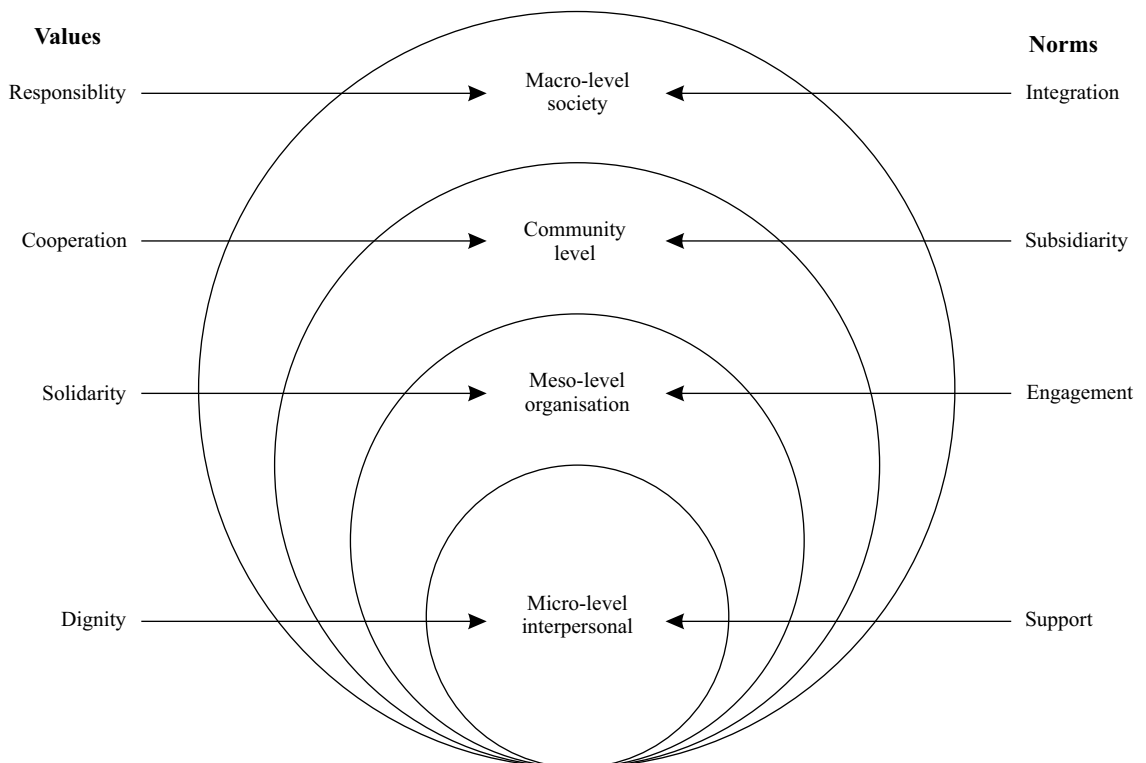

Figure 1. A public institution multi-level communication and its values and norms

to organise the values and norms typical for particular communication systems is presented in Fig. 1.

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