

Retoryka wizerunku publicznego Rhetoric of the public image

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Public image of the British Monarchy in times of crises
Wizerunek publiczny monarchii brytyjskiej w czasach kryzysu

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Public image of the British Monarchy in times of crises

United Kingdom is one of the best known monarchies in the world. Queen Elizabeth II during her reign achieved many titles and honours, for instance, that of and longest reigning monarch in the United Kingdom, as well as the oldest living monarch among other currently reigning monarchs in other countries. 2022 is the year of her seventieth anniversary as a sovereign. Would it be possible for anyone not to make any controversial decisions and not to compromise the public image of monarchy during such a long time?

Parliamentary monarchy is characterized by queen or king having only representative role and their power focusing solely on keeping correct diplomatic relations between countries and strengthening the state's public image. In fact, public image is the essence of the monarchy today. For this purpose, monarchs and other members of royal families receive proper training from an early age to maintain impeccable etiquette and to follow diplomatic protocols. The pressure and expected perfection could possibly create this perception of royal family members as 'more than regular civilians' and the ones setting examples. Therefore, anyone from the British Royal Family who steps out of line too many times is automatically in the centre of public attention. Today, this issue is even more significant than ever, when the means of communication expand rapidly and reach to the furthest corners of the world.

Just in the last two years, the Royal Family in Britain was troubled with a few public image violating situations – or scandals, as tabloid press likes to call them – caused by the Queen's close family. The most recent crisis concerned Queen's son, Prince Andrew, and seriously affected the Royal Family's image just moments before his mother's Platinum Jubilee celebrations (Jenkins, 2022). The Duke of York was accused by a US court of an act of sexual assault allegedly committed in 2011 on seventeen-year-old girl Virginia Giuffre (Coughlan, 2022). The reaction from the royal damage control team was immediate, as they distanced themselves from Andrew without waiting for the American court's judgment, additionally deleting all of his social media accounts (Davies, 2022). The statement published on the official account of The Royal Family announced depriving him of his

“Royal Highness” title, as well as all his military ranks, in order for him to face all the accusations as a regular civilian, not a public figure (The Royal Family, 2022). It was also clearly stressed that the Duke of York will never return to his official royal role (Coughlan, 2022).

These strict and harsh measures in reaction to Prince Andrew’s case might have been different if only the Royal Family had not faced repeated embarrassment and all sorts of serious accusations just a few months earlier. It can be safely stated that over the period of 2019-2021, the whole followed the developing rift between Queen’s grandchild, Prince Harry and his partner and then wife, Meghan Markle, an actress and socialite. The tension and speculation about the crisis within the family started from the beginning of Harry and Meghan’s relation and seriously worsened after engagement announcement, as Meghan was a commoner, an American, and already divorced at that time, and obviously without any royal connections or supports in Britain. Then, the wedding ceremony significantly marked the point from when serious animosities started and each next news piece demonizing Megan progressively ruined the Royals’ and Queen’s image (Olusoga, 2021).

Due to the tense situation, Duke and Duchess of Sussex decided to move to the United States and not long after this was followed by the Buckingham Palace releasing statements announcing that Prince Harry and Meghan are no longer working members of the Royal Family but stay loving members of family (Her Majesty the Queen, 2020; Buckingham Palace, 2021). This public image crisis made history under the notorious term “Megxit” (The Guardian, 2021). However, the most damage for the British monarchy came with Oprah Winfrey’s televised interview with Harry and Meghan on 7th of March 2021. Although no specific names were given, serious accusations concerning acts of racism towards Duchess of Sussex and her son, as well as the lack of help when Meghan struggled with serious mental health issues, involving suicidal thoughts, were revealed. This not only caused mass public outcry, but also deepened the family rift with openly publicized gestures unwelcoming to Harry’s family (Schuman, 2021). The official Buckingham Palace’s response came quickly, in an act of damage control, making overall impression as the Royal Family was not aware of Meghan’s mental health struggles and will deal with all raised during the interview issues privately (Buckingham Palace, 2021).

Although always quick in crisis management and relying on Queen’s long-lasting reign and support, the phenomenon of polarisation among British society is increasing in relation to the British political system and the Royal Family itself. For a better understanding as a concept, “polarisation is focused on the division of attitudes along a single dimension – generally along ideological lines” (Duffy,

Hewlett, McCrae, Hall, 2019). Also, in general it is specific attitudes that should be assessed in terms of 'highly polarised' or 'relatively unpolarised', rather than the society itself. In Britain, two strong opposite stands have been created, with one group considering the monarchy to be a relic of the past, with an extended family of royals who undeservedly consume public money, and with the other camp rooting for a traditional system, with The Royal Family being a symbol and a model to follow, where the country's pride in its heritage is dignified (Nolsoe, 2021).

Not surprisingly, the former group is dominated by today's young adults' generation. On analysing a substantial number of recent surveys on the condition of the British society, a visible turning point can be observed in a rather short period of time. The data gathered by Deltapoll (2020) surveys across 2020 clearly presents that more than a half of every age group considers monarchy being good for Britain and prefers it being this way, rather than a republic. Also, replacing current political system with an elected head of state was visibly rejected. However, YouGov (Nolsoe, 2021) most recent research shows just the opposite, as most of the 18-24 year-olds object to continuing the monarchy and throne's succession. The alleged reason for such change could be traced back to public crises caused by Queen's immediate family and a relatively inconsiderate or wrong reaction from the Palace's crisis management team. Duke and Duchess of Sussex struggles and the interview that made it apparent, as well as Prince Andrew's scandal seem to be the first crises in the recent history of British monarchy that will not be easily forgotten and forgiven. It is becoming obvious that the Royal Family is currently under a rather unwanted scrutiny and is unsure of the future society support.

The particular interest for discussing the public image of the British Royal Family and the measures of current attitudes towards the monarchy derives from my current MA research on Queen's language democratisation as a rhetorical strategy implemented in Christmas Broadcasts throughout the years of her reign. The main assumption to verify is that the Queen's expressive repertoire, including her pronunciation has been gradually influenced by all sorts of sociolinguistic modernisation, stylistic evolution and rhetorical diversification. The link between this research and this article is mainly based on the communicative goals channelled towards public image enhancement with language shaped accordingly to the situation. Recently, for Queen Elisabeth II the speeches were a way to reframe inconvenient aspects and direct general attention to positive or background issues.

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