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The ethical behavior in the public organizations: A bibliometric analysis of the academic literature

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Abstract

This research paper aims to present a thorough overview of the existing academic literature an analysis of the most prolific writers of ethical behavior and ethical codes applied to Public Administration (PA) in the last few years, to understand how ethical considerations are being discussed by researchers, and practitioners, and to identify gaps, priorities and recommendations for ethical practice. Through a bibliometric analysis, we managed and analyzed 360 records in the period from 2018 to 2021, collected on databases Web of Science and Scopus. The findings of this analysis show a map of the knowledge regards the ethical behavior measured through the coordinates of many scientific approaches, but still lacking within public administrations such as the universities. This research contributes to ethic knowledge about behavior and code within PA. It also provides to define the peculiarity of ethical profiles in the public sector, in a multidimensional perspective of organizational behavior, digital communication and institutional communication.

Keywords – Ethical Behavior; Ethical Codes; Public Administration; Bibliometric Analysis

Paper type – Academic Research Paper

Sommario

Il presente articolo ha l'obiettivo di presentare un'analisi della letteratura degli ultimi anni relativa agli studi e alle ricerche sul comportamento etico e i codici etici nella Pubblica Amministrazione (PA), al fine di approfondire come le tematiche sull'etica siano oggetto del più recente dibattito fra mondo scientifico e professionisti, evidenziando lacune, priorità e sollecitazioni nella gestione dell'etica. A tal fine, attraverso un'analisi bibliometrica, sono stati analizzati 360 record compresi nel periodo dal 2018 al 2021, i documenti sono stati raccolti dai database di Web of Science e Scopus. I risultati della ricerca evidenziano una chiara mappatura delle conoscenze sul comportamento etico, valutato attraverso molti approcci scientifici, purtuttavia restano ancora scarse, a volte inesistenti, le analisi all'interno di pubbliche amministrazioni, come le Università. Infine, il presente lavoro contribuisce alla conoscenza sull'etica del comportamento e sui codici etici all'interno della PA, oltre che a definire le peculiarità dei profili etici nel settore pubblico, in una prospettiva multidimensionale di comportamento organizzativo, comunicazione digitale e comunicazione istituzionale.

Parole chiave – Comportamento etico; Codice etico; Pubblica Amministrazione; Analisi bibliometrica

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1 Introduction

There may be relevant literature that has explored ethic, in the studies of private and public business, and these studies have become particular strategic for the public business communication (Starling, 2011; Mazza & Furlotti, 2020; Consorti, 2021), in the vision of a redrawing of boundaries and semantic levels on the digital platforms (van Dijck et al., 2019; Boccia Artieri & Bentivegna, 2019; Colombo, 2020).

During the last few years ethic in digital communication has also attracted a nascent body of valuable literature and experts have been writing about the role in the Public Administration (PA) (Fabris, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Neri, 2020). What emerges is a polyphony of approaches to the matter of ethic in PA, starting from two lines of research, the first one is more focused on institutional communication, as a platforms instrument of policy making, in the area of predictive algorithms, artificial intelligence, data driven knowledge; the second line, aimed at exploring the tradition of studies on open government. Through the production, processing of curricula for the ethical recruiting, in order to overcome bias, distorting factors of the relationship with the audience (Cardon, 2016; Chadwick, 2017; Celotto, 2019; Zambonelli, 2020). In both scientific guidance the focus is on the medium schedule, as reference model for the public, social, institutional, communication of the third sector.

Legislative Decree No. 231/2001, laying down the Rules of administrative liability of legal persons, societies and the associations not having legal personality, in accordance with Article 11 of Law No. 300/2000, introduced into Italian law the principle of liability of the institutions for crimes committed by employees and/or by other subjects indicated in Article 5 of the same Legislative Decree (such as administrators, mayors, executives, representatives, and also persons under their management or supervision), unless, among the others conditions, the institution hasn't implemented a suitable plan of organization, management and control.

In this law framework, both public and private organizations, choose to draft an ethical code, in order to define in a clear way, the rules of conduct, through the definition of common values and fundamental assumptions, in accordance with the basic aims of the organization and with the appropriate behavior to the enterprise culture (Schein, 2000).

The scientific debate focuses not only on the configuration of communication values of the public administrations, but also on the shape of relations that could be promoted to the citizenship: the net simplifies the communication practices in so far as it is able to build aware relationship (Ducci, 2017; Dominici, 2019; Borgonovi, 2020).

The ethical codes become means to shape the behavior in situations where individuals could be protagonists, within permissive environments, showing lack of ethical sensitivity, as highlighted by Desautels and Jacob (2012). The ethical codes should therefore be considered as a heuristic tool that

could, on one hand, strengthen the fundamental institutional dimension (Pasca di Magliano, 2020), on the other hand, make the institutional and public communication processes more usable. All this cannot be achieved without a precise scan of the communication skills (Giorgilli, 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the literature and the empirical researches on ethic within the public administrations with the help of bibliometric analysis, taking cues from yet unresolved questions of the relationship between ethics and communication of the public administration and the reflection on the role of digital communication and its use by employees at any hierarchical level.

2 The theoretical background

Etymologically the word “ethics” comes from the Greek word *ethikè*, that a culture related element. The word ethics also includes the criteria which guide the action, in general, or alternatively in a precise historic moment: so we talk about virtue ethics, duty ethics, the Fathers’ and the Sons’ (Alici, 2004).

Ethics studies the areas of human life characterized by codified behaviors and habits, where morality defines the rules that must lead the free man’s action (Fabris, 2018b). The words ethics and moral are still used today often as synonyms and as it often happens to a couple of words introduced with the same meaning in a language, they are conventionally used to express different meanings; according to Floridi (2020) it is not risky to state that moral is the set of general principles which lead our behavior and relationships; ethics is the practice, the way in which we make use of it.

The social media ecosystem (Di Virgilio, 2018) becomes the area in which the analysis of communication considers subjects of individual and collective nature. It is difficult to analyze and shed light where a tweet by a CEO, a politician, a manager or a simple employee, violates the ethical code. During the last few years a new phenomenon has been arising, that is the flourishing of digital platforms at global level (Gillespie, 2018; Plantin, 2018) of what was known as the first axiom of Palo Alto, who at the beginning of the 70s adopted a relational view of the communication, seen as a way of dialogue or bidirectional process.

According to Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues, in *Pragmatica della comunicazione umana* (1971) it is not possible to not communicate, it cannot exist a not-communication since it cannot exist a not-behavior; in order to have communication, intentionality it is not necessary. The cognitive analysis is essential in order to identify the labile boundary between the individual communication in its organizational and institutional role or as an expression of one’s own sphere of values and personal ideologies (Germano & Felicetti, 2020).

In light of an unceasing production of contents through the social media (Comunello & Mulargia, 2017; Di Virgilio, 2018, 2021), it becomes very important the focus on the ethical code in its contents. The formalization and the building of an ethical code becomes a policy instrument in the management of human resources; on the other hand, the ethical dimension must not be associated with the concept of punishment for the violation of a code, but it must be considered as a way to promote ethical behaviors (Rusconi, 2018; Mordacci, 2019; Pasca di Magliano, 2020), representing a positive approach that encourages the personal liability in front of the organizational identity to which one's belong.

The public communication is today a field of research that makes of interdisciplinarity a strong point, taking a double significance for private and public actors, whether they are manager, public manager or employees (Rovinetti, 2014; Sorice, 2020).

Communicating to the citizens the validity or legal compliance of the decisions taking by an administration belongs to policy, to make them taking part into the decision process and to the given opportunities implies a widening of the social dimension of communication, and in order to do this the adoption of an ethical code is required (Gessi, 2019).

The institutional communication and the organizational behavior fully entitled to access the dimension of the new PA mission: no more as an adjunct to the study but as integral part in administrative action (Tursunbayeva et al., 2021).

The focus on the analysis of ethical dimension in public administrations, allows to build ethical profiles in public work, based on an interdisciplinary perspective: in studies of organizational behavior, digital communication and institutional communication (Tursunbayeva et al., 2021; Romanelli, 2018).

Rediscovering the ethical dimension in PA contributes to the enhancement of individuals, who by taking new values, attitudes and behaviors, should rediscover a constitutive role in the transition to the change, it is the people' quality what helps to assure the efficacy of the public administrations (Borgonovi, 2004, 2020).

Everyday life is the first producers of values, from simple behaviors to those that are more visible, since they are nestled in social and community dynamics (Benanti, 2020). In the growing complexity of the contemporary society the organizations' reality gradually becomes a more and more significant part in individual lives and one cannot wonder too much on the meaning of this process (De Blasio, 2019).

The pandemic overturned more than one phase, also and above all the communicative one. Inevitably, the scientific literature has not managed yet to subsume a conceptual frame capable to analyze the communicative relapses, from a philosophical, sociological, business, organizational and ethical perspective (Panarari, 2020; Pietrini, 2021).

2.1 Ethical behavior in the PA

A good public administration is the one geared to give effective execution to the objectives defined by the representative bodies of a citizenship according to different political-institutional systems (Hinna et al., 2016).

During the last years, public managers had not only the responsibility for implement the laws, the rules and procedures but they also had the responsibility to understand the characteristics of the needs identified through the chosen policies and to organize the technical-operative and economic answers to meet the citizens need (Di Mascio & Natalini, 2018; Barberis et al., 2019).

The New Public Management promoted values that are closer to the business entrepreneurship determining the spreading within the PA of new methods of judgment based on business and management logics (Pollit & Bouckaert, 2017).

The management or modern administration model encloses an increase in discretion when it comes to choose the most effective modalities and combination of productive factors to meet the needs (Hinna et al., 2016; Cepiku, 2018). Nevertheless, when this discretionary becomes subjectivity used for particular aims (personal, of corporative defense, of privileges, of content creation for one's own political referents) there is a risk of negative consequences for the society (Sangiorgi, 2008; Di Mascio, 2012). There is a need of public administrations that show behaviors respectful of the rules and which are consistent with the ethical values (Cortese et al., 2014).

The ethics of public management becomes again a fundamental point in the enhancement of the identities of the individual people or the social groups (Borgonovi, 2020).

In the institutional and business restructuring processes which set up the structures geared to the goals and results, giving tasks and roles to the administration, the management plays a crucial role as change agent (Rebora, 2018).

Rediscovering the ethical dimension of the public administration contributes to enhance the people, who by taking new values, attitudes and behaviors, should play a fundamental role in the transition to the change (Butera, 2007; Costa 2009).

In the pursuit of an ethical dimension of the action at the service of citizens the public administration affords a delicate step, fundamental and necessary in the transition to the change which goes on combining knowledge, values and behaviors; ethics means to lead behaviors in the will to do according to justice and equality, following laws and rules of conduct which are universally accepted (Borgonovi, 2004, 2020).

The public management, as human and financial resources manager, in assuming a specific leadership profile in order to control behaviors and actions universally accepted as legitimate, helps to

rediscover the ethics dimension of the PA as responsible organization, sample of good practice, which promotes ethics-oriented behaviors (Hassan et al., 2014).

The ethics leader is able to influence behaviors and attitudes of the public employees by promoting ethics-oriented behaviors; this kind of leadership approach represents a solution to avoid the employee's dissatisfaction in the relationship with their organization (Pellicano & Monetta, 2004).

The ethical leadership contributes to the efficiency and efficacy of the public administrations, since to invest and believe in ethics as resource and set of values that lead human behavior, becomes the new goal of PA that change (Giusino, 2019).

3 A bibliometric analysis of the academic literature

Based on the theoretical premises and the research lines above highlighted, the study consists of a bibliometric analysis of the scientific literature on ethics and some fields related to it, which contribute to fuel the scientific debate that developed in the last years, from 2018 to 2021, around the studies on the PA, in terms of organization and social communication.

In order to understand how the ethics considerations and the ethical codes in particular are discussed by researchers and predictionaries, and in order to identify gaps, priorities and future recommendations for practical ethics in public field, we put the following research questions:

RQ1. Which are the current trends in publishing on ethics and ethical codes subject?

RQ2. Which is the kind of documents that are mostly produced?

RQ3. Which are the most popular issues, among researchers, that are related to ethics and other correlated topics?

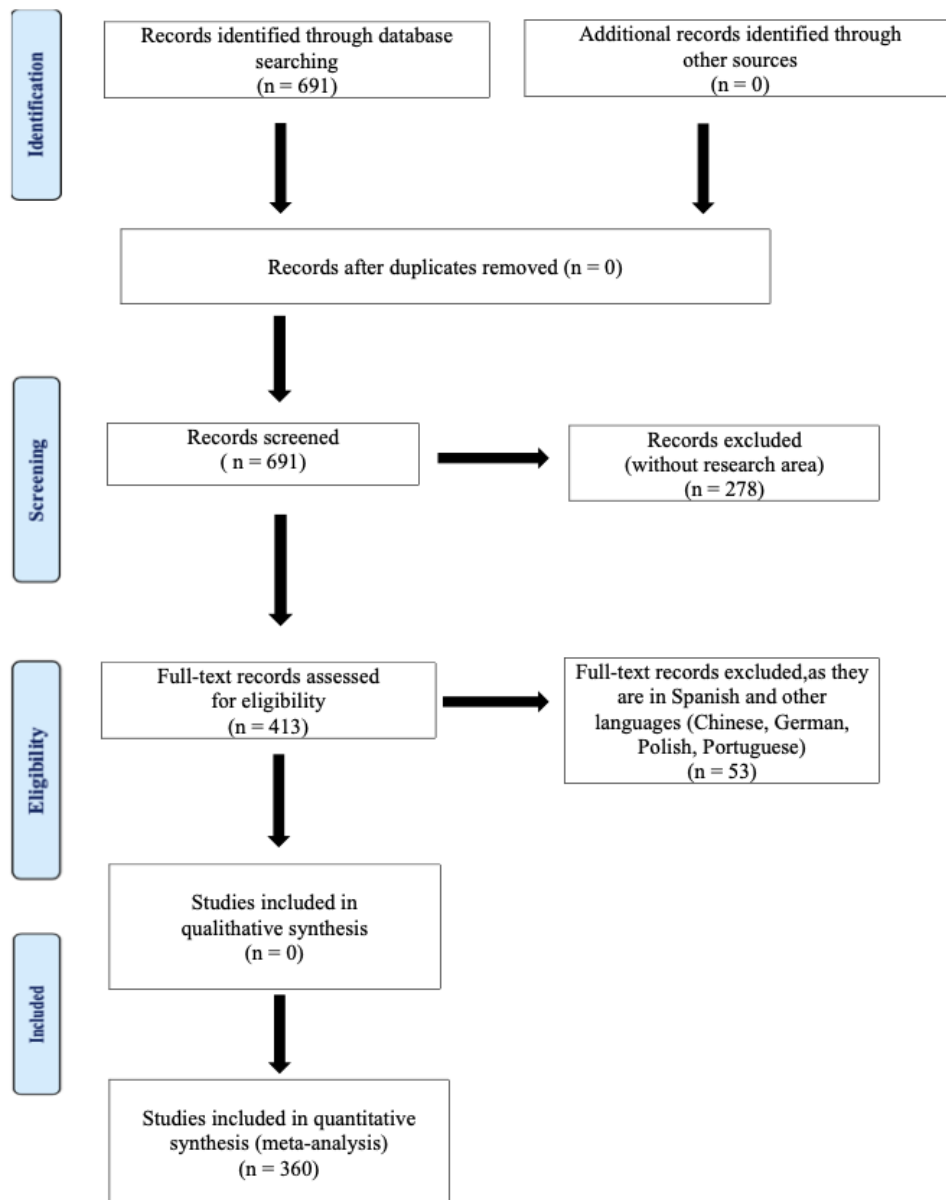
4 Methodology

In the scientific debate 7 keywords related to ethics were identified. Besides the macro-subject ethics, the research was refined through the combination of keywords such as: *code of ethics*, *business*, *management*, *communication*, *public administration*, *public high education*.

Then we proceed with the census of contributes and their bibliographical references using the databases Web of Science and Scopus, by integrating the results with any other resource available in other databases with articles not included in the two official databases of scientific articles. We used the reference lists of scientific documents (scientific articles, publications, conference proceedings, chapters

of books, books) generated by the database to do the bibliometric analysis allowing to extrapolate the data in flow chart (Fig. 1), as described below.

Figure 1 - Flow Chart



Source: our elaboration

4.1 Data analysis

The research produced 691 documents referring to the period from 2018 to 2021 and the combination of keywords. After the screening of titles, we considered as not relevant the articles that mentioned the ethics issues but only in a philosophical perspective and did not focus specifically on the PA and on ethics; so we excluded 278 documents, whose area of research had not been pointed out, together with those without keywords or abstract. After, in the analysis we excluded other 53 records, since we just considered publications in English and Italian, considering marginal productions in others languages (Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, German, Chinese), that we considered not relevant since they were numerically inconsistent for a quantitative analysis. In the final sample of academic documents, we identified 360 records (Tab. 1).

Table 1 - Document Type and Number

Document Type	Frequency	% (N=360)
Article	297	82.55
Editorial	3	0.83
Review	23	6.37
Book Chapter	2	0.55
Book	16	4.43
Proceedings Paper	19	5.26
Total	360	100

Source: our elaboration

The bibliometric analysis first allowed us to categorize the types of scientific documents in the Table 1, highlighting the prevalence of scientific articles with 82.55%, review articles 6.37%, proceeding paper 5.26% and books 4.43%. The results clearly highlight how the scientific community is oriented towards the publication of their works in specialized scientific journals. A data against the trends of other issues, where National and International scientific debates give a first meeting in the field of conferences, convention, workshop. However, during the last few years it has gained more and more relevance the data showing the interest and increased sensitivity towards ethics issues and ethical codes in PA, among researchers and practioners, with an increase of the percentage from 2.22% in 2018, to 34.63% in 2021 (Tab. 2), mostly due to the Pandemic period which started during the spring in 2020 and led the public organizations to triple their use of digital platforms to communicate with their own users and to provide many services.

Table 2 - Years of publications

Year	Frequency	% (N=360)
2021	125	34.63
2020	121	33.52
2019	106	29.64
2018	8	2.22
Total	360	100

Source: our elaboration

Table 3 - Language used in publications

Language	Frequency	% (N=360)
English	333	94.90
Italian	27	5.10
Total	360	100

Source: our elaboration

The analysis of the content of the publications and the used dataset also show that most isolated contributes are mostly from scientific documents in Italian, in particular only 5.10% compared to 94.90% in English (Tab. 3). This proves a clear interest in ethics issues within the PA among researchers that must be compared to international level, with possible difficulties in finding occasions of publication in Italian journals, conferences, conventions and public meetings, books, and paper and digital publishing initiatives that deal with ethics issues digital communication in public field. The comparison remains International, even though the Italian public context has management characteristics which are often different compared to the European and international context, both for sectors and number of involved organizations.

Moreover, the analysis shows the number of keywords (Tab. 4), highlighting the predominant of studies which consider not only the aspect of ethics but also its relation with other aspects such as management, the communication and the business, and the consequent influence on decisions about governance instruments. These studies show a great focus on the consequences of the ethical decisions taken by PA and above all in public education (such as Universities).

Table 4 - Keywords' occurrences

Keywords	Occurrences
Ethics	238
Business Ethics	79
Code of Ethics	55
Management	84
Communication	95
Public Administration	36
Public Education	40

*Source: our elaboration***Table 5 - Subjects research areas**

Subjects Research Area	Frequency	% (N=360)
Business & Economics	39	10.80
Business & Ethics	62	17.17
Business & Management	6	1.66
Communication	30	8.31
Computer Science	13	3.60
Cultural Studies	3	0.83
Development Studies	1	0.28
Economics & Management	1	0.28
Education & Educational Research	30	8.31
Environmental Studies	3	0.83
Ethics	8	2.22
Ethics & Multidisciplinary Sciences	16	4.43
Government & Law	6	1.66
Industrial Relation	1	0.28
Information Science & Library Science	5	1.39
Management	54	14.96
Philosophy	5	1.39
Psychology	10	2.77
Public Administration	21	5.82
Social Sciences	41	11.63
Social Work	5	1.39
Total	360	100

Source: our elaboration

Lastly, our analysis focused on the areas of research (Tab. 5), analyzing the relations we can see that studies consider aspects related to the area of Business and Ethics 17.17%, in many cases, the issue is the Management area 14.96%, Social Sciences area 11.63%, Education and Educational Research and Communication area both 8.31%. With reference to these last aspects we see that they are particularly close to the issue of Ethics in public sector above all in the period considered for the analysis.

5 Conclusions and future research perspectives

The analysis of literature and the empirical researches highlighted the variety of ethics aspects in the contexts of PA or more in general including the entire public field, such as the important role of health sector or the high education sector, such as universities.

The analysis shows that the debate on the purposes that a PA has or should have is an issue of confrontation that the Covid-19 reignited in an unexpected way (García-Sánchez & García-Sánchez, 2020; Manuel & Herron, 2020) the scientific production in 2020 and 2021 on ethics and ethics codes.

The subject of Business ethics for example in health sector, presents dilemmas on aims to pursue and on the balance between business interests and health interests (involving people) which cyclically reproduce (Borgonovi & D’Avanzo, 2018; Ferrando, 2020). “Coronavirus Is Putting Corporate Social Responsibility to the Test” with this title, an article appeared on “Harvard Business Review” suggests that companies are called to rethink their own social and environmental aims in order to face in a proper way the crisis (Kramer, 2020).

In all its general aspects, on one side there are the creators so called *stockholder view*, for which the managers have the moral duty to increase the investors’ financial; on the other side the creators so called *stakeholder view*, for which the managers have the moral duty to respect the stakeholders’ rights of a public company too (Pirozzi, 2019; Consorti, 2021).

Considering the evolution in the research areas of the study, we can see how the varied debate about the purposes of the PA has continued to oppose two keywords, that are deeply rooted in the public opinion and partially in the economic-social literature (Rullani, 2019a). On one side the efficient organization, that, thanks to modernity automations, put the company self-interest at collective interest service; on the other side the ethical or responsible company, which – without renouncing the efficient use of means – it uses its degrees discretion, more or less wide, when it comes to decisions, in order to overcome the self-interest, giving room to the expectations and interests of different entities who populate its organizations and environment (Rullani, 2020).

Coda (2010) reminds us that business literature in Italy has never separated the business from ethics, placing at the core of business choices the requirement of decision-makers’ personal responsibility.

Regardless of the different views on the goals and the modalities of management with which a company introduces ethics and social responsibility among its objectives, ethics steps out of the role that liberalism gave it, as external limit to the pursuit of financial-economic goal, and it comes to be considered as factor of survival/success (Coda, 2010, 2014).

In perspective, the differences tend to reduce, in the light of a process of hybridization of the social habitat, where past hierarchical axes collapse and the innovation creates uncertainty and at the same time possibility to imagine accurate moments of communicative life in the digital ecosystem.

The articles showed in our research results highlight the challenges involved in the implementation of PA projects, assuring at the same time that their ethical and legal conformity, besides recommendations to face (Tursunbayeva et al., 2021). This is considered particularly difficult for the International organizations which operate in different contexts with many laws and different cultural and political expectations.

The PA rise in National contexts raises new questions for science about the interdisciplinary management and joins the current debates on the future of human work and occupation in a digital society, guided by algorithms. These innovations represent a dilemma for those organizations that try to optimize their workforce and efficacy, risking the employees' security, the depersonalization and dissatisfaction, together with new legal vulnerability.

The PA, in Italy, should adopt ethics-communicative protocols in order to really talk about digital innovation, besides the analogical dimension that still characterizes it. In particular through the enhancement of the power of the ethical code, which should be shaped on a greater transparency and innovation, in order to assure a more complete, clearer and more efficient utility of the public communication. All this is done in full responsibility and awareness of the direction to which the management, the organization and the realization of an Ethics Code is oriented in order to meet citizens, users, followers' need in their digital platforms. According to Couldry (2016) the digital platforms are not only a mirror of the social context, but they also produce the structures in which we live today.

This transformation presents us with a process that Helmond (2015) calls "platformization" which is saturating any area of the web where institutional actors, editors and users move, providing a mediation function that shapes the information flow through the way in which users use data, subjected to the logic and algorithms (Marinelli, 2017; Boccia Artieri & Bentivegna, 2019).

The new paradigm at the base of the Platform Society is a programmable digital architecture, projected to organize interactions among users – not only final users, but also public institutions (van Dijck et al., 2019).

The meeting point between ethics and contradictions concerning the platforms ecosystem is in the coordinates of the algorithms in the way they are supporting and replacing human decisions causing a problem on ethical and juridical base (Rulli, 2018; Talia, 2018; Sassi, 2019).

The legal position of a subject, his personal freedom, privacy, the right to information, come into contact with a not-human decisional system of which a human must be held liable (Cardon, 2016; Celotto, 2019). The ethical empowerment of the digital society, in conclusion, needs its own caretaker, who could be, according to some researchers, an Authority for Telecommunication and one for data protection, a real Authority of the digital society (Fabris, 2018a; Celotto, 2019).

To sum up, the current study contribute to analyze how the characteristics of the different research area could influence the relation between the variables of ethical behavior and ethical codes in the PA.

The use of the method of bibliometric analysis gave the opportunity to overcome the blooming literature on ethics of the PA in order to analyze how researchers, the consulting sector and the same employees of the PA face these problems.

For the reasons explained in the section of methods, the current study is the first natural step in what is an emerging field and it is directly based on the observation of a lacking ethical debate and ethical multidimensional codes of good proposal for the PA.

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