

The Evolving Role of Ethics in Public Relation: Examining the Growing Importance of Responsible Communication Strategies in the Digital Age

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Abstract

A crucial aspect of the media society, public relations is a managerial task that aids in establishing and promoting connections between an organization and its surrounding community through mutual communication, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation. However, there are some concerns, or rather ethical problems, when talking about the practice of public relations in the twenty-first century. Public relations ethics are crucial to human communication. It gives organizations credibility. It aids in the development of dependable relationships between companies and the general public. Ethical procedures can help you excel in public relations. Organizations involved in public relations should adhere to a code of ethics like honesty, advocacy, expertise loyalty, etc. to deliver trustworthy services to their target market. This paper will focus on the role of ethics in public relations also the different codes of ethics used in the PR profession will be discussed.

Introduction

Public relations is an area of study and a professional practice with its own knowledge. Nonetheless, public relations is a branch of study that is still relatively new, having just evolved a clear theory in the last 25 years ago. Public relations is evolving into a theoretically grounded area of applied communication that can inform numerous communication and mass communication fields and provide theoretical and conceptual tools useful in, among other things, political, health, and risk communication (Botan & Taylor 2004). The 1978 Mexican Declaration of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) defines public relations as an art and science that presents the findings of trends in the social and business environment, offers consulting services to organization leaders, and implements action programs designed to serve both the organization's and the public interest (Gregory, 2003).

Public relations can be practiced by a vice president of a major corporation making \$200,000 per year, or it can be practiced by a part-time employee or volunteer producing a brochure or a press release for a small-town charitable organization. Both scenarios are examples of people practicing public relations. But, each of these public relations operations makes a unique contribution, however small, to the overall task of managing communication between a corporation and the various groups with whom it interacts (Grunig & Hunt 1984).

More than 20 years of research and analysis on public relations have been dedicated to the subject of ethics. Early thought leaders in the profession discussed ethical issues and offered their opinions on a variety of subjects, including codes of ethics, ethical universalism and relativism, and practitioner ethics. Every major public relations theory has typically been followed by a consideration of ethics. For instance, the normative theory of symmetry and relationship management both presume ethics as a key component of relationship creation (Taylor & Yang, 2015). It is likely that the majority of individuals hold the belief that public relations is inherently immoral, and a significant portion of the work done in public relations is unethical. Scholars in the field of public relations assert, however, that public relations is predicated on ethical principles, social responsibility, and ecological sustainability (Grunig, 2014).

Ethics is the study of what constitutes what is good or bad behavior in humans. In more exact terms, it is a system of standards by which judgments about what is wrong are made (Brautović & Brkan, 2009). In all spheres of society, ethics are a major concern and a topic of discussion. Scholars have given varied levels of emphasis to ethics in public relations. For many years, it has been established in public relations research that ethics must be at the heart of professional conduct cited ethics as the tenth and final public relations excellence principle. Public relations can play a crucial communication role for organizations, nations, and even the entire planet when ethics and responsibility are ensured. (Haque & Ahmad 2017). Specific to public relations, Parsons (2008) defined values in terms of five pillars of ethics as follows: (1) Beneficence or to do well; (2) Confidentiality or to respect privacy; (3)

Non-maleficence or to do no harm; (4) Fairness to be fair and socially responsible; and (5) Veracity or to tell the truth.

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) created a code of professional standards for the PR industry to accomplish three things.

- 1) to give its members behavioral guidelines
- 2) to educate management on public relations standards.
- 3) to distinguish those working in public relations from those who use the title but are thought to be defaming the field.

It's crucial to keep in mind that ethical norms are not universal because it cannot be assumed that everyone, regardless of circumstance or culture, upholds the same moral principles. Thought to be defaming the field (Brautović & Brkan, 2009).

Literature Review

It is vital to define ethics before talking about public relations ethics in the normative sense. "Ethics is concerned with the proper way for us to live. It focuses on issues of right and wrong, fairness and injustice, compassion and callousness, goodness and evil, and responsibility and irresponsibility. There are many ethical challenges in the field of public relations, but there aren't enough written publications on the subject to provide practitioners with guidance. The major public relations groups' ethics rules may have logical inconsistencies and are typically too vague to offer particular advice in a given situation. The enforcement of rules of ethics and the reporting of violations both encounter significant difficulties. As a result, codes of ethics don't provide the detailed rules for ethical analysis that the profession requires; rather, they act as a straightforward assertion of goodwill (Bowen, 2004).

According to the Global communication report 2018 on the evolution of ethics, only 12% of PR experts believe that corporations will become less ethical over the next five years, while 62% believe that more will happen. Ethics could be a hurdle for people entering the field, as 75% of students report that the PR industry's ethics are important in determining their future careers. Almost 50% of students believe that the public has an unethical perception of the public relations (PR) industry. Nonetheless, 69% of the up-and-comers think that during the next few years, the PR profession will move toward greater ethics while 14% predict the opposite of it (Annenberg, 2018).

Baskin et al., 1997 believed that ethics has attracted the interest of public relations due to the following reason:

- 1) Public relations professionals are aware that misconduct endangers the public relations industry's reputation.
- 2) Public relations serves as both the repository for ethical and social policies and the source of an organization's ethical standards. Practitioners of public relations have also put a lot of effort into developing their own set of ethical standards.
- 3) Public relations professionals should participate in initiatives that assist organizations as ethical experts of their target population

As stated by Botan & Taylor, (2004) the earliest theoretical method of public relations is dialogue. Referring to the dissertation titled "A Theory of Public Relations Ethics," provided the groundwork for current scholars to develop a more ethical framework for public relations. According to theory public relations as the management of interpersonal dialectic and ethical

public relations means having a dialogic "system" rather than monologic "policies." This theory about dialogue contributed to the shift in public relations theory.

Idid, & Arandas, (2016) conducts a study to explore the influence of education, length of service, professionalism, ethics and ethical code on the professional values of public relations. The study was conducted through questionnaires distributed between both males and females. The study's findings totally corroborated the theories stating that public relations practitioners' professional values were influenced by their level of professionalism and ethical behavior. The findings also demonstrated that professionalism and ethics were influenced by education and by the length of service.

To study the public relations ethics research was done by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation. The survey was done among 1,827 IABC members and other professional communicators worldwide. The study showed a number of surprising and interesting findings in public relations ethics. Around the world, 65% of public relations professionals claim to regularly interact with the "dominant coalition" or executive level of their organizations that make decisions, sometimes known as the Chief Officers level or "C-suite." This finding is encouraging because it shows that public relations managers frequently participate in strategic management and planning processes and provide ethical advice at the highest levels of their firms (Bowen, 2007).

Most people agree that the main ethical problem in public relations comes up when partisan beliefs and shared values clash. When there is two-way communication in public relations, ethical behavior is much more likely. In public relations ethics, the main thing that is looked at is the conflict between what the public wants and what an organization wants.

The author calls this kind of public relations "two-way symmetric public relations." It might be the only way to get people to act ethically in public relations (Wright, 1993).

The emerging role of Global Ethical Values in public relations was studied by (Taylor & Yang, 2015). Data were analyzed by using Centering Resonance Analysis, a textual analysis methodology, that uses linguistics theory to assess main concepts, their influence, and their interrelationships. The study's researchers discovered that six key themes emerged from the codes of ethics of professional communication associations: (1) professionalism, (2) advocacy, (3) moral standards, (4) clients' interests, (5) expertise, and (6) relationships. The results imply that international ideals that will effect how organizations interact with the public are beginning to emerge in professional communication practice.

An online survey was conducted with PRSA members by Ting Lee, (2012). The study was designed to explore the construct of ethical knowledge in the public relations context. The author posed the question about the characteristics of ethical knowledge in public relations. The majority of respondents believed that ethics is an important body of knowledge in public relations while more than half of respondents agreed that for public relations professionals, ethics is a personal responsibility.

According to Walle (2003), the ethical rules of public relations all over the world have been formed by five associations: the PRSA (Public Relations Society of America), the CPRS (Canadian Public Relations Society), the PRIA (Public Relations Institute of Australia), the PRINZ (Public Relations Institute of New Zealand), and the PRISA (Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa). These codes include a variety of written regulations that define how practitioners should conduct themselves in an "ethical" manner while going about their daily tasks. The Athens Code served as the basis for the development of all of these regulations, which were first drafted in 1965 by the International Public Relations Association (IPRA). The Declaration of Athens of IPRA was the first written basic law established for the field of public relations. These coding standards are vitally important and are still in use. A large number of unofficial public relations organizations from a variety of nations came together to create a set of principles regarding what ethics entail in practice. These standards were eventually copied by IPRA based on Athens Law.

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