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# Ethics in the Field of Public Relations

*by Amy Appleby*

*This essay was the product of Writing Studio 209, a course focusing on rhetoric. However, my interest in the topic was piqued during the prior semester. My p.r. professor delivered a lecture on ethics in the field of public relations; it was this oxymoron that enticed me into researching and proposing a solution to negative connotation that often plagues public relations practitioners.*

## Roots of Public Relations

Contemporary public relations is a twentieth-century phenomenon that evolved from the press gentry of the 1800s. These old-time press agents played upon the credulity of the public in its desire to be entertained, whether or not they were deceived. Advertisements and press releases were often exaggerated to the point of being complete falsifications. In promoting an attraction, press agents dropped multitudes of tickets on the newspaper editors desk along with the releases. Voluminous publicity for the attraction usually resulted, and reporters, editors, and their families flocked to the free entertainment with scant regard for any ethical constraints (Wilcox, Ault, & Agee 37). One man, Phineas T. Barnum, exemplified such a press agent to the extreme. Barnum is considered the master of the pseudoevent, the planned event that occurs primarily for the purpose of being reported similar to the special events held by public relations practitioners of today. However, modern-day practitioners like to draw the line of comparison between Barnum and themselves at this point. This hardheaded businessman used deception and hoax in his operations and in his publicity and advertising. Nevertheless, a public thirsting for entertainment permitted his exaggerations and people were amazed by the wonders he produced (Wilcox, Ault, & Agee 38). For example, Joice Heath was a slave who claimed to be 161 years old and said she had been George Washington's nurse. Barnum produced a stained birth certificate as evidence for the public, but after she died, her autopsy disclosed that she was far younger. On the same note, Jumbo, the world's largest elephant, was brought by Barnum from England with enormous publicity. Posters and pamphlets featuring inflated prose exaggerated the animal's size (Wilcox, Ault, & Agee 38).

Roots such as these have created the skepticism with which the public views the field of public relations. Furthermore, it is the duty of practitioners to create positive images for businesses and organizations. Therefore, other, more recent issues have augmented Americans' mistrust in the business world in general, including the Watergate Affair and the business-and-government-related scandals of the 1980s, such as the near collapse of the savings and loan industry. The American public is demanding higher ethical practices from business firms and organizations than it did in the past (Wilcox, Ault, & Agee 116).

## How Public Relations Practitioners are Perceived

Despite pressure from the public, very little empirical evidence on the ethics of public relations practitioners exists. As recently as the spring of 1988, a Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) task force could only uncover 16 journal articles and two books as initial readings that dealt with ethics issues in length (Pratt, "Empirical" 230).

However, one study conducted in 1989, has revealed the pathetic state of ethics in, and has called into question the credibility, professional integrity and public image of, public relations (229). In the broad field of mass communications, of which public relations practitioners are considered a part, the occupation is viewed with cynicism. For example, an investigation of journalists' attitudes toward public relations, conducted in 1975, disclosed generally negative attitudes. In this sample survey, respondents had to rank the perceived respect of 16 occupations and professions; journalists ranked themselves first and public relations practitioners last, while public relations practitioners ranked themselves fourth and journalists third.

It has also been reported that college students develop a negative disposition toward public relations early on in their college careers. This disposition could be caused by the content of textbooks. In a content analysis of 12 introductory textbooks in mass communications, an insidious bias against public relations and a fierce anti-public relations stance was found (229).

Even public relations practitioners have doubts about the degree of morality in the field. In a recent survey of practitioners, none of the respondents assigned very high marks to the honesty and ethical standards of their colleagues. Fifty-five percent of them viewed the chief executive as the most credible source of information about an organization, and only five percent selected a public relations representative (Pratt, "Empirical," 230). Ironically, practitioners themselves hold little credence in the ability of their peers to carry out an essential component of their profession: the management of an organizations relationships with its various publics. Often times, the management of these relationships is jeopardized by poor decision-making on the part of practitioners.

### **Judgment Calls**

Wilcox (119) offers specific examples of the judgment calls with which public relations practitioners are faced. For instance, if the company president asks a public relations representative to write a news release claiming that a new product is four times better than the competition, he/she should be wary. Making extravagant claims about a product, which cannot be substantiated, should be avoided. Another example could be an American company that wants to increase its visibility and market share in Eastern Europe. The director of public relations invites a group of German business editors to visit the firms headquarters with all expenses paid. This is considered permissible by the whole body of practitioners, as long as the visit has legitimate news value, and as long as it furthers the press understanding of the companys operations.

A primary judgment call happens during the job search of a public relations practitioner. To illustrate, if a tobacco company offers someone the highest salary from among his/her potential employers, he/she should not oppose smoking. This could place the person in a position where personal interest is in conflict with an employer or client, and fulfilling obligations to the employer would be difficult.

Dilemmas such as these must be addressed by practitioners everyday. One might glance at these examples and wonder were the difficulty in making these decisions lies. The fact is that not everybody holds the same set of personal and/or professional standards. One person might not see anything wrong with exaggerating a news release for a new product, while another might consider such an act to be dishonest.

Studies have been done which categorize public relations practitioners as being either more ethical or less ethical; the factors that have been researched and that provided conclusive evidence include age, years of experience, gender, and individual moral values. The older and the more years of experience, the more ethical the practitioner. Similarly, the higher ones individual moral values are, the more ethical ones professional standard will be (Shamir, Reed, & Connell 956-953). Female practitioners beliefs were significantly more ethical than those of their male counterparts. It was also reported that women practiced unethical behavior less often than men (Pratt, "Perceptions," 153).

In addition to incongruous ethical standards, several other factors serve as possible reasons for the lack of values. A number of practitioners said that because of the competitive environment in which practitioners tend to work, ethics may have low priority (Pratt, Empirical 232). Also, some practitioners blame the availability, or lack thereof, of good, effective role models, particularly among top business executives, for both practitioners and society in general. In a nationwide study of U.S. business ethics conducted by Brenner and Molander, respondents reported that the behavior of ones superiors was a primary influence on the making of unethical decisions (Pratt, "Empirical," 233).

### **Proposed Solutions to the Ethical Dilemma**

The only way for public relations practitioners to rid themselves of this unethical behavior is to come up with plausible solutions. Public relations practitioners surveyed proposed several suggestions, varying in degrees of severity. First, some respondents said that because ethics in public relations is a reflection of a general decline in values, overall ethics in society should be improved by instilling moral values in the home (Pratt, "Empirical," 232). This, however, would be a difficult task in todays society, due to the deterioration of stable homes. It would be a long-term undertaking, and the results would not be seen for years. Furthermore, this solution could not be taken on solely by public relations practitioners; rather, all of society would have to be willing to pursue greater ethics in each and every household. Another proposed solution deals with education. Practitioners believe that stronger exploration of ethics issues in high school and college curricula, more ethics awareness among upper management, and better clarification on what is or is

not acceptable behavior would solve the problem (231). After completing a media ethics course, mass communications students displayed an increase in the importance they placed on moral and social issues, an increase their awareness of such issues, and shifts in their value system to approximate more closely the value system affording the greatest level of ethical self-esteem (232). Thus, similar results could be achieved if current practitioners were involved in a continuing education program that offered courses in ethics. However, I believe that the positive results of such courses would be like temporary exposure to sun: At first you have a beautiful, bronze tan, but after awhile that tan fades; initially, the practitioners would place more emphasis on moral issues, but, like the tan, that emphasis will fade.

Another recommendation is to place more emphasis on personal professionalism. Practitioners suggested that, if employers hire honest people, it may help change the image of practitioners from that of incompetent, shoddy opportunists. They also suggested practitioners need to look at their responsibilities as much more than just jobs but as a way of life, and that practitioners should be well-trained in public relations. Striving toward full professionalization could improve professional ethics (Pratt, Empirical 232). In addition, specifying exactly what constitutes public relations would clear up any misperceptions on the part of practitioners.

Other ideas include rewarding and publicizing good conduct, developing a universally-honored code of ethics, and governmentally regulating the licensing of public relations practitioners. Of all the solutions suggested, from increasing household values to hiring honest people, the two proposals that have been taken the most seriously by practitioners are the development of a code and the licensing of practitioners. The following reasoning has led to their earnest contemplation:

How could public relations survive as a profession, if as many of its practitioners as are believed to be guilty of unethical behavior were actually guilty? Wouldn't many of the college students choosing to major in this field change their minds? After all, who would want to number him/herself among such cheats? It is quite possible that the field of public relations is not as corrupt as people make it seem. The majority of ethical practitioners could be taking the bad rap for the minority of those who are unethical.

However, popular beliefs will prevail. The only way for practitioners to free themselves of this stereotype is to take action against the few that ruin it for the many. In an attempt to do that, some public relations practitioners support licensing and consider it to be the only solution.

### **Licensing as a Solution**

Proposals to take the control of ethical decision-making out of the hands of practitioners and to put it into the hands of the state had been discussed even before the PRSA was founded. Edward L. Bernays, a proponent of licensing who played an indispensable role in formulating the modern concept of public relations, believes that licensing would protect the profession and the public from charlatans who do not have the knowledge, talent, or ethics required (Wilcox, Ault & Agee 129). The problem is stated by a PRSA task force on demonstrating professionalism:

Pick up any metropolitan newspaper and scan the employment ads. Under the public relations classification, you are likely to find opportunities for door-to-door salespersons, receptionists, used-car salespeople, singles bar hostesses and others of less savory reputation. The front pages of the newspapers are full of stories about former government employees peddling influence and calling it public relations. (Wilcox 129)

If public relations practitioners had to obtain a license in order to practice, those who did not meet a certain set of qualifications would have to refer to themselves as something other than public relations counselors. The qualifications could resemble those of a doctor or lawyer, such that a practitioner would have to pass a certain level of education, rigid examinations, and tests of personal integrity. Other designations adopted by those who failed to meet the standards could be publicist or press agent.

Several arguments have been offered, both for and against, mandatory licensing and regulation by the state. (Wilcox, Ault, & Agee 129). First, proponents say that licensing would define the practice of public relations, while opponents contend that it is too difficult to define public relations rigidly enough to legally regulate its practice.

Second, both those for and against agree that licensing would set uniform ethical standards. However, licensing does not assure high ethical behavior. The credibility and status of an occupation are not necessarily guaranteed through

licensing. Attorneys, for instance, do not particularly enjoy high public status and prestige because they are licensed. Nor do licensed practical nurses. Third, many believe licensing would protect the consumer of public relations services (clients and employers) from the impostors and the inept. Opponents point out that civil and criminal laws already exist to deal with malpractice, or the impostors.

Proponents claim that since licensing would not control anyone's right to deal with the media, government, or public, or to speak out in any way, no infringement of First Amendment rights would be involved. However, opponents believe that any licensing in the communications field is an infringement on the First Amendment, as the government could actually control practitioners.

Finally, those for licensing state that it would establish uniform educational curricula. Those opposed conclude that too much emphasis would then be placed on education.

In addition to these contentions, opponents offer further justification for their opinion. They think that voluntarily adhering to the professional organizations code would be sufficient to establish standards. The codes to which they are referring are those created by professional associations, such as the PRSA, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), and the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ). Members of these organizations are expected to follow these sets of standards.

Next, licensing would be a states function, and public relations people often work on a national and international basis. Furthermore, the machinery required for the government to license and police all public relations practitioners in this country would be elaborate and very costly to the American taxpayer.

In a final argument, proponents reason that, if medical doctors have defined themselves and have accepted a different paradigm of professionalism than have chiropractors and faith healers, then practitioners, in accordance with the state, can define and protect this definition of public relations (Kruckeberg 23). Opponents claim that legislators show little or no interest in licensing public relations, since the health and welfare of the general public are not directly at stake.

In addition, this analogy of comparing public relations professionals to medical doctors is inappropriate. This is because of the First Amendment-type rights which prohibit the exclusion of others to the performance of most types of public relations activities. Public relations is considered part of the mass communications field, and practitioners do not feel that anyone should be able to regulate what they say or do.

A more befitting comparison would be between public relations counselors and Certified Public Accountants, because, like public relations, not all of the activities of accounting practitioners can be exclusionary or limited to those in professional positions (Kruckeberg 24). In other words, it is common for ordinary people, as opposed to professionals, to utilize many of the activities involved in both public relations and accounting. In my opinion, this point wins the argument for those opposed to licensing, and leads to a more realistic solution, proposed by public relations people: the development of a universal code of ethics, self-binding to all practitioners. Ethics codes in public relations do currently exist. One such code was created by the PRSA. However, this code is neither general enough nor does it encompass enough practitioners to solve the immense ethical dilemma faced by practitioners, as will be illustrated in the next section.

### **The PRSA Code of Professional Standards**

Most professional organizations and many businesses have codes of ethics, which are intended to set acceptable norms of behavior for working professionals and employees. The public relations field is no exception. Several public relations organizations have created ethical codes and hold their members responsible for upholding these standards.

The Public Relations Society of America is one such organization that has a highly regarded code. Adopted in 1950, the PRSA Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations was a fore-runner in the field and remains highly regarded due to its longevity. The society was established in 1948 its primary mission being the unification of the public relations profession. Its first concern, according to the late Rea W. Smith, former executive vice president, was the development of an ethical code so that its members would have behavioral guidelines; management would have a clear understanding of standards; and professionals in public relations would be distinguished from shady promoters

Appleby: Ethics in the Field of Public Relations  
and ballyhoo advance men who, unfortunately, [had] been quick to appropriate the words public relations to describe their operations. (Wilcox, Ault & Agee 117)

This code consists of 17 articles dealing, for instance, with fairness toward clients, employers, and the public; with intentional communication of false or misleading information; and with engaging in practices that corrupt the channels of communication or processes of government. If a complaint is made about a member by a peer, that person is investigated by the society's Board of Ethical and Professional Standards. These findings are reviewed, and punitive actions can be made by the board of directors. The PRSA may expel, suspend, censure, or reprimand a member, depending on what aspect of and how seriously the code was violated.

Enforcement of these standards is effective. However, only about ten percent of the estimated 15,700 public relations professionals in the United States are members of the PRSA. In addition to encompassing only one out of every fifteen practitioners, the society can take no legal actions against violators. The only thing the code jeopardizes is the practitioners membership status. No news releases are made about a terminated member, so little damage can be done to the persons career. Therefore, this code, although good in theory, is not really that effectual. Only a universal code of ethics, encompassing all practitioners, will be able to do the job.

### **Development of a Universal Code of Ethics as a Solution**

Public relations does not have to become a legally protected profession or be governmentally licensed and regulated. Rather, a professional model similar to that of Certified Public Accountants could be used. No indomitable obstacles impede the development of a binding code for the public relations professional community, although it might be a logistically difficult and sobering task. Creating a universal ethical code is both a reasonable and an essential task, if one expects public relations practitioners to ever gain the respect they might actually deserve (Kruckeberg 21). Whenever someone tries to implement something new or attempts to make progress/ there are always people ready-and waiting to contradict the idea or squelch the movement. In the case of developing a universal ethics code for public relations, these people are ignorantly preventing a phenomenal plan which could free the term public relations ethics from being considered an oxymoron.

The first argument opponents have against a universal code is that there may be considerable differences of opinion, globally, about what constitutes ethical practice by those public relations professionals practicing within different social/cultural/geopolitical systems (Kruckeberg 22). However, more similarities between cultural values exist than some realize. Kruckeberg (26) states that central moral aspirations in nearly all cultures include: life, social order, family protection from arbitrary rule, prohibition of inhuman and degrading treatment, the guarantee of a place in the life of the community, and access to an equitable share of the means of subsistence.

For example, in all cultures, parents have duties toward their children, and children have duties to their parents; everywhere gratitude is regarded as good, the miser is despised, and the man of generous spirit is held highly. Rather than throwing up ones hands and declaring that they do things differently in other countries, it would be useful to put forth a general code and let its interpretation and use suggest further refinements that will help adapt it to the nuances of the global community (Hunt & Tirpock 9).

A second argument is that of conflicting codes. Many public relations practitioners find themselves covered by more than one code specific to their workplace, in addition to one or more codes resulting from membership in professional associations. However, in a study of numerous codes conducted in 1985, it was found that similar themes of accuracy, objectivity, truthfulness, and completeness recurred in all, indicating that ethics codes do not change substantially from organization to organization (Hunt & Tirpock 4). Furthermore, the purpose of creating a universal code is not to eliminate individual, existing codes. Rather, a universal code would serve as an umbrella, broadly covering ethical points and setting standards. Practitioners could still adhere to those codes set by their employers or professional organizations.

Next, some practitioners ask, What's the use? The ten percent who are unethical will spoil it for all by their refusal to adhere to ethics. However, if leaders in the field have the connections and mechanism that help them to speak out and declare to the public that such behaviors are not the norm and are not ethical according to accepted standards, then public perception can be changed. To give up on the idea of a universal code is to concede to the public their view that

Finally, critics of the universal code argue that such a code would be meaningless due to the lack of legal power to enforce ethical behavior (Kruckeberg 22). This is true, but the purpose of creating a code is not to legally regulate practitioners. The success of a universal ethics code adopted by organizations would depend largely on the acceptance and compliance of members rather than enforcement. It would take a number of years to get all practitioners involved; in the long run, those who do not abide by the standards would find it impossible to get a job. This point is discussed further below in the section titled The Timetable for Developing the Universal Code.

### **The Framework of a Universal Code**

Both the framework for such a code and the timetable for its implementation have been critically thought about. Hunt and Tirpok (8) suggest that the best ways to move the field toward consideration of a universal ethics code would be for someone to draft such a code and present it for discussion. Such a code would need to be generic enough to cover the various activities that public relations entails, as well as globally-differing ethical standards.

The draft would have to begin with an appeal to public relations practitioners to keep faith with the public (8). Also, in the preamble, the profession must be defined, and that definition should include the modern perception of public relations as a two-way symmetrical process. This means that communication is not only disseminated from public relations people to the publics, but feedback from the publics to the practitioners is equally as important. The introduction would explain that first-order concerns and issues, not the specifics of a particular ethical situation, would be dealt with by the code.

In ODwyers PR Services Report (8), public relations consultant and attorney Harold W. Suckenic recently proposed some key issues that could be dealt with simply and clearly. He argued that the need of clients, publics, journalists, and public relations firms would all be served by such straightforward statements as:

- I will not represent a client who is not truthful with me or the news media.
- I will not represent a client who takes a position opposed to my personal beliefs (e.g., the cigarette company example given earlier).
- I will not represent a client who wants to conceal his or her real identity. I will not represent a client who does not allow me to disclose that I represent this client.
- I will not represent a client whose name is misleading as to the source of funding or motivation of his/her group.
- I will not take on as a client someone who refuses to meet the media face-to-face. Neither I nor my client will obstruct or dodge those media.

Most of these suggested rules seem to concern the tracing of accountability of practitioners. They are general enough that they would cover the different duties practitioners must perform and would not conflict with individual organizations codes of ethics.

### **The Timetable for Developing the Universal Code**

Once the contents of a universal code have been seriously discussed, an inevitable question must be asked: Is it possible for the concept to leave the talking stage and enter the development stage? The answer is Yes. Hunt and Tirpok (9-10) suggest a well-thought out timetable.

During phase one, which is anticipated to last one year, a group of interested academics seeks foundation or corporation funding for a two-day conference on drafting the universal code. Academics and representatives of public relations organizations are invited to attend the conference. The first day of the conference is devoted to invited papers. The second day is a working session, with breakout groups working on different sections of the code, and a final plenary session for the purpose of assembling a draft of the code. In the second phase, a duration of two years, a task force is created to visit all of the concerned professional organizations to make presentations on the draft of the universal code. They will accept suggestions for modification, implementation, and dissemination of the code. Phase three, lasting two years, includes the ratification and implementation of the code by the participating public relations organizations.

In the final, one-year phase, the universal code would be published. A publicity campaign would be launched to inform target publics (such as the journalists, students, and practitioners who perceive public relations as being unethical) about the code and its importance to global public relations. Assessment of the impact of and the reaction to the code will suggest the next phases of the timetable to gain acceptance for the Universal Code of Ethics. Over time, the code will become common knowledge to those seeking the services of public relations practitioners just as those who have not adopted the code will be recognized. Eventually, those who choose not to abide by its prominent principles will no longer be able to find employment.

## Conclusion

Public Relations is a field which is viewed with much skepticism by the American public, journalists, students, and even public relations practitioners. In order for public relations to survive as a profession, actions must be taken to change the unethical image these people hold of public relations. Several solutions have been offered by practitioners, including instilling moral values in the home, educating about ethical/unethical behavior, hiring more honest practitioners, rewarding and publicizing good conduct, and governmentally regulating the licensing of practitioners. All of these propositions are unfeasible, be it because the solution would be too difficult to implement, or because it is an infringement of First Amendment rights.

The way to reverse the unethical perception of public relations is to develop a universal code of ethics. None of the four arguments popularly cited against a universal code is problematic to such a task. A universal code, in fact, can be devised which will be satisfactory to those within different social/cultural/geopolitical systems, notwithstanding the gray areas of cultural values which may be present within such specific systems.

Public relations practitioners should establish a professional model similar to that of Certified Public Accountants, recognizing that much of what they do professionally cannot be exclusionary. Globally, they can be confident that there is a plenitude of shared ethical values, and those which are within differing areas of moral taste can be discussed, universally accepted or negotiated. A universal code of professional ethics for public relations is conceivable. It should be pursued.

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