

# An Essential Component in Teaching Public Relations Ethics

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Public relations students – as well as practitioners – can easily find themselves immersed in a very real experience of cognitive dissonance if they do not understand the important function that role differentiation plays in professional ethics. Unfortunately, any indepth examination of this important ethical concept seems all too often absent from the public relations literature. (An example of an exception is an article I authored a number of years ago for *Public Relations Quarterly*. That article is cited in the references section below. Much of the material utilized here was also cited in that article.)

Role differentiation becomes important in public relations ethics because practitioners are frequently defined as advocates for a particular organization/business/cause. The late Scott Cutlip (1994) perhaps articulated this view as forcefully as anyone when he argued that "the social justification for public relations in a free society is to ethically and effectively plead the cause of a client or organization in the free-wheeling forum of public debate" (p. xii).

That is not to suggest, of course, that practitioners must be defined exclusively in an advocacy capacity. A number of scholars such as Grunig and Hunt (1984) have advanced alternative models. In what they call the two-way symmetric model, for example, "the public relations staff brings...groups together, and, as long as...(there is effective communication), the public relations effort...(is) successful" (p. 23).

Nevertheless, ethical considerations/questions germane to advocacy in public relations—as is also the case in fields such as advertising and law—will not disappear. In one way or another, to a greater or lesser degree, advocacy will continue to be linked to what it is that public relations practitioners do. Even if viewed from the perspective of a two-way symmetric model, a major goal of public relations "is to promote the exchange of influence and understanding among an organization's constituent parts and publics" (Baskin and Aronoff, 1992, p. 2).

## Two Questions That Need to be Asked

Public relations students often find themselves perplexed and at a loss for words when attempting to respond to students in journalism sequences who will suggest that it is an oxymoron to even use the phrase "ethical public relations professional." Students may even hear caustic remarks from professors in schools/departments of journalism and mass communication. Illustrative are the words of a journalism professor cited in *Quill* – the magazine of the Society of Professional Journalists – who argued that public relations courses and curricula have no place within schools/departments of journalism (Berkman, 1992, p. 32). He supported his thesis by stating:

C'mon guys and gals: the bottom line in PR is to make the client look good. If, in a given instance, it happens that truth and desired image coincide, fine; but that is only a coincidental concern. No PR practitioner has ever been paid to tell the truth about a client whose financial practices, labor relations, product or service quality are unethical or dishonest (p. 32).

Even if they are able to dismiss such rhetoric as unwarranted hyperbole, public relations students, in fact, frequently do find themselves struggling to respond to two particular questions/considerations that go directly the heart of the contemporary public relations practice:

1. Can a public relations practitioner ethically communicate at the same time he/she is serving as an advocate for a particular client/organization?
2. If the first question/consideration is answered in the affirmative, how does one distinguish ethical from unethical persuasive communication for persons serving in a public relations capacity?

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## Advocacy and Role Differentiation

One of the central maxims in ethics discourse generally centers around what might be termed universalizability. More particularly, "whatever is right (or wrong) in one situation is right (or wrong) in any relevantly similar situation" (Jaksa and Pritchard, 1994, p. 101). This means, for example, that one can not justify cheating on his/her income taxes unless one is willing to make it a universal rule that everyone can cheat on his/her taxes. Similarly, it is wrong to lie or mislead in a particular communication effort unless one is willing to make it a universal rule that anyone can lie or mislead in any relevantly similar situation.

(Examples the instructor can use to make this point – which are directly relevant to students – are seemingly endless. It is wrong to cheat on a test, for example, unless

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one is willing to allow everyone to cheat on that test. If cheating became the universal maxim, of course, giving tests would serve no purpose. Similarly, if one wants to argue that he or she is justified in ignoring posted speed limits, one must allow that everyone is justified in ignoring posted speed limits. In that case, again, it would seem rather pointless to post speed limits in the first place.)

One of America's best known philosophers, John Rawls, has written extensively on this subject. According to Rawls, when making important decisions that could seriously impact on others, one must assume a "veil of ignorance" in order to "temporarily deprive...(the individual) of special knowledge about themselves that often biases judgments in their own favor" (Jaksa and Pritchard, 1994, p. 111).

The problem for public relations students being introduced to such ethical concepts for the first time centers around the fact that they may well begin to interpret them in a simplistic and/or fundamentalist manner. That is, they may erroneously perceive that traditional ethics prohibits one from taking an advocacy role because in doing so one is "playing favorites." That is not the case – and it is precisely for this reason that students must be introduced to what in ethics is termed role differentiation.

In professional ethics, role differentiation allows one to assume a role in which one favors one person (organization, client, etc.) within the parameters of the particular role one assumes. The attorney in a courtroom, for example, is ethically permitted to serve in an advocacy capacity vis-a-vis his/her client. (Although I am troubled when individuals use the attorney analogy to justify what it is public relations people do, in this particular and narrow circumstance it is useful and justified.)

Students need to understand that one is allowed to

favor a client/organization in a role differentiated capacity because by doing so the professional is serving the greater common good/public interest. Bayles (1981) makes this point well when he argues that "norms for professional roles are...justified by their promoting and preserving the values of liberal society" (p. 19).

Bayles, like others, uses the parent/child analogy to make this point. That is, a parent can be partial to his/her children in the parental role. Bayles states perhaps the obvious when he asserts: "People in a parental role are not expected to weigh the interests and needs of their children equally with all others" (p. 20). It is ethical for a parent to be partial to his/her children in the role of a parent because society allows that all parents can be partial to their children in the parental role. Put another way, society universalizes that all parents can be partial to their children because to do so is in the interest of society/the common good.

Analogously, an attorney in the courtroom or a doctor treating a patient can be partial to their client/patient because society/the common good benefits. Furthermore, the attorney or physician is not making an exception to him/herself. Again, all attorneys and all physicians can be partial – the partiality is universalized.

Consequently, it is ethical for the public relations practitioner to be partial to his/her clients/organization in the practitioner's professional role defined position. The practitioner can be partial because all practitioners – in their role defined position – can be partial. The particular public relations practitioner is not making an exception for him/herself. Society will benefit because, in Cutlip's vision, practitioners are assisting in articulating ideas/viewpoints into the marketplace of ideas.

### Role Partiality Has Its Limits

It is equally essential, however, that students understand that in his/her role defined position, the professional is not ethically permitted to "do anything" in the interest of his/her clients/organization. Again, the analogy vis-a-vis the parental role is useful:

In some cases, partiality toward...(one's child) is morally objectionable. For example, if a teacher's daughter is a member of...(the teacher's) class, partiality toward her should be discouraged. If the teacher is either lenient or severe with...(the) daughter, a moral complaint is in order (Jaksa and Pritchard, 1994, p. 110).

Similarly, a attorney can be partial to his/her clients, but that does not mean the lawyer can "do anything" to assist a client in winning a case. The attorney, for example, is not entitled to ethically lie for a client because lying – of and in itself is wrong – and one is not allowed to lie in a representative capacity (Fried, 1978, p. 192-193). Furthermore, attorneys who lie for their clients do not serve the common good/public interest. Fried compares the ethical obligations of a lawyer in this regard to those of a soldier in an armed conflict:

Think of the lawyer as a soldier. If he is a citizen of a just state, where foreign policy decisions are made in a democratic way, he may accept an official judgment that the war he fights is a just war. He is personally bound, however, not to fire dum-dum bullets, not to abuse prisoners. These are personal wrongs, wrongs done by his person to the person of the victim (p. 191).

In other words, students need to recognize that role differentiation is not some form of ethical relativism (Bayles, 1981, p. 20). Professionals must be able to justify their actions in their role-defined capacity "by the same values as other norms in a liberal society" (p. 20). Society, for example, grants the physician the right to protect his/her patients' confidentiality in the physician's role-defined position. That does not mean, however, that the physician is free of all other ethical obligations or that he/she can protect a patient's confidentiality to the detriment of the greater common good/public interest.

Perhaps the best analogy the instructor can use with public relations students to make this point is the debate centered around the passage of reporter "shield laws." A majority of states have passed laws that allow a reporter to protect his/her sources under some circumstances. Reporters are granted this role-defined privilege because the legislature believes to do so will serve the greater public interest. That does not mean, however, that a reporter is above the law. He/she is obligated, for example, to disclose information in cases where society (the legislature) deems that disclosure overrides the confidentiality privilege if the public interest is to be genuinely served.

### Public Relations Examples

At the proverbial ethical "bottom line," what public relations students need to understand is that the public relations practitioner can "favor" a client/organization within the parameters of his/her role-defined position. The public relations practitioner representing a particular political cause, for example, can ethically attempt to persuade outside publics of the "correctness" of the viewpoint he/she is espousing. That practitioner, however, is not entitled to lie or distribute misleading information in support of that viewpoint because, as noted above, the practitioner is not ethically permitted in his/her role-defined position to engage in unethical actions on behalf of others. Why are such actions unethical? Because the common good/public interest is not served by making it a universal rule that practitioners can lie or mislead others on behalf of clients.

The same would hold true for the practitioner representing an athletic department at a university. That practitioner is ethically entitled to promote that department – he/she is obviously not ethically obligated to similarly promote athletic departments at rival institutions. In serving as an advocate for his/her athletic department, however, that individual is "limited" by the parameters relevant to what one may do in one's role

defined position as a public relations practitioner. It would not be ethical, for example, for that practitioner to disseminate misleading information about a rival institution because that would fall outside the parameters of what role differentiation permits.

An actual case example cited in the *Wall Street Journal* is very useful in making this point. The *Journal* reported on the communication efforts of a public relations practitioner working "for a large conglomerate" (Montgomery, 1978, p. 14). This practitioner said "that his company was able to show in the front of its annual report that per-share earnings were as good as management had predicted they would be" (p. 14). He added, however, that if one examined the fine print and the financial tables in the back, one would discover that earnings were down sharply. "It's so damn easy to massage the numbers," he said (p. 14).

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Noteworthy, the *Journal* reported "that a Wall Street analyst...(who) viewed the final...(report thought it) `so misleading as to be fraudulent' " (p. 14). And, therefore, the ethicist would argue, not ethical because a public relations practitioner in his/her role-defined position is not entitled to disseminate fraudulent information. He/she is not entitled to do so because such actions obviously do not further the common good/public interest.

The public relations instructor might well refer to ethicists such as Sissela Bok for additional support vis-a-vis the practitioner's ethical responsibilities in this regard. Bok would likely argue that practitioners are justified in disseminating persuasive information on behalf of a client/organization so long as objective and reasonable persons would view those persuasive efforts as generally truthful (Jaksa and Pritchard, 1994, 107-109). (Objective and reasonable persons in this circumstance can be defined as those who do not have a vested interest in a particular communication.)

Reasonable persons recognize that public relations practitioners can serve important societal goals in an advocacy (role-defined) capacity. What reasonable persons require, is that such advocacy efforts be directed toward genuinely informing impacted publics. Communication efforts directed toward genuinely informing significant others will not attempt, for example, to present false/deceptive/misleading information under the guise of literal truth no matter how strongly the practitioner wants to convince others of the merits of a particular client/organization's position/cause.

## Conclusions

Public relations students need to recognize that the public relations field has a very negative reputation among large segments of the American public not so much because practitioners engage in persuasive communication efforts on behalf of clients/organizations in their role defined capacity. The problem, rather, is related to the public perception that too many persons who call themselves public relations professionals do not respect the truth and do not respect those to whom particular communication efforts are directed. Too often the public perceives practitioners as persons willing to "do anything" to further a client/organization's special interest.

Role differentiation is not a license to "lie, cheat and/or steal" on behalf of clients whether one is an attorney, physician, or public relations practitioner. The failure of many professionals to internalize this ethical maxim is disturbingly evident across the professional spectrum. The challenge for public relations instructors in this regard seems clear.

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