



Teaching Public Relations

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Educators Define 'Telling the Truth' in PR

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As every lawyer knows very well, it is almost always a big mistake to do anything in such a simple and straightforward way that everybody understands what you're doing and why you're doing in. It is equally inadvisable to express any thought in such simple and straightforward terms that everybody understands exactly what you are saying and exactly what you mean by it. (1)

- - Charles Osgood

The author of a contemporary public relations textbook sounds like he is speaking of Osgood's lawyers when he says "although public relations practitioners should not tell outright lies and untruths, they do try to put their best foot forward." (2) He goes on to suggest that "no one really expects an advocate to tell the whole truth and nothing but the whole truth because so very few people do this except under oath in a court of law." (3)

But therein lies the problem. What, for example, are those whole truths the practitioner withholds? How is that determination made? What happens if partial truths *seriously* mislead others? Is it not difficult to reconcile such a stance with any claim that public relations is fast becoming a profession since one of the distinguishing characteristics of a *genuine* profession centers around a concern for others -- not just clients? If public relations is to ever mature into a genuine profession, contemporary practitioners must strive to develop clear and workable guidelines as to what will be -- and what will not be -- considered truthful communication in public relations. This is an issue of immense importance and an issue where faculty in colleges and universities having programs in public relations can and should play a leading role. Educators must emphasize the importance of truthful communication in the classes they teach, in the writing they do for professional and academic journals, and in their interactions with practitioners active in the field.

If one is to look to public relations educators for leadership in this area, however, one must ask first how educators define truthful communication.

Methodology

In order to help answer that question, a questionnaire was sent to each institution listed in the *AEJMC Directory* reporting that it had a public relations sequence. The questionnaire was directed to the public relations sequence head of 116 departments/schools. After two mailings, responses were received from 83 persons (72 percent).

Each respondent was given a hypothetical case in which a highly successful college basketball coach is pressured to resign because he used unacceptable practices in recruiting two players.⁽⁴⁾ No one outside the college administration and the parties immediately involved knows about the violations -- or are likely to know unless someone talks to the press. College officials are worried about NCAA sanctions and about the impact the infractions could have on fund raising should they become known.

The coach is given a position in the development office in exchange for his resignation and the public relations director at the college is told to simply report that the coach has resigned; nothing is to be said about the recruiting violations. Shortly thereafter, a journalist -- who had heard a rumor about why the coach resigned -- shows up and asks about possible recruiting violations.

The case was followed by the 13 statements reported in Table 1. These statements, along with the case, had been used in an earlier study of journalists and public relations practitioners.⁽⁵⁾ The first three statements (Items 1-A, 1-B and 1-C) refer directly to the hypothetical case. Items 2, 3, 4, and 7 are concerned with how respondents generally define lying. Items 5, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11 center around questions of professional ethics--apart from whether or not the practitioner is telling what could be classified as a formal lie in the strictest meaning of that word.⁽⁶⁾

Each of the statements was followed by a seven-point Likert-type scale on which the respondent could express his/her agreement/disagreement with the item. Choices ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Results

Public relations sequence heads apparently believe public relations practitioners do lie when they make factual declarations that they know to be untrue. They agreed fairly strongly, for example, with *Item 1-C* which suggested the practitioner in this hypothetical case would be lying if he/she said the rumors about the recruiting violations and the reasons for the coach getting a new job were wrong (*mean=1.84*).

They are more cautious, however, as to whether it would be a lie for the practitioner to give evasive answers or to refuse to even respond to the reporter's questions. Respondents narrowly agreed that it would be a lie to give evasive answers (*Item 1-B. mean=3.28*), and slightly disagreed that the practitioner would be lying if he/she refused to comment if asked for information beyond what was given in the news release (*Item 1-A. mean=4.86*)

TABLE I

**Responses of Public Relations Sequence Heads
to Statements About Lying, Unethical Conduct**

		Mean
1-A	The public relations officer in effect, is lying if he/she simply refuses to comment when the reporter asks questions that go beyond information in the news release.	4.86
1-B	The public relations officer, in effect, is lying if he/she gives evasive answers to the reporter's direct request for information beyond that reported	3.28

	in the release.	
1-C	The public relations officer, in effect, is lying if he/she asserts that rumors about the recruiting violations and the reasons for the coach getting a new job are wrong.	1.84
2	Public relations practitioners lie when they do not volunteer to journalists (without being asked by the journalist) information that is intrinsically important if people are to understand a story.	4.44
3	Public relations practitioners lie when they give evasive answers to journalists who are seeking information that is intrinsically important if people are to understand a story.	2.87
4	Public relations practitioners lie when they deny the accuracy of information they know is true.	1.27
5	Public relations practitioners do not act unethically when they do not volunteer to journalists (without being asked by the journalist) information that is intrinsically important if people are to understand a story.	3.49
6	Public relations practitioners do not act unethically when they give evasive answers to journalists who are seeking information that is intrinsically important if people are to understand a story.	5.23
7	Public relations practitioners are not lying when they release to reporters what management tells them to -- even when the information is false.	6.80
8	Public relations practitioners are not acting unethically when they release to reporters what management tells them to -- even when the information is false.	6.77
9	Public relations practitioners who counsel management should not recommend withholding information that is intrinsically important for people to understand a story.	2.38
10	Practitioners can be acting ethically when they withhold from journalists information about personnel decisions within an organization.	2.00
11	Practitioners can be acting ethically when they withhold information about decisions, events or situations within an organization even when withholding that information might have a	3.56

	negative impact on some publics.	
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Note: A "1" on the scale represented "strongly agree" while a "7" represented "strongly disagree." Therefore, the smaller means in this table represent greater agreement with the items than the larger means. A "4" indicated a neutral response.

The responses to Items 2, 3, 4 and 7 point in that same direction. Respondents agreed very strongly that practitioners lie when they deny the accuracy of information they know is true (*Item 4, mean=1.27*) and they slightly agreed that practitioners lie when they give evasive answers if reporters are seeking information that is intrinsically important (*Item 3, mean=2.87*). They disagreed -- very slightly -- that practitioners lie when they do not volunteer important information (*Item 2, mean=4.44*).

Some have argued that the practitioner should play a role somewhat equivalent to that of an attorney, that the practitioner simply represent the client and that questions regarding the factual content of a particular communications effort should be directed toward the management of the organization being represented. Public relations sequence heads, however, strongly disagreed that the practitioner would not be lying if he/she released information from management that the practitioner knew to be false (*Item 7, mean=6.80*).

The items directed toward professional ethics suggest that respondents do not differentiate between the "letter of the law" -- whether the person is actually lying -- and whether or not the practitioner is behaving in an ethical manner. By strongly disagreeing with *Item 8 (mean=6.77)*, for example, these educators indicated they believed the practitioner would be acting unethically just as surely as he/she would be lying if the practitioner were to release information from management the practitioner knew was wrong. Respondents suggested that practitioners could be acting ethically if they withheld information about personnel decisions within the organization (*Item 10, mean=2.00*).

One of the most interesting responses was that regarding *Item 11*. Respondents very slightly agreed (*mean=3.56*) that a practitioner could be acting ethically when he/she withheld information about an organization even when doing so might have a negative impact on some publics. They also agreed, however, that public relations practitioners should not recommend withholding information that is important if people are to understand a story (*Item 9, mean=2.38*).

The results from this survey, it might be noted, were in general agreement with what was found in the earlier study of how journalists and practicing public relations practitioners responded to the statements in Table 1.(7) Public relations sequence heads in this survey and practitioners from the previous study, for example, were always on the same side of the agree/disagree continuum.

Conclusions

Educators, as suggested earlier, must play a leading role if public relations is ever to evolve into a *genuine* profession Grunig and Hunt maintain that "someone must stand back and analyze the profession, conduct research related to the profession, and feed new ideas to working professionals who can test them for their practical utility."(8) That seems a natural role for public relations faculty.

A critically important step in any movement toward desired professionalism centers around ascertaining how public relations educators and practitioners define truthful communication. The next step rests in analyzing these responses, in expending the intellectual energy required to determine if they meet the tests for veracity that philosophers, theologians and others interested in this most complex issue have placed before us.

Too often it appears there has been an attempt to rationalize away less than truthful communication in public relations by not holding that communication up to objective standards. Even more disheartening, some have simply given up trying to be ethical. In that regard, one is reminded of the practitioner quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* who said, "There are a lot of things you don't agree with, so you go home and drink a lot."⁹ Most would agree that "drinking a lot" is not an acceptable solution -- nor is rationalizing away unethical conduct.

Practitioners and educators must work together to determine what will be considered truthful communication in public relations if practitioners are ever to emerge from under the ethical cloud that hovers over the field in the eyes of many. It is also essential if public relations, as a craft, is to achieve *genuine* professional status.

Endnotes

1. Charles Osgood. "Gulf Solution Rests on Art of Doubletalk. Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel. December 7, 1990. p. 27A.
2. Raymond Simon. *Public Relations: Concepts and Practices*. 3rd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1984), p. 383.
3. Ibid.
4. Variations of this case have been used by the author and coauthor in a number of studies over the years. See, for example, Michael Ryan and David L. Martinson, "How Journalists and Public Relations Practitioners Define Lying," paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication convention, Boston, August, 1991, where a questionnaire having identical wording was used -- as well as an updated version of that same study, "Public Relations Practitioners, Journalists View Lying Similarly, *Journalism Quarterly*, in press. See also Michael Ryan and David L. Martinson, "Ethical Values, the Flow of Journalistic Information and Public Relations Persons. *Journalism Quarterly* 61 (Spring 1984), pp. 27-34.
5. Ryan and Martinson convention paper and *Journalism Quarterly* article cited in endnote 4.
6. Clearly whether or not a person is willing to lie is directly related to whether or not that person wants to behave in an ethical manner. Just as clearly, however, there may be statements that while factually true, are nevertheless ethically inappropriate from a professional perspective. One could argue, for example, that a practitioner has an ethical obligation to release balanced information if a failure to do so would have a negative impact on the general public. Releasing only partial information might not be classified as lying in the formal sense, but it would be considered unethical professional conduct.
7. The earlier study incorporated a different scale. Therefore, only general reference is made to it. No statistical inferences are drawn.
8. James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt. *Managing Public Relations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984) p. 80.
9. Jim Montgomery, "In Public Relations, Ethical Conflicts Pose Continuing Problems," *Wall Street Journal*, August 1, 1978, p.1.

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