

Teaching Public Relations Students To Place 'Public Interest' Before Client/Management Concerns

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A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO I authored an article for the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* in which I argued that public relations practitioners will be able to genuinely serve society "only when a majority of practitioners recognize that distributive and social justice claims take precedence over those of management and clients" (Martinson, 1998, p. 150).

In that article I voiced my concern that too frequently practitioners have fallen back on a simplistic verbalization of the Miltonian "marketplace of ideas" doctrine as a rationalization for taking actions on behalf of clients/management that others may legitimately perceive as detrimental to the greater public good. I questioned "whether, in contemporary America, an adherence to a narrow individualistic marketplace model – within a functional public relations context – demonstrates a level of respect for the distributive and social justice rights to which all members of society are entitled" (p. 150).

[According to Fagothey (1976), "distributive justice is a relation between the community and its members. . . . [I]t requires a fair and proper distribution of public benefits and burdens" (p. 177). He states that "social justice refers to the organization of society in such a way that the common good, to which all are expected to contribute in proportion to their ability and opportunity, is available to all the members for their ready use and enjoyment" (p. 177).]

A major problem in motivating future practitioners – that is, students in the classroom – to become more cognizant of social and distributive justice issues centers around the unfortunate fact that most who enter public relations/mass communication programs are basically illiterate regarding rudimentary political/social philosophy. Most, for example, have never been intellectually challenged to consider why organized society even exists.

While a considerable measure of blame for this reality can/must be directed toward those responsible for social studies education at both the secondary school and collegiate levels, placing blame does not address the problem. Frankly, in the immediate time frame, the only practical solution probably rests with

public relations instructors taking upon themselves the task of providing students with a "mini-education" in basic social/political philosophy. There are four important points that I believe must be addressed in this regard:

1. Students need to understand the impact that the ideology of individualism has had on both society and the emergence of public relations as a recognizable craft/potential profession.
2. The basis of the "marketplace of ideas" as a rationalization for much of the "defense" of practitioners as advocates must be seriously – and critically – examined.
3. Every student graduating with a major in public relations should have spent considerable time attempting to conceptualize the "public interest" in the context of an evolving democratic social system.
4. The relationship of society (and the state/government), the individual and the communications professions must be addressed.

Individualism and the Growth of Public Relations

Much of the "defense" for the social utility of public relations has been stated in terms of an ideological individualism that is almost inseparable from the American cultural experience. Scott Cutlip (1994), for example, argues 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). Cutlip maintains that "it is a basic democratic right that every idea, individual, and institution shall have a full and fair hearing in the public forum – that their merit ultimately must be determined by their ability to be accepted in the marketplace" (p. xii).

Viewed in such a context, however, it is far too easy for students to visualize the practitioner functioning as "simply a "hired gun" on behalf of clients/management – which, unfortunately, is the perception many hold. In this same context it is too easy, for example, to "excuse" the ethical conduct of those prac-

Monograph No. 52

WINTER 2001

TPR Editor: Linda Morton, University of Oklahoma

tioners who for years served U.S. tobacco companies in efforts to make the public believe smoking was harmless. After all, they — like the high-priced attorneys who also represented Big Tobacco — were “simply” assisting in injecting a particular view into the marketplace — their democratic “right.”

Speaking directing to the issue of tobacco and the public health, Pratt (1997-98) argues that “using public relations to foment a campaign of blatant denial about the earlier documented effects of tobacco suggests a wanton disregard for the public health” (p. 9). He maintains that “the common failings of public relations reflect the narrowly conceived, asymmetrical activities in which it has been used” (p. 9). Instead, he asserts, public relations should be utilized as a means to “build quality relationships through dialogue and negotiation...[by] earning the acceptance of publics...[and by] influencing those relationships and publics mutually” (p. 9).

Talk of “building quality relations” and “earning the acceptance of publics” moves one beyond the traditional individualistic notion that “fulfillment lies in an essentially lonely struggle where the fit survive...[and where] nonsurvival simply means unfitness” (Lodge, 1977, p. 85). It requires that the practitioner not view his or her “relations with others...[merely] as contractual in nature, based on one’s right to work to fulfill one’s interests so long as this does not interfere with the right of others to do the same” (Schindler, 1989, p. 36). It means, in short, that practitioners — and future practitioners — must view their societal responsibilities to others and to the common good as something involving much more than the narrow obligations relative to injecting client or organizational viewpoints into the marketplace of ideas.

Does the Marketplace Exist?

In the article I authored for the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* I also questioned whether, in fact, a genuine marketplace of ideas exists in America today. This is a critical question that students need to address — particularly if practitioners are going to argue that they serve society by their very participation as actors in that process.

Many, in fact, argue that the marketplace no longer exists — because “too frequently those without resources have no real opportunity” to enter that marketplace (Martinson, 1998, p. 144). I suggest to students that asserting that the marketplace of ideas is open to all is the moral equivalent to suggesting that all persons in America have the same opportunity as O.J. Simpson to use — or abuse — the criminal justice system. O.J. Simpson had the financial resources to purchase the best legal advice money could buy. Those with superior financial resources too often similarly use their superior resources to buy the best public relations counsel money can buy — and in the process talk about a marketplace of ideas in which ideas genuinely compete becomes something more approaching

a meaningless sham.

The public relations literature has increasingly come to acknowledge this reality. A prime example is Cutlip, Center and Broom’s classic textbook, *Effective Public Relations*. In the sixth edition of that text published in 1985, the authors suggest that “two minuses can be written against the...[public relations] practice: (1) Public relations has cluttered our already choked channels of communication with the debris of pseudo-events and phony phrases that confuse rather than clarify. (2) Public relations has corroded our channels of communication with cynicism and ‘credibility gaps’” (p. 451).

In the seventh edition published in 1994, however, they add a third “negative” — which, in fact, they list first. “Public relations,” they acknowledge, “gains advantages for and promotes special interests sometimes at the cost of the public well-being” (p. 133). In other words, the so-called marketplace of ideas has become so dominated by those with the superior resources that there is no assurance that ideas will clash with ideas. Or, as Jerome Barron argued more than three decades ago: “There is inequality in the power to communicate ideas just as there is inequality in economic bargaining power; to recognize the latter and deny the former is quixotic” (Gillmor, Barron and Simon, 1998, p. 462).

If educators are going to assist students — and public relations practitioners generally — in an effort to achieve some degree of professionalism, they must insist that one move well beyond what I refer to as a “dogmatic fundamentalist faith” in the marketplace of ideas as a social justification for the practice (Martinson, 1998, p. 150). Educators must insist that a movement toward genuine professionalism begin with a commitment to placing service to the public interest ahead of the more narrow and immediate self-interested concerns of clients/management.

Defining the “Public Interest”

It is difficult — impossible — to enter into a serious dialogue about professionalism and responding to distributive and social justice concerns with students in public relations sequences if they have never been challenged to define the “public interest.” Unfortunately, the term has been misused and abused to such a degree that some argue we would be better off if we simply dropped it from our vocabulary.

At one level such critics are correct. Too many public relations practitioners have inundated the channels of communication with pious sermonizing about serving the public interest — at the very time their actions display a hypocrisy that has tarnished the field’s reputation among large segments of the American public. One applauds the Public Relations Society of America’s code when it declares that “a member shall conduct his or her professional life in accord with the public interest.” At the same time, however, one is forced to ask how many PRSA mem-

bers could give an intellectually tenable definition of the public interest?

The same is true of students. Too often they are willing to employ the term “public interest” without having the slightest idea as to what it means. If pressed, they often propose that it means what the majority believes or feels is in its interest. At that point I ask if they believe segregation was in the public interest in the South in the 1940s because a majority supported it, or whether it would be in the public interest to force everyone in Mississippi to become a Baptist if a majority of residents of that state happened to be members of that particular religious denomination? Obviously a definition of the public interest must include more than blind submission to the will of the majority. (Long ago political philosophers recognized that majorities — like kings — could be tyrannical.)

Public relations students need to be introduced to intellectual giants like the legendary Walter Lippmann who defined the public interest as “what men would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently” (Lippmann, 1955, p. 42). Public relations professors also need to familiarize students with scholars like Michael Bayles (1981) who notes that “many of the most...difficult problems of professional ethics concern conflicts between a professional’s obligations to a client and to others...[and that too often in our discussions] we appear to sacrifice society interests to those of individual clients” (p. 92).

I believe Grunig and Hunt (1984) touch on a key point when they state that “professionals believe that serving others is more important than their own economic gain” (p. 66). Public relations practitioners — and future practitioners — will genuinely serve others in any meaningful sense only when they place serving the public interest ahead of that of clients/management. They will not ever be able to serve that public interest, however, if they are unable to define what the phrase means!

Practitioners and Society

I find that a key step in helping students appreciate what the public interest means centers around challenging them to define their relationship to society (and the state/government). Students will not understand why — or perhaps even acknowledge — that they may have an obligation to serve the public interest if they have not conceptualized the relationship of the individual (themselves) to society (as well as to the state/government).

I ask students to consider where they would be if there were no organized society. I like to quote both Austin Fagothey and Jacques Maritain in this regard. Both assert that the individual has obligations to society because each person is “utterly dependent on...[his/her] equals for every kind of service and...[is] abounding in needs and wants, both physical

and intellectual, that only his fellow...[persons] can supply” (Fagothey, 1976, p. 293). Maritain, in fact, maintains that to suggest “that the aim of society is...the mere aggregate of the individual goods of each of the persons who constitute it...would dissolve society as such for the benefit of its parts and would lead to an anarchy of atoms” (Maritain, 1971, p. 8). (Students undoubtedly tire of my placing “anarchy of atoms” questions on the exams I give!)

To emphasize my point, I tell students that it is always interesting — and predictable — that each year when the legislature talks about raising student tuition, student government reacts as if it had just been announced that the end of the world was imminent. I also note, however, that students are generally rather apathetic regarding issues germane to governmental support for senior citizen health insurance, an issue of enormous concern to a large number of persons living in Florida. For students, the good of society is frequently defined in terms of how well society assists them in their efforts to pay for a college education. For senior citizens, on the other hand, the societal good is often defined in terms of a societal willingness to make health care affordable for those on Medicare. Society is defined in self-interested terms — the result being an “anarchy of atoms.” What we all need to recognize, in a broader context, is that without society there would be no system of public higher education from which many young people benefit. At the same time, senior citizens would likely — statistically — have a much shorter life span!

One can make this point in a specific public relations context by noting how often the success — or lack of it — of a university public relations program is similarly defined in self-interested terms. That is, a successful university public relations effort is defined almost exclusively in relation to how much the university and its immediate constituents benefit. Whether the university gains at the expense of other important/legitimate societal interests is too often forgotten or ignored. It is certainly conceivable, however, that at least some of the tax dollars going to support higher education, which frequently most benefits the already affluent in society, might be better spent — from a social/distributive justice perspective — by better funding programs to support early childhood health care in socially/economically depressed areas. One needs to recognize, of course, that persons living under such conditions have very few public relations practitioners actively working to inject their views into the marketplace of ideas.

Conclusions

The public relations practitioner has obligations to society (the public interest) because without society there would be no need for public relations — or public relations practitioners. In fact, as Schindler (1989) argues, “without society, we could not exist as persons” (p. 105). For public relations practitioners to

acknowledge that they have obligations to society and the public interest is simply an acknowledgement that they are "owning up to a debt that can never fully be repaid" (p. 105).

A Republican candidate running for the U.S. Senate in 1994 declared boldly that he wanted "a government that did nothing." In many ways he was echoing the Reagan rhetoric of the 1980s when government was viewed as the enemy of freedom and where rugged individualism reflected a philosophy of "I'll get mine and I'll leave you free to worry about getting yours." The public relations practitioner who serves as a "naked" advocate for an organization or client by injecting ideas into the marketplace fits well into such an ideological mindset.

But, students need to ask, does the social justification for public relations rest primarily on the practitioner's expertise in assisting clients/management to "win battles" in the marketplace of ideas? Does he/she not have, rather, at least an equal obligation to serve the public interest (or common good) in a genuinely professionalism manner?

One might suggest that a "true" societal justification for public relations will emerge only when practitioners accept their responsibility for establishing an authentic marketplace of ideas where the views of

those who are not rich and powerful have an opportunity of being heard.

Professors in schools of law need to remind their students that the O.J. Simpsons of the world will never lack for legal representation. What, however, about the poor teenager living in the inner city? How many high-priced attorneys will that person be able to afford to challenge the competency of those who gathered evidence at a crime scene? Will that person have a "dream legal team" available to uncover potentially incriminating behavior among arresting officers?

In the same way, public relations instructors must remind students that there will always be practitioners willing to make their services available to those in privileged positions of wealth and power. Like their brethren in the field of law, the challenge for public relations educators rests in motivating more students to accept the challenge of genuine service to the public interest/common good. Pratt points out that many practitioners were willing to assist big tobacco in injecting its "ideas" into the marketplace. One only wishes there had been as large a number willing to assist those dying from cancer to inject their "ideas" into that marketplace — who knows how many lives might have been saved.

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