
Commentary: What happened to public responsibility? The lack of society in public relations codes of ethics.

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The issue of ethics is complex and contentious. For public relations it is also critical, as the industry will only win the struggle to salvage its own reputation if it can clearly demonstrate not only a commitment to ethics, but also some means to enforce ethical standards. There are many ethical reasoning tools, both intricate and useful, that public relations practitioners use to try to make ethical decisions, and these have been widely discussed in textbooks and specialist articles (e.g. Johnston & Zawawi, 2000; Bivins, 1992; Wright, 1989a; Pratt, 1993; Kruckeberg, 1996). This article does not attempt a comprehensive overview of ethical schemas; rather, it takes one corner of the ethical practitioner's kitbag of tools, the association code of conduct, and examines one aspect of code content; its stand on social duty. As practical ethics tools, codes clearly have strengths and weaknesses beyond their incorporation or otherwise of a specific 'duty to society' clause (c.f. Roth & Stravopoulos, 1996; Wright, 1993; Zupko, 1994). However, this article suggests that the absence or flimsiness of such clauses in some of the world's leading PR association codes is too important a weakness to pass without comment. This article is intended not as a definitive word on ethics code requirements, nor an overview of their effectiveness and enforcement, but rather as a means to ensure that the important debate about ethics continues.

In an effort to provide members with clear ethical guidelines, non-governmental public relations organisations in several countries have outlined ethics codes. This article reviews the codes of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS), the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ), and the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa

(PRISA). These codes consist of 15 to 20 written "rules", spelled out in short sentences, telling the practitioner how to behave ethically in the course of their daily activity. All the various codes are derived from the Code of Athens, developed by the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) in 1965. They all address practitioners' duties towards clients and other practitioners by including clauses such as "only seek payment for services specifically commissioned" and "do not bring discredit upon the profession". Most also include specific prohibition of unethical personal behaviours by practitioners, for example lying. What the codes do not spell out clearly, however, is the issue of the practitioners' duties towards their publics and to society in general. Some contain mention of public interest, yet none of the codes explicitly addresses the issue of taking a stand on client behaviour where it conflicts with that interest.

The importance of ethics

In public relations research, agreement has existed for many years that ethics must be central to professional practice (e.g. Pratt, 1993, p. 219; Wright 1989a, p. 3; Schick, 1994; Pearson, 1989). According to Seitzel (1992), "the [future] success of public relations [...] will depend to a large degree on how the field responds to the issue of ethical conduct" (cited in Pratt, 1993, p. 220).

The public relations field suffers from a poor public image (Shamir & Reed, 1990, p. 956). Studies have revealed credibility gaps between public relations practitioners and their publics (Bovet, 1993, p. 26). A critical look at the public relations profession's reputation shows that much of this negative visibility relates to public perceptions about ethical standards (Bovet, 1993, p. 25).

In their role as communication manager, the practitioner is confronted with various choices and ethical dilemmas. Many of these dilemmas derive from the fact that what is best for the company often is not in the best interests of the society. For instance, for a tobacco company the goal is to sell as many cigarettes as possible, and the company will be better off if more people start to smoke. However, for society in general, this is not the optimal situation, as it increases health problems among the population. Seib and Fitzpatrick argue that, because “much of the distrust of public relations professionals derives from the lack of public trust in the institutions they represent” (1995, p. 7), public relations practitioners must take it upon themselves not only to improve their own reputation “both with the public and the organizations they represent” by acting ethically at a personal level, but also by actively seeking to “improve the social responsibility of client organizations” (p. 7). To take responsibility for such an indefinable quality as public interest is not straightforward. And intent is not always easy to put into practice. Public relations practitioners, especially those working as technicians, often experience over-ruling of their suggestions by upper management. However, as Wright argues, “the bottom-line of ethical decision making in [public relations] will continue to rest in the laps of individual practitioners” (Wright, 1989a, p. 4). Also, as Martinson concludes, the public relations profession “will never be any more ethical than the level of basic ethical morality of the people who are in [the field]” (1998, p. 14). Therefore codes should be seen to spell out social duty as a priority.

Conflicts of duty

Martinson (1994) asks whether public relations practitioners are responsible for client behaviour or actions. Further, he asks to what extent the practitioners are responsible for “bad” things that happen to others as a result of actions undertaken on behalf of the client (Martinson, 1994, pp. 1-5). The answer to these questions should be that the practitioners must relate to the same ethical standards when considering the client’s actions, as they do when considering

their personal actions. Aristotle argued that ethical behaviour is the balance or the “mean” between thinking and acting in extreme ways (Martinson, 2000, p 19). To Aristotle then, the ethical practitioner would be the one who balances between the welfare of the public and the welfare of the client. Most ethics codes contain clauses governing practitioner behaviour and methods; they require practitioners to ensure that the methods undertaken are ethical. Few would argue with the suggestion that it does not matter how ethical the aim of the organisation, the practitioner working for Amnesty International will not be ethical if using bribery to get his or her story in the news. Yet the reverse is also true; the bottom line is that it does not help using ethical methods if the product that is promoted is unethical. Yet how many codes of ethics also include specific reference not only to personal practitioner behaviours but also to ultimate social good? Ethics codes that ignore duty to society are not reflecting Aristotle’s fundamental call for balance.

How sufficient are existing codes of ethics?

In order to identify to what extent existing codes address social responsibility, the author evaluated five codes; those of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS), the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ), and the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA). The different ethics codes vary in length, number of clauses, and to some extent content. The code that includes the smallest number of guidelines, with only nine paragraphs, is that of the CPRS. Containing twenty-four different clauses, the PRISA covers the largest amount of information.

Duties to society, public, client, profession, and self

All five codes include a paragraph stating that “the member shall deal fairly and honestly with his or her employers, clients, fellow workers, the general public, and fellow

members”. However, none of the codes explains what is meant by “deal fairly”, and in relation to the public none of the codes mention the word ‘duty’. Only the CPRS code provides examples of what could be meant by “deal fairly”. These examples (conferring gifts and privileges to influence decisions) are limited as they only cover the issue of bribery.

All codes include several paragraphs addressing the member’s responsibility to the client, the profession, and to other members. A smaller number of paragraphs are dedicated to the public, and no paragraphs mention the member’s duty to society or contain explicit instructions about prioritising duties where they conflict.

Endorsement of public welfare and happiness

No code explicitly addresses the issue of public welfare and happiness. Although most codes address this issue indirectly by mentioning that the practitioners should conduct their practice according to the aims of their member organisations, where responsibility towards the community is emphasised, none of the codes mention that endorsing public welfare is something the practitioners should consider. Two of the codes (PRISA and the PRSA), do however explicitly address human rights.

The PRIA code does not address the issue of public welfare, but mainly focuses on the member’s responsibility towards the PRIA itself and the client he or she is interacting with.

Public as the first priority

In one way or another all codes suggest that members conduct professional behaviour in the public interest. However, the different wordings give quite a different emphasis to each statement. The PRIA code includes this issue by mentioning that the members shall “deal fairly with the general public” (PRIA, 2001, §1), without explanation of fair dealing. The CPRS code takes a prohibitive approach to the issue of public responsibility by stating that members “shall conduct their professional lives in a manner that does not conflict with the public interest and the dignity of the individual, with

respect for the rights of the public as contained in the Constitution of Canada and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms” (CPRS, 2000, §2). This expression is not optimal, as there is a significant difference between ‘not conflict with’ and ‘prioritise’.

The code that addresses the issue of public responsibility with the strongest wording is the PRISA code, which states that the members “shall respect the public interest and the dignity of the individual” (PRISA, 2001: §2.1).

Truthful behaviour

All codes include the paragraph “the member shall not *knowingly* or *intentionally* communicate false or misleading information”. However, two codes (those of the PRISA and the PRIA) add the word ‘*recklessly*’ or ‘*inadvertently*’ (PRISA 2001: §2.4, PRIA 2001: §3). This inclusion encourages the member to be more responsible and more careful about what is said and written, and makes it harder to hide behind “I did not mean to” excuses. None of the codes mentions anything about withholding information or includes directives that might help practitioners navigate the complex relationships between truthfulness and public interest (c.f. Bleile, 1998; Schick, 1994; Martinson, 1996; Lordan, 1997).

Responsibility for client behaviour

The closest any code comes to addressing the issue of taking a stand on client behaviour is the PRSA clause stating that “a member shall as soon as possible, sever relations with any organization or individual if such relationship requires conduct contrary to the articles of this Code” (PRSA, 2001, §17). The PRSA code also states that “a member shall not place himself or herself in a position where the member’s personal interest is or may be in conflict with an obligation to an employer or client” (PRSA, 2001, §10). This aspect is also mentioned in the CPRS code (CPRS, 2001, §7).

Although all codes state that no member shall represent “conflicting interests”, no codes explicitly state that members must take a stand on client behaviour where that behaviour

conflicts with the social good. It is interesting to note that, in Australia, some consultancies have formed their own codes of conduct that extend or depart from industry codes on this issue. For example the code developed by Sydney-based consultancy Jackson Wells Morris (JWM), gives explicit instructions about how client/society conflicts will be resolved. JWM's code states that, where social and client interests conflict, and "if the conflict is ethically relevant, JWM will seek to change the client's position" (JWM, 2002, n.p.). This is not necessarily a new or unusual idea; back in 1988 IPR managing director John Fitzgerald told delegates to the Public Relations World Congress that his consultancy conducts careful social interest research before agreeing to represent clients, and asserted that "many Australian public relations companies refuse briefs" (p. 161). Yet industry codes contain no mention of assessing social interest in client selection.

Emphasising symmetrical two-way communication

All codes except the PRIA code include the paragraph "the member shall not corrupt or influence the communication channels and the media". The PRIA code mentions that members "shall deal fairly with the communication media", but does not explain what "dealing fairly" should incorporate (PRIA, 2001, §1).

No code addresses the issue of establishing communication channels endorsing symmetrical two-way communication. The closest any code comes to addressing the issue is the PRSA code mentioning that the members have "obligations to the democratic process" (PRSA, 2001, §2).

Regular discourse about ethics and ethical values

No code addresses the issue of regular moral reflection. Most codes are posed in the negative, i.e. a list of prohibitions detailing what the practitioner should *not* do. No code encourages the practitioner in a positive sense to become *more* ethical or to reflect upon moral issues, for example by scheduling regular ethics reviews or discussions, or writing ethics reviews into

campaigning as a specific step in the planning. None of the codes specifically sets out requirements for practitioners to engage in pro bono work, for example.

Conclusion

Member organisations and codes of ethics have gone far in providing ethical guidelines for practitioners and thus developing credibility and transparency for the profession. But more emphasis must be put, directly and explicitly, on the public responsibility of the profession. Codes should include explicit directives placing social duty above client needs, fellow practitioner interests, and self interest. Only this way will the profession meet its responsibilities towards society and begin to address its own poor reputation.

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