

Public Relations: Good or Evil?

The purpose of this assignment is essentially to decide whether public relations is a technique used by the masses to make sure their voices are heard by the powerful – “good” – or a black art for the powerful – “evil.” The Oxford English Dictionary defines “good” as something containing characteristics “which are either admirable in themselves or useful for some purpose” (“Good” 1989). The same source describes “evil” as being “morally depraved” (“Bad” 1989). In simpler terms, the purpose of this paper is therefore to decide whether public relations – or perhaps being a public relations practitioner – is something admirable and ethical or something that implies moral depravity or corruption.

The obvious problem with this question is that a discipline in itself is unlikely to be inherently good or evil. It is how people apply the discipline which makes it one of the two. Stuart Ewen describes public relations as having a “‘foundational conceit’. . . born of the notion that the public mind can and should be manipulated” (qtd. in Parsons 2004, p. 5). This “foundational conceit” is an idea which stems from public relations’ history of propaganda, which is usually assumed to be “bad,” to be something that persuades the small minded masses to think or act in a certain way. Noam Chomsky wrote the original leaders in the public relations industry were committed “to controlling the public mind” (2002, p. 23). This is certainly unethical or “evil” behaviour.

According to Chomsky, public relations and propaganda go hand in hand. “[Their] crucial value is that [they divert] your attention from a question that *does* mean something.” (2002, p. 26). The ideal public relations campaign is one that results in what Edward Bernays called “the engineering of consent” (qtd. in 2002, p. 29). However, to engineer consent – to reach out to the

crowds and get them to agree on something – you need resources and power. This should automatically prevent the masses from ensuring their voices are heard by the powerful. But with today's technology, this is not the case.

Twitter, for example, is a free service which allows all people and all organisations to monitor and respond to what's being said about them. Companies can participate in conversations about themselves or use twitter to promote stories. The website allows for an increase in transparency for today's consumers. Comcast and JetBlue are two companies which have in past years begun taking advantage of this technology to ensure customer satisfaction. TechCrunch founder Michael Arrington "tweeted" about his frustrations with Comcast after 36 hours without the internet and receiving no help from the company after calling in complaints. Within 20 minutes of his tweet, Arrington "got a call from a Comcast executive in Philadelphia who wanted to know how he could help. . . [The executive] uses Twitter and blogs to get an understanding of what people are saying about Comcast, and so he saw the discussion break out around [Arrington's] messages." (Arrington 2008). Similarly, Morgan Johnston, the Corporate Communications representative from JetBlue Airways, sent blogger Jonathan Fields an email a few minutes after Fields tweeted about seeing a celebrity at the JetBlue boarding gate. When questioned about his Twitter use, Johnston explained "we saw the potential for corporate interaction directly with customers. - not necessarily marketing - but a proper communication tool to talk with customers" (qtd. in Fields 2008).

Following an organisation on Twitter is simple. Tweet Scan (<http://tweetscan.com/>) allows for near immediate updates on any tweet mentioning the company name. Micro-blogging sites have allowed even the smallest company with no budget to monitor itself and, potentially, start conversations about itself. Johnston talks about speaking *with* customers, not speaking *to* them. This is an important part of customer and public relations. PR practitioner Todd Defren has said we are

living in the social media era, and “In the Social Media era, getting better at Public Relations means getting better at the Relationships, not the Publicity” (2008).

If micro-blogging technology has helped both small and large companies get their messages across, it has also helped individuals amplify their voices. James Karl Buck, a student at the University of California, was arrested in Egypt last year. On the way to jail he posted a message on Twitter announcing his arrest. The message set off a chain of events catching the eye of his friends, university officials, and the media, leading to the university hiring a lawyer on his behalf. The following day, Buck posted another message telling followers that he had been freed.

“In the era of blogs, social networks, and microblogging, fans of endangered shows can quickly organize and protest, and in some cases, even guilt network execs into giving them at least a bit more of their favorite programs” (Ostrow 2009). CBS brought back *Jericho* after an online campaign involving wikis and facebook. After the Fox Broadcasting Company cancelled *Arrested Development* fans went online and loudly complained. In response, show creator Michael Hurtz has begun planning an *Arrested Development* feature film. Many news stories were written about both cases. The current television-related online protest revolves around NBC’s *Chuck*: popular TV blog *Give Me Back My Remote* has changed its name to *Give Me Back My Chuck*. In the days leading up to the season finale, fans of the show bought sandwiches from show sponsor Subway and left comment cards telling the sponsor they do not want the show to be cancelled (France 2009). Although NBC has not yet made a decision regarding the show, representatives have stated they are well aware of the fan reaction. Technology has allowed individuals to demand “change from a larger entity that may otherwise not be swayed” (Nicole 2008).

Technology combined with public relations techniques has certainly given the average citizen access to powerful organisations and forced them to listen. However, as Chomsky said,

public relations is use to divert the attention of the masses to something powerful organisations have deemed important (2002, p. 26). Examining the ethics of public relations – or its practitioners – is a step in understanding whether the industry is good or bad.

Public relations societies around the world suggest ethical guidelines for their members. The Public Relations Society of America has a Code of Ethics on its website. “The Code is designed to be a useful guide for PRSA members as they carry out their ethical responsibilities” which include advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness (“Public Relations Society of America Member Code of Ethics” 2000). While the PRSA encourages members to act ethically, considering “ethical practice [to be] the most important obligation of a PRSA member,” the society has removed any emphasis on enforcing the Code (*ibid.*). The Chartered Institute of Public Relations does not explicitly have a code of ethics, but they offer a code of conduct. The word “ethics” appears once in the code of conduct, under the section “Principles of Good Practice: Competence,” stating that members should “[ensure] that services provided are costed and accounted for in a manner that conforms to accepted business practice and ethics” (“CIPR Code of Conduct”). The CIPR Social Media Guidelines discuss ethics in much the same way: something which must be followed, but never spelling out what exactly is ethical behaviour.

The problem with this, of course, is that ethics is an individual topic: what one person finds ethical, another may not. Additionally, there are two ways to approach ethics – either by following a set code of ethics and following them unconditionally, or by taking ethical rules and principles and adjusting them based on specific circumstances.

The International Public Relations Association “specifies the conditions for the ethical practice of public affairs” (“Code of Brussels”) These are:

1. *Integrity.*

Act with honesty and integrity at all times so as to secure the confidence of those with whom the practitioner comes into contact;

2. *Transparency.*

Be open and transparent in declaring their name, organisation and the interest they represent;

3. *Dialogue.*

Establish the moral, psychological and intellectual conditions for dialogue, and recognise the rights of all parties involved to state their case and express their views;

4. *Accuracy.*

Take all reasonable steps to ensure the truth and accuracy of all information provided to public authorities;

5. *Falsehood.*

Not intentionally disseminate false or misleading information, and shall exercise proper care to avoid doing so unintentionally and correct any such act promptly;

6. *Deception.*

Not obtain information from public authorities by deceptive or dishonest means;

7. *Confidentiality.*

Honour confidential information provided to them;

8. *Influence.*

Neither propose nor undertake any action which would constitute an improper influence on public authorities;

9. *Inducement.*

Neither directly nor indirectly offer nor give any financial or other inducement to members of public authorities or public representatives;

10. *Conflict.*

Avoid any professional conflicts of interest and to disclose such conflicts to affected parties when they occur;

11. *Profit.*

Not sell for profit to third parties copies of documents obtained from public authorities;

12. *Employment.*

Only employ personnel from public authorities subject to the rules and confidentiality requirements of those authorities. (*ibid.*)

While it is not clear on the IPRA website what their disciplinary actions are, the Code of Brussels does state that members who do not follow the Code are subject to disciplinary procedure. All three of the aforementioned public relations societies offer committees to which complaints can be made, though the actions taken are rarely, if ever, more extreme than “a public reprimand or expulsion” from the group (Theaker 2008, p. 59).

The nature of public relations prevents barring anyone from becoming a practitioner. There is no license or accreditation required such as to become a teacher or a lawyer. Because of this – and because of the large number of public relations practitioners around the world – it is near impossible to regulate the actions of every practitioner. Additionally, public relations does deal with a certain amount of persuasion and “how can you ensure that your strategies designed to influence the public’s attitudes and opinions. . . are ethical and above reproach?” (Parsons 2004, p. 107).

Public relations consultant Peter O’Malley believes a discussion about honesty and integrity “ignores what public relations is all about” (qtd. in Parsons 2004, p. 18). The truth is, public

relations will not always be used in an ethical manner. Modern technology has allowed for organisations to hear the voice of the individual, but that does not necessarily mean the individual has an impact. In the case of Jericho, CBS only brought the show back for a mini-series of seven episodes before cancelling it again. But CBS ignoring the fans' second public outcry does not mean it is a "bad" corporation or engages in "evil" practices. It is important to remember that public relations and technology allowed a large corporation to listen to their customers and react.

O'Malley believes that "if you want to be an ethical public relations practitioner you 'choose to serve clients whose self-defined interests are in [your] view, correct. And [you] don't serve those whose purposes and interests are incorrect. Period.'" (*ibid.*). But this once more raises the issue of what exactly is correct and ethical and good. There is no correct answer to that question. Until there is, there will always be "unethical" organisations and public relations practitioners acting on their behalf. There will always be "unethical" actions taken on behalf of a company. On the other hand, technology has allowed for a sort of reverse public relations allowing individual consumers to use public relations techniques to force large companies into listening to the smaller voices. In this sense, there is a movement for public relations to be used in an ethical and "good" way. As long as people use public relations to tell the truth – or speak what they believe to be the truth – and do not purposely mislead, public relations can be used in an ethical manner. It is entirely possible for public relations to be "good" and "ethical," but this fully depends on who is using the PR techniques.

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