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Ethical public relations serve the public interest

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ABSTRACT

This commentary makes the argument that the ethical practice of public relations is in the public interest. This is because efficient communication between organizations and the public, as well as between organizations and themselves, is at the core of the democratic process our political system is predicated on.

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For public relations to be eventually recognized as a profession, society must recognize its usefulness. What is the nature of this usefulness? The answer lies at the core of the bonds that unite our society.

The democratic process on which our political system is predicated is intimately linked to the free flow of ideas and opinions. For ideas to circulate freely and for debates to occur, some form of organization is required. For information to be widely shared, it must be organized and distributed. It is in organizing and distributing information, and in managing relations between organizations and their publics that public relations will find its purpose as a profession at the service of business, government, the not-for-profit sector and society at large.

The art and science of efficient communication is, in itself, a field of expertise

Efficient communication requires the mastery of the spoken and written

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word, knowledge of the mechanisms of perception and of the multiple ways in which messages can be altered. If for no other reason than to talk with the media, organizations require expertise, but there is much more. Organizations must also talk, exchange, discuss, and negotiate with one another, as well as with their publics and markets, either directly or through the media. Organizations also need to participate in the ever-growing consultation mechanisms that have spread throughout society, such as the public consultations processes that precede all projects and new government policies with any significant impact on society, the environment or the economy.

The efficient management of relations between organizations and their publics should contribute to the common good. In a society where so much is virtual and information flows freely, the practice of public relations has become very powerful at influencing and suggesting the common values and attitudes that shape our society. Hence the importance of defining adequate ethical safeguards, as with any other profession, not only to protect our clients, but also to ensure that our practice is in line with public interest. I strongly urge all public relations professionals to read the many codes of ethical public relations that can easily be found on the internet. An examination of these codes reveals the following shared main thrust:

- *Public relations that encourage the free flow of information and that aim to shed light on debated questions are legitimate and ethical.*
- *Public relations that aim to suppress opinions or to obfuscate debates are illegitimate and unethical.*

Ethics and the social utility of public relations

These tenets are at least implied in all major codes and they are explicitly laid out in many of them. Following are four examples, from the least to the most explicit.

In its *Royal Charter of Incorporation*, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations of the United Kingdom defines public relations as, “the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.” The very first sentence of its *Code of Conduct* reads as follows: “Reputation has a direct and major impact on the corporate well-being of every organisation, be it a multinational, a charity, a Government Department or a small business.” Honesty and integrity are at the top of its list of values.

Article 3 of the *CPRS Code of Ethics* reads: "A member shall practice the highest standards of honesty, accuracy, integrity and truth, and shall not knowingly disseminate false or misleading information."

The *Code of the Public Relations Society of America* explicitly links the free flow of information and the public interest: "Protecting and advancing the free flow of information is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society." And also this: "Open communication fosters informed decision making in a democratic society."

The *Code of Conduct*, adopted in 2011 by the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), amalgamates and replaces their three previous codes of ethics and legitimates public relations by linking them to basic human needs as well as to the democratic process. Here are some excerpts:

- (a) RECALLING the Charter of the United Nations which determines "to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, and in the dignity and worth of the human person";
- (b) RECALLING the 1948 "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and especially recalling Article 19¹;
- (c) RECALLING that public relations, by fostering the free flow of information, contributes to the interests of all stakeholders;
- (d) RECALLING that the conduct of public relations and public affairs provides essential democratic representation to public authorities:

Public relations practitioners shall:

1. Observe the principles of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
2. Act with honesty and integrity at all times so as to secure and retain the confidence of those with whom the practitioner comes into contact;
3. Seek to establish the moral, cultural and intellectual conditions for dialogue, and recognize the rights of all parties involved to state their case and express their views.

¹ "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

These excerpts clearly establish the legitimacy and social usefulness of public relations and the vital importance of dialogue based on fundamental human needs and on the requirements of society. However, this legitimacy is only valid within the framework of ethical practice.

The CPRS definition of public relations

The CPRS definition of public relations reads: “Public relations is the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals, and serve the public interest” (Flynn, Gregory & Valin, 2008).

Public relations do not serve any and all purposes; their specific purpose is to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals, and serve the public interest. I did not participate in the discussions leading up to this definition and I do not know of its exegesis, but I believe the order in which these three goals are set out is capital. It is necessary to achieve mutual understanding first, in order to be able to realize organizational goals. One does not go without the other. It is in the interest of the organization as well as in the general public interest that it be so.

The importance of maintaining a respectful dialogue

Mutual understanding does not mean mutual acceptance, or mutual agreement; nor does the establishment of “confidence” as required by Article 2 of the IPRA *Code of Conduct*. The establishment of confidence, or of mutual understanding, means that both parties know exactly what the other party’s opinions, ideas and goals are. Mutual understanding can easily coexist with fundamental disagreement. What is essential from the public relations standpoint is not to reconcile the parties (but it is of course the most desirable outcome), it is that both parties know exactly what the other party stands for, and that efficient communications channels (dialogue) be kept open between them. For when disagreement occurs in the context of open, honest and respectful communication, it is possible to circumscribe the negatives to the real areas of disagreement, to work towards resolving conflicts, and to discuss

mitigation or compensation measures. But if disagreement occurs in a context of bad faith and concealment, then the negatives will multiply into a cascade of incomprehension and mistrust leading to rupture. Problems crop up when parties stop talking to one another – problems such as strikes, lockouts, law suits, sabotage, bad media coverage, reputational damage and decline in share value on the stock market.

To give but this one example, consider the shale gas industry's spectacular failure in Quebec. Supported by the Government of Quebec, many companies tried to conduct exploratory drilling in the St. Lawrence Valley – the most densely populated area of the province – without first gaining public support. There was a tremendous uproar and within six months, shale gas went from the industry no one knew about to the newest poster child for blind, unscrupulous capitalism. The government had to bring in the Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement (the provincial environmental review board) whose report translated into a virtual freeze on all development for the foreseeable future. Contrast this with the construction of a 200 kilometre pipeline in the same region in the same time period, involving negotiations with 32 municipalities and 680 land-owners. It took 5 years and the cost of the project went up, but 90% of all cases were settled amicably, the remaining court cases received no public support and, of course, the pipeline is being built.

The long-term interest of the client is that dialogue should always prevail over conflict, even in situations where interests are diametrically opposed. Put another way, for the winners as well as for the losers, diplomacy is always preferable to war.

Extending this line of thinking to all interactions between organizations and individuals across the breadth and depth of society, it becomes clear that mechanisms that favour dialogue, the peaceful resolution of conflicts and the construction of sound individual and collective opinions are conducive to the public good.

There can be no opposition between the interest of my client and the public interest

In this paper, I have demonstrated that ethical public relations are useful inasmuch as they foster informed public debate between organisations and their publics. First, the free flow of information allows the best ideas to surface. Second, since disagreements and confrontation are sometimes inevitable

in society, there is a definite need for mechanisms that will allow organisations to adjust to one another through dialogue rather than brute force.

Translated into my everyday practice, this means my client's interest is not only to achieve his or her organizational goals, it is to do so in a climate of mutual respect and understanding, even if one or both parties are unhappy with the end result. I would do a great disservice to my client by pursuing a strategy based on deceit, lies and the refusal of dialogue, where gains are at the expense of social harmony. Such strategies can generate short-term positive results but they inevitably produce a long-term loss of trust, with the negative consequences that ensue. I refuse to undermine my own credibility – and that of my profession – by condoning practices that are contrary to my clients' interests, and to the public interest.

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