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# Ethics in Public Relations

Peter Neijens

## INTRODUCTION

Ethical issues have long been a preoccupation of the public relations field (Jackson & Moloney, 2018). This is not surprising given the often conflicting interests between public relations professionals serving their clients on the one hand and other players in the field such as activist groups and critical journalists on the other, and the thin line between just communicating the view of a client and spin or propaganda. A vast majority of public relations professionals believe that public relations suffers from credibility issues, that ethics are important, and that they increasingly experience ethical challenges and dilemmas in their daily work (Lee & Cheng, 2012; Zerfass et al., 2012).

Ethical issues have become even more prominent since the introduction of the internet and the emergence of social media, which have launched new ethical challenges such as fake news, disguised persuasion, ghost authors, dealing with customer feedback, customer tracking through data mining, and privacy. Increased polarization and greater awareness of ethnical, racial, religious, and sexual identities have also contributed to the importance of ethics (Christians, 2007).

Public relations – ‘the management of communication between an organization and its publics’ (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) – has many aspects and comes in various shapes and sizes. The field includes organizations as diverse as powerful (multinational) corporations, government bodies, unions, non-profit organizations, activist groups, and charity organizations. The strategic communication process covers monitoring information and (public) discussions, informing, engaging with and influencing stakeholders, and advocating organizations’ positions on (public) issues, often during crises and periods of change. Stakeholders range from government, political parties, the media, financial institutions, investors, suppliers, customers, and the general public, to employees and potential employees.

A variety of names are used for (different aspects of) public relations, such as strategic communication, communication management, corporate communication, organizational communication, public affairs, stakeholder relations, issue management, press offices, and information officers. Although few will disagree with the general definition of public relations given above, agencies and associations place different emphasis on the different aspects of public relations. The field is characterized by ‘a wealth of different

perspectives' and paradigms (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012, p. 160). These perspectives range from focusing on understanding audiences' attitudes and behaviors in order to better persuade them to serve society by helping organizations participate in the public sphere and serve the needs of stakeholders such as citizens (e.g., Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Heath & Coombs, 2006; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012). The different perspectives are associated with different ethical norms and practices. We will discuss these later in this chapter.

Ethical issues in public relations have much in common with those in other marketing instruments, in part because the boundaries between public relations, advertising, and sponsorship have been blurred, and integrated marketing communication has become very important. Public relations and advertising professionals not only collaborate on campaigns, but also often work for the same agency and were classmates at school, which contributes to similarities in thinking and doing with regard to ethical decision making.

This chapter aims to add insights into and knowledge about marketing ethics by focusing on the issues that are specifically discussed in relation to public relations. In line with the distinction between normative (what ought to be) versus positive (what is) ethics (Ferrell et al., 2013), we will discuss ethical norms and ethical practices respectively.

## ETHICAL NORMS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

In this section we discuss ethical norms for ethical decision making, including ethical values and codes of ethics developed by public relations associations and agencies in different parts of the world, and how these are related to conceptions of public relations.

### *Ethical Values*

Ethical decision making 'involves making rational choices between what is good and bad, between what is morally justifiable action and what is not' (Patterson & Wilkins, 2005, p. 4), and should be based on 'values, which are considered guiding principles in people's lives' (Schwartz, 1996, p. 2). These values can be based on religious, utilitarian, legalistic, political, human-nature, dialogical, feminist, and situational perspectives (Johannesen, Valde, & Whedbeed, 2008). The list of values that should guide ethical decision

making in public relations which are derived from these perspectives is almost endless. To name a 'few': accountability, appreciation, authenticity, autonomy, care, caring (including the notion of avoiding unnecessary harm), citizenship (including the notions of obeying laws and protecting the environment), collaborative decision making, commitment, consistency, credibility, dialogue, dignity, disclosure, ethical leadership, equity, fairness, honesty, humility, impartiality, integrity, interdependence, listening, loyalty, mutuality, openness, professionalism, reciprocity, reliability, respect (for the persuader, for others, for privacy, for human rights), responsibility, responsiveness, social responsibility, transparency, trustworthiness, truthfulness (e.g., Baker, 1999; Baker & Martinson, 2001; Heath & Coombs, 2006; L'Etang, 2011; Schauster & Neill, 2017; Schwartz, 1996; 2005; St. John & Pearson, 2017).

Specific values were proposed for using social media in public relations; Bowen (2013) developed 15 ethical guidelines. Some of them are quite general, others are more concrete, for instance: avoid deception, paid speech should be transparently identified as such, and personal speech must be clearly distinguished from speech that is representative of the organization (see also DiStaso & Bortree, 2014).

More recent developments such as fake news and inappropriate use of automated communications have triggered a broad coalition of international and national public relations associations and agencies to install a task force to explore possible enhancements to their codes of ethics.<sup>1</sup>

### *Codes of Ethics*

Professional organizations such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), and the British Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) as well as individual public relations agencies, have developed codes of ethics, also referred to as codes of conduct, codes of practice, corporate credos, mission statements, or values statements (Ki & Kim, 2010). There are some minor differences in meaning between these labels (for details see Murphy, 2005), but they can all be defined as 'a written, distinct, and formal document which consists of moral standards which help guide employee or corporate behaviors' (Schwartz, 2005, p. 27) or as 'written and formal documents intended to increase moral resistance in the organization and to guide corporate, employee and

other stakeholders' behavior' (Babri, Davidson, & Helin, 2019, pp. 1–2). See for example <https://www.prsa.org/about/ethics/prsa-code-of-ethics> showing the code of ethics of the largest public relations association, the Public Relations Society of America, which views ethics as an important building block in public relations (Lee & Cheng, 2012).

### **Codes of Ethics of Other Public Relations Associations**

Taylor and Yang (2015) studied the codes of ethics of 8 international and 33 national public relations (PR) associations across the world. Their study showed three core values in the codes of the *international* associations: professionalism, client's interest, and advocacy. The codes of the 33 *national* associations had six core values in common: (1) professionalism (e.g., duty, practice), (2) advocacy (influencing public opinion), (3) moral standards (e.g., human rights, moral principles), (4) clients' interests, (5) expertise, and (6) relationship building.

The codes of the national associations, however, did differ as well in their emphasis on particular values. Taylor and Yang (2015) found five clusters of countries with similar codes. The cluster with the USA, for instance, highlights clients' rights, professionalism, and relationship, while the 'European' cluster with Germany and Belgium underline advocacy and moral standards. The authors interpreted this difference as a distinction between an 'organization-centric' approach to ethics with a focus on the interests of clients versus a 'societal' approach that emphasizes duty to society and high moral standards.

### **Codes of Ethics of PR Agencies**

The codes of PR agencies showed the same variance in foci as were found in the codes of the different national associations. In the USA results-oriented values are emphasized more than public interest values, as shown by the study of Ki and Kim (2010) (who studied the codes of about 1,500 PR agencies). More specifically, their study found that respect for clients, service, and results were the values most frequently accentuated. On the other hand, 'balance,' 'fairness,' 'honor,' 'social responsibility,' and 'independence' were the least frequently mentioned. In Norway, for instance, openness, loyalty, integrity, and credibility are the most important moral issues addressed by PR agencies' codes (Brinkmann, 2002).

### **Different Ethical Values, Different Conceptions of PR**

Differences between codes of ethics can be linked to differing views on PR, according to Yang, Taylor, and Saffer (2016). They argue that the focus on serving clients and professionalism is associated with a management approach dominant in the USA. Emphasizing advocacy and moral standards is associated with the 'reflective paradigm' popular in Europe. Europeans, or at least some PR academics, perceive PR as a social activity, serving society by helping organizations participate in the public sphere and serving the needs of citizens to engage with organizations open to debating competing ideas (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012), and 'factual information and not propaganda or spin, is shared with the public' (Yang et al., 2016, p. 149).

### **Pros and Cons of Ethical Codes**

Codes of ethics can serve several objectives other than ethical behavior (Kaptein & Schwartz, 2008), such as enhancing the reputation of a company (Bowie, 1990), preventing regulations and controls by authorities (Clark, 1980) and improving the work climate (Manley, 1991). On the other hand, several objections to codes of ethics are articulated, such as the use of meaningless rhetoric (Wright, 1993), too abstract and vague (Johannesen et al., 2008). It is also stated that the detached absolutist tone of some codes may limit influence in everyday life (Bowden & Surma, 2003), that some values are conflicting – for example, transparency vs. confidentiality (L'Etang, 2011) – and enforcement is lacking (e.g., Wright, 1993). Some authors believe that the codes are 'window dressing,' only created with the intention of promoting an ethical appearance rather than preventing unethical behaviors (Ki & Kim, 2010).

### **Ethical Decision Making**

Ethical values are one thing, but how should these values be applied in ethical decision making? A distinction is made between rationalist-based and non-rationalist-based moral judgment processes. In the latter, intuition and emotion dominate (Schwartz, 2016). For rationalist processes – moral reasoning – PRSA's Ethics Decision Making Guide<sup>2</sup> proposes six steps: (a) define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict; (b) identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision; (c) identify key values; (d) identify the public who may be affected by the decision and

define the PR professional's obligation to each; (e) select ethical principles to guide the decision-making process; and (f) make a decision and justify. Other models distinguish similar steps (e.g., Rest, 1986; Wellington, 2009), including identification of the ethical problem, assessment of moral intensity, evaluation of alternatives, and implementation of the decision. 'In general, a mechanism for justifying the decision with an appropriate rationale is added to the analysis and decision-making phases' (Farmer, 2018, p. 4). This rationale specifies how the different ethical values at stake in a decision-making process are weighted to arrive at a conclusion (Farmer, 2018) which can be based on theories of behavioral decision making, for instance (Slovic, Fischhoff, & Lichtenstein, 1977).

### **Managing Ethics**

Three types of actors may play a role in the development and enforcement of ethical decision making and behavior. In the first place: legal authorities. In the USA, the Federal Trade Commission (<https://www.ftc.gov>) has administered a wide variety of consumer protection laws against unfair and deceptive acts or practices. In Europe, several EU directives and national laws safeguard the consumer from misleading advertising. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (<https://gdpr.eu>), for instance, is Europe's data privacy and security law which has been in force since 2018. In the second place, self-regulation: professional organizations can regulate ethical behaviors through codes of conduct. And finally, agencies can enforce ethical behavior in their organizations through rules, procedures, training, and the role of management (Brinkmann, 2002; Johannesen et al., 2008).

Ethical decision making and behavior of an organization require plans and activities. 'Ethics management is the formal, systematic, and goal-directed development of activities to improve the ethics of an organization' (Lee & Cheng, 2012, p. 92; see also Kaptein, 1998; Wieland, 2003), and includes not only written codes but also training programs, confidants, investigation of violations, punishments, and rewards (Lee & Cheng, 2012).

Some authors argue that PR professionals should expand their role and act as the corporate conscience of the entire organization and provide ethical leadership in their organization (Bowen, 2004; 2008; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001; Neill, 2017; Neill & Drumwright, 2012; PRSA, 2010; Ryan & Martinson, 1983).

### **ETHICAL PRACTICES IN PR**

In this section we discuss empirical studies of ethical practices in PR. We show how ethics, codes of ethics, ethical training, and other aspects of ethical management function in practice. We also examine PR professionals' knowledge of and opinions on ethics, and how individual, organizational, and other variables influence ethical decision making.

#### ***Ethical Regulations and Training in PR Agencies***

Several studies have examined to what extent PR organizations have formulated or implemented codes of ethics and training. Although these studies were conducted in different years and in different countries, a general tentative conclusion is that less than half of the number of organizations have developed explicit statements for ethical decision making. For instance, Ki and Kim (2010), studying the codes of more than 1,500 PR agencies in the USA, found that 40% of these provided an ethical statement on their websites, the more so the larger and younger the companies. A little more than half of the PRSA members surveyed in the study of Lee and Cheng (2012) worked for organizations with a code of ethics.

The adoption of guidelines for social media shows a similar pattern: a third of them about 400 US non-profit organizations in the study of Messner (2014) had written ethical guidelines for social media engagement, and a quarter had verbally provided guidelines. His study shows that the longer and more frequent an organization was active on social media, the more likely it was to have implemented ethical guidelines.

Ethical guidelines are important, but ethical training is probably even more important for the implementation of ethical decision making. The survey among PRSA members by Lee and Cheng (2012), however, showed that more than 40% had not received any ethics instruction at all – neither in their education, nor through training courses later. These findings are in line with Bowen's (2006) survey of about 2,000 professional communicators worldwide and the study by Toledano and Avidar (2016) among professionals in New Zealand and Israel: half of the former and three-quarters of the latter believed that they were not well trained to deal with ethical issues relating to communication on social media. Also, in their study of Fortune 1000 firms, Weaver, Trevino, and Cochran (1999) conclude that 'the vast majority of firms have

committed to the low cost, possibly symbolic side of ethics management (e.g., adoption of ethics codes and policies, etc.). But firms differ substantially in their efforts to see that those policies or codes are actually put into practice' (p. 283).

Studies of ethical training offered in colleges and universities showed that only one-third of these offered independent ethics courses within the PR curriculum, and only 14% of the courses offered were PR-specific (international study by Austin & Toth, 2011). In her study of US curricula, Neill (2017) observed little attention to classical theories by philosophers, decision-making models, effects of organizational culture and values, raising ethical concerns, global perspectives on ethics, and PR's role as ethical conscience and leadership.

Some studies also found that not all PR professionals believe they are responsible for ethical practices. Some prefer to 'pass the buck' to other parties such as parents, peers, the media, clients ('are smart'), regulators, and society at large (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004) or attorneys (Bowen, 2008).

### ***Ethical Knowledge and Moral Development of PR Professionals***

Are PR professionals aware of and do they know the code of their organization or association? Schwartz (2001) studied 57 employees of four Canadian companies and found that almost all respondents were aware of the existence of the code. The study also found, however, that most respondents had never taken the time to read the entire document. Although respondents were able to recall at least a few key provisions, many had difficulty recalling what the code in fact dealt with.

The European Communication Monitor 2012, a survey among more than 2,000 communications professionals in 42 European countries, showed that 93% think that ethical codes are important, but only a minority (29%) use ethical codes to solve moral issues, because they believe that typical codes of ethics provided by the PR profession are outdated today (Zerfass et al., 2012).

The ethical abilities of PR professionals were also measured in several studies using the Defining Issues Test (DIT) developed by Rest (1979), which measures an individual's moral development. Using this test, Coleman and Wilkins (2009) evaluated 118 PR professionals from a random sample of the 400 largest PR firms. Their study showed that PR professionals scored

seventh highest among all professionals tested, not significantly different from nurses (6th), dental students (5th), and journalists (4th), but better than business professionals, for instance. No differences were found between managers and non-managers, nor between men and women. Another test for measuring ethical abilities is the so-called TARES test, which asks individuals to evaluate PR messages on five criteria: the truthfulness of the message, authenticity of the persuader, respect for the one being persuaded, equity of the appeal, and social responsibility (Baker & Martinson, 2001).

In addition to general ethical knowledge and abilities, it is interesting to know which views professionals have on specific ethical issues. Toledano and Avidar (2015) found that a large majority (in New Zealand) and a small majority (in Israel) did not find it okay 'to write comments on social media without a disclaimer about the sponsor that paid them to do it,' and almost all considered it not okay 'to pay for distributing rumors and negative messages about organizations that compete with their client.' 'Support for creating an activist group to support my employer or client's interests and pay them to post their side of the story on social media' is considered not done by 80% (New Zealand) and 50% (Israel) of PR professionals.

### ***Corporate-Conscience Role***

The study by Bowen (2008) showed that many PR professionals indeed perform the role of ethics counsel or corporate conscience in their organizations. They believed that ethics was a natural part of their jobs. A majority of the PRSA members, in particular those with more experience, also felt quite strongly that PR professionals should play an important role in acting as the ethical conscience of the organization (PRSA, 2010). A study among 30 senior (at least 10 years of experience) PR professionals by Neill and Drumwright (2012) confirmed these findings: these senior professionals believed that they can, and do, play the role of the organizational conscience. Bowen (2008) and Neill and Weaver (2017), however, found that non-senior PR professionals do not feel prepared for this role. In the study by Bowen, the professionals expressed that this role was beyond their 'professional responsibilities, abilities or training' (p. 284). The Neill and Weaver study among 200 young professionals (Millennials) showed the same: they did not feel prepared to offer ethics counsel.

### **Ethical Behavior of PR Professionals**

Despite their attention to ethical norms, PR professionals are regularly accused of unethical behaviors, such as manipulation (of consumers, stakeholders, publics, the general public, and the media), deception, lying, puffery, sophistry, pandering, bribery, covert lobbying, digital misconduct such as native advertising, fake news, artificially increasing the number of ad impressions (e.g., click fraud by bots), data mining that violates consumer privacy, paying bloggers, and overbilling clients, kickbacks, and paying under the table (L'Etang, 2011; Neijens & Smit, 2006; Schauster & Neill, 2017). In the words of St. John and Pearson (2017):

Much to the chagrin of people who study ethics in depth and take seriously the view that ethical inquiry is important, ethics is often distorted or ignored by individuals or organizations seeking to achieve goals deemed more important, such as preserving or bolstering one's reputation, making money, or gaining power. (p. xii)

Behavior that is actually unethical is by its very nature not easy to investigate by means of academic research. Indications for (un)ethical behavior were found in a study in the related field of advertising by Drumwright and Murphy (2004), who studied 29 agencies in eight US cities. Their study revealed three types of professionals: morally myopic professionals (who have difficulty in seeing ethical issues), morally mute professionals (who recognize ethical issues, but remain silent), and seeing/talking professionals who recognize ethical issues and talk about them inside the agency. 'Almost without exception, the agencies in which the "seeing, talking" professionals worked appeared to have organizational cultures and climates that encouraged moral seeing and talking' (Drumwright & Murphy, 2004, p. 15). The authors indicated that moral myopia or moral muteness is not unique to advertising or marketing. Other indications for (un)ethical behavior were revealed in Lee et al. (2014)'s content analysis of comments on the Facebook and Twitter accounts of Fortune 50 companies. The companies were almost always respectful to their consumers, but performed really poorly on truthfulness of the message, authenticity of the persuader, equity of the appeal, and social responsibility. McCorkindale's study (2014) showed unethical behavior such as editing and removing negative comments on social media pages of Fortune 50 companies. Only 10% of the comments on the social media pages were negative. Indications

were found that this small number was the result of corporations 'sanitizing' their pages.

### **Factors Influencing Ethical Practices**

Factors influencing ethical decision making in organizations can be grouped into three types (e.g., Brinkmann, 2002; Drumwright, 2019; Ferrell et al., 2013; Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Ford & Richardson, 1994; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; 2006; Trevino, 1986). Firstly, factors related to the individual decision maker, such as gender, age, religion, nationality, ego strength (power to resist pressures), strength of moral character, independence, locus of control, knowledge, moral development, ethical sensitivity, and organizational consciences. Secondly, organizational factors like supervisors, colleagues, corporate culture ('the common set of assumptions, values, and beliefs shared by organizational members' (Trevino, 1986, p. 611)), availability and enforcement of ethical codes, corporate policy (rewards and punishments), pressures of time, and type of issue. Thirdly, external factors including competition, country-specific political, economic, and social-cultural conditions, society, industry, and professional organizations.

With respect to the individual factors, a review of the empirical literature by Ford and Richardson (1994) showed that personal attributes such as gender, age, education, religion, nationality, and employment background were found to be important in some studies, but not in others. Personality, beliefs, and values, in particular Machiavellianism, were important factors in all studies in which they were tested. The 'Canadian' study of Schwartz (2001) introduced above showed the importance of self-interest (i.e., greed, being a star, financial distress), dissatisfaction with one's job, and level of reimbursement. Family upbringing was important in terms of knowledge about ethics for more than half of the PRSA members in the study of Lee and Cheng (2012). Canary (2007) showed that ethical education in college and universities helped students increase their moral-reasoning abilities.

With respect to organizational factors, Kaptein and Schwartz (2008) reviewed 79 empirical studies on the effectiveness of ethical codes and found that the outcomes range from largely counterproductive, ineffective, often ineffective, insufficient, not enough, not very effective, uncertain, doubtful, little impact, less effective than their proponents think, to needed, necessary, valuable, vital, invaluable, effective (see p. 112). Their explanation for these divergent findings include the use

of different definitions of key terms, deficiencies in the empirical data and methodologies used, and lack of theory. Kaptein and Schwartz (2008) pointed to the importance of characteristics of the code (ambition, scope, and whether the code is about values and beliefs, or rules and standards) and the implementation and update processes for (comparative studies on) the effectiveness of the codes.

A substantial number of studies showed the importance of 'significant others' for ethical behavior in organizations: namely, supervisors, mentors, peers (Ford & Richardson, 1994; Lee & Cheng, 2012; Schwartz, 2001; Stevens, 2008). Organizational ethical climate and culture, training, and education were also found to be important (Bowen, 2004; Ford & Richardson, 1994).

External factors such as clients, time pressure, public debate, the media, and critical journalism also influence ethical behavior in organizations (e.g., Brinkmann, 2002). Toledano and Avidar (2016) showed that PR ethics is linked to the culture and social environment in which professionals function; in particular, the ethical opinions of their PR respondents corresponded with their nations' position on international ranking indexes of democratic values, freedoms, and transparency.

## CONCLUSION

The theoretical and empirical studies discussed in this chapter show that ethical values, ethical decision making, and ethical behavior are studied widely within public relations. Taken together, the studies reveal many aspects of how the field thinks about ethical norms and how they are applied in practice. We also notice some limitations and gaps in our current knowledge (see also Babri, Davidson, & Helin, 2019; Kaptein & Schwartz, 2008, for instance). Firstly, the contributions to our knowledge on this topic come mostly from American and European scholars, and are based on interviews and surveys of communications professionals in these regions. Secondly, the studies primarily use qualitative interviews and non-representative surveys, also due to substantial non-response, which hinders generation of a representative picture. A third limitation is the focus on perceptions and opinions instead of real behavior. Fourthly, many empirical studies are descriptive and lack theory.

Theories and causal models that include underlying individual and organizational processes, representative samples, behavioral data, as well

as longitudinal studies are much needed to further improve our understanding of ethical decision making and behavior in public relations, and ways to improve these.

## Notes

- 1 <https://www.globalalliancepr.org/madrid-meeting>, accessed January 25, 2020.
- 2 [https://www.prsa.org/docs/default-source/about/ethics/ethics-case-studies/ethics-case-study-ethical-decision-making-guide.pdf?sfvrsn=8a55268f\\_4](https://www.prsa.org/docs/default-source/about/ethics/ethics-case-studies/ethics-case-study-ethical-decision-making-guide.pdf?sfvrsn=8a55268f_4), accessed January 15, 2020.

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