Public relations ethics and the “new” media

The introduction of new methods of disseminating information and persuading audiences are changing the landscape of media ethics. Most, but not all, of these “new” media are computer-generated or computer-assisted. The allure of a democratized media has resulted in an internet presence that is both gratifying and alarming. According to long-time web-content guru, Gerry McGovern,

Traditionally, public relations was about honing a silvery message that communicated exactly what the organization wanted us to hear. Now, we can hear all sorts of voices on the subject. It’s true democracy at work.¹

Virtually anyone with access to a computer (or a device that can be linked to the internet) can voice his or her opinion instantaneously, and to millions of people. As you might imagine, this ease of transmission has great potential for abuse. As Aristotle pointed out in response to the argument that his rhetorical guidelines for persuasion could be used for evil ends, the ultimate use of any tool is up to the person who uses it. So it is with the new media. The most important thing to remember is that all of the approaches to ethical communication apply to the new forms as well. A hidden agenda on a blog site is still a hidden agenda. The rules for ethical persuasion still count, no matter the format in which the persuasion appears.

Public relations and the internet

Recent changes in technology have allowed organizations to reach out to their constituencies in ways never before imaginable. The computer has not only spawned word processing and desktop publishing, it has also allowed us to reconfigure our communications and our modes of delivery. Additionally, technology has expanded the scope of both internal and external communications beyond that of traditional media. The role of everything from the news release to the corporate magazine has been broadened by the ability to make what was once a static delivery system now interactive. There are a number of relatively new methods for getting a public relations message out over the internet including: intranets, web-sites, weblogs (blogs), web seminars (webinars), online newsletters, and podcasts. All have great potential for clarifying information and for persuading audiences. They also are burdened with predictable pitfalls—most, simply new versions of old evils. We are going to concentrate here on blogging, but it is indicative of the types of ethical problems associated with much of the new media.

Blogging—the need for transparency

Blogging is a relatively new phenomenon which has managed to catch on very quickly. In what is known as conventional blogging, anyone can write anything they want any time. It has become a haven for the verbose, highly opinionated, and often uninformed. Obviously, this is not what blogging in public relations should represent. The key difference is that PR people don’t represent themselves. They represent their clients and/or organizations. In addition, public relations messages have to be economical and to-the-point, and, above all, accurate.

Blogging can be a less formal way of keeping people informed than many other media options. It’s a low-cost publishing tool that has the advantage of being able to get company news out quickly.
Unlike email, blogging is literally “broadcast” simultaneously to anyone who wants to read it. It is also egalitarian in a way that much of public relations communication is not. Blogs allow for instant responses, multiple conversation threads, and a sort of accessible history of issues that can be referenced, added to, and corrected at any time. However, there are disadvantages.

- Most people don’t have very much to say that’s interesting, and/or are unable to write down their ideas in a compelling and clear manner.

- It’s often true that the people who have most time to write have least to say, and the people who have most to say don’t have enough time to write it. Thus, the real expertise within the organization lays hidden, as you get drowned in trivia.

- Organizations are not democracies. The Web makes many organizations look like disorganizations, with multiple tones and opinions. Contrary to what some might think, the average customer prefers it if the organization they are about to purchase from is at least somewhat coherent.2

Blogging is a perfect example, then, of both the benefits and the potential problems often inherent in public relations communication. In addition to the functional disadvantages of blogging, there are several ethical problems that can arise in relation to this new form of communication.

For example, one of the major disadvantages of blogs not mentioned above is the tendency to want to respond immediately to queries and comments posted by other people. This often leads to not very-well-thought-out responses, which, for public relations professionals, is not a good approach to communicating with publics. Moral decision making requires a certain degree of reflection—time in which to consider the ethical ramifications of your actions. Immediate responses, by nature, are not reflective. But, perhaps the most troublesome aspect of blogging, and with many of the new technologies now used in public relations, is the lure of anonymity.

**What is anonymity?**

To be anonymous is to present yourself or your opinion publicly without disclosing your true identity. Historically, there have been many good reasons for people to remain anonymous. In societies in which free expression is limited, anti-government positions have often been stated publicly by anonymous writers in order to protect themselves from harm. Benjamin Franklin used anonymity under various pseudonyms to poke fun at both people and institutions with the serious aim of improving society. Anonymity, in this sense, has been a mainstay of democracy in the United States since its founding. The Federalist Papers, which argued for ratification of the U.S. Constitution at a time in which it was being hotly debated, were written by James Madison, John Jay, and Alexander Hamilton, but under the joint assumed name of *Publius*. This anonymity allowed them to express more openly their views without fear of censorship or retribution. In an important 1995 Supreme Court decision, the Court held that

 Protections for anonymous speech are vital to democratic discourse. Allowing dissenters to shield their identities frees them to express critical, minority views . . . Anonymity is a shield from the tyranny of the majority. . . . It thus exemplifies the purpose behind the Bill of Rights, and of the First Amendment in particular: to protect unpopular individuals from retaliation . . . at the hand of an intolerant society.3
In other words, following on the writings of John Stewart Mill, a democratic society can often be as intolerant of minority opinion as an authoritarian one, but in a democracy, it is incumbent upon the people to allow for such opinion. In the marketplace theory of free speech, all information is welcomed—even if it is presented anonymously. However (and this is a big “however”), anonymity also allows for abuses without accountability. It is easy to say something that others find objectionable when you cannot be held accountable for your words. More importantly, it complicates the issue of credibility.

For example, suppose you read some information online suggesting that a local politician has been having a sexual relationship with a married man. The information has been posted anonymously on a blog site you frequent. How do you know the information is legitimate? How can you evaluate the reliability of the information without knowing the credibility of the source? Or the motivation of the source? Recall the Elaboration Likelihood Model discussed earlier. Those tending to decipher persuasive attempts cognitively will always ask about source credibility, seeking to know the source of the information in order to determine expertise and, even more importantly, the motivation of the sender of the message. Those using the peripheral route will often accept ideas they already agree with or simply be convinced by cues, such as seeming expertise on a subject, without necessarily considering motivation. We are often convinced by a seemingly well-constructed argument, especially if we don’t stop to consider the motivation behind it.

**What is transparency?**

Being transparent in public relations (or any form of public communication) means that both your identity and your motivation are apparent to those whom you are trying to persuade. Media ethics scholar Patrick Plaisance suggests that “Transparent interaction is what allows us as rational, autonomous beings to assess each other’s behavior. Our motivations, aspirations, and intents are fully set forth for examination.”

Communication is based on the notion of honest exchange. This norm of forthrightness, or being “aboveboard,” is what is known as being transparent. And society would not be possible if we did not place a premium on the spirit of openness, or transparent behavior.

Plaisance points out that communication that is intentionally opaque as regards the sender’s identity and motive manifestly disrespects the humanity and autonomy of the receiver. In other words, the receiver is being used as a means to an end. Transparency in media communication, or in all communication for that matter, is the mainstay of human interaction. It is the mortar that binds us to each other in mutual respect.

Transparent behavior can be defined as conduct that presumes an openness in communication and serves a reasonable expectation of forthright exchange when parties have a legitimate stake in the possible outcomes or effects of the communicative act. It is an attitude of proactive moral engagement that manifests an express concern for the persons-as-ends principle when a degree of deception or omission can reasonably be said to risk thwarting the receiver’s due dignity or the ability to exercise reason.

In a practical sense, transparency in public relations means being up front with your identity as a PR professional and with the identity of those whom you represent. However, in order to avoid the automatic defense mechanism that most of us employ against a persuader’s vested interest, some in
both public relations and advertising are moving into an old use of new media—the anonymous identity, or, worse yet, the fabricated identity.

**The Whole Foods case**

For six years, John Mackey, the CEO and co-founder of Whole Foods, a nationwide organic grocery chain, appeared as a regular blog poster on *Yahoo Finance* stock forums. During that time, he posted dozens of negative attacks on his company’s biggest competitor, Wild Oats. He questioned their corporate structure, verbally berated their management, and generally denigrated the value of their stock, often suggesting it was overpriced. At the same time, he praised his own company, its management, and even predicted its success in the stock market. On the face of it, this would appear, at worst, an unseemly display of corporate precociousness. The catch was, he was posting anonymously. He used the pseudonym Rahodeb (an acronym of his wife’s name, Deborah) and hid behind the mask of anonymity to bash his competition.

His vehemence eventually began to attract attention. When questioned by other bloggers, he steadfastly asserted his innocence as just another anonymous poster. Once it became clear who he really was, the Federal Trade Commission published some of his online comments in an anti-trust suit file against Whole Foods in its bid to take over Wild Oats. Mackey maintains that he was simply acting as a private citizen, and has a right to do so. While his anonymous postings were being written, he simultaneously maintained regular postings under his real name on the Whole Foods blog site. Although he denied it, many believe that this was all part of a larger, and intentional, corporate strategy to lower the value of Wild Oats so that a buyout would be easier and cheaper.

The question for us is whether this type of deception is ethically acceptable, and to answer that, we need simply to question motivation. The discussion of conflict of interest earlier is also applicable here. When someone argues a point of view from a vested interest (they can benefit from the decision they promote) we naturally suspect them. When they do so from a position of anonymity, and with a sense of expertise, we are left not knowing whether to question their motivations or not.

Would we have been more suspicious of John Mackey’s arguments condemning his competitor had he been open about his identity? Probably. We would have realized he had a very vested interest in trashing his competitor and would have taken his comments with a huge grain of salt. In other words, our defenses would have gone up immediately. Recall that ethical persuasion requires that the person being persuaded have all the facts she needs to reflect critically on a situation and make an informed decision. That includes the identity of the persuader and his motivation. Without that complete information, we are being effectively deceived.

**Government PR poses as news**

In 2004, a number of news organizations reported that federal investigators were looking into television segments in which the Bush administration had paid people to pose as journalists. Their segments included praise for the new Medicare law, especially its prescription drug benefits, which had been highly controversial. Several of the segments included pictures of President Bush receiving a standing ovation from a crowd as he signed the new Medicare bill into law.

These taped “news” segments were actually produced by the Department of Health and Human Services and intended for use by local television stations, who often have difficulty filling news holes with local-only stories. This type of product is typically called a video news release (VNR) and should
have been labeled as such by the company who produced them, along with the name of the company and its client. In fact, the sources of these “news” segments were not identified, and two of the videos ended with reporter-like sign offs—“In Washington, I’m Karen Ryan reporting.” As it turned out, the “reporter” was a hired actor paid to read a script prepared by the government.

In addition to the unlabeled VNRs, a script accompanied the tapes that could be used by local news anchors to introduce what the administration later described as a “story package.” One such script suggested that anchors use this language: “In December, President Bush signed into law the first-ever prescription drug benefit for people with Medicare. Since then, there have been a lot of questions about how the law will help older Americans and people with disabilities. Reporter Karen Ryan helps sort through the details.”

Lawyers from the General Accounting Office reported to Congress that the television news segments were a legal, and effective, way of educating the public on this new Medicare law—despite their admission that the source of this information campaign was intentionally omitted and the “reporters” had been paid actors. And, even though federal law prohibits the use of federal money for “publicity or propaganda purposes” not authorized by Congress, the Department of Health and Human Services suggested there was nothing wrong with their approach to disseminating this information. Their spokesperson went on record as saying, “The use of video news releases is a common, routine practice in government and the private sector. Anyone who has questions about this practice needs to do some research on modern public information tools.”

In fact, VNRs have been used for years to promote both products and ideas. Pharmaceutical companies, especially, have used them to promote their products by placing them within a narrative framework, or human interest environment. These short segments (usually “feature-length,” 90-seconds to three-minutes) are easily sandwiched into local news programs to fill empty news holes. As more local stations cut news-gathering budgets in the late 1980s, the use of VNRs became more prominent. The real problem was that the sponsors, and the producers, of the segments were not always mentioned, giving the false impression that these were either locally produced, legitimate news segments, or nationally produced segments “shared” with the local station.

Although it may be perfectly legal to produce and to run VNRs without citing the source, it violates the ethical requirement of transparency, thus it violates the trust relationship between the public in its information sources. This violation occurs at several levels. First, any public relations firm that produces VNRs for a client is morally obligated to make it clear that it is a video “news release” and indicate who the client is. Without this information, we are left either to question the credibility of the piece (especially if we are central-route processors), or simply to accept it as legitimate news based mostly on its news-like presentation (peripheral-route processors). In either event, we are cheated out of information vital to our understanding of the issue and to our subsequent decision-making ability.

It is important to note, however, that the onus of disclosure doesn’t rest solely with the public relations firm originating the VNR. It is shared by the news organization that runs it. It is incumbent on local news stations to reveal the sources of their stories. News directors must distinguish between news and public relations, both for themselves and for their audiences. Their integrity is as much at stake as that of the PR people who produced the information in the first place. It is certain that much of the information generated by public relations professionals is newsworthy; however, astute
journalists need to distinguish the difference between pure publicity and news value, and insure that their final product is composed entirely of the latter.

The Edelman-Wal-Mart scandal

Another, perhaps better-known example, is the so-called “Wal-Mart” scandal involving Edelman Public Relations, one of the nation’s largest PR firms. A pair of seemingly independent travelers drove their recreational vehicle around the country, stopping overnight at Wal-Mart stores everywhere they went. (Wal-Mart allows RV parking for free in their lots overnight.) The pair subsequently interviewed Wal-Mart employees at these stores and posted glowing blog accounts of these happy individuals and the wonders of working for Wal-Mart. This blog and another, also seemingly independent and ostensibly set up by Wal-Mart “families” eventually came under suspicion. A New York Times story revealed that both blogs were supported by Wal-Mart and developed by Edelman Public Relations as part of a “stealth” marketing plan. In fact, one of the blogs was written almost entirely by Edelman employees posing as Wal-Mart employees. For many in public relations, this was a big step over the line. In responding to questions about the fake blog (flog) scandal, Emmanuel Tchividjian, the executive director of Ethics Consulting Practice of the public relations firm Ruder Finn, described the problem this way:

[T]here is something new at work when it comes to the Internet, in terms of morality and ethics. The big element here is that of anonymity. When we complain that someone lied to us, we say, ‘He lied to my face. He looked at me and lied.’ That factor of human interaction is gone when it comes to the Internet. You can use an assumed name and nobody can trace you. This goes to the whole issue of transparency. If you follow the PRSA code, for example, you wouldn’t do that.9

As with the other examples cited here, the question is not so much whether what is being said is true. The question is whether the people who are giving us information have a vested interest in the outcome, and, if so, why are they hiding their identities? Public relations, in order maintain its own integrity, must be entirely transparent and above board. Hiding behind the free speech right to anonymity may be all well and good for whistle blowers and others fearing for their livelihood, reputations, or even their lives, but there is no acceptable reason for anyone engaged in public relations on behalf of a client to act anonymously.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Public relations is an eclectic practice with a great many job descriptions involving myriad functional obligations. Along with these functional obligations, there will always be accompanying moral obligations—either directly or indirectly related. As the message vehicles available to public relations professionals evolve and increase in number, there will always be a temptation to avoid moral obligations in favor of the purely functional. As noted, these ethical lapses are often discovered by the very audiences involved in the communication. In the case of Whole Foods’ CEO, it was initially the other bloggers who suspected the ruse.

Public relations, more than any other media industry, is entering with gusto into the realm of new media, especially the opportunities provided by the internet and the concept of social marketing. However, public relations professionals must continue to follow the dictates of their already established standards, either codes provided by professional organizations such as PRSA, to the idea...
of social responsibility, or to their own personal ethics. A basic rule of thumb is that if it was unethical before, it will be unethical now. Despite the advent of new ways to communicate with people, respect is still respect. The only way to insure ethical practice is to practice ethics in everything you do.

2 Ibid.


5 Ibid., 191.

6 Ibid., 188.

