Introduction

Ethics problems and theories in public relations

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Résumé

Les professionnels des relations publiques doivent faire face à des problèmes de nature éthique, d'abord en tant qu'individus (lorsqu'ils prennent des décisions reliées à leur vie professionnelle), mais aussi dans le cadre de leurs fonctions de conseillers en matière d'éthique pour les organisations (lorsqu'ils aident ces dernières à agir de façon éthique, responsable et durable). La présente introduction définit les responsabilités éthiques et sociales des professionnels des relations publiques et discute des possibilités et des obstacles qu'ils rencontrent dans le cadre de leurs fonctions de conseillers en matière d'éthique. Nous aborderons sept thèmes de recherche en relations publiques : les décisions éthiques personnelles; les relations avec les clients et les autres praticiens; la loyauté envers les organisations, le public et la société; le choix d'un client ou d'une organisation; les rôles de défenseur et de conseiller; la confidentialité et la transparence; et finalement les médias numériques. Nous terminerons avec une discussion sur la nécessité des théories en éthique des relations publiques et nous en décrirons quelques-unes des plus prometteuses.

Mots-clés : relations publiques; théorie éthique; responsabilité sociale; durabilité; gestion stratégique; dialogue; confidentialité; défenseur; conseiller; communication symétrique ou asymétrique

Public relations professionals encounter ethical problems as individuals who make decisions about their professional lives. They also serve as ethical counselors to organizations, a role in which they help organizations behave in ethical, responsible, and sustainable ways. This introduction defines ethics and social responsibility and discusses the possibilities and obstacles that public relations professionals face in the role of ethical counselor. Seven research problems in public relations are discussed: personal ethical decisions; relationships with clients and other practitioners; loyalty to organizations, publics, and society; choice of a client or organization, advocate and counselor roles, secrecy and openness, and digital media. The introduction ends with a discussion of the need for ethical theories of public relations and describes several promising theories.

Keywords: Public relations, ethical theory, social responsibility, sustainability, strategic management, dialogue, secrecy, advocate, counselor, symmetrical and asymmetrical communication..

In the minds of most people, public relations probably is considered to be inherently unethical. And, to be honest, a great deal of public relations practice is unethical. However, to public relations theorists, public relations is inherently about ethics, social responsibility, and sustainability.

In 1980, Edward L. Bernays, who was probably the first public relations theorist, told public relations educators meeting at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication that, "Public relations is the practice of social responsibility. It holds the key to America's future." In the same way that Bernays linked public relations and social responsibility, John F. Budd, a highly respected public relations professional in the last half of the 20th Century, maintained that public relations professionals could be the professional ethics counselors that former U. S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren said business executives need to provide sophisticated guidance in ethical decision-making. In his book *Streetwise Public Relations,* Budd (1992) said: "In the sense that we regularly deal with such intangibles as trust, reputation--those abstract values that quantitative executives have some difficulty with--we are doing what Warren sought" (p. 87).

Ryan and Martinson (1983) were perhaps the first scholars to endorse the idea that public relations practitioners should be a conscience for their organizations. Ryan (1986) followed up this suggestion by surveying public relations practitioners to see if they agreed and found that nearly all of his survey participants thought that practitioners should act as a corporate conscience, that they should be deeply involved in defining a corporation's social role, and that corporations must try to calculate the social impacts of major decisions before taking action.

More recently, L'Etang (2003) and Bowen (2008) surveyed public relations professionals and found that the idea of public relations as a corporate conscience is indeed a part of the self-identity of public relations practitioners and that they do play this role. However, they also found that few practitioners had the educational background or theoretical tools needed to actually serve in this role.

In 2010, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management issued a statement about the nature of the public relations profession called the Stockholm Accords and followed it with an additional statement called the Melbourne Mandate in 2012. In the first statement, the Global Alliance asserted that public relations should "deliver timely analysis and recommendations for an effective governance of stakeholder relationships by enhancing transparency, trustworthy behavior, authentic and verifiable representation, thus sustaining the organization's 'licence to operate'" (p. 5). In the second statement, members of the Alliance asserted that "public relations and communication professionals have a mandate to define an organization's character and values" and to "instill responsible behaviours by individuals and organisations" (p. 1).

Management theorists also have suggested the need for such an ethics role, although few have realized that public relations can fill it. For example, in their book, *Corporate Strategy and the Search for Ethics*, Freeman and Gilbert (1988) pointed out that management theorists have made two "discoveries": 1) organizations consist of human beings that have values, values that help to explain how managers make strategic decisions; and 2) in making strategic choices organizations have found that outside groups--stakeholders--such as customers, suppliers, communities, governments, owners, and employees affect and are affected by the choices organizations make. Freeman and Gilbert then stated two axioms of corporate strategy: Corporate strategy must reflect an understanding of the values of organizational members and stakeholders, and corporate strategy must reflect an understanding of the ethical nature of strategic choice.

For public relations professionals to serve as ethics counselors for client organizations, it is necessary to address the ethics and social responsibility of public relations as it is currently practiced and to incorporate ethics and social responsibility into our theories of how public relations should be practiced. In studying the ethics of public relations, therefore,

it is important to distinguish between normative and positive theories of public relations--theories that explain how public relations *should be* practiced vs. theories that explain how it usually *is* practiced. Ethical theorists and researchers divide their field into two similar branches, which they call normative and descriptive ethics (e.g., Velasquez, 1991).

Descriptive studies of ethics examine the ethical behavior of groups of people such as public relations practitioners. There have been numerous descriptive studies of the ethical behavior of public relations people, and a number of theorists have developed normative theories of ethics and social responsibility in public relations. A normative theory is especially important if public relations is to be the management function primarily responsible for introducing moral values and social responsibility into organizational decisions. Descriptive studies, however, tell us how well public relations professionals actually are serving that normative role at the organizational level and the extent to which their individual behaviors as practitioners meet ethical guidelines.

Definitions of ethics and social responsibility

Before discussing problems of ethics and social responsibility in public relations, we need to define these two key terms. Of the two terms, ethics is the broader one because the question of what is socially responsible or irresponsible for an organization is an ethical question. Not all ethical questions in public relations are related to social responsibility, however. The term *ethics* often is used interchangeably with *morals* and *values*--because ethical questions generally ask what is morally right or what should be valued.

Although philosophers say that these three terms generally can be used interchangeably, they add that there are differences in their precise meanings (Velasquez, 1991, p. 412). We study ethics to develop rules or principles that can be used to solve problems in which morals and values are in question. Morals generally refer to "traditions of belief that have evolved over several years or even centuries in societies concerning right and wrong conduct" (Buchholz, 1989, p. 52). Values, then, are beliefs about what objects or ideas are important. As Velasquez (1991) put it: "To decide to choose your own values is to decide to philosophize" (p. 408). Thus, we study ethics to determine how to make moral judgments and value judgments.

Not all decisions that public relations people make involve ethical issues. The difference lies, in Buchholz' (1989) words, in whether "questions of justice and rights are serious and relevant moral considerations" (p. 53). Public relations decisions are especially likely to involve ethics when practitioners are serving in the role of organizational conscience. These decisions generally involve the question of social responsibility. Management theorists have debated the meaning of the term "social responsibility" extensively. Bartol and Martin (1991) captured its essence, however, when they said: "Organizational social responsibility refers to the obligation of an organization to seek actions that protect and improve the welfare of society along with its own interests" (p. 115).

Most discussions of the concept refer to it as "corporate social responsibility" because the term has been studied most extensively for corporations--asking essentially when the corporation has a responsibility to society beyond making profits for its owners. But, as Bartol and Martin's definition suggests, the concept applies equally to all kinds of organizations. Theorists also have distinguished between *social* and *public* responsibility--the responsibility to society at large vs. responsibility only to the stakeholders of an organization. Theorists have discussed essentially the same difference in distinguishing

between social *responsibility* and social *responsiveness*--the obligation to better society in general vs. the need to be responsive to stakeholders affected by the organization.

In recent years, public relations professionals have begun to use the term sustainability rather than responsibility when they discuss relationships between organizations and the stakeholders in their environment (e.g., in the Stockholm Accords, 2010, and Muzi Falconi, 2014). Sustainability is the ability of an organization to endure as well as to preserve its natural and social environment. It is an umbrella term that includes such concepts as corporate social responsibility, corporate citizenship, corporate social performance, social accountability/triple bottom line, corporate governance, and corporate sustainability communication (Signitzer & Prexl, 2008).

All of these related concepts fall clearly into the bailiwick of public relations: The managerial function that introduces the concerns of all stakeholders, not just of the owners, into managerial decisions. Organizational responsibility and sustainability, therefore, are an integral part of a strategic management role for public relations (J. Grunig, 2006). Public relations professionals experience ethical problems when they embrace these roles, the most common of which are discussed next.

Research problems in public relations ethics

Over the years, there has been a great deal of discussion about ethics and social responsibility in the public relations literature. Much of this literature has been written by professionals who discuss ethical problems without applying ethical theory or principles to the discussion. To develop ethical principles, however, public relations theorists need to progress beyond examples and cases of ethical dilemmas and problems in public relations. The literature contains several recurring and central ethical questions in public relations, which I have classified in this section. My list of these problem areas undoubtedly is not exhaustive, nor are the issues included under each always mutually exclusive. However, this taxonomy of central ethical questions helps point toward ethical principles that can be applied to them and, eventually, toward theories of public relations ethics. The first two of these problems are individual ethical problems; but the others are ethical problems of public relations as a profession and center on the ethical role of public relations at the level of organizational, rather than individual, decision making.

Personal Ethical Decisions

Public relations practitioners confront a number of personal ethical decisions in their work. They may be tempted to do insider trading, to provide free passes for plays or sporting events to journalists, to take or receive gifts, or to accept or offer bribes. They may divulge confidential information to a competitor, pad an expense account, falsify a time report, conceal errors, lie, or selectively report research results. Ethical rules may help practitioners solve these problems, and professionals who are more ethical as individuals generally provide better ethical advice to their organizations as counselors. In spite of the great attention paid to personal ethics in the public relations literature, however, these problems, although important, are not the most central ethical questions for the public relations profession.

Relationships with Clients and Other Practitioners

Practitioners who work in public relations firms face ethical problems in attracting clients and in competing with other practitioners for those clients, although similar problems occur for practitioners who work in organizations as well. Such relationship problems appear

in all codes of ethics in the profession and dominate much of the discussion about public relations ethics.

In dealing with clients or bosses, practitioners have a tendency to oversell the effects of what they do. A*ccountability* is important in relationships between practitioners and their clients or employers. Professionals should hold themselves accountable for accomplishing what they say they will do for the people who pay them. Accountability can be established through evaluative research, which practitioners with a professional orientation may learn to conduct in their specialized, graduate education. A second aspect of accountability is fee for services. This is a special problem for the public relations consultant, because clients rarely understand what is fair to pay for public relations programs or counsel. The unscrupulous practitioner could take advantage of the naive client. In addition to padding time sheets, or charging clients for time dedicated to cultivating new business, the unethical principal of a public relations firm may engage in what amounts to "bait and switch." That is, the principal or others highly placed in the firm pitch the account to clients. They suggest, either overtly or subtly, that they themselves will be handling the account. Once the business is secured, the account work is handed over to far more junior employees.

Public relations professionals also confront ethical problems in their relationships with other practitioners. For example, practitioners compete with other practitioners for clients, yet professional codes of ethics prohibit them from intentionally damaging the reputations of other practitioners. Professional codes also point out that professionals damage the reputation of other public relations people when they are unethical. Some codes also mandate that practitioners report the ethical shortcomings of others to review boards. Many practitioners also face ethical dilemmas when they interact with their superiors and colleagues in their own organizations. Finally, the problems of discrimination against women and minorities in public relations fit into this category.

Problems of personal ethics and professional relationships dominate much of the discussion of ethics in public relations. Although these first two sets of problems affect public relations practice, they do not address the fundamental question of how public relations can be an ethical conscience for an organization nor how public relations can overcome the stigma that most people attach to the profession. The next problems pertain to these fundamental questions.

Loyalty to Whom?

Perhaps the most important question that I have addressed theoretically in my 50 years as a public relations theorist is whether public relations should be practiced asymmetrically or symmetrically—in the interest only of a client organization or in the interests of publics, stakeholders, and society as well as the organization (see, e.g., L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, Chapter 8). The question of whether public relations people should practice their profession symmetrically or asymmetrically hinges to a large extent on the question of loyalty. Must professionals be loyal only to the client or organization that employs them? Or do they have loyalties to others as well?

Many public relations practitioners and scholars come down squarely in favor of loyalty only to the client or employer. Public relations practitioners, as well as theorists like van der Meiden (1993), often equate a pragmatic concern for the interests of a client or employer with undivided loyalty to whatever the client or employer asks them to do. Unquestioned loyalty to one's employer provides public relations practitioners with an easy ethical escape route: Ethical problems are their bosses' problems, not their's. Most codes of ethics of public relations societies, however, state that public relations professionals have loyalties

not only to their clients but also to publics, the media, the public relations profession, and themselves. Likewise, Parsons (1993) said practitioners have a responsibility to themselves, the profession, and to society, as well as to the organization that employs them.

The ethical question of divided loyalty, therefore, is central to public relations practice. Two concepts, the social roles and the values of public relations, help to clarify the problem. When faced with conflicting loyalties, public relations practitioners generally turn to their basic set of beliefs and assumptions about the world in which they live--their *world view*--to make sense of moral questions of right and wrong.

As conceptualized by the British theorist Jon White (as explained, e.g., in J. Grunig & White, 1992), practitioners typically view their role in society in four ways--as pragmatic, conservative, radical, and idealistic social roles. Practitioners who view their work in terms of a *pragmatic social role* generally pay little attention to the social responsibility or ethics of their client organization. They believe that every client deserves representation in what they consider to be a free marketplace of ideas. The idea is to represent the client's views or interests and to help that client achieve his or her objectives. Practitioners believing in this social role practice public relations asymmetrically—they serve the client's interests but not those of publics.

Practitioners who take a *conservative social role* see their job as defending, also asymmetrically, the interests and privileges of the economically and politically powerful. Typically, conservative practitioners see their role as protecting the capitalistic system from attack by activists, unions, government, and socialists. Practitioners who take a *radical social role* generally represent organizations that want change in society. Public relations contributes to social change by asymmetrically providing information for use in public debate, by establishing links among groups in society, and by bringing resources together that can be brought to bear on the solution of social problems. It should not be surprising that practitioners taking conservative and radical social roles often campaign against each other in a supposed battle for public opinion.

The *idealistic social role*, in contrast to the other three, takes a symmetrical world view of public relations. It presupposes that public relations serves the interests of publics as well as organizational interests, contributes to informed debate about issues in society, and facilitates a dialogue between organizations and their publics. Whereas the radical social role sees public relations as a way of directing social change in ways it prefers, the idealistic world view sees society as emerging from dialogue and the resolution of conflict between groups in society.

To be ethical with the conservative and radical social roles, practitioners must be certain that either the status quo or change is morally right. With the pragmatic social role, the question of ethics is left to the client organization. With the idealistic social role, however, public relations helps to empower both the organization and its publics; and the question of right and wrong is determined through dialogue and negotiation.

The question of values in public relations was articulated in a doctoral dissertation by Pearson (1989). In the dissertation, Pearson identified Albert J. Sullivan, a public relations scholar at Boston University, who in 1965 "articulated genuinely philosophical statements about ... what it means to practice public relations ethically." Sullivan's work, Pearson said, "represents some of the most significant public relations theory, yet he is not often cited as a source in major public relations textbooks" (p. 97). Sullivan distinguished between technical and partisan values.

Practitioners who are guided by technical values "look to techniques of framing messages, of beaming them accurately, of selecting appropriate audiences and evaluating the effectiveness of the process." These values do not relate to ethical problems, however, because they are, according to Sullivan, "by definition impersonal, amoral" (p. 412). Ethical problems arise instead around the conflict between *partisan* values and *mutual* values.

Partisan values flow from a belief in the essential rightness of some person or party or idea, and they underlie the willingness to champion the object of this belief, to further its cause, to defend it, to fight for it. Sullivan identified four partisan values: commitment, trust, loyalty, and obedience. Sullivan added that, "Public relations has particularly suffered from abuses of partisan values; its reputation has been scarred... by too much 'commitment' and too much 'obedience'; its techniques are often feared, its practitioners often held suspect, just because of misplaced 'trust' and 'loyalty' (p. 419).

Sullivan believed in higher values that he described as mutual values. These mutual values are human rights, which belong to people simply because they are human and no one may take them away. In Sullivan's words, "If one man has a right, another man has an obligation to respect that right, to fulfill that right, because otherwise, in effect he would be taking that right away" (p. 427). Sullivan defined two basic rights that are particularly relevant to public relations: "(1) Each person has a right to true information in matters which affect him. (2) Each person has a right to participate in decisions which affect him" (p. 428). Sullivan concluded by saying that technical values and partisan values are not enough in public relations. "The mutual values peculiar to public relations light up the road to professionhood," he added (p. 437).

The contrast between the idealistic social role and the pragmatic, conservative, and radical social roles as well as the contrast between partisan and mutual values seem to articulate clearly the ethical problems of excessive loyalty to a practitioner's client or employer. Public relations work must be idealistic as well as pragmatic. It must conform to mutual values as well as partisan values. These concepts, then, have great value for theorists who develop theories of ethical public relations.

Choice of a Client or Organization

Throughout history, people have used public relations ideas on behalf of oppressive governments, oppressive organizations, and socially irresponsible corporations. At the same time, they have been involved in great social reform movements that have helped eliminate slavery, reduced the oppression of women and minorities, and improved the health and safety of millions of people. If practitioners approach the question of whom to represent from an asymmetrical world view, the choice generally depends on how they perceive their social role, first, and then their values.

Practitioners who see their social role as pragmatic will work for any organization that hires them because they see their role as value free. Such practitioners easily could switch sides or represent both sides. Asymmetrical practitioners who see their social role as conservative or radical typically choose organizations whose partisan values are similar to their own. Such practitioners then can passionately defend or promote the interests and values of their client organizations. As Sullivan pointed out, however, practitioners who defend partisan values often make unethical decisions because of too much commitment and obedience.

Practitioners who work through an idealistic social role and who strive for mutual values as well as partisan values could, at least in principle, work for any organization.

These practitioners attempt to facilitate dialogue with all publics of the organization and advocate that mutual values be applied to management decisions. As a result of such public relations activity, the organization could be made more ethical and socially responsible. Danger lurks in this situation for the symmetrical professional, however. A symmetrical, idealistic approach to public relations could be dangerous because unethical organizations might employ such practitioners only to give the appearance of being ethical and responsible when they have no intention of changing their behavior—in a sense practicing a *pseudo symmetrical* model of public relations. The symmetrical professional runs the risk of damaging his or her reputation by associating with an unethical client, and he or she must choose organizations carefully to protect his or her professional reputation as well as the reputation of the public relations profession.

Advocate or Counselor: Is There a Court of Public Opinion?

As with the previous two problems, this ethical problem is strongly related to whether the practitioner takes an asymmetrical or symmetrical approach to public relations and his or her related view of social role and values. Asymmetrical practitioners see themselves as *advocates* of the partisan values of their clients. Symmetrical practitioners see themselves as *counselors* who help client organizations implement mutual values as they make decisions.

Advocates see their role as interpreting "truth" or "facts" in ways that put their client in the most favorable light or are most likely to elicit support for their client's position. Advocates do not disclose everything that publics might need or want to know about their client organization. They reason that they have no obligation to do so, just as a lawyer has no obligation to tell everything about a client in a court of law. In a court of law, the opposing attorneys attempt to establish the guilt or innocence of the accused. In the give and take between two advocates, this reasoning goes, the truth will emerge and the jury will make a reasoned judgment.

Throughout the history of public relations, many practitioners have claimed that public relations advocates operate in a court of public opinion that is similar to a court of law. There are three major criticisms of a supposed court of public opinion, however. First, not all organizations, interests, and publics have equal representation in the court. Those with the most money and power are represented best. Second, publics--and also the media--generally do not have the opportunity to search for all the information they need to put the positions of advocates into perspective. Third, the comparison of public relations people with lawyers is a poor one--at least the comparison with trial lawyers. Kruckeberg (1992) instead compared the public relations person to a "rehabilitating social worker"—a professional whose job is to repair bad organizations rather than to defend them. Bivins (1989) pointed out, similarly, that not all lawyers are advocates. Corporate lawyers, for example, are counselors who work to keep corporations out of trouble rather than to defend them once they are in trouble. The court of public opinion, therefore, does not automatically make asymmetrical public relations ethical, and a symmetrical role of counselor rather than advocate is easier to defend on ethical grounds.

Secrecy and Openness

Debates between journalists and public relations practitioners often center on the question of whether public relations people are obligated to be completely open and truthful in communicating about their organizations with the media and publics. Journalists expect candor and openness, whereas public relations people typically argue that they have no obligation to divulge the complete truth about their client organization. The problem of

secrecy and openness also includes such concerns as disinformation; hype; front groups (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Palenchar, 2006); "spin doctoring;" the failure to label the source of print and video new leases; and the use of fake blogs and disguised identities in social and other digital media.

In her book, *Secrets*, Bok (1983) pointed out that some secrecy, which she defined as "intentional concealment," is necessary for society to function (pp. 14, 17). If everyone could somehow see or hear what everyone else is thinking, she said, the result would be chaos. "Brute force," she explained, then would be the only means of "self defense and gaining the upper hand" (p. 18). Secrecy, Bok added, often is necessary to protect our identity, plans, actions, and property. Public relations people often cite such reasons for practicing public relations asymmetrically, and many question whether their organizations can be successful if they practice public relations symmetrically.

Bok, nevertheless, cautioned that secrecy must be used carefully. Secrecy has several negative effects, especially for organizations. First, it shuts out criticism and feedback that can improve judgments. Second, it reduces the likelihood of good moral choices. Third, secrecy removes accountability to others; and, fourth, it "increases the temptation not to cooperate with others" (p. 107). Secrecy, therefore, harms both the person--or public-- that does not have information and the person--or organization--that keeps secrets. Bok prescribed public discussion, which she called publicity, as a remedy for the dangers of secrecy: "To deliberate, to reason, to seek to justify in public: These are all ways of stating and of testing views, of talking them over, of making them explicit and thus open to inspection and criticism. Such openness challenges private biases, errors, and ignorance and allows the shifting of perspectives open to moral choice" (p. 113).

Bok's writing suggests that public relations people cannot always carry on a full discussion about moral choices publicly (symmetrically) but that they can explain publicly the reasons why they think the deliberations must be kept secret. Bivins (1987) similarly, suggested that asymmetrical public relations can be ethical if the practitioner reveals the motives (reasons) that underlie asymmetrical publicity--i.e., selective secrecy. Bivins addressed the problem of "hidden interests" by prohibiting the use of front groups or the corruption of channels of communication. Thus, he said that it is the intent behind a message that is immoral rather than the message itself: "The key moral issue here is covert versus overt intent" (p. 199). That is, it is ethical to communicate asymmetrical messages (those that are truthful in what they say but do not reveal all relevant information) as long as the advocate reveals his or her reasons for this selective secrecy. This was essentially the same rule that Bok applied to secrecy: Secrecy may be moral as long as one reveals the reasons for secrecy.
Thus, for example, it might be ethical to create a front organization as long as the interests that funded the organization are revealed and their persuasive intent is made clear. It also would be ethical to produce a video news release for a new product as long as the release made clear that the release was intended to get people to buy the product. Or one could lobby against a provision that would limit the sale or price of a pharmaceutical product as long as the intent to preserve sales is clear and the message is not couched only as being in the interest of users of the drug.

Bivins' recommendations are similar to those offered by scholars of rhetoric and persuasive communication. Asymmetrical public relations practitioners can be ethical if they act with integrity and good will so that they do not intentionally injure the interests of publics; if they reveal the motives, reasons, and perspectives behind the messages they communicate; if they do not use deceptive methods of communication; and if they open themselves and their organizations to persuasion even as they attempt to persuade. If we return to Bok's concept of publicity, which I would call disclosure, we can see that a rule of

disclosure is a powerful ethical rule for public relations that works with both symmetrical and asymmetrical public relations. Organizations that disclose their identities, their interests, and their persuasive intent are on firm ethical ground even when they selectively communicate information with the intent to persuade.

Digital Media

In the 21st Century, public relations practitioners have embraced social and other digital media as primary communication tools for their work. Indeed, the importance of this research problem is evident in the attention given to it by authors in this special issue. Practitioners typically claim that digital media have changed everything about how they do public relations work. As far as theory is concerned, however, I have emphasized that digital media do not make existing theories such as symmetrical communication and the strategic management role of public relations irrelevant but, in fact, make them easier to apply (J. Grunig, 2009). The interactive nature of digital media make them especially useful for dialogical/symmetrical communication. Likewise, the power that these media give to publics make digital media especially useful as a source of research data that can be used to inform management about the consequences of organizational decisions on publics and about the interests of publics.

In the same way that digital media do not change public relations theory, the same ethical problems I have described above appear often in relation to the use of the new media. Problems of secrecy and disclosure are especially important—as evidenced, for example, in the use of fake blogs (or flogs) in the Wal-Marting Across America campaign conducted by Edelman Public Relations for Wal-Mart (Burns, 2008; Bowen, 2013). Bowen (2013), for example, identified 15 ethical principles for the use of social media and tested them against seven cases of both "social media fiascos" and good practice. These principles included *eschew secrecy*, *clearly identify*, and *disclose*—all principles related to secrecy and disclosure. Digital media, therefore, provide fertile ground for studying ethical problems in public relations and for developing theories of public relations as an ethical counselor for organizations.

Theories of public relations ethics

Public relations professionals experience ethical problems both as individuals making decisions about their personal and professional behaviors and as ethical counselors for organizations making ethical strategic decisions. As we saw above, public relations people, for the most part, embrace ethical counseling as part of their professional role. However, numerous studies (e.g., Bowen, 2008; L'Etang, 2003; Place, 2010) reveal that most practitioners lack the educational background and theoretical knowledge needed to serve in this capacity.

An important challenge for public relations theorists and researchers in the coming years, therefore, is to develop ethical theories of public relations that provide principles that professionals can use as ethics counselors at the organizational level. An important challenge for public relations educators is to incorporate such theories into academic curricula. And, an important challenge for public relations associations is to teach these principles to practitioners who have not learned them as part of their educational background in continuing education seminars and programs.

Evidence that ethical theories are emerging can be found in my previous discussion of ethical problems in public relations. Concepts such as loyalty, social roles, values, secrecy,

and disclosure all relate to an ethical theory. In the third book on the Excellence study funded by the International Association of Business Communications, L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) proposed an ethical theory inspired by the work of Pearson (1989) that incorporated both teleological principles (the ethics of consequences) and deontological principles (the ethics of rules). We proposed two principles:

- Teleology: Ethical public relations professionals ask what consequences potential organizational decisions have on publics.
- Deontology: Ethical public relations professionals then have the moral obligation to disclose these consequences to publics that are affected and to engage in dialogue with the publics about the potential decisions. (p. 556)

Bowen (2004a) expanded our discussion of ethics into a Tenth Generic Principle of Excellent Public Relations, primarily based on the deontological ethical theories of Immanuel Kant. In Bowen (2004b), she tested this deontological theory on an exemplary organization. In Bowen (2013), she applied them to social media practices of organizations. Place (2010) similarly conducted a descriptive study of ethics to determine whether public relations practitioners found deontological principles to be useful in their work.

Van Es and Meijlink (2000) and Marsh (2001) also constructed ethical theories based on the principle of dialogue, and Langett (2013) developed a dialogical theory of relationships of public relations people and bloggers. Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) articulated a professional responsibility theory of public relations ethics "based on the public relations professional's dual obligations to serve client organizations and the public interest" (p. 193). Tilley (2005) has conceptualized an Ethics Pyramid. Most of these ethical theories are based, at least in part, on the principles of dialogue/symmetry, moral obligations to others as well as to self/organization, and the responsibility/sustainability of organizational consequences on publics and society. These theories are well developed and still developing—evidence of the needed attention now being paid to the development of theories of public relations ethics.

This special issue of the *Revue Iinternationale de Communication Sociale et Publique* on ethics and public relations is a testament to the importance of theories on and research into the ethics of public relations. I am proud to have been asked to write this introduction to the special issue.

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