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Communicating with Global Publics

Building a Theoretical Framework for International Public Relations

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Public relations is experiencing arguably its most dramatic paradigm shift to date. Mainstream Internet acceptance has ushered in Marshall McLuhan’s (1965) vision of a global village and with it new communication challenges and increased scrutiny of large (often global) business organizations (Wheeler & Silanpää, 1997). Not only has this generated unprecedented expectations of public relations practitioners to service a new, worldwide audience (Fitzgerald & Spagnolia, 1999), but it has also increased the complexity of the ethical issues these practitioners face on a daily basis (Hickson, 2004).

In addition to protecting client reputations, today’s public relations practitioners must also ensure message consistency (Wakefield, 2001) and discharge accountability (Zadek, 1998) across multiple, often diverse, contexts. In this age of heightened demands for corporate accountability, public relations practitioners are also increasingly finding themselves in the role of “ethical guardians” of their organizations (L’Etang, 2003).

Public relations practitioners thus now require global strategies that reflect the complex reality of global communications practice. As trade barriers continue to fall and nations unite economically, globalization becomes more of a reality. Even a cursory glance at some statistics reveals the significance of emerging trends: the combined gross product produced by multinational corporations is an impressive $2,535.6 billion, with these organizations employing 31.6 million people worldwide (Mataloni, 2003). Moreover, nearly one-third of all U.S. corporate profits are generated internationally (Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, & Agee, 2006). The implications for public relations practitioners are clear: within seconds a press release originating in Shanghai about corporate operations in New Delhi is read by shareholders in New York City. Further, corporate Web sites and blogs communicate messages instantaneously to an international conglomerate of stakeholders, many of which are also active (and strategic) communicators in the electronic age (Rutherford, 2000).

Within such a global marketplace the stakes have never been higher for strategic communicators, as the sources of ethical mishaps multiply
and the aftershocks resonate both worldwide and synchronously. For many public relations practitioners, nearly every communications decision (both in terms of advice provided internally to senior managers and those representing the organization’s position to organizational constituents) potentially carries enormous global consequences (Hatcher, 2002). Such consequences require ethical approaches capable of maintaining global public relationships (Gower, 2003).

This chapter presents a theoretical analysis of the strengths or weaknesses of existing theoretical approaches to these global relationships and the strategic communication ethics which define them. To accomplish this analysis, we highlighted two of the world’s largest public relations systems, those in Australia and New Zealand. Moreover, this chapter simultaneously addresses the challenges of conducting cross-cultural research for a now globally connected and diverse field.

**Global Ethical Standards**

Much is written about cross-cultural communication and the ethical issues that arise in a global business environment (Adler, 1983; Christie, Kwon, Stoebel, & Baumhart, 2003). For the most part, significant culture-related differences (Alderson & Kakabadse, 1994; Becker & Fritzsch, 1987; Dubinsky & Jolson, 1991; Moore & Radloff, 1996) have been found in how managers identify (Vitell, Nwachukwu, & Barnes, 1993) and address (Husted, Dozier, McMahon, & Kattan, 1996) ethical issues.¹

In terms of public relations practice, while there has been considerable academic and practitioner interest in ethical matters (e.g., Bivins, 1980; Bowen, 2002; Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006), reflection about how these issues play out in a global context remains underdeveloped (although see Hickson, 2004).

One noteworthy exception is the attempt to develop a set of global ethical standards for those in the media and in public relations. The Media Transparency Charter, an ethical code recognized by the International Public Relations Association, the Institute for Public Relations, the International Communications Consultancy Organisation, and the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management attempts to compensate for the nuances of an individual country’s public relations and journalistic systems. No document, however, can truly be a one-size-fits-all, ethical mandate considering the vast spectrum of ethical norms across the globe (Curtin, 2006).

Moreover, cultural disparities of what is “ethical” further obfuscate this attempt. Collectivist cultures, for example, shun codes that require individual practitioners to report each other for violations (Weaver, 2001). The same situation pertains for European-based systems, where
in Germany ethics are considered private versus public realm issues (Palazzo, 2002). In authoritarian countries ethical codes might be perceived as something to work around versus adhere to (Husted, 2002).

Even in the United States, which has the world's oldest and most advanced public relations system, ethical expectations for its industry and practitioners continue to shift, even after 300 years. What began as a field intended to protect private interests at the expense of public ones soon merged the two in an attempt to advance railroad and utility company holdings (Olasky, 1987). Industry icons Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays introduced more scientific methods of persuasion to public relations, and likewise a new role as guardians of the public opinion formation process.

While issues such as ethical relativism, the possibility and desirability of some kind of universal ethics code, and reflections about cultural imperialism (Beauchamp & Bowie, 2004; De George, 2006) continue to occupy philosophers and academics (and rightly so) these debates provide little in the way of accessible guidance for public relations practitioners caught in the current mire of global communications practice.

In one attempt to understand global advocacy issues, Day (2005) grouped modern-day, U.S. practitioners into two distinct roles. The first categorizes the practitioner, while paid, as a person simply advocating a principle that he or she already believes in (akin to expression of an opinion under the First Amendment freedom of speech protections). The second philosophy sees the public relations representative only as a hired conduit for a particular point of view; personal opinion on the issue is irrelevant. In this latter definition, the practitioner's role is to ensure voices are heard within the marketplace of public opinion. This second definition is arguably the field's standard worldwide, echoing both Grunig's (1992) two-way symmetrical model of public relations and Barney and Black's (1994) attorney–adversary explanation for practitioner role.

Still, global ethical conundrums persist. Neither of these positions provides a satisfactory remedy for issues that arise when the two imperatives collide; those situations where the practitioner's values clash with what may be in the organization's best interests. Take a few recent situations as examples of the potentially dire consequences. In August of 2000, the U.S.-based Ford Motor Company and the Japanese tire manufacturer Firestone/Bridgestone made front-page headlines when treads on certain Ford vehicles—most notably its very popular Ford Explorer—began to inexplicably peel. Nearly 90 Ford owners in the United States died from exploding tires before Firestone/Bridgestone initiated a formal recall. More troubling is that both companies had known of the defects for 7 years, initiating a similar recall overseas back in 1993 (Verschoor, 2001).
An ugly public relations, finger-pointing battle emerged between both companies. Two months later, public relations agency powerhouse Fleishman-Hillard dismissed themselves from service to Firestone/Bridgestone only 8 months after securing the high-paying account (Grodsky, 2000). Serious questions soon emerged both about an agency abandoning a client during a crisis plus the client's deliberate omission of tire safety information which had resulted in dozens of deaths.

In Australia and New Zealand—countries whose public relations systems rank as two of the most active and advanced in the Western hemisphere (Wilcox et al., 2006)—ethical questions likewise reside. In a study on New Zealand business managers’ attitudes toward unethical behavior, Brennan, Ennis, and Esslemont (1992) uncovered individuals who viewed themselves as more ethical than the “average” executive but would simultaneously consider acting in unethical ways. Likewise, Story (1996) discovered New Zealand managers’ tolerance of unethical behavior as higher than of their American counterparts across lower, middle, and senior management levels of the organization.

One such example was the recent Timberlands logging scandal (Hager & Burton, 1999). Timberlands is a New Zealand government-owned logging company. It hired British public relations firm Shandwick New Zealand to represent the company (Rowell, 1999). Shandwick spied on Timberlands critics, infiltrated opposition factions, and threatened to sue anyone who was counter to their interests. False declarations of public support for logging exacerbated Shandwick’s wrongdoing, with New Zealand’s then Prime Minister Jenny Shipley accused of leaking information to assist existing public relations efforts.

Increases in global trade and associated controversies,² the rise in visibility of the Australian indigenous population, and increased awareness about the need to address past injustices; government communication; intercultural communication and the increased prominence of the non-profit sector all have contributed to an Australian focus on ethics that mirrors the practice of its New Zealand public relations neighbors (Singh & Smyth, 2000). For Australia’s public relations practitioners, trade-offs are often required between presenting the clients in the best possible light (including protecting their privacy) and telling the full truth (Motion & Leitch, 2000). This challenge, according to Motion and Leitch, often relegates discussion about truth and honesty to a question of “strategic choice rather than a moral imperative.”

National Australia Bank (NAB) turned this choice into front-page news. In 2004, four of NAB’s financial traders were cited for covering up $455 million in losses stemming from a foreign exchange trading scam (BBC, 2004a). The Australian Prudential Regulatory Authority condemned NAB for its lack of internal controls to prevent this scandal
from occurring (BBC, 2004c). Internal fallout for National Australia Bank was substantial: three top managers and five traders were fired. Frank Cicutto, the bank’s chairman and CEO, stepped down shortly after the allegations came to light (BBC, 2004b).

**Corporate Accountability**

Challenges for public relations practitioners multiply when growing demands for greater corporate accountability are factored into the equation. Technological developments, trends toward globalization, concerns for ethical and ecological issues, and the changing role of governments over the past 30 years (Post & Berman, 2001) have ushered in a new era of stakeholder scrutiny of global business operations (Logsdon & Wood, 2005). Not only are more groups able to communicate with the public about important issues, Internet technology enables these groups to communicate much faster and more directly than has previously been the case.

Increasing in number, and increasingly well organized, NGOs and other social/environmental pressure groups have successfully positioned a diverse and complex range of social and environmental issues as a core part of corporate image and reputation. The work of Amnesty International in Nigeria, for example, placed issues of indigenous rights, human rights, and cultural imperialism on the agenda for Shell. As Elkington (1998) reports, the accusations that Shell was complicit in the execution of Ogoni activists campaigning for a greater share of oil revenues had significant implications for its reputation in Europe.

Similarly, exposure of labor practices in sportswear factories in South East Asia has led to significant reactive activity on the part of Nike and others (den Hond & de Bakker, 2007). People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have had a similar effect on global fast-food giant McDonalds. Greater exposure of internal organizational practices have caught these companies by surprise and raised new communicative challenges.

Increasingly sophisticated in their own communication practices, den Hond and de Bakker (2007) point out that it is NGOs and other independent organizations’ ability to inflict symbolic (rather than exclusively material) damage on an organization that has public relations and corporate affairs practitioners sitting up and taking notice.

Findings from the *Millennium Poll on Corporate Social Responsibility* (Enviroinics & PWBLF, 1999)³ that citizens across all six continents are prepared to reward or punish companies based on their *perceived* social performance, suggests that demands for greater accountability (Zadek, Pruwan, & Evans, 1999) and more detailed information about corporate impacts (Logdson & Wood, 2005) have entered into the main-
stream—trends further reinforced by a growing number of best sellers critical of the emerging world order and the role of business within it.


Arguments that global information flows, and thus democracy, is under threat from the activities of large business organizations (Heertz, 2001; Pilger, 2002) coupled with notions that reputation, image, and corporate identity are becoming more important than product price and quality for business survival (Post & Berman, 2001; Wheeler & Silanpää, 1997) have substantially increased the complexity of the public relations practitioner's job. Not only does public relations involve representing the organization's interests to the outside world, but if Zadek, Pruzan, and Evans' (1999) notion that two-way dialogue with stakeholders is necessary to build and maintain corporate reputation, L'Etang's (2003) observation must be taken seriously that "the public relations practitioner as an ethical guardian is gathering force to become a key occupational myth" (p. 53).

**International Industry Codes**

While arguably extreme instances of global communications practice, the examples cited above nevertheless highlight at a minimum some need for formal conduct guidance or enforcement within public relations' new global sphere. This sphere, however, lacks formalized educational, certification, and barrier-of-entry requirements for any individual country let alone collective. The solution to date is largely the conscription of industry-wide ethical codes ideally meant to guide both inter- and intranation ethical decision making, and a smattering of ethics checklists and models for practitioners to draw on in addressing ethical dilemmas. Tilley (2005) proposes an "ethics pyramid" in which "multistage, objective-based modeling" is applied to professional ethics. Practitioners consider ethical intent, ethical means, and ethical ends at various stages of a communication project. Bowen (2004) suggests that broader consideration needs to
be given to management education. Baker’s (1997) ethical decision checklist for media ethics is representative (see also Kidder, 1995):

1. Identify the relevant facts
2. Recognize and identify the relevant moral issue(s)
3. Determine the moral actor(s)
4. Investigate whether there’s another way, the middle ground
5. Test for right vs. wrong issues (is it legal, does it feel right, what if it became public, would someone of high moral standing do this?)
6. Test for right vs. wrong dilemma paradigms (truth vs. loyalty, individual vs. community, short-term vs. long-term, justice vs. mercy)
7. Identify other role-specific values and duties (e.g., organizational policies)
8. Apply resolution principles (e.g., Kant’s categorical imperative, Mill’s principle of utility)
9. Make the decision
10. Justify the decision.

In addition to the Media Transparency Charter alluded to above (Curtin, 2006), several industry-related organizations feature ethical bylines for members aimed at curtailing transgressions. Arguably the most widely cited is the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)’s Code of Ethics. The Code’s first iteration appeared in December 1950, and its contents have been continuously revised over the next half-century in line with the changing roles of the field’s practitioners. The PRSA Code “emphasiz[es] serving the public interest; avoiding misrepresentations to clients, employers and others; and the continuing development of public relations practitioners” (Fitzpatrick, 2002).

Codes akin to PRSA’s, Huang (2001) suggested, are crucial for public relations to be granted status as a bona fide profession. The PRSA Code, however, contains no formal means of enforcement. Without punitive measures, code enforcement falls upon the shoulders of individual practitioners guided by subjective, ethical self-standards (Wright, 1993).

The Media Transparency Charter is not alone: similar international codes fare no better. The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Code of Ethics—adopted in 1976 and modified in 1985—does possess enforcement and sanction methods. These methods, however, are likewise nondisciplinary. Enforcement is intended only to serve informational and educational purposes (Briggs & Bernal, 1992).

In Australia and New Zealand, the two biggest public relations organizations—the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) and the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ, 2003)—likewise lack formal enforcement procedures for ethical violations.

The PRIA, founded in 1949, last updated its Code of Ethics in November 2001. While the PRIA requires its members to “adhere to the high-
est standards of ethical practice and professional competence” (PRIA, 2004) in a number of industry studies performed in Australia between 1983 and 1999, ethical issues were not specifically addressed (Singh & Smyth, 2000).

In New Zealand, Simpson (1999) challenged the notion of objectivity and impartiality of PRINZ ethics committees considering the small size of the country’s public relations industry. As of May 2002, there were fewer than 700 PRINZ members nationwide (PRINZ, 2003).

**Toward a Theoric Approach**

As could be expected, current research on global public relations ethics struggles with the same challenges as its industry codes. In a field where self-enforcement, subjective standards, and cultural norms determine ethical practice, its scholars are often limited to proposing loose qualitative, operational guidelines to match (Lieber, 2005). Such an approach is logical for a trio of reasons: (1) the relative newness of the field (in comparison to other mass communication disciplines); (2) its constant evolution—for example, its recent global push; and (3) because of this relative newness, most public relations practitioners are veterans of related, mass communication disciplines, most notably, journalism (U.S. Department of Labor, 2003). Thus, gauging the attitudes of individuals from these sister disciplines provided ethical data arguably transferable to public relations.

Such data, however, do little to explain and remedy the scandals at Ford/Firestone, Timberlands, and National Australia Bank. Moreover, and as evidenced above, today’s public relations environments are worldwide in every sense of the word. Not only do the ethics of sister disciplines fail to address a dynamic public relations discipline environment domestically, applying these ethics across countries would be an ethical disaster. In short, existing models are not adequate for the modern, global public relations landscape and its multitude of cultures and systems. It is therefore imperative for the public relations vocation and its scholars to adopt a cross-cultural approach for their industry, one that can more accurately assess the industry’s realities.

There are two primary benefits of a cross-cultural research approach to public relations (Ho & Wu, 2001). First, it can uncover systematic relationships between behavioral and ethnic-cultural variables across public relations environments. Second, it allows for generalizations to be made about psychological principles governing the field’s practitioners across the globe.

Cross-cultural researchers typically use three analytic concepts to help describe their work: emics, etics, and theorics. Emics are culture specific concepts, applicable in one particular culture alone; no research claim is
made about their applicability elsewhere. In contrast, an etic approach looks for culture universals applicable to multiple cultures. Etics that are assumed but not yet demonstrated are known as imposed etics (Berry, 1969) or pseudoetics (Triandis, Malpass, & Davidson, 1972). Theorics, the highest level of cross-cultural analysis, are theoretical concepts that interpret and account for both emic variation and etic constants (Berry, 1980).

To elaborate, a theoretic approach is a holistic one, where a researcher simultaneously looks for disparities and similarities within and among groups. With emic and etic data already in hand, this approach enables a researcher to form higher level data assumptions, or “big picture” type perspectives.

For a field still struggling with definitional norms, it is imperative for public relations to move toward theoretic-level constructs if research and professional progress are to be made. Technological advances will not stagnate in hopes of the public relations vocation catching up; the worldview Kruckeberg (1993) argued for nearly a decade and a half ago remains sorely needed.

Data for this worldview should possess common variables that explain similarities and differences both within and across individual public relations systems. For example, multinational public relations agencies share two or three cultures: the culture of the host country and the culture of the parent company or nation. Research and theory should attempt to explain both where these cultures meet and likewise where they diverge.

Such an approach would not only combine emic and etic approaches, it would simultaneously provide new life for theory attached to a particular strategic communication problem, region, or paradigm. A related point is that ethical codes that arguably explain membership norms versus practice ones would discover newfound purpose.

Alluded to above, future research should ideally isolate variables that explain public relations from a theoretic context, one that transcends individual cultural nuances and microscopic analysis levels. For example, research should analyze information disclosure patterns and justifications for such practices contingent on role, not geographic location. In addition, research should test predictive modeling, emphasizing client type in overall equation, and likewise technological infrastructure impact on word selection or announcement timing.

**Conclusions**

There remains an active dialogue about creating valid ethical and operational templates for this now-worldwide field. Dozens of industry organizations left these dialogues with a stated purpose of creating such templates (AFX News Limited, 2004; Associated Press, 2003; Cordasco,
2003). The reality, however, is that more often than not these conversations are simply just that: dialogues. There is little tangible proof that any such conversation is having an actual impact in shaping public relations activities. Shouting from the rooftops that quantifiable reform is needed does not equate to it actually taking place.

There is arguably no better time than the present to remedy these deficiencies. Current events in business and national security continue to spotlight strategic communication ethics, making the timing ripe to both research and quantify this topic. Funding should be sufficient to support studies possessing a global focus, with public relations agencies eager to regain lost budgets, practitioners aching for a return of credibility post the dot com crash.

The benefits of quantifying both public relations and its ethics are enormous. Similar to the aforementioned reforms by Lee and Bernays (making strategic communication a more scientific process) (Olasky, 1987), quantification of the field provides tangible, numerical data for an industry known more for spin-doctor rhetoric than ethical practice (Lovel, 2001; Penchansky, 2001). A theoretic approach provides the global scope sorely needed to power such efforts.

Data obtained can bolster codes, standards, and general industry understanding. More importantly, it can shape the field, its practitioners, educators, and clients toward its global present and future.

**Notes**

1. Some, however, have found similar moral attitudes amongst those from different cultural backgrounds (see Abratt, Nel, & Higgs, 1992; Lyonski & Gaddis, 1991; Tsalikis & Nwachukwu, 1988). The morality of managers is found to be influenced by education, gender, and position in the organizational hierarchy, rather than culture per se. McDonald and Pak (1996) argue that the inconclusive nature of these results tends to be related to a lack of consistency in samples and research instruments used.
2. Specifically related to the movement of manufacturing to cheaper, developing countries and consumer concern about the conditions under which goods are manufactured in these countries.
3. The Millennium Poll on Corporate Social Responsibility interviewed a total of 25,000 people in 25 countries across six continents in May 1999.

**References**


