

Ethical Public Relations and The Current UK Media Landscape

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Abstract. This paper explores the possibility and practice of ethical public relations (PR) in the current media landscape, with a particular focus on an in-depth analysis of the United Kingdom (UK). Organizational reputation is crucial to its survival and success, making PR a vital role in managing and shaping public opinion. However, the persuasive nature of PR and its close collaboration with the media have sparked debates on the feasibility of ethical PR. The paper begins by reviewing the literature on PR and ethics, defining PR and its relationship with the media. It then assesses the capacity for practicing ethical PR through case studies of PR practitioners, such as the London Metropolitan Police's PR strategy in handling police crime incidents. The study points out that PR practitioners face dual expectations from both organizations and the public, often requiring them to balance protecting organizational reputation and satisfying public demands during crises. Furthermore, the evolution of the UK media landscape, from paid media to self-media, has increased the pressure on PR practitioners to communicate information swiftly and effectively in crises. Although changes in the media environment may promote greater transparency in PR practices, it does not necessarily lead to the automatic implementation of ethical PR. Finally, the paper argues that achieving ethical PR may necessitate the support of legislation and other concrete measures.

Keywords: Ethical Public Relations, Media Landscape, Organizational Reputation, PR Practitioners, Dual Expectations.

1. Is “ethical public relations” possible, and how might “ethical public relations” work (or not work) in the current media landscape of a country of your own choosing?

An organisation's reputation directly impacts its ability to survive and succeed (CIPR, n.d.). When the organisation is faced with injurious media reports or a public that holds damaging stereotypes about it, it needs to actively counter and manage this public opinion to mitigate the damage (L'Etang, 2008). This is the role of Public Relations (PR), and it also includes proactively shaping the public-organisation relationship. Often, organisations make use of the media for these communications. This paper understands PR as the management of public opinion to promote an organisation or counter public attacks against it (L'Etang, 2008; Roberts-Bowman, 2016). However, the term ‘public management’ has negative implications that suggest unethical manipulation of people to achieve the organisation's ends (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015). The persuasive nature of PR and its collaboration with the media ensures that ethical PR practice is impossible, and that ethical PR cannot work in the current media landscape. The paper explains this position through a discussion of PR and related theories (Section 1), an exploration of PR practitioners' works (Section 2), and exploration of the current situation of the media in the UK (Section 3).

2. Definitions and Literature Review

2.1. This section examines the literature around PR and Ethics to establish definitions and the lens for the rest of the discussion.

From the perspective that PR is about reputation, the CIPR (n.d., para. 6) defines PR as “the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour”. Additionally, it requires PR practitioners to intentionally and consistently work on creating and upholding mutual understanding and positive relations between an organisation and the people around it. Examples of PR along this definition include the activities of

Unilever, which recognised a social need for effective hygiene to combat diarrheal disease (Roberts-Bowman, 2016). Unilever then assumed social responsibility over the health and hygiene of millions of impoverished people by extensively promoting their affordable Lifebuoy soap to encourage hand-washing. This campaign represented both a sustained communication of Unilever's values, and the brand's plan to channel its products to address social needs. Previously, Unilever had received bad media attention, such as exposing Indian workers to toxic mercury, (Borelli, 2017). Such stories in the media harm brands' reputation, leading to Unilever needing to actively boost its reputation by targeted social responsibility campaigns in response (Young, 2016a).

Due to its persuasive communication nature, PR slightly relates to another approach of persuasion: propaganda. Jowett and O'Donnell (2015, p. 7) define propaganda as "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist". They propose that due to PR has similar intentions, it is a kind of 'gray propaganda' with an inherent intention to positively direct public opinion about the organisation by developing deliberate media releases (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015, p. 27). Oppositely, the PR profession defines that PR involves mutual communication and understanding between the organisation and its publics (CIPR, n.d.; PRCA, n.d.). But this defence of PR is criticised by other scholars who propose that certainly the CIPR (UK professional PR body) would consciously or subconsciously attempt to spin their profession positively by failing to fully emphasize the reasons they engage in PR (Morris & Goldsworthy, 2008, p. 98).

In fact, the media and PR interact frequently and extensively. The paper understands the media as the name for the collective platforms including print, websites, and social media, whose function is to distribute news and information to the public (Morris & Goldsworthy, 2008, pp. 23-48; Young, 2016b). Organisations primarily include the media when they use the Public Information or Press Agency models of PR (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 22). In the Press Agency/Publicity model of CSR, an organisation issues a message to the public in one direction, from the organisation to the public, and the truth is not essential as it is a form of propaganda messaging. In the Public Information model, the truth is important due to the organisation attempts to disseminate important information. In both models, the organisation's message is forwarded by the media and its practitioners. Therefore, the models support the view that journalists and PR practitioners have a direct relationship (Morris & Goldsworthy, 2008, p. 36). On one hand, "[t]he way an organisation is represented in the media has a huge impact on how people perceive it", leading to PR practitioners try to influence the media to portray the practitioner's organisation positively (PRCA, n.d., para. 2). On the other hand, the media thrives on sensationalism, and its best interest is to publish content that grabs viewers' attention (Young, 2016b).

3. The Ability to Practice Ethical PR

3.1. This section considers the ability of PR to operate ethically.

One pain point about PR is that the job description of practitioners is deliberately or accidentally vague due to PR practitioners ostensibly carry out social responsibility duty, while also having a duty to their organisation. Morris and Goldsworthy (2008) argue that it is unethical for PR practitioners to conceal the true meaning of their PR work by using such buzzwords like 'reputation management' and 'developing goodwill' (CIPR, n.d.). The reason is that the entire scope of factors that can affect the reputation of an organisation exceeds the scope of PR, and it is developing goodwill is not the same as being in the state of goodwill.

Firms engage in PR practices when there is a need to facilitate change (L'Etang, 2008). The essay considers that the case of London Metropolitan Police. In 2021, Officer Wayne Couzens was arrested for using his police uniform to falsely arrest Sarah Everard, kidnap and murder her (Notices, n.d.; Oppenheim, 2021). This fact simultaneously damaged the Metropolitan Police reputation and made women fearful about the police. The role of the PR practitioners in this case can be considered dual. First, the practitioner should communicate ideas that facilitate change for people affected by the attack

(L'Etang, 2008, p. 18). Second, it should change their untrusting views and rebuild a positive image and reputation for the Metropolitan Police (CIPR, n.d., para 6).

The paper contends that these two directives are too vague and to an extent, they compete against each other. Operating along these two definitions of PR, the Police first responded by making a statement to address public fears about dangerous men acting like police officers and attacking more people. The Police advised that women who feared a police officer might actually be an attacker should shout and draw attention to themselves, run into the nearest house or to wave at passing bus drivers for help (Oppenheim, 2021). After this advice, the Police issued another press release acknowledging that women's safety in London was a critical concern and listing their subsequent efforts to improve the situation (Notices, n.d.).

The first response is unethical as it distances the Metropolitan Police from the situation, placing the responsibility about women being potentially attacked by police into the hands of those women. Additionally, the Police unethically did not communicate the fact that some of its officers have discipline problems, and take advantage of their trusted uniform and appearance to commit crimes. While unethical, this first statement does help the reputation of the Metropolitan Police as it implies that it is women who should be careful of rogue police officers, and not the Metropolitan Police who should.

In their second statement, the Police acknowledge their responsibility and direct the public on new procedures to use when suspecting that a police officer is false. The new procedures refer the public to demand the officer verify their identity by video-calling their local operations room where colleagues can confirm their identity. In this second response, the Police centre themselves back into the negative situation where a police officer is falsely representing themselves. Despite being ethical and making the public feel trust about the Police, the second statement may harm the Police reputation. In the hypothetical situation where another police officer commits crime while dressed in uniform, the public can directly criticise that the new procedure does not work and again blame the Metropolitan Police, threatening its reputation. From the perspective that the function of PR is to essentially protect the organisation, then behaving ethically may directly violate that mandate.

4. Ethical PR and the UK Media Landscape

4.1. This section considers the role of the media landscape of the UK in helping or hindering PR ability to be ethical.

UK media is able to exert strong influence on organisations because it has evolved from paid media, where organisations would be able to make lucrative contributions to a media house in exchange for positive stories as part of the Press Agency model of PR (Gruning & Hunt, 1984; Morris & Goldsworthy, 2008). Now, the media is earned, and organisations have no control over their media appearance which is crafted by individual blogs and websites and social media. As a result, the organisations revert to the Public Information model where they try to balance ethically telling the truth and maintaining their reputation as they disseminate statements to the publics. Of course, organisations can and do try to manage their narrative on social media by purchasing bots (Ferrara et al., 2016). But, like in the immediate aftermath of the Everard case, when a story about an organisation goes viral, it becomes owned by social media and the role of the organisation is to provide a statement to angry netizens (L'Etang, 2008; Oppenheim, 2021).

The UK media immediately publicised both of the Metropolitan's responses knowing that as crisis situations for the Metropolitan police, it would be major news across the country (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). According to Butterick (2011), time is essential to PR practitioners as they need it to plan an effective response to a crisis. It is possible to conclude that the Metropolitan Police's initial response to media questions about the involvement of a police officer in the Everard case was rushed (Oppenheim, 2021). Being rushed may have led to the police being unable to meet the PR goals of addressing the publics' fears effectively without harming the reputation of the Police organisation.

Indeed, the response in the Metropolitan Police website press release, which was made after Officer Couzens' sentencing, is more measured.

The implication is that UK media places significant pressure on organisations during crises, and leads the PR practitioners of those organisations to respond without enough preparation (Young, 2016b). On one hand, denying PR practitioners the time to carefully craft communications makes it more likely that they can reveal their real motives, such as their attempts to positively spin their organisation and save its reputation. Being forced to reveal their true motives would essentially be a way to 'force' PR to act ethically by being transparent. On the other hand, some organisations have effective crises communication plans prepared proactively. Therefore, it is not certain that being forced to address the public without warning can encourage more openness and transparency (Butterick, 2011).

PR practitioners' ability to do their work in an ethical way is affected by the contradictory expectations they face from the publics and their organisations. The media landscape intensifies pressure on the organisation, and as PR is a function of the organisation, may actually encourage more unethical behaviour from as the organisation is in a crisis to protect its reputation and limit the damage inflicted on it by the crisis.

5. Conclusion

The mandate of PR is to function in a way that benefits the organisations more than it benefits its publics, and from this perspective, the ethics of its PR communications are not a primary objective. The paper contends that the current media landscape in the certainly UK adds pressures to the practice of PR by demanding accountability and giving organisations less time to craft communications that can manipulate the publics. However, such pressure is not guaranteed to promote ethical behaviour in PR. There is a persistent clash of motives between an organisation and its publics, and PR is in the middle of it. In closing, the paper considers that it may take legislative and other tangible processes to encourage ethical PR, and in future, scholars and other stakeholders may develop such methods of encouraging PR.

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