

PR practitioners - learn to say No!

By [Richard Linning](#)

31 Mar 2011

TEHRAN, IRAN: First comes a full stomach, and then ethics? The role and responsibility of public relations in social engineering. What exactly are correct attitudes and behaviour? Who decides? Is this a question of ethics or morals? Ethics which has to do with what's right for society as a whole, or morality which has to do with individual choice? Therein lies the global public relations dilemma, both as a practice and as a practitioner.



In principle everyone - whatever their belief, opinion or product - deserves their day in court. Even the guilty have their right for representation in a court of law or the court of public opinion, but what responsibility does the public relations practitioner bear for their advocacy role? The right of refusal if they disagree on moral grounds, the responsibility for the content of the message of advocacy or defence? Or none?

An ancient profession

The origins of public relations lie in advocacy. The Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II for example, born around 1303BC, is promoted by some^[1] as the father of public relations. Tricked by Hittite spies, Ramses marched his men into a trap at Kadesh but upon his return home, he declared an overwhelmingly victory. Reliefs inside the Abu Simbel temple depict a chariot-bound Ramses riding roughshod over decimated Hittite soldiers. He may have won at Kadesh, but if so it was a "pyrrhic victory." His subsequent "spinning" of the event certainly shows a keen - and very early - understanding of public relations.

The English term 'propaganda', of which Ramses II's action is clearly an early if not the first example, has its origins in the Latin *propagare* "to propagate", originally used in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV in setting up the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, the Catholic Church's Congregation for Propagating the Faith. In its turn, the word *propagare* is related to the word *propages*, "a slip, a cutting of a vine" and refers to the gardener's practice of propagating plants by inserting cuttings into fertile ground.

The carrot *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* offered for identifying what is required of you by higher forces was reward for your devoutness. To use the Islamic terminology, what is required of the believer is *taqlid* not *ijtihad*: that is submissiveness, not an enquiring mind.^[2]

A new definition

A more recent definition describes a "neutrally defined" concept of propaganda as "a systematic form of purposeful persuasion that attempts to influence the emotions, attitudes, opinions, and actions of specified target audiences for ideological, political or commercial purposes through the controlled transmission of one-sided messages (which may or may not be factual) via mass and direct media channels. A propaganda organisation employs propagandists who engage in propagandism-the applied creation and distribution of such forms of persuasion."^[3] It is not a giant step from that definition to a simple definition of public relations as the art or science of establishing and promoting a favourable relationship with the public.

The link between PR and propaganda is both historic and direct. Edward Bernays, generally regarded as the father of

modern public relations, liked to say, "What I do is propaganda, and I just hope it's not impropaganda."

Only the messenger?

If public relations is accepted as a mere process - as in the Grunig two-way symmetrical model - then the problem of ethical relativism does not arise because it is a process not an outcome. It has long been argued that the public relations practitioner is only the messenger: "I had no responsibility for the facts and no duty beyond compiling them into the best form for publicity work" as a founder of the business replied in testimony in 1915 [4]. More recently the UK Institute of Public Relations (now Chartered Institute of Public Relations) changed from urging "having regard to the truth" ... to today just referring to integrity and bad practice.[5] Increasingly the court of public opinion - and the law courts - have decided that our responsibility goes further.

Too often unfortunately - as Berthold Brecht put it - (f)irst comes a full stomach, then comes ethics. Too often an ethic of service to society is at war with a craving for gain. [6]

Reference to any dictionary produces the definition of ethics as "a moral principle or set of moral values held by an individual or group". It follows then that what one individual or group regards as ethical behaviour, other individuals or groups may not. Ethics are not set in stone: they may change over time and according to circumstances. One size certainly does not always fit all. Nor are differences always accepted. As Ivan Turgenev observed: most people cannot understand why others blow their noses differently than they do.[7]

'... born to service the fellow who "cannot lye sufficiently himself '

Any history of public relations is a running commentary on the techniques used behind the scenes to deliver third party endorsement. Since the 17th century when the publicist was born to service the fellow who "cannot lye sufficiently himself (who) gets one of these to don't for him" this has been the case. When Gustave Le Bon spoke of "managing the human climate"[8] (social engineering) he could not have had in mind that in 1921 Roger Babson would declare "The war taught us the power of propaganda. Now when we have anything to sell ... we have the know-how to sell it."[9]

How far should we be complicit in this process? Is it a matter, as the Marxist theorist Slavoj Žižek has argued, that there is often a willing suspension of belief - we believe in the ideal rather than the reality. "(We) know very well how things are, but still (we) are doing it as if (we) did not know [10]? Since Aldus Manutius the Elder (1450-1515) there's been no excuse: the Elder and Younger Aldus Manutius together developed the modern signs of punctuation[11]. Since then there's been no excuse for not being explicit, for confusing the meaning of the sentence A woman without her man is nothing with that of A woman, without her, man is nothing.

Ask the hard questions

Nor can we any longer can be hide behind the anonymity of the third-party-endorsement puppet master. We have to ask the hard questions: are we responsible for the consequences of the use of our (public relations) means to an end which we

had not foreseen or even considered? Or, do we throw our hands up in the air and claim we been unwittingly or deliberately manipulated? Are we just a tool in the hands of others?

Is our role confined to "...gilding, with the appearance of a virtuous sense of obligation, a commendable deference for public opinion, or a laudable zeal for public good, the foolish compliances of ambition, corruption, or infatuation." [12]

An analogy can be drawn between the National Rifle Association slogan "Guns don't kill people, people do" and public relations practice. As tools, both can be used for good or for ill. If public relations is no more than a tool then the ethical and moral questions are easy to resolve. Every client, cause or issue related position or product is entitled to advocacy and every practitioner has the right to refuse representation on personal moral grounds: tobacco has the right to representation, but not by me.

Will our actions result in harm?

But if public relations aspires to be more? A profession? Then the complementary question to that of Bernays' "impropaganda" is: will our actions result in harm?: the *primum non nocere* principle which is one of the principal precepts of medical ethics.

Could the harm which has resulted in India (and elsewhere) from the introduction of broad-spectrum herbicides have been foreseen?

The problem that biotechnology would solve through social engineering is only too real: poverty and starvation. The World Health Organisation estimates that one-third of the world is well-fed, one-third is under-fed and one-third is starving.

According to Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) statistics, there are 925 million hungry people in the world and 98% of them are in developing countries. The FAO calculates that 75% of the hungry people in developing countries, half are farming families, surviving off marginal lands prone to natural disasters like drought or flood.

In India, the green revolution which biotechnology promised was perceived as the right solution at the time. A technological solution to a political problem. [13]

"Many were against it, but they were won over by heavy propaganda," claims Jagdish Pappa a farmer from southern Punjab and campaigner against Green Revolution technology. [14]

In the fire-and-forget school of farming - crops are engineered not to taste better, provide better nutrition, or grow taller or resist drought: they are engineered to survive being sprayed by a broad spectrum herbicide.

Seeds that farmers saved from one crop to plant for the next "were replaced by corporate seeds which needed fertilizers and pesticides and could not be saved" according to Vandana Shiva. [15] A free resource available on farms has become a commodity which farmers are forced to buy every year.

A spate of farm suicides - the largest sustained wave of such deaths recorded in history - has accompanied India's embrace of this brave new world. What do the farm suicides have in common? Those who have taken their lives were deep in debt. The rate of farmers' suicides has worsened particularly after 2001, by which time India was well down the WTO garden path in agriculture. In the five years after 2001, one Indian farmer took his or her life every 30 minutes on average. The miracle seeds came at a very high cost.

Accountability

"(A)ccountability in a profession means that practitioners must face up to the consequences of their actions." [16] The Code of Ethics (for example) developed by the Public Relations Society of America states that PR people must "be honest and accurate in all communications" and "avoid deceptive practices" and "reveal the sponsors for causes and interests

represented".

Are public relations practitioners really only responsible for the process and not for the outcome of that process? Responsible for the means but not for the ends? It is against this background that the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) has launched an internal discussion about a Code of Conduct for public relations. It is not the first or only code.

IPRA itself has had the Codes of Venice (1961), Athens (1965) and Brussels (2007) for professional conduct, ethical behavior and the conduct of public affairs. All are based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[17], of which Article 19 is especially relevant.

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

PR has a PR problem for good reason

That is our aspiration, making a contribution to the implementation of a principle easily stated but difficult to achieve universally. PR has a PR problem for good reason. The reality is that public relations is rightly associated with many unethical practices - with manipulation and propaganda, with misrepresentation, lying and spin-doctoring. Many critics argue that the term 'public relations ethics' itself is an oxymoron: either an unreal possibility, or a question of smoke and mirrors.

Statements such as "We'd represent Satan if he paid"[18] seem to support them. Reconciling that statement with Article 19's the right to freedom of opinion and expression in day-to-day public relations practice is precisely where the dilemma lies. Principle or full stomach?

In a recent exchange on the blogosphere[19] Richard Edelman defended the eponymous consultancy against a charge that bigger firms "pay little heed to ethical guidelines because they are happy to take your money and launder it." Edelman, (he wrote) like many (if not most) PR firms, and our trade organisations, publish and adhere to a clear ethical code) based on core values of transparency, accountability and honesty.

Fake blog

In a response - "Is Ethical PR an Oxymoron, Richard Edelman?"[20] - Wendell Potter, author of *Deadly Spin*, replied: "In *Deadly Spin*, I wrote that Edelman, renowned for touting ethics as a touchstone of the PR business, created a false grassroots movement as part of its campaign to help Wal-Mart improve its image. I noted that in March, 2006 the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* reported that Edelman recruited bloggers to publish favourable comments about Wal-Mart, which was being widely criticised at the time for paying workers low wages and not offering health benefits to many of them. BusinessWeek.com later exposed an ostensibly independent blog titled "Wal-Marting Across America" as an Edelman project. *BusinessWeek* outed it as a fake blog (or "flog"). Richard Edelman confessed in his own blog that the agency had violated its stated ethical standards, but he stressed that he was not personally involved in the project."

Such examples of the slip between the cup and the lip only serve to underline the limitations to any code of ethics. Where does the buck lie? If the code requires declining "representation of clients or organisations that urge or require actions contrary to (the) code" how does this square with Article 19: the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers?

This question is particularly relevant today when (t)here are among us those who are striving to make this a new dark age of dogma and accountability in a profession - and that is the aspiration of many in public relations - means that practitioners must face up to the consequences of their actions.

A code of ethics can provide the guidelines, but it is individual morality which determines how they are interpreted and

implemented. For practitioners ethical public relations starts with the willingness to say NO! And to suffer on an empty stomach.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Linning is the 2011 president of the International Public Relations Association ([www.ipra.org IPRA]) and a 2011 Fellow IPRA and Fellow CIPR. This is the full text of his speech to the sixth International Public Relations Symposium Tehran, Iran, 11-12 January 2011. He runs a strategic public affairs advice business, The Stable House Partnership.

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