

## Disliking public relations: Democratic ideals and the habits of ethical communicators

*Public relations is broadly consistent with concepts of freedom of expression and access to information, but there is an enduring dislike of public relations in democratic societies where it is widely practised. The paper uses the theories relating to the 'habits of ethical communicators' (Rubin and Yoder 1985) to reflect on public relations practice, using public relations advice offered to a high profile footballer facing public scrutiny over an incident involving group sex with a 19-year-old girl as a point of discussion. The paper aims to contribute to the debate on the poor public image of public relations, arguing that public relations practice frequently violates notions of ethical communication, and that privileging the interests of those represented by public relations ahead of a greater good is antithetical to core democratic values.*

**Key words:** communication; ethics; ethical habits; democracy; public relations

### Introduction

Public relations has been lauded by advocates and advanced as an essential feature of a healthy democracy and part of a free marketplace for the exchange of ideas. Such views recur across a spectrum of public relations theory, from the Grunigian paradigm of ethical public relations illustrated through two-way symmetry in public communication (Grunig and Hunt 1984), to a collaborative symmetrical relationship where 'communicators keep their eye on a broad professional perspective of balancing private and public interests' (Grunig 2000:

34). Other theories stress the intrinsic role of public relations in mutually advantageous organisation-public relationships (Ledingham 2006), and as the 'shout' of organisations 'struggling for advantage in a competitive world' (Moloney 2005: 552).

The future of the public relations industry appears bright. In Australia, a recent study of 10 leading newspapers found that more than 50 per cent of stories are 'driven by some form of public relations or promotion' (Bacon and Pavey 2010). In the US, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts a 24 per cent growth of the number of public relations specialists between 2008 and 2018 (USLB 2010).

But in the democracies where its practice is commonplace, public relations is often synonymous with spin, deception and incomplete truths, and 'most people do not like it' (Moloney 2006: 1). According to Moloney (ibid), public relations has grown immensely alongside marketing and computing over the past 40 years, but has not grown in corresponding respect or status. Indeed, many practitioners themselves decline to publicly acknowledge public relations as their field of practice (de Bussy and Wolf 2009: 380). As Fawkes (2009: 37) says, the 'frequent claims that public relations works for the benefit of society need to be scrutinised and challenged'.

Utilitarian ethics are used here to contribute to further understanding the dislike of public relations, given the discussion on its role in democracy and the privileging of individual (or corporate/client) interests over the greater good. In particular, the discussion here revisits Wallace (1955) to identify connections between values inherent in communication practices and values which he argues are inherent in democratic ideals. Wallace (ibid) argues that 'communication inevitably must stand for and must reflect the same ethical values as the political society of which it is a part'. Wallace's assertions were developed further by Rubin and Yoder (1985) in their articulation of the 'habits of ethical communicators'. This paper uses Rubin and Yoder's (op cit) habits, and Wallace's (op cit) assertions concerning the values inherent in democracy, as a framework for analysis of the ethics of public relations communication. This framework of principles and values is used to guide a 'reading' of public relations advice provided on a blog by a high-profile practitioner to help a disgraced footballing identity restore his

reputation and return to work in television. A single case does not represent public relations practice generally, but this is a rare case of professional counsel, that would normally be given in confidence, made public. The application of the framework to the details of the case helps to illustrate and explore matters relating to the ethics of public relations. The paper argues that although public relations accords broadly with democratic values of freedom of expression and access to information, the norms of practice may frequently violate other fundamental democratic values, and underpin the poor credibility of the profession. The authors are not aware of similar, previous application of Rubin and Yoder (op cit) or Wallace (op cit).

#### **Dislike of public relations**

The poor reputation of public relations is widely acknowledged by practitioners, academics, journalists and others. Among scholars Moloney (2006) refers to the poor state of public relations own public relations, and a bias among public relations agencies, business and academics away from using the words 'public relations'. Public relations is either synonymous with the ability to '(throw)...a party or (make) a splash in the social pages of a Sunday paper' (de Bussy and Wolf 2009: 380), or with images of deceit, manipulation and unscrupulous tactics (Stauber and Rampton 1995).

The poor reputation of public relations practitioners influences the way journalists present the work of public relations (Spicer 1993) and the way practitioners present themselves. Students of public relations themselves see the profession as mostly about 'lying, manipulation, covering up the truth, or "spin" of a message into something positive' (Bowen 2009: 407). de Bussy and Wolf (op cit) found that only one in five public relations practitioners use the words public relations in their job title. They reported that 'despite the positions of influence and comparatively high salaries, PR practitioners appear almost embarrassed to acknowledge their field of practice. Public relations, it may be said, is the profession that dare not speak its name' (ibid). It seems that public relations people and their employers know full well the value of their contributions to the entities they represent, but 'the more socially sensitive PR people have doubts about reduced status through association with PR and there is evidence of a flight from the term towards substitutes, which usually use 'communications' (Moloney 2006: 20).

#### **Ethics and symmetry in public relations**

It has been claimed that ethical conduct for public relations practitioners is defined as duty to self, client and society (Lieber 2008: 244). However, there is little consistency or consensus on ethics in public relations in the academic literature (Tilley 2005: 305). Standards such as ethical two-way symmetrical communications are posed as normative benchmarks 'arguably based more in moral philosophy than practice' (Lieber op cit: 244) and it is suggested that the field has not yet developed a 'workable set of ethics' (Fawkes 2006). The utilitarian ethical approach of the greatest good for the greatest number poses a 'collectivist ethic' which can be useful in public relations when dealing with large publics (Bowen 2008: 166), or when considering the consequences of public relations decision-making. It also provides a useful basis for discussion around the symmetry of private interests over the broader social good, and how public relations aims to realistically balance these.

The discussion on the merits and realistic achievement of true symmetry in public relations and its relationship to ethics has been constant since the proposal of Grunig and Hunt's four-way model of communications in 1984. The point of relevance for this article is the notion of two-way symmetrical communications as the ideal 'ethical' model of communications and, by extension, the claim that 'public relations professionals...believe their role is to balance the interests of their clients with the interests of the publics that constitute society' (Grunig 2000: 27). Van Ruler and Vercic (2005) argue that models of public relations have emphasised the interests of organisations and their publics, and have neglected the societal level. It is this persistent perception that public relations does not balance these various interests, but instead voices the interests of those with power (Holtzhausen 2000) and privileges corporate interests over broader social interests that lies at the heart of this discussion.

#### **Public Relations and Wallace's democratic ideals**

Karl Wallace drew heavily on Aristotelian ethics when, responding to what he perceived were very public abuses of democracy by Senator Joe McCarthy, he wrote his guide for teachers of communication, *An ethical basis of communication* (op cit). Wallace felt that the nation's obsession with anti-communist ends led to tacit indifference to evil communication means, and he argued a need for clearly stated ethical stan-

dards of communication 'that could be freely used by expert and layman alike' (ibid: 4). He said that respect for dignity and worth of the individual, and pursuit of a greater good ahead of one's own interests, are values inherent to a society's belief in democracy. Wallace explains that these values lead to beliefs in fairness of opportunity and law, freedom without endangering others, and freedom of expression and access to knowledge;

A democracy demands that knowledge be made available to all, rather than to the few, it requires that the sources and channels of communication be wide and diverse, rather than limited and one-sided. It cannot tolerate restriction and distortion (ibid: 6).

However, it has been argued that public relations is synonymous with the subversion of democracy (Miller and Dinan 2007: 11) and that it contributes to the distortion of discourse in the public sphere (Habermas 1984).

The public relations industry holds up the free flow of information as a desirable outcome in a democracy: that public relations plays an important role in 'making the activities and views of organisations and other entities accessible to the public through the media' (Simmons 2007: 35), that it contributes to social development through the facilitation of debate between organisations and their key publics (see Fawkes 2006: 33).

But it is proposed here that democracy is best served when the source of information is clear, depth is explored, and motives are discussed. Communicators who aspire to democratic values must always ask themselves if they have concealed information or motives that would damage their case (Wallace op cit). This open, transparent notion of communication is antithetical to much public relations practice, which is contracted and paid for by individual entities seeking promotion of their own interests. As House (1977) says, individuals are prone to subjectivity based on the logic of their own perspective, and to assert simplicity where there is complexity.

It has been argued that persuasion is an essential function of public relations (Linning 2004), and that public relations practitioner interests are frequently best served when the source of information and its motives are not disclosed or discussed. Indeed, the very heart of media relations practiced by public relations is to understand media drivers and frame news stories so

that, when run, they seamlessly appear real (Stanton 2007: 20). Linning (op cit) suggests that public relations' greatest asset is its ability to secure third party endorsement when self promotion would diminish credibility.

Public relations media release material, for example, acquires the implied credibility of independent journalism when presented as editorial news without attribution of source. Journalists are frequently blamed for 'media release journalism', but as resources for news-gathering and source-checking diminish, the onus of democratic responsibility shifts increasingly to public relations not to take advantage of opportunities to present vested opinion as journalist-created news (Simmons and Spence 2006). When sources are not checked or disclosed adequately the information that flows from public relations tends to favour the private interests of the entities that pay for public relations.

Rubin and Yoder (1985) argued that the human tendency to subjectivity makes ethics an important issue in the evaluation of communication. They drew on Wallace (op cit) to articulate four 'habits of ethical communicators':

- the habit of *search* requires the communicator to explore the complexity of issues;
- the habit of *justice* requires the open presentation of information with concern for distortion';
- the habit of *preferring public over private motivations* requires the sharing of sources and disclosure of 'biases that may influence positions';
- the habit of *respect for dissent* encourages the voicing of 'opposing viewpoints and arguments' (Shockley-Zalabak 2006: 122). Respect for dissent embraces the idea that one can advocate a position with conviction, while staying open to new information and alternative views (Rubin and Yoder op cit).

Shockley-Zalabak (op cit) says the habits of ethical communicators are appropriate for most organisational communication contexts. The habits are used here to analyse a leading PR consultant's blog post at a time when there was much media and community attention on footballer behaviour towards women. Because the advice was neither solicited nor paid for it was made publicly available. This gives a rare insight into public relations counsel that would normally be proprietary and confidential.

**A public relations response to a high profile social issue**

In April 2009, a leading Australian Broadcasting Corporation investigative current affairs programme, *Four Corners*, investigated allegations that Matthew Johns, a high profile sports commentator and former national team player, had, during his professional rugby league playing days seven years earlier, led an incident where he and approximately 10 of his teammates had sex with a 19-year-old woman. Having become aware of the investigation, Johns appeared on *The Footy Show* (football news, commentary and comedy programme hosted by former professional footballers including Johns) several days before *Four Corners* was due to be broadcast, and announced and gave his version of the incident. One journalist's account read:

Mr Johns has admitted he and some other Cronulla Sharks players had sex with the woman at a Christchurch hotel while on a preseason tour in 2002, and he insists it was consensual.

Police investigated the incident but no charges were laid.

Speaking on the Nine Network's *Footy Show* on Thursday night, Mr Johns apologised to his family.

'For me personally, it has put my family through enormous anguish and embarrassment and it has once again. For that I can't say sorry enough,' he said.

'But the police did investigate the situation at the time, the allegation, and there was no charges laid' (Barrett 2009).

Johns' appearance on the *Footy Show*, followed by widespread media coverage, and then the report on *Four Corners* created a momentum that led to further interviews and extensive coverage in NSW and other parts of Australia throughout May 2009. There were numerous important issues raised including the attitudes of footballers to women, the responsibility of the sport's governing bodies and clubs, the responsibility of professional footballers as role-models, abuse of power, John's failure to apologise to the complainant, and the notion of 'consensuality' in such circumstances.

Behind the scenes public relations experts were advising Mathew Johns, his employers, and the governing bodies and clubs involved. One public contribution from public relations came from consultant and leading blogger, Trevor Cook. Cook's blog post for 13 May 2009 focuses

on restoring Johns' 'reputation, his earning capacity and his self-respect'. It is titled *What Matthew Johns should do* (Cook 2009). Few would be surprised that a public relations blog would focus on the restoration of Johns' reputation. This, surely, is what public relations people do. But what does the post tell us about public relations when viewed through Wallace's (op cit) ideas and the prism of ethical communication habits?

Cook takes the position of advisor to Johns, offering reasoned advice mostly focused on achieving a positive reputation outcome for Johns. That he focuses on Johns' needs gives weight to a view of the role of public relations as servant of private interests, rather than a greater, collective good.

There is little display of *search*, of exploration of what had by this point become a very complex issue. On the contrary, Cook cuts through days of outcry and accusations and speculation to focus on restoring Johns' reputation. He advises Johns to take the initiative with a 'three-point plan': 'apologise'; 'make restitution'; 'make a difference'. The advice read:

**What Matthew Johns should do**

Johns' reputation is a key part of his future earning capacity. At the moment his reputation is sinking faster than the Irish economy. Sydney talkback callers are ignoring the Budget to keep talking about Johns. Even his well-meaning supporters are doing him damage with arguments like: 'sure group sex is disgusting but ...' Instead of bunkering down in Broome, he needs to do something about it, and fast. Here's a three-point plan:

1) **Apologise.** He doesn't have to admit rape or anything illegal. But he does have to apologise, and publicly, for any hurt or damage the woman has felt as a result of this incident. We all do this. We do something without intending any hurt, but if we subsequently discover our actions have hurt someone we apologise for these unintended consequences. It's called accepting personal responsibility not just for our intentions but for the consequences. Only children can get away with 'I didn't mean it'. If he apologises he will help the woman and he will earn respect from fair-minded people. Because we all stuff up, what you do afterwards is what matters. The good guys accept responsibility.

2) **Make restitution.** He should do something to help the woman i.e. give her some money to help with medical bills or something. This will again help the woman, but it will also demonstrate that his apology is sincere, and meaningful.

3) **Make a difference.** He should offer to help an organisation that deals with abuse of women, perhaps one that deals with domestic violence or rape or the plight of abandoned mothers. Anything that will show that he 'gets it' and that he is determined to change his attitudes. This should include working with the NRL to help change the culture among younger players. The plan will be hard to implement. Many people will scoff, that's why he needs to do more than a few words on the *Footy Show*. But the issue will go away if he does these things and he will have his reputation, his earning capacity and his self-respect restored. Surely, that's worth the initial embarrassment (Cook op cit).

According to Wallace (op cit: 7) the *habit of justice* is based on 'respect for truth and accuracy and respect for fair dealing. Neither can be disassociated from communication in a free society...because the health and welfare of a free society depend upon the integrity of the communicator'. Cook's communication advice shows concern for the appearance of integrity. Essentially he advises Johns to manufacture his response, to express regret in ways he does not necessarily feel. This public relations advice might aid his redemption, but does society or democracy benefit from a redemption based on artifice?

Rubin and Yoder (op cit) and Wallace (op cit) were writing for audiences that mostly comprised teachers of speech and communication. Rubin and Yoder emphasise the communicative habit of sharing information and disclosing bias that may influence position. For Wallace, it is the habit of prioritising public over private motivation that is at the heart of democratic values. As public relations communication advisor, Cook's strategic focus is on Johns' private motivation to restore his reputation. Cook advises Johns to 'demonstrate that his apology is sincere' and 'show' that he wants to change his attitudes by giving money to the victim and contributing to changing culture among young players. Johns' true thoughts and beliefs are not known, he may or may not be sorry or want to help the woman, so we can't determine the true extent of symmetry in

his intentions. Cook's advice is based on Cook's own awareness of public antipathy towards the football player culture and publicly known behaviours. Public motivations for culture change and prevention of future similar incidents become, in this advice, mere instruments for achieving Johns' private goals.

The advice offered to Johns is also at odds with the fourth habit of ethical communicators, *respect for dissent*, which holds that an individual or organisation can advocate a position with conviction, while staying open to new information and alternative views. This assumes that the organisation or the individual is open to evolution of their own position. However, the public advice offered by Cook suggests that Johns cannot publicly assert an unchanged position with conviction and achieve his private ends; it suggests he only appease the prevailing, dissenting views. It can be argued, then, that this public relations advice recommends public appeasement for the sake of one person's public image, over and irrespective of personal evolution through reflection and understanding of dissenting views.

As an example of public relations communication, Cook's post, although perhaps well-intentioned counsel, is valuable as an illustration of the primacy of private motivation over public interest. Case by case, public relations might appear to be reasonable, but too frequently its public practice is fundamentally at odds with values of ethical communication.

This conflict of core values is perhaps why so many who aspire to democracy and democratic values distrust the public relations that surrounds them.

#### Discussion

Whether he ever followed Cook's advice or not, within a year Johns was back on television, this time hosting his own show. We might reasonably argue that at the time the blog was posted Johns was being attacked by a bloodthirsty media that did not care about innocence, guilt or justice. They simply wanted stories and Johns the celebrity footballer was a useful villain. It seems reasonable to argue that, overwhelmed as Johns would have been by such scrutiny, he was entitled to advocates focused on his interests and expert at symbolism and pithy messaging. But even if we accept Johns' right to advocacy, and accept the legitimacy of public relations' role in providing this advocacy, perhaps the main

point here is that for as long as people hold a deep-seated preference for public motivations over private, public relations will not be 'liked'.

The paper has been limited to a single case that may or may not be representative of general public relations practice. The advice was free when normally it would be paid for, and was given in public where normally it would be confidential. But as an example of public relations communication it is valuable as an illustration of apparently reasonable counsel that prioritises private motivation over public interest. In siding with the private, this instance of public relations advice is antithetical to deep-seated values that are integral to the democratic aspirations articulated by Wallace (op cit). In other ways the advice has also been shown to be inconsistent with Rubin and Yoder's (op cit) habits of ethical communication.

Individuals and organisations are prone to view and evaluate situations through their own particular prisms of self-interest. Public relations practitioners, in pursuit of their strategic objectives, are prone to reduce even the most complex debates to a client's preferred focus, and to see and communicate only the positives concerning the entities they represent. 'Even if PRs adopt a case-by-case ethical evaluation, they have to decide whether they are morally comfortable with this imbalance. If not, they should leave public relations work' (Moloney 2006: 11).

It has been said that public relations might mitigate the perception of self-interest through pro bono work or by making its services more available to less well resourced organisations and groups (ibid). Fawkes (op cit) explores notions of deep, honest self-reflection by the public relations profession. She says she doesn't envisage 'mass therapy', or that public relations will 'find God', but that public relations should seek to situate its authority in a concept of society (ibid: 37).

If Wallace's (op cit) assertions concerning the deep-seated democratic values apply today, and Cook's advice illustrates at least one approach to public relations practice (that may well be representative given Cook's extensive experience in the field), the analysis here may help to explain dislike of public relations. The authors can report that Rubin and Yoder's (op cit) habits provided a user-friendly framework for reflecting on the ethics of this case of public

relations communication. In line with Wallace's (op cit) wishes, the 1985 habits may serve as the basis of a useful tool for both experts and lay people. We encourage other researchers to explore their utility with a range of expert and lay coders, and larger and different samples of public relations communication.

It may well be a sign of the efficacy of public relations that when the profession demonstrates sound consideration of public interests and client or individual interests, together with the habits of search, justice and respect for dissent, it forms a soundless component in the machinery of democracy. It may be that instances of the more client-focused practice of 'spin' public relations, that somehow make their way into the public eye, further contribute to its poor image and public distrust.

Perhaps the dislike of public relations can be mitigated by changes to practice that more closely resemble those of the habitually ethical communicator, exploring the complexity of issues, openly sharing information and sources, disclosing biases and encouraging dissent. But widespread shift from the norms of much contemporary practice only occur with genuine professional leadership, time, professionalisation and probably regulation.

If we accept that some of the dislike of public relations derives from the privileging of private over public interest, then the dislike will be enduring. Despite what public relations textbooks promote, the structures, traditions and habits of public relations practice are often at odds with habits of ethical communication, habits which in themselves could help earn respect and credibility for the profession.

As long as public relations advice such as that discussed in this paper is given, without regard for broader social and ethical considerations around the issue, public relations may well remain the profession that dare not speak its name.

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