

PUBLIC RELATIONS & PROPAGANDA

A Proposal to Global Strategy Group for Ethical Leadership



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March 15, 2017

Introduction / Summary:

Is public relations propaganda? This question is relevant now, possibly more than ever, with an increasingly informed and scrutinizing public as well as the current context of “alternative facts” and “fake news.” Global Strategy Group, a leading public relations firm, has the opportunity to advance the PR field by taking concrete steps – including committing resources – to the ethical education of their employees.

Background on the Issue:

In 1928, Edward Bernays -- a founding father of public relations -- wrote, “Whatever of social importance is done today, whether in politics, finance, manufacture, agriculture, charity, education, or other fields, must be done with the help of propaganda” (Bernays 1928). In contemporary times, propaganda does not hold the same status of approval. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defines propaganda as, “Messages specifically designed to shape perceptions or motivate actions that an organization wants... The word took on negative connotations in the 20th century and is usually associated with lies, deceit and misinformation” (www.PRSA.org). Dave Gelders goes into depth about the question of public relations and propaganda:

“Typically, scholars will point to how public relations practitioners will foster dialogue between the organization and its publics, and seek mutually beneficial outcomes and relationships. Public relations is painted as a socially responsible function (L’Etang, 2006). It has, however, been pointed out that the distinction is not that clear-cut and critical scholars often place propaganda and public relations on a continuum. Using discourse theory Weaver, Motion, and Roper (2006), point out that what is considered as truth is highly problematic and not necessarily something that will always help to distinguish ethical from unethical practice... Ellul (1965/1973) writes that propaganda is obviously a “necessary instrument for the State and the authorities” (p. 121). Given the baggage of the concept, however, many governments have latched upon the concept of public relations” (Gelders pg. 60).

Similar to propaganda, the term *spin* is also sometimes identified with public relations. PR Week featured the conflicting opinions of Alan Kelly and Julie Hamp in the piece, “Gloves Off: Is PR all about spin?” (PR Week 2014).

Regardless of its relationship to propaganda, the term public relations comes with its own baggage; PR “is not well understood” and “the media’s use of the term “PR” seems fraught with negative connotations” (Coombs & Holladay pg. 6). Randall Rothenberg’s NY Times article, “P.R. Firms Head for Capitol Hill,” reveals some of the biggest PR agencies’ multi-million dollar acquisitions of lobbying firms and Alan Kelly’s alarmingly titled, “Fake News: PR’s Little Monster,” piece in the Huffington Post exclaims, “Call me mad, but fake news and post-truth shouldn’t be a surprise, not to practitioners of public relations and communications. Donald Trump is, of course, the most celebrated example of today’s bad PR practices” (Kelly 2017).

While PRSA defines public relations as, “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics,” the industry must still grapple with societal assumptions about the field. The perception of public relations’ relationship to propaganda isn’t as antithetical as PR practitioners might hope; “...PR cannot undo its historical relationship to the communication practices now described as Propaganda. Moloney has described modern public relations as “weak propaganda” (Moloney, 2006, pp. 13, 165). In this definition, PR is not only, if very much at all, the presentation of information, or seeking an exchange with its target audiences” (Senne & Moore pg. 327). Nonetheless, most PR professionals and academics maintain that PR is not propaganda. For example, Dr. Maria De Moya, professor of public relations and advertising at DePaul University, tweeted the following in response to *Salon* sharing an article on Twitter with the caption,

“Donald Trump's transition is becoming more and more like a PR smokescreen” – “This is not what PR is and not what PR does. It’s propaganda and misinformation. #PRADEthics” (De Moya 2016).

Relevance of the issue:

Public relations professionals insist that PR is not synonymous with propaganda and debate on the subject can be lively. The efforts of *PR Watch* reveal the existence of a diversity of opinions on the subject. PR industry leader Richard Edelman responded strongly to *PR Watch* founder, Wendell Potter, and his book, Deadly Spin:

“Most outrageous is Potter's conflation of propaganda and modern public relations... You have done the public a great disservice in distorting the PR field, which provided you a good living for the better part of your career. There will always be much to criticize in the world of PR, but do not call into question the motives of the vast majority of practitioners who are interested in the truth and in educating stakeholders about issues of our time” (Edelman 2010).

If it is true that the vast majority of practitioners are engaged in ethical and honest communication, then the PR field, as a whole, faces a large challenge in terms of bringing the public up to speed.

The relationship between PR and propaganda is highly relevant today, as propaganda runs rampant across the political scene. For example, consider presidential counselor Kellyanne Conway’s use of the phrase “alternative facts” earlier this year. Emily Tess Katz of CBS News explains, “In an interview with “Meet the Press” on Sunday, the counselor to President Trump defended Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s inaccurate claim that the 2017 inauguration was “the largest ever” by explaining that he was offering “alternative facts”” (Katz 2017). The public often equates this type of unethical communication as spin, propaganda, and even public relations itself.

It seems that the PR industry, despite offering strategic communication advice to organizations, companies, and public figures, has failed to convince the public that their industry practices something

other than propaganda. It is time for PR practitioners to boldly implement their trade skills for their own interests. Now is the time to prove that the majority of public relations professionals aim to practice honest and ethical communication. On this front, there's much room for improvement.

PRSA has taken an initial step in the right direction. PRSA's Jane Dvorak did speak out against Conway's use of the controversial phrase:

"Truth is the foundation of all effective communications. By being truthful, we build and maintain trust with the media and our customers, clients and employees. As professional communicators, we take very seriously our responsibility to communicate with honesty and accuracy... Encouraging and perpetuating the use of alternative facts by a high-profile spokesperson reflects poorly on all communications professionals. PRSA strongly objects to any effort to deliberately misrepresent information. Honest, ethical professionals never spin, mislead or alter facts" (Dvorak 2017).

An academic leader who also spoke against Conway's practices was Patricia McGuire, the president of Conway's alma mater, Trinity Washington University. In a public statement, she admonished Conway's "large role in facilitating the manipulation of facts" and went on to say that she, "felt a moral imperative to speak out against the Trump administration — in particular for its policies on immigration and its lack of truthfulness — and Conway is not exempt from that" (Svrluga 2017).

However, I argue that these steps are not sufficient. Can we honestly say that the PR industry's moral imperative to speak out against political propaganda start and stop with the PRSA's short statement opposing the use of alternative facts? I would say not. PR practitioners should seize on this opportunity to prove that public relations, at its best, is antithetical to propaganda.

Global Strategy Group is a leader in the political PR scene and considers itself an expert agency dedicated "to change minds and influence public opinion, build and protect reputations, navigate crises, manage legislative and regulatory landscapes, and win campaigns" (GlobalStrategyGroup.com).

GSG's tagline is "Lead the Way" and one way they can make good on their motto is to be a leader in speaking out against propaganda. Amy Knapp, for *The National Law Review*, urges public relations practitioners to practice their trade ethically:

"Even PR professionals, accustomed as we are to being called hacks and hired guns, are suddenly facing a looking glass world where the old rules encouraging honesty and integrity no longer apply... talking heads are spouting outrageous spin, negating our efforts to maintain best practices in our industry. Now more than ever, media professionals must hold fast to the ethical code which until recently was revered within the industry: a commitment to evidence-based analysis, robust debate and objective truths. Effective communication efforts are rooted in basic integrity: whether we are speaking to our clients or the press, or crafting messaging aimed at specific audiences, true credibility and effectiveness come not from dazzling wordsmithing and spin but from underlying honesty" (Knapp 2017).

As a leader in the field, GSG has a role to play in ensuring that public relations is rooted in ethical practices, integrity, and honesty.

Existing guidelines:

The PRSA's member code of ethics constitutes "a useful guide for PRSA members" and outlines provisions of conduct such as the free flow information, disclosure, safeguarding confidences, and enhancing the profession. The document urges members to "preserve the integrity of the process of communication" and to "be honest and accurate in all communications" (PRSA). PRSA membership, however, is voluntary and the code's preamble explicitly states, "Emphasis on enforcement of the Code has been eliminated" (PRSA).

Another guide for communicators is the TARES test. The authors of, "The TARES Test: Five Principles for Ethical Persuasion," point out assumptions and limitations of practicing persuasion:

"Advertisers and public relations practitioners are distrusted because the public—with good reason—has come to recognize that too frequently the goal in persuasive communication centers around exploiting them...Defining the problem, of course, is less difficult than advancing—from an ethics perspective—an answer. Surely there would not be so much

unethical persuasive communication if there were not some benefit in engaging in such wrong actions. Many feel they are “forced” to use less than ethical means because the use of such means are essential to achieving the desired end” (Baker & Martinson pg. 151).

Baker and Martinson offer a five-part “TARES” test -- truthfulness of the message, authenticity of the persuader, respect for the persuadee, social responsibility for the common good, and equity for the appeal -- to define “the moral boundaries of persuasive communications” and to serve “as a set of action-guiding principles directed toward a moral consequence in persuasion” (Baker & Martinson pg. 159). They argue that that ethical persuasion is possible if practitioners adhere to these five principles. While the TARES test is useful to help guide PR professionals’ decisions, the test is indeed only a guide, meaning that adherence is voluntary.

An additional formula for ethical communication is the modified Potter Box, an “ethical judgement tool used primarily in media ethics,” to assist with communication development and to promote an ethical decision-making process (Watley pg. 1). The tool requires the determination of five key elements; situation, stakeholders, obligations, values, and universalization. The author points out this tool “should be useful in a variety of academic settings, including stand-alone ethics courses, ethics modules in other courses and industry-specific ethics training sessions” (Watley pg. 10). Therefore, while the modified Potter Box can be a useful educational exercise, it is likely not regularly practiced in the implemented work of PR professionals.

Voluntary adherence to ethical codes and guidelines is a recurring theme in the field of public relations. The practice of PR in the United States is not bound by any necessary certifications, mandatory degrees, or other specific requirements. To regulate public relations could indeed limit constitutionally-protected freedom of speech. Therefore, it is important for practitioners and agencies

to set a positive example and take it upon themselves to provide potential solutions for the ethical practice of public relations.

Proposed solution:

While the public relations industry is not legally bound to PR-specific regulation (PR professionals must still comply with all appropriate laws), accreditation does exist. PRSA and the Universal Accreditation Board developed the “APR” designation; *Accreditation in Public Relations*. “Earning the APR demonstrates your mastery of today’s strategic communications practice and your commitment to lifelong learning and ethical standards” (PRaccreditation.org). The APR process involves completing the accreditation application, preparing and sitting for a panel presentation, completing a computer-based examination, and demonstrating a commitment to lifelong learning through maintenance (PRaccreditation.org). Ultimately, becoming versed in ethical standards and practices is part and parcel to attaining an APR.

Global Strategy Group should lead the struggle to legitimize public relations and promote ethical communications by requiring all employees in supervisory roles to earn APR accreditation. To do so, current supervisory employees would be given a reasonable timeline to become accredited; for example, two (2) years from the implementation of the APR policy. Similarly, that two (2) year deadline would represent the date in which all new supervisory job applicants, or existing employees up for promotion, would need to earn APR accreditation before commencing a supervisory position. Regulating the field of public relations as a whole is not realistic, at least not any time soon. PR regulation will almost always be equated with the limiting of free speech. Until, and if, a potential PR regulation system is proposed, responsibility falls on public relations practitioners to self-regulate.

A recent study, “Silent & unprepared: Most millennial practitioners have not embraced role as ethical conscience,” emphasizes the benefits of ethical training on a subset of the population that will continue to be moving into public relations supervisory and leadership roles:

“The factors that significantly impacted Millennials’ perceptions of readiness included the existence of a mentor, completion of an ethics course in college, ethics training provided by their employer, and participation in PRSA or PRSSA ethics programming. In addition, Millennials who were familiar and likely to use PRSA’s ethics resources were more likely to believe that public relations practitioners should provide ethics counsel, demonstrating the value of professional associations for socializing new practitioners regarding ethical practices” (Neill & Weaver pg. 6).

While the benefits of ethical training, including APR accreditation, are important, one aspect to keep in mind is that the process is not free; “The Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations fees are: \$25 application fee and \$385 Examination fee” (PRaccreditation.org). GSG should not only require accreditation, but should cover the cost. Committing resources to ethical training of their employees will show GSG’s commitment and dedication to maintaining an ethical PR field. Along with paying for its employees to attain APR’s, GSG should give existing and new employees who are already accredited a \$410 ethical employee bonus.

GSG’s political client base alone, not including businesses or causes, boasts over eighty (80) U.S. senators (e.g. Joe Manchin), local officeholders (e.g. Rahm Emanuel), members of congress (e.g. Joe Crowley), party committees (e.g. Democratic National Committee), state officeholders (e.g. Susana Mendoza), and independent expenditures (e.g. Planned Parenthood). These political representatives and bodies are a prime target audience for the cause of combatting propaganda and manipulative communication like the use of “alternative facts.” The fact of the matter is that PR and the government are seen as inseparable. A Forbes article, “Meet the 2nd Largest PR Firm in the World: The U.S. Government,” details the *billions* of dollars federal agencies spend on public relations. Promoting

and committing resources to the ethical education of GSG's supervisory employees – as well as rewarding all levels of employees who earn accreditation – is a concrete step in the effort to popularize public relations as a respectable practice that does not equate to spin or propaganda.

Illustrative examples:

Numerous companies and organizations have spoken out, in their own way, against “alternative facts” and the Trump administration in general. Ogilvy London partnered with Dove for a hard-hitting deodorant print ad. Above the hashtag, #AlternativeFacts, Dove lists ten (10) ridiculous claims like, “New Dove antiperspirant was first used by Cleopatra... boosts your Wi-Fi signal... rhymes with orange...” and so on. Adjacent to these claims, and above the hashtag, #RealFacts, Dove writes, “New Dove antiperspirant cares for your underarm skin like never before” (Ledbetter 2017). Well-known publishing and dictionary company, Merriam-Webster, even tweeted, “A fact is a piece of information presented as having objective reality,” including a link to a short write-up on their website about Kellyanne Conway's description of “false statements” (Merriam-Webster 2017).

One company, however, has taken disapproval of the Trump administration to unprecedented ground. Illamasqua, a U.K.-based beauty company, is demanding that customers take “The Illamasqua anti-fascism pledge” before purchasing their products. In a seemingly reverse-boycott, the brand is demanding that Trump-supporters refrain from patronizing their business:

“We're realistic. We know we can't stop anyone buying our products. But we also know that no matter how hard some people work to make themselves beautiful on the outside, make-up can never hide the ugliness inside. So please, if you don't agree with the above **DON'T BUY US**” (Illamasqua 2017).

Illamasqua's anti-Trump strategy was the most aggressive move I've found. It is one thing to produce clever ads or make general statements, but asking potential customers to stay away from your

business if they don't align with your values is bold. Nevertheless, Illamasqua's decision provides food for thought for taking substantial action. At the end of the day, Illamasqua is willing to potentially lose sales – therefore sacrificing resources – to affirm their values.

In terms of public relations, one example of industry leadership in the era of alternative facts has been implemented by GSG itself. In February, GSG and the PR Council hosted a conversation about “Communicating in a Trump World” including PR representatives from Burson-Marsteller, JDA Frontline, and Ketchum. GSG and the PR Council co-published a summary of the event written by Jon Silvan in which he stated, “alternative facts might be the new normal” and that it’s “already clear that all of us, Democrat or Republican, will have to re imagine our communications approaches... Perhaps President Trump has emerged as our industry’s disrupter” (Silvan 2017). Along with this panel, GSG published a Compass survey last month titled, “It’s Not About Him, It’s About the People,” outlining what voters really care about. The report advises using words that focus on the consequences of Trump’s conflicts, rather than emphasizing his money or business interests, along with other messaging suggestions:

“...the only message frame that is more compelling — or even as compelling — to voters than Trump’s, is one that focuses on how his lack of preparation, his reckless approach, and his worrisome temperament could lead us into fights with enemies and potentially war” (GSG 2017).

The GSG/PR Council industry leader discussion and this Compass report reveal that GSG is willing to speak out against the current presidential administration’s words and actions. Silvan ends his summary of the “Communicating in a Trump World” panel by exclaiming, “At the PR Council, we plan on continuing this conversation!” (Silvan 2017). Along with continuing discussion, GSG can take action – and commit resources – to prove their commitment and leadership in fostering and maintaining ethical public relations. Requiring GSG’s supervisory employees to attain APR’s would be a noble pledge.

Conclusion:

The public relations field overwhelmingly insists that the practice is neither spin nor propaganda. It is in the PR industry's best interest to use the opportunity provided by the era of "alternative facts" to build trust with the public and redefine the field's reputation. Global Strategy Group, especially considering its extensive work in the political landscape, can truly lead the way in legitimizing public relations. Statements are not enough. The fact of the matter is that public relations is an unregulated industry and ensuring ethical standards rests on the shoulders of the field itself. Requiring an ethically educated workforce, as well as committing financial resources to this goal, represents a concrete step that GSG can take to affirm the legitimacy and integrity of public relations.

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