

What is Next?

-- An Examination of the Negative Stereotypes of Public Relations Practitioners in the Discourse of 'Post-disciplinary PR'

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Abstract

The saying “advertising is what you pay for, publicity is what you pray for” revealed the essential role of public relations in modern corporate operation. With the delegation of public relations across different industry in mega-corporations and non-stop media messages about how PR has once again rescued or created another public crisis, some negative stereotypes about public relations emerged. The problem whether public relations practitioner should be treated as a respected profession is becoming more prevailing as well. In order to understand this issue, the essay analyzes two of the most common stereotypes that the public hold towards PR practitioners: usage of propaganda and belying the truth from the public. In addition, solutions such as ethical practices and using the new public sphere is discussed as well.

Keywords

Public Relations; Negative Stereotypes; Marketing Practices; Marketing Ethics.

1. Introduction

From the face of the corporate machine to social workers unpacking public issues through smart communication, various opinions of public relations practitioners emerge, which tend to make the responsibility of practitioners abstruse to the general public. Certain negative stereotypes of public relations have been forced onto practitioners due to both external and internal reasons. In this essay, the main debate within the public relations studies of whether it is a fragmented, post-disciplinary subject and the discussion of its role as a business profession will be demonstrated. It is then followed by the analysis of two separate but related negative stereotypes: public relations practitioner is still setting up propaganda without concerns of ethics and they exist to lie after crisis simply for the benefits of the corporations they serve. Possible reasons for the stereotypes will be outlined in the text. In addition, the discussion of PR being post-disciplinary is revisited and solutions regarding ethics and the new public sphere will be proposed.

2. Current Debate of Public Relations

In order to establish the ground for understanding the negative stereotypes of public relations practitioners, the discussion of public relations categorized as a business profession and a research discipline needs to be addressed. According to Duhring (2015), current public relations research is gradually separating from its origin of school of journalism and media while increasingly being recognized as management occupation as ‘strategic communication’. PR in academic research is an inter-disciplinary subject which has been viewed as extracting empirical knowledge from psychology, communications, media, business management and

sociology. The progress of public relations research has been accused of being 'plateaued' and reaching a wide variety of theoretical approach therefore lacks the foundation (Sisco, 2011). Due to the long history of public relations' reputation being related to propaganda and corporate machine, critical scholars found it extremely difficult to recognize PR as a credible and sustainably discipline. According to Grunig (2001), public relations researchers should indicate how their approach could contribute to the practice and research, not just the theories. While public relations has been widely criticized for its fragmentation as a discipline, it has served its functions and purposes and proved to be effective in the discourse of business and corporate management which established its post-disciplinary role functionally. As a business profession during the recession of economy, organizations rely on public relations department to market building, clients serving and public communicating (Smith, 2013). PR practitioners indirectly generate profits for organization and assist companies to achieve the long-term objectives of brand building. In marketing arena, it acts as an educational guide for the marketing department to synthesize the 'marketing mix' and to support every phase of the corporate operation both internally and externally (Jefkins, 2016). Since there will be tension and conflicts between gaining profits and facing the public for a corporation, according to Cutlip et.al (1995), the goal of PR practitioners should 'operate as moral agent in society' and act as the supervisor of corporate social responsibility of an organization, while find the balance between the company and stakeholders. However, despite the contributions public relations have made in these arenas, PR practitioners have been widely criticized for its negative representation of propaganda, unethical conducts, crisis management failures and lack of considering other stakeholders besides the company itself by both scholars and the general audience.

3. Negative Stereotypes of Public Relations Practitioners and Possible Reasons

3.1. Stereotype 1: Public Relations Practitioners Use Propaganda and Ignore Ethics

Public relations practitioners are still facing the accusation of using propaganda negatively. According to L'etang (2004), PR's dark side of association with propaganda has been proved through historical evidence. Audiences of the mass media tend to reflect tragedy of human history to public relations, for example Nazis propaganda during WWII, hence connecting propaganda and public relations together. The father of PR Bernays (1952) argued that propaganda should be treated as neutral therefore refer to general public relations practices, however the narratives of public relations used politically has set a misleading narrative for the overall perception and feelings of this subject (Myers, 2015). Many contemporary TV shows such as the popular American series 'Scandals' could be misleading for the mass audiences as well when they tend to presume that public relations is sharing the same characteristics with TV drama and other negatively portrayed PR professionals. The linkage between glib politicians and public relations could be established if the observer lacks general understanding of public relations. The historical context and contemporary pop culture both generate the false impression of it, therefore it is possible that the rhetorical and systematic understanding of PR in reality have been categorized into this specific negative stereotype.

The role of ethics in public relations have been ignored by some practitioners influenced by the conduct of organization. Public relation ethics could be defined as 'the application of knowledge, understanding and reasoning to questions of right or wrong behavior in the professional practice...'. (Parsons, 2016) Practitioners of PR are facing numerous of ethical dilemma and confrontation of tough situations. It is often tremendously difficult to evaluate the stakeholders' interests and balance them with practitioner's own ethical value. According to Pratt (1994), the struggle of PR practitioners originates from their responsibility of management communication

and over-watching moral conducts. When the corporation lacks basic corporate social responsibility, public relations practitioners become its spoke-person and therefore the representation of lies and unethical behaviors commanded by their superiors. One of the failed example was the Volkswagen emission scandal back in 2015 where the company heads were twisting the facts and eventually resulted in brand damage, financial loss and the practitioners being blamed as a 'major PR fail'. In addition, according to a research conducted by Peck and Matchett (2010), very few public relations professionals could recognize ethical dilemma situations or claim that they apply codes of conducts when communicating on behalf of the organization, which could also trigger the negativity against public relations.

3.2. Stereotype 2: Public Relations Practitioners Often Covers up the Truth after Crisis to Protect the Corporate'S Interest

Most perceive that majority of PR's responsibility is about crisis management, therefore public relations practitioners are held responsible for any mistakes made by the corporate after a crisis. According to Coombs (2004), the crisis response plan includes what a company does and says after the incident occurs. If a systematic, strategic, comprehensive and humane communication plan with interactivity and sincerity could not be delivered promptly after the accident or crisis, the PR practitioner will be judged for their delay or agenda of 'hiding the facts' from the public. The crisis of an organization often indicates that the organization has possibly lost its control over its operation, hence response means actions (Coombs, 2006). During the communications of the organization and audience, the relationship between the public and PR professionals become essential. According to Grunig (1989), in current public relations the asymmetrical communication model is still in use which defines public relations as a method of manipulation. However, some improvements on this point of view have been witnessed due to the new tool of managing crisis and execute communication: the new public sphere social media. The emergence of social media could improve the effectiveness of current crisis management efforts (Ki and Elmie, 2014).

For some PR professionals, the lack of communication strategy and critical thinking contributes to this negative stereotype of public relations practitioners only serving corporate's interests. Under the premise of conducting based on ethic codes, organizations need to invest resources selectively to important stakeholder groups and identify stakeholder priority (Kim, Lan and Bey-Ling, 2008). Because of the interconnection nature of the public problems such as globalization, economic development and AIDS, the trend requires the framework of stakeholder analysis to be more completed (Bryson, 2004). Ignoring the basic step for identifying stakeholders and meeting expectations in communication results in negative impression of PR practitioners. Another challenge the practitioners are facing is: without a comprehensive understanding of the interaction between the stakeholders, they cannot identify the stakeholder multiplicity and exert full corporate social responsibility on behalf of the company. By linking back to theories of CSR, based on Neville and Bulent's theory(2006), the current weakness of CSR studies lies simply about the 'hub and spoke' relationship between organizations. The stakeholders and the complexity of interactions between all these parties should also be addressed.

4. Further Discussions and Possible Solutions

As both a business profession and an academic subject, public relations entered a post-disciplinary stage of its research history which merges a wide variety of theories including strategic communication studies, journalism, media, humanities, arts, corporate management, and eventually blends them together, therefore it is possible that the boundaries of any single discipline may be ignored. This post-disciplinary characteristic of PR could actually be applied to understanding the negative stereotypes of practitioners and assist them to be more ethical

and help them to develop new skill sets for the development of the industry. According to Edward (2012), the variety of fields linked to PR research is a symbol of its maturity. A variety of guidance across different disciplines also should be applied to current public relations practitioners.

To address the negative stereotypes, eliminate the false accusation and re-emphasize on how to improve the conducts of public relations practitioners, ethics in both business narratives and societal values, discourse of power and the rise of new public sphere should be revisited. According to Breit (2007), the basic ethic codes of public relations are honesty, fairness and respect for others. As simple and ideal as these codes seem, they represent the core value of being a public relations professional and continually following these principles could be the first challenge. Another difficult situation that the PR practitioners found themselves in is the perception and stereotype of hegemony and power, which applies to the negative representation propaganda stereotype. According to Gramsci (1971), power originates from consent, and it does not only exist in the economic narratives but also embeds in the societal sphere. The power regime changes over time and with the new web 2.0 public sphere—for example, social media platforms, forums and websites—developing for PR practitioners to better communicate with audiences, mutual understanding could be gained. Transparency and more autonomy can shift the power back to the public and release the tension. For example, social media platforms can be a useful tool which allow more discussion to take place. The new public sphere can lead to more diversity and give more space for PR professionals to handle the time-sensitive crisis more promptly. Marketing practices which are open and respectful could not only enhance the conducts of public relations practitioners themselves, but the core value of organizations they work for. As Heath(2006) mentioned, the future of PR is about doing good for the society which is both the expectation of public relations scholars and practitioners.

5. Conclusion

When reflecting the practices of PR professionals based on the ‘fragmented’ public relations study, the accusation of public relations being ‘post-disciplinary’ does not necessarily have to be a criticism, but a welcoming invitation to a forum which enables meaningful, constructive suggestions from multiple subjects flow in order to improve the public relations practices and research. It is possible that with behaving under the codes of ethics, staying conscious and keeping on the path of self-education, public relations practitioners could gradually eliminate some of the negative stereotypes, or simply live with them and understand them in a more appropriate manner. Also, as the interfaces and mediums public relations use advance, thinking about how PR practitioners could adapt to the changing, dynamic cyber internet environment and what types of new challenges they might be facing could be brought to agenda.

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