



Public relations models and persuasion ethics: a new approach

Public relations
models

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review public relations and related literature to examine attitudes to persuasion and propaganda as part of a long-term project to produce an integrated ethical framework.

Design/methodology/approach – A critical approach to existing literature, examining assumptions and value judgments underpinning core texts and other writing. The limitations of systems, marketplace and relationship theory are briefly examined.

Findings – The dominance of systems theory and its reluctance to engage with persuasion has created a vacuum which is filled by critics, such as Stauber and Rampton. The common models of public relations – boundary spanner, advocate, relationship manager and propagandist – have limited discussion of persuasion and persuasion ethics, with the exception of the rhetorical version of advocacy which has produced considerable material of interest. However, rhetoric is rarely taught in the UK and the marketplace approach is more common. Social psychology has useful insights into persuasion and the Maletzke model is adapted to suggest future direction for an integrated ethical framework.

Research limitations/implications – These are preliminary findings, based on literature, which will underpin the PhD started in July 2007. The application of the model is explored but has not yet been tested in practice.

Practical implications – If practitioners internalise particular versions of public relations and adopt ethical assumptions connected with each model, competing views of PR ethics will undermine an integrative approach. The adapted model proposed in this paper can be used either as a tool for analysing communication ethics or as a practical guide to professional behaviour.

Originality/value – Others (L'Etang, Piezka, Moloney, Weaver, Edgett) have covered some of these issues. This paper links ethical approaches with models of public relations and suggests the use of a communication model rarely referenced in PR literature.

Keywords Propaganda, Ethics, Public relations, Social psychology

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There is a raging debate on the role of public relations in society, only partially reflected in public relations own literature, which has tended to ignore or dismiss the attacks on its practices.

On one side of the debate are the critics of public relations (Miller, Stauber and Rampton, Chomsky, Ewen, among others) who argue that public relations, past and present, undermines democracy and stifles or distorts debates. On the other side of the debate public relations' defenders (Grunig, Dozier, Cutlip, Gregory, Vercic and others) tend to minimise public relations' historical roots in propaganda. The Excellence project has the laudable aim of improving public relations practice by emphasising the best and demonstrating how others can improve. However, there has been tendency to



marginalise the role of persuasion (Moloney, 2000), concentrating instead on the positive role that public relations makes to society and democracy. Between the two is a small body of interested academics (L'Etang, Pieczka, Moloney, Weaver, Holtzhausen and McKie among others) who note the extensive involvement of public relations' pioneers in wartime government propaganda (before the term became pejorative) but (L'Etang especially) emphasise differences between the growth of the field in the USA (whence most of the core texts have come) and in Europe and the UK. This paper draws on their work and applies some of the issues they raise to the different models of public relations practice.

Research approach

The paper draws on a wide range of literature from the fields of propaganda, the psychology of persuasion and public relations literature as well as ethics. The paper takes a critical perspective (Hall, 1980) on public relations' attempts to distance itself from propaganda. As Heath (2001, p. 53) says, "the purpose of the critical perspective is to be confrontational". Heath also refers to Burke's (1966) discussion of this and the use of terministic screens, where language is used to shape perception, evaluation and behaviour, with the dominant forces in an organisation (or in this case, field of study) attempting to determine the perspectives of others. Role models are examined for their underlying assumptions, in particular in regard to ethical behaviour.

The paper attempts to compare attitudes to persuasion and ethics, not to establish new definitions or analyse these topics in depth. The paper draws on work by Moloney (2006), L'Etang (1996), L'Etang (1998) and Weaver *et al.* (2006). It extends their ideas by examining the ethics of persuasion adopted by – or available for adoption by – different models of public relations. A more detailed exploration of propaganda and public relations is covered in Fawkes (2006b) which is summarized here.

Finally some concepts from social psychology and psychological communication are offered for use as a framework for discussing the ethics of persuasion.

The paper aims to make explicit assumptions which are usually implicit concerning the role of public relations in society. This exposure should in turn highlight flaws and assumptions underpinning varying approaches to public relations ethics. It does not aim to solve the problems it raises, but hopes, that in identifying fault lines running through the field, future work in constructing a coherent ethical framework for public relations will build on stronger foundations.

The paper sets out to:

- establish the links between public relations, persuasion and propaganda;
- compare four key models of public relations to evaluate their approaches to persuasion and persuasion ethics; and
- consider whether a communication model could be adapted as a framework for discussing persuasion ethics.

Public relations, propaganda and persuasion- defining the field

The fields of persuasion, propaganda, and public relations have all been extensively researched and studied – but usually without reference to each other.

The bulk of persuasion studies (Bettinghaus and Cody, 1994; Perloff, 2003; Simons, 2001; O'Keefe, 2002, for example) come from Social Psychology schools in the USA,

which have been concerned with the process of persuasion since the 1950s. These say surprising little about the ethics of persuasion and rarely refer to public relations, though advertising and public information campaigns often provide useful case studies. Propaganda scholars (such as Pratkanis and Aronson, 2001) locate propaganda in the shift of persuasive communication from rational argument to emotional triggers. Other scholars of persuasion and propaganda (Taylor, 2001, 2003; Jaksa and Pritchard, 1994 among others) propose that propaganda is inherently neutral but, again, there is no discussion of public relations.

On the other hand the most virulent critics of public relations (Stauber and Rampton, 2004; PRWatch.org, 2007; Spinwatch.com, 2007 for example) assert that it is synonymous with propaganda, citing a constant stream of abuses of public trust by corporate communicators, such as the creation of “front organisations”.

Core public relations texts (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Wilcox *et al.*, 2003; Seitel, 1992; Cutlip *et al.*, 1985) with the exception of the schools of rhetoric and critical theory (see below) provide a kind of mirror image to these critical voices: issues of propaganda, past and present are largely absent from the debate and persuasion is often marginalised (Moloney, 2000). Persuasion is higher up the scale, covered in the two-way asymmetrical model of communication, though it is still “inferior” to the excellent two way symmetrical ideal. Despite G. Miller’s (1989) famous argument that the similarities between public relations and persuasion are “overwhelming”, persuasion is still viewed with distaste, and persuasion is not explored in depth within systems theory approaches.

Schools of rhetoric are, of course, based on the study of persuasion and bring this to the public relations curriculum, drawing on the teachings of Aristotle and more recently Burke (1966), among others (Heath, 2001; Toth and Heath, 1992). However, while this is extensively taught in the USA there is no evidence of rhetoric playing a part in the public relations curriculum in the UK (Fawkes and Tench, 2004). This may account for transatlantic differences in attitudes to persuasion and persuasion ethics.

European scholars’ have tended to analyse propaganda and persuasion as aspects of economic power and social control of media and other channels of communication (e.g. the Frankfurt school and critical/political economy approaches) rather than the empirical research conducted in the USA. The other notable contribution to the study of persuasion and its role in public relations comes from Habermas’ (1989) concept of the public sphere. He views persuasion as unethical due to the inequalities of interests between persuader and persuadee. However, given the dominance of persuasive messages in the public sphere, Moloney (2000) suggests the term should be revised to the “persuasive sphere”. From the above, it might be concluded that the reason persuasion, propaganda and public relations scholars rarely refer to each others’ work is that they have nothing in common. However, L’Etang (1996, 2004, 2006) has demonstrated that this is a failure of nerve rather than an extra-jurisdictional issue. Weaver *et al.* (2006, p. 21) conclude that “the critical theory perspective... finds no substantive difference between propaganda and public relations.. this is a consequence of a rejection of the notions that propaganda necessarily operates counter to the public interest, and that public relations necessarily works for the public interest”. Pieczka (1996) argues that “there has been a long campaign to distance public relations from propaganda by asserting its ethical practices and contribution to democracy”, but, as she says, assertions are not proof.

This paper shares the view of Jaksa and Pritchard (1994, p. 128) that “it cannot be seriously maintained that all persuasion is bad or undesirable”. Indeed, G. Miller (1989) famously argues that despite minor technical differences, the similarities between public relations and persuasion are “overwhelming”. It would appear that the moral repugnance attached to the term propaganda has spread to its neighbour persuasion, despite the fact that our entire culture is permeated with persuasive messages, from health campaigns to toothpaste ads. It is difficult to conceive of organisational communication which does not contain some persuasive content, if only in the selection of material for the particular public.

Each of the approaches to propaganda and persuasion outlined above has generated its own definitions. The comparative table of definitions offered in Fawkes (2006a) illustrates the problem of drawing clear boundaries between the terms, propaganda, persuasion and public relations. This echoes the findings of Weaver *et al.* (2006) (see Table I).

Table II also summarises the approach of various schools of communication towards persuasion and illustrates the range of consideration given to these topics.

This author believes that persuasion should be brought to the centre of discussion about what public relations is, not marginalised. It is difficult to conceive of organisational communication which does not contain some persuasive content, if only in the selection of material for the particular public. As Jaksa and Pritchard (1994, p. 128) note, “it cannot be seriously maintained that all persuasion is bad or undesirable”.

Public relations role models and the ethics of persuasion

This section examines four approaches in closer detail and seeks to correlate the key role models for public relations with their attitudes to persuasion and to the ethics of persuasion. It will not look at other fields of ethics, such as corporate social responsibility, which are widely covered elsewhere. The four models – boundary spanner, advocate, relationship manager and propagandist – are selected because they dominate the debate about the roles public relations practitioner take, or in some cases should take, in their dealings with employers and with society as a whole.

Boundary spanner

Description of role. The boundary spanner role is central to systems theory-based communication. It sees the excellent communicator as the key player with access to internal stakeholders via the dominant coalition and salient external stakeholders. White and Dozier (1992, p. 93) explain how public relations practitioners interact with the organisations environment to “gather, select, and relay information from the environment to decision makers in the dominant coalition”. This role achieves its highest level in symmetric communication when the full range of negotiating and diplomatic skills is deployed to secure positive outcomes for all parties: “In the two-way symmetric model.. practitioners serve as mediators between organisations and their publics. Their goal is mutual understanding between practitioners and their publics.” (Grunic and Hunt, 1984, p. 22). The resonance of this statement can be seen in the UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) 1987 definition of public relations as: “The planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and understanding between an organisation and its publics.”

Propaganda	Persuasion	Public relations
<p>The deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1992, p. 4)</p> <p>A propaganda model... traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalise dissent and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public (Herman and Chomsky, 1988)</p> <p>Public relations serves a propaganda function in the press agent/publicity model. Practitioners spread the faith of the organisation involved, often through incomplete, distorted or half-true information (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 21)</p> <p>A practical process of persuasion.. it is an inherently neutral concept. . . . We should discard any notions of propaganda being "good" or "bad", and use those terms merely to describe effective or ineffective propaganda (Taylor, 2003)</p>	<p>A successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom (O'Keefe, 2002, p. 5)</p> <p>Persuasion is an activity or process in which a communicator attempts to induce a change in the belief, attitude, or behavior of another person or group of persons through the transmission of a message in a context in which the persuadee has some degree of free choice (Perloff, 2003)</p> <p>Ethos (the credibility or charisma of the speaker) + logos (the nature of the message) + pathos (the response of the audience) (Aristotle)</p> <p>Because both persuader and persuadee stand to have their needs fulfilled, persuasion is regarded as more mutually satisfying than propaganda (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1992), p. 21</p> <p>...situations where attempts are made to modify [attitudes and/or] behavior by symbolic transactions (messages) that are sometimes, but not always, linked with coercive force (indirectly coercive) and that appeal to the reason and emotions of the intended persuadee(s) (Miller, 2004)</p>	<p>The planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and understanding between an organisation and its publics (UK Institute of Public Relations (IPR), 1987)</p> <p>The art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organisation's and the public interest (Mexican statement Wilcox <i>et al.</i>, 2003, p. 6)</p> <p>... the planned persuasion to change adverse public opinion or reinforce public opinion and the evaluation of results for future use (Peake 1980, cited in Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 7)</p> <p>The discipline concerned with the reputation of organisations (or products, services or individuals) with the aim of earning understanding and support (CIPR)</p> <p>...the process of attempting to exert symbolic control over the evaluative predispositions ("attitudes", "images" etc.) and subsequent behaviours of relevant publics or clientele (Miller, 2004, p. 47)</p>

Source: Fawkes (2006b)

Table I. Comparison of definitions

Table II.
Approaches to PR,
persuasion and
propaganda

School/approach	Key proposals/framework	Leading PR scholars	Understanding of persuasion
Systems theory	Information is a quantity which is transferred between organisations and various publics, with different degrees of consequent change. Studying the systems through which information is transferred enables one to adjust and adapt	Grunig, Cutlip, Dozier	Propaganda is similar to press agency (one-way) Persuasion involves two-way asymmetric communication – neither of them excellent. The greater the degree of exchange of information between parties, the more ethical the communication.
Rhetoric	Communication involves speech and symbols which can be analysed to understand meanings – shared or otherwise	Heath, Toth	Systems theory is applied to PR practice Persuasion uses words and symbols to influence the perceptions of others There is not good or bad persuasion – some works; some does not. PR is taught as practical persuasion
Political economy	Information is used by interest groups to protect their own position in society: the mechanisms of control – legal, corporate, economic, political and social can be studied to see whose interests are best served by the communication	Moloney, Glasgow Media Group, Chomsky	Persuasion is neutral in itself but is used to maintain the status quo by those with. PR is employed by the powerful to manage the less powerful
Communications/process	The mechanisms of communication can be studied to understand what barriers there may be between sender and receiver, the role of the audience, the media and message etc.	Burgoon	Persuasion may be contained in a message: understanding and overcoming barriers to persuasion can improve successful communication. PR rarely mentioned
Social psychology	Studying the attitudes and behaviours of senders and receivers helps understand the nature of communication and/or persuasion	Perloff, Bettinghaus and Cody	Persuasion is the attempt to influence the attitude or behaviour of others. PR rarely mentioned
Public sphere	European approach: events and communications take place in space where public can participate in “discourse”; and may influence debates.	Habermas	Persuasion is part of the dialogue of the public sphere, where parties seek to influence each other, with differing degrees of success
Critical	Exposing the assumptions and value judgements behind “neutral” or “objective” theories, helps understand who benefits from not examining these issues	L’Etang, Pieczka, Weaver	Persuasion is not inherently “bad”; PR is built on persuasion; ethics cannot be tacked onto false assumptions. New approaches are needed

Boundary spanners and persuasion. The degree of persuasion exercised by boundary spanners is dependent upon the degree of asymmetry in the communication: in a system of balances and counterbalances, the more imbalance, the more persuasion (and therefore the less ethics). Grunig and White (1992, p. 175) observes that “Persuasion is less relevant than other processes (such as negotiation) when a symmetrical model of public relations is practiced.” This waning interest is clearly seen as a positive development – and negotiation is not seen as part of persuasion. More recently Grunig (2001) has developed the mixed-motives model, combining the ideals of symmetry with the everyday reality of persuasion aims to accommodate some of the limitations of the earlier approach. However, the perception that only the symmetrical model is ethical persists (L’Etang and Pieczka, 2006).

Boundary spanners and ethics. As stated above, the boundary spanner role is conceived as only truly ethical when it is symmetrical: “it is difficult, if not impossible, to practice public relations in a way that is ethical and socially responsible using an asymmetrical model” (Grunig and White, 1992, p. 175). Although detailed systems theory approaches to ethics are developed by Bivins (1992, 2004) and McElreath (1997), overall the project tends to focus on codes and idealised or excellent behaviour particularly regarding duty to client and society. The core texts referred to elsewhere may include a page or two on ethics at most, but provide nothing of real help to the novice practitioner, preferring to rely on Codes for guidance. A recent analysis of these codes (Harrison and Galloway, 2005) suggests that most practitioners absorb the message that they should do the best they can without jeopardising their careers. The image of the ethical boundary spanner contributing to “social harmony” (Seib and Fitzpatrick, 1995, p. 1) dominates the conceptualisation of public relations, informs attitudes to corporate social responsibility, issues management and many other aspects of the field. This is obviously testament to its salience, but as others have pointed out (Holtzhausen, L’Etang), it is popular with pro-PR voices because it glorifies their contribution to democracy, and social progress and avoids awkward discussion of its involvement with historical or contemporary propaganda.

Advocate

Description of role. This model recognises that public relations often plays a more asymmetrical or persuasive role than is encompassed by the boundary spanner. One view locates this approach in marketplace theory, (Fitzpatrick and Bronstein, 2006) which argues that all organisations are entitled to have a voice: “Marketplace theory is predicated, first on the existence of an objective ‘truth’ that will emerge from a cacophony of voices promoting various interests; second on a marketplace in which all citizens have the right- and perhaps the means – to be both heard and informed; and third, on the rational ability of people to discern ‘truth’” (Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. 4). It is strongly USA-based, citing the First Amendment as inspiration, as well as social responsibility theory (Siebert *et al.*, 1956).

Another approach to advocacy is based on rhetorical theory (Heath, 2001; Toth and Heath, 1992) and addresses the role of persuasion in communication, dating back to Aristotle and strongly linked to concepts of democracy. The advocacy model is fairly uncritical, especially as presented by Fitzpatrick and Bronstein, of the workings and morality of the free market, but does recognise that advocacy carries the risk of persuasion shading into propaganda, which is why this is the area which appears to

have generated the most ideas about the ethics of persuasion. Rhetoric and the art of persuasion is widely studied in the USA but it should be noted that rhetoric is rarely taught on UK public relations courses (Fawkes and Tench, 2004).

Advocacy and persuasion. As the term implies, advocacy is essentially persuasive. Persuasion is not seen as inherently good or bad but as the stuff of human interaction (Heath, 2001, p. 2). However this is contradicted by apparent distaste for the idea of persuasion, expressed in the belief (hope?) that scholars are more interested in conflict resolution today and that “engineering consent is in the past...in practice as well as theory”. Discourse, like symmetry, is seen as more ethical than persuasion, offering equal access to the debate, which links with Habermas’ (1989) ideas of dialogic communication and the public sphere evolved from discourse ethics. Burleson and Kline (1979, p. 423) summarised these principles as:

- participants must have an equal chance to initiate and maintain discourse;
- participants must have an equal chance to make challenges, explanations, or interpretations; and
- interaction among participants must be free of manipulations, domination, or control; and
- participants must be equal with respect to power.

The Fitzpatrick and Bronstein approach is more firmly rooted in the US First Amendment and jurisprudence, in other words closer to the model of the legal advocate. This suggests two problems: one is the cultural bias involved in creating a set of ethics located so firmly in one national legal system; the other is the absence of a (metaphorical) court room, a court appointed opponent, a silent forum where arguments may be stated and cross examined, let alone the presiding judge summing up for the jury.

Advocacy and ethics. Despite the limitations suggested in the last paragraph, advocacy ethics do recognise the need for constraints within the free market place and suggest that these should involve awareness of factors such as access, process, truth and disclosure (Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. 3). Other writers on ethics from the rhetorical perspective such as Pearson, Heath, Sullivan and Toth have examined the ethics of persuasion at depth. The following two proposals draw on this background to formulate a set of questions the advocate should ask themselves in order to ascertain the degree of ethics in their persuasive communication. Baker (1999) suggests that public relations practitioners tend to use one of five “justifications for persuasion”, as follows:

- (1) self interest (what’s in it for me?);
- (2) entitlement (if it’s legal, its ethical);
- (3) enlightened self-interest (ethical behaviour is good business sense);
- (4) social responsibility (personal practice has an impact on larger society); and
- (5) kingdom of ends (the highest standards should be provided for and expected from all) (my summary in italics).

This echoes Kohlberg’s (1981, 1984) typology of six stages of moral reasoning, from pre-conventional, self-centred responses, through conventional, work and profession-centred thinking, to post conventional, society-centred reasoning. It

should be noted that Martinson (1996) rejected the concept that enlightened self interest could be considered as an ethical position, and by inference the three levels below this.

Edgett (2002) proposes ten principles for ethical advocacy, some of which overlap with Baker and Martinson's (2002) five principles, which they call the TARES test, covering:

- (1) truthfulness;
- (2) authenticity;
- (3) respect;
- (4) equity; and
- (5) social responsibility.

This approach addresses the personality of the communicator and asks them to reflect on their own motives and behaviours. It also concentrates on the communication itself – whether the message is for health or arms promotion, the act of persuasion is seen as having at least the potential to be ethical – a refreshing change from some of the earlier approaches outlined above. There are still a number of problems: the issue of publics having equality of access to commercially sensitive information is not addressed; the inequalities of resources likewise. And as the propaganda model discussed below indicates, it is hard to insist that public relations practitioners even aspire to, let alone practice, such standards. Nevertheless, despite their failure to recognise power relationships in communication (L'Etang and Pieczka, 2006), as in society, there is considerable engagement with the ethics of persuasion here.

Relationship manager

Description of role. This model is based on relationship theory and centres on the role of public relations professionals in negotiating a complex set of relationships inside and outside client/employer organisations (Ledingham and Bruning, 2000). Relationship management draws on a variety of theoretical disciplines to identify the elements that make up a positive relationship, such as; control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship and communal relationship (Hon and Grunig, 1999). Unlike some of the organisation-centred perspective of systems theory approaches to public relations, it takes the standpoint of the publics (Leitch and Neislon, 2001). Jahoonzi (2006) suggests that this is partially due to cultural and technological shifts which have empowered publics and facilitated international dialogue and/or coalitions.

Relationship management and persuasion. “The relationship perspective has the potential to shift public relations practitioners away from using persuasive communication as a tool to manipulate public opinion towards building and maintaining mutually beneficial organisation-public relationships”, according to Jahoonzi (2006, p. 78). This implies that persuasion is inherently unethical and manipulative – a view that can be challenged (see below). Jahoonzi notes that the communication aspects of the relationship are so far underexplored and argues for a deeper understanding of transparency (a term also used by advocacy and rhetorical scholars). Ledingham and Bruning (2000) rarely refer to persuasion and, again use it as synonymous with manipulation.

Relationship management and ethics. The ethics of relationship management regarding persuasive communication and other communication seem underexplored, particularly in the lack of a developed theory of relationship dialogue. Jahoonzi (ibid) cites Kent and Taylor (2002, p. 22) as arguing that dialogue is “one of the most ethical forms of communication and...one of the central means of separating truth from falsehood”. Day *et al.* (2001) reiterate the importance of dialogic communication as the emerging theme in public relations theory for the twenty-first century, a view shared by Grunig (2001), suggesting a real convergence of values in this area over the past five or six years. It seems likely that relationship management will emerge as the dominant paradigm for public relations in the near future. However, as with all the approaches outlined above, it minimises the obstacles to relationship created by power imbalances. Many of the most important communication issues facing this century, from global warming to religious fundamentalism, raise questions concerning the relative power of those seeking to establish dialogue.

Propagandist

Description of role. While the previously covered models share an optimistic view of how public relations can or does contribute to democracy and what Seib and Fitzpatrick (1995) called “social harmony”, this view is not universal. The propaganda model developed by Herman and Chomsky (1988) and Chomsky (2002) suggests that “free” press can be manipulated to serve governmental and business interests above others by a variety of means, such as controlling access and by framing debates to reflect the views of the dominant forces in society rather than dissenting minorities. The role of public relations in shaping political, military and corporate communications, not just publicity, is seen as inherently propagandist and there is some analysis of the numbers of personnel employed by these organisations to promote their views. Traditionally scholars who study propaganda concentrate on its wartime application, including recent wars like the 2003 war in Iraq (Taylor, 2003). However critics increasingly argue not only that wartime propaganda techniques have been extended as responses first to the threat of communism and more recently as part of the “war on terror” (Chomsky, 2002) but that advertising and public relations are involved in economic propaganda (Taylor, 2003). They share the view of public relations as advocacy but only to malign effect.

Propaganda and persuasion. Like some of the other models outlined above, these critics (Stauber and Rampton, 2004, for example) assume persuasion is the same as propaganda and often fail to distinguish between types of communication. Health campaigns, for example, are rarely attacked – unless they turn out to be disguising a commercial interest. PR activity is seen as inherently corrupt and organisations such as the USA-based Centre for Media and Democracy (PRWatch.org, 2007), reveal how “public relations wizards concoct and spin the news, organize phoney ‘grassroots’ front groups, spy on citizens, and conspire with lobbyists and politicians to thwart democracy”, according to its website. Viewing this site, it is hard to insist that public relations never employs the techniques of propaganda identified by the Institute of Propaganda Analysis (Delwiche, 2002): Name-Calling, Glittering Generality, Transfer, Testimonial, Plain Folks, Card Stacking, and Band Wagon.

Propaganda and ethics. The critics cited here are not really interested in developing an ethical framework for public relations: they want to expose rather than reform.

However, one can reflect on their arguments as counterblasts to the high ethical standards exhorted above. It is hard to call for transparency when major public relations firms engage in front organisations, apparently without consequence. Finally the critics concentrate on the imbalances of power which excellent public relations seeks to avoid but which keeps cropping up in the real world. This at least would be welcomed by those who call for greater reflection by public relations scholars on the question of power, such as Holtzhausen (2000) and McKie (2001).

Key points

The following key points emerge from the examination of the four models and their approaches to persuasion and to ethics:

- Most theorists dislike persuasion, see it as inherently unethical and suggest how to avoid it.
- Persuasion itself is rarely explored in any depth, so that the complexities of persuading another person or group to any change in attitudes or behaviour are not considered.
- Persuasion is placed in opposition to negotiation and understandings of public interests, though persuasion scholars make it clear these are all aspects of the persuasive process.
- Ethics are often used to describe business decisions rather than communication acts.
- The groups who recognise the most persuasion have also evolved the most detailed ethical responses.
- Relationship management is emerging as the dominant view of public relations, by scholars at least, for the 21st century. All the approaches outlined above stress the value of dialogic communication.
- The literature of persuasive communication is rarely referenced in any of the above models
- The critics of public relations highlight real gaps in conceptualising its influence in society, particularly in regard to power relations.

Research possibilities

While L'Etang, Moloney and Weaver have proposed that public relations cannot be automatically distanced from propaganda or persuasion this is still a minority viewpoint. There remain serious problems to be investigated: for example, if the existing definitions do not offer guidance for discrimination, how can ethical public relations be more fully delineated? The existing approaches outlined above tend to produce a partial description of ethical communication because they omit persuasion from the lexicon of legitimate public relations.

There is scope for more research into legitimacy: is persuasion to be acceptable according to the ends (teleological ethics) or the means of communication (deontological)? Who is to determine the ethics – the sender or receiver? Is persuasion ethically acceptable if society deems it so – in which case who is deemed to represent “society” in such debates?

There is also a reservoir of interesting and potentially useful theories, concepts and models available from social and communicative psychology which could play a central part in creating a new approach to ethical persuasion. Three examples are suggested here, though of course there is a huge literature available for discussion. These are taken out of context and are not analysed in depth but offered as examples of the complexity and richness of persuasion studies which public relations has so far denied itself (see Figure 1).

I suggest that this somewhat neglected model is re-examined for its possible contribution to developing an ethical framework for persuasive communication. Although it is rarely referenced in public relations texts (except Fawkes, 2004), and produces few results in on-line searches (Google, Questia.com) this model by the German scholar Gerhard Maletzke has many elements to recommend it for use in the current discussion:

- it offers a 'map' of communication, showing all the players, including the media and all the possible connections between communicators (including but not depending on media channels);
- it emphasises the psychological characteristics of the participants;
- it shows the context for communication, including the culture of all participants; and
- it highlights the constraints – technical and social – affecting mass communication acts.

It also has limitations: it is based on mass communications and assumes an intervening media channel – though this can be substituted with face to face, one to one, one to many or many to one communication without damaging the flow. It has origins in left-right transmission models, but again because the political, legal, sociological and psychological contexts of organisational communications and publics are highlighted this need not mean that the bias is all in the sender.

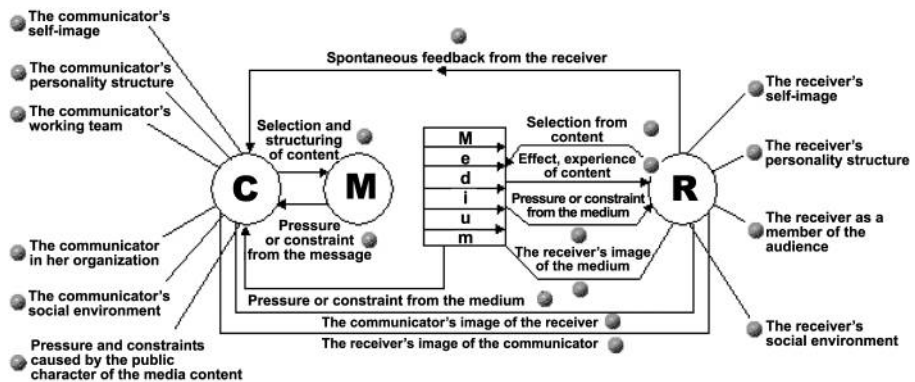


Figure 1.
The Maletzke (1963) model
of the psychology of
communication

Note: Taken from Mick Underwood's Communication, Culture and Media Studies web site,
<http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml>

In order to restore the role of power in persuasion, the power dynamics of every element needs to be highlighted, such as:

- Internal attitude of practitioner to power over media and over publics: is the PR person likely to influence the media content and behaviour or vice versa?
- Internal power relationships in the working context – both peers and hierarchies: how autonomous are the practitioners? How powerful is the communication department/agency in the corporate hierarchy?
- Issues of media power over sources and audiences: is the media channel shaping audience responses or seeking out public attitudes in advance? Is the journalist autonomous or subject to internal organisational pressures? What is their attitude to the source of the information? What is their attitude to readers and viewers?
- Receiver power dynamics – in relation to media and source organisation: is the target public an elite or general public? Are there grass roots campaigns which might influence media or source behaviour?

To be effective as tool for ethical persuasion, the ethical context would need to be added at each stage of the communication. This would include:

- Ethical values of the communicator: what are they, how are they constructed, what are the references? How far do they influence the practitioner's behaviour?
- Ethical culture in which they operate – formal and informal: how do colleagues demonstrate implicit ethical values, regardless of the explicit corporate values
- Professional codes and practices of public relations professionals and media of communication: what are they, how are they enforced, are they actually implemented or just for display?
- Ethical expectations and values of publics towards media channel and towards communication originator: what are the individual and social ethical values operating in the key publics? Are there internal divisions? What impact will these have on the communication behaviour of all the players covered by the model?

A revised model would look like Figure 2.

While this describes the relationships between different ethical viewpoints, it does not impose a single set of values and could be set to be relativist. However, I propose that this is primarily a diagnostic tool and that accurate assessment is a necessary precursor to a coherent ethical framework. If required, overarching value systems may be used for comparison after the map is created.

Using the model

I can see two potential uses and users of this revised model: analysts exploring the ethical dimensions of campaigns after the event; and practitioners using the model to identify potential conflicts between ethical viewpoints before conducting a particular communication campaign:

- (1) Academic or professional analysis of the roles and expectations of different players in a particular communication campaign. This might occur as part of a routine ethical audit or to understand more fully what has gone wrong where a

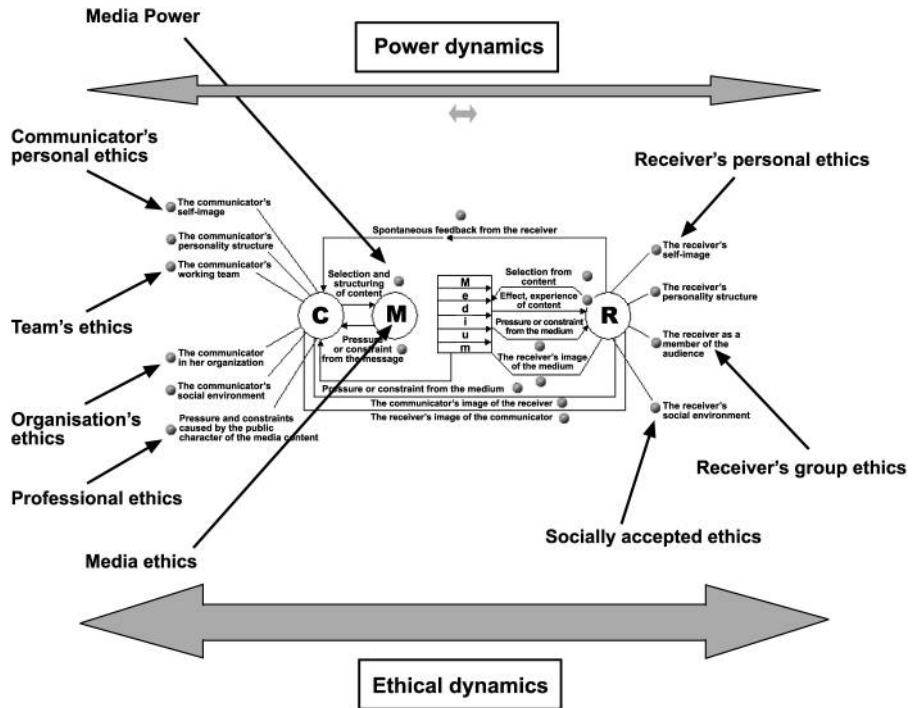


Figure 2.
Ethical dynamics of
communication

lapse of ethics is exposed. Through interviews, surveys, textual analysis or other tools the researcher might identify that there was an ethical problem in the communication team, in their understanding of media ethics, in the relationship between the media channel and its receivers or in prior evaluation by receivers of the communicator – media channel or originator – and their ethical stance. An example might be the recent lapses in ethical standards at the BBC, where in some cases the individual ethical responses of production team members were apparently out of sync with the corporate views on ethical responsibility. The model would then encourage closer analysis of the individual ethical standards of BBC employers – and their suppliers in independent production companies of course, as well as the “team ethos” which prevails and the clarity with which corporate standards are communicated to employees and outsourced programme makers. Do the team prioritise meeting deadlines or competitive pressures over ethical considerations? Were there just a few isolated individuals out of line or is there a more generalised contempt for the audience? Did power dynamics play a part, either on the studio floor, cutting room or in assessing the requirements of the audience? Perhaps there is an assumption that minor breaches of ethical standards will make no difference to them? Although the BBC example is itself a media channel it does illustrate how the elements of the model can work. It also highlights that there are different constraints on broadcasting from print media and that future analysis of such cases will have to presume that the receivers have lowered expectations of

ethical behaviour in broadcasting. All of these questions are of central relevance to public relations practitioners.

- (2) Practitioners can also use the model to identify ethical issues before launching a campaign. Before starting a campaign the professional communicator can assess the ethical dimensions involved – within him or herself, within the team, in connection to corporate ethics and values. They can reflect on the relevant media ethics involved in the communication channel and in particular, they can look at the ethical values residing in the relevant target population, individually and in peer groups. This might highlight disparities within the originating or receiving group or between these groups, such as a police campaign to stamp out racism would encounter. An individual practitioner might even use the model to have an internal conversation about their personal ethics in relation to those of colleagues and corporate aims. Again the power dimension reminds us that the options available to the practitioner may be constrained by their power in the organisation.

Limitations

While this model describes the relationships between different ethical viewpoints, it does not impose a single set of values and could be set to be relativist. However, I propose that this is primarily a diagnostic tool and that accurate assessment is a necessary precursor to a coherent ethical framework. If required, overarching value systems may be used for comparison after the map is created. In any event, this detailed analysis should reveal fault lines in the communication process which have been ignored for too long.

Conclusion

Because of the reluctance to engage with the subject of persuasion, let alone admit that public relations is sometimes synonymous with propaganda, the field has not evolved a workable set of ethics. The systems theorists' focus on excellence has failed to engage with the philosophical and ethical complexities of persuasion in every day practice. In the absence of discussion the spectre of persuasion has grown more malevolent and more powerful, so that it is often seen as synonymous with manipulation. The idea of negotiation as intrinsic to persuasion is absent from much of the discussion. Different models of public relations make conflicting or unjustified assumptions and claims about ethical responsibilities. Many of the existing ethical models state ideals which seem unlikely to be workable – a factor which may account for their regular marginalisation. This is not to institutionalise abusive or unethical behaviour. Quite the reverse: new ethical approaches can only be explored if persuasion is recognised as a central part of practice. The literature of persuasion should be reviewed for potential concepts and models that might help public relations evolve an ethical framework that incorporates reality rather than starts and ends with fantasy. The proposed model provides a diagnostic tool to facilitate such a discussion.

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