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January 2010

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Recommended Citation

Breit, R., Demetrious, K. (2010). Professionalization and public relations: an ethical mismatch. *Ethical space*, 7(4), 20-29.

Available at: http://ecommons.aku.edu/eastafrica_gsmc/7

Professionalisation and public relations: An ethical mismatch

This paper explores the ethical culture in which contemporary public relations practitioners' work and how it relates to the professionalisation of the domain. Focusing on the international umbrella public relations institution Global Alliance (GA) and other important industry bodies such as the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) and Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ), we study how the 'work' of a public relations practitioner is described, and as a corollary, what professional and ethical standards are promoted. Our analysis draws on theories of professions (Abbott 1988; Anderson and Schudson 2009; Volti 2008) and narrative (Surma 2004, Herman 2009), and argues that key elements of professionalisation in public relations contribute to a normative culture which is potentially at odds with notions of ethical communication. We suggest public relations needs to engage more rigorously with professional values to develop, effectively, ethical practice and be normatively aligned with other professions.

Key words: professionalism, public relations, Global Alliance, ethical communication

Introduction

This paper calls for a broader analysis of public relations ethics that takes account of how important industry bodies use 'ethics' as a tool to claim professional legitimacy. We draw on the theories relating to professions and narrative to help explain how an occupational group claims power, authority and professional status but more importantly analyse how this might shape ethical culture. Our approach is informed by studies into the sociology of professions (see

Abbott 1988), which see professionalism linked to work, and studies into the organisational traits of professional bodies (see Volti 2008).

In its simplest terms, a profession is an occupation that has assumed a dominant position in the division of labour, so that it gains control over the determination and substance of its own work (Friedman 1970). Professionalisation, therefore, is a process involving cooperation around work tasks (human problems that require a solution); unique knowledge and expertise; as well as a set of rules, conventions and structures designed to preserve and enhance professional control (normative context). Our study investigates these processes through a review of online narratives about ethics and public relations work sourced from peak professional bodies.

We draw on the idea of narrative or 'telling a story' to audiences as 'a basic human strategy for coming to terms with time, process and change' that in turn develops order, coherence and identity (Herman op cit: 2). While storytelling is most obviously associated with genres of fiction it can take a number of forms. It is possible 'to construct a narrative about the development of science, to tell a story about who made what discoveries and under what circumstance, it is possible to use the tools of science – definition, analysis, classification, comparison, etc. – to work toward a principled account of what makes a text, discourse, film or other artefact a narrative' (ibid).

Indeed Surma (2004) applies narrative theory to analyse social responsibility reports, arguing more broadly that written public relations texts (including online) routinely use narrative to position the reader to accept coherences in relation to their ethical responsibilities and moral identity. This idea of public relations texts as a distinctive narrative form is strengthened by Herman's theory (op cit: 29-30) that 'description' is an indirect, low-level, rhetorical mode of dramatisation.

We deploy this technique to investigate the professional narratives around public relations work and ethics using a case study. Our case involves an analysis of the websites of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) and the international umbrella body Global Alliance (GA). GA has mapped the core competencies of public relations, resulting in a 'Global Protocol on Ethics in Public Relations' and has moved to standardise accreditation

credentials. The 'narratives' around GA, therefore, provide essential insights into the type of work being performed and promoted within public relations; the type of expertise and knowledge being valued; and the rules used to promote ethical culture.

Public relations, history and the 'struggle' for professionalism

Difficulties in scoping public relations' professional project emerge on a number of levels including defining its unique knowledge and expertise; what it does for the domain and how it relates more broadly to modern society (Guth and Marsh 2006: 6; Tench and Yeomans 2009: 58).

For influential US public relations theorists' Grunig and Hunt (1984:3), public relations formed as an ethical, socially-responsible and scientifically grounded profession in 1922 when Bernays described the 'new profession of the public relations counsel'. This distinguished it from the journalistically-oriented occupation of press publicity. Similarly, for Edwards (in Tench and Yeomans 2009: 8-9) the development of a distinctive knowledge base in public relations occurred around 1920, when psychological techniques borrowed from social science were developed to persuade target publics.

Grunig and Hunt (op cit: 3) argue that another breakthrough came in the late 1940s, when a scholarly book *Public relations and American democracy* by J.A.R. Pimlott bolstered public relations' professional status by arguing its practices articulated into the maintenance of democratic process. Hence for later theorists, such as Fraser P. Seitel (1995: xvii), there is no question surrounding public relations' professional legitimacy: It 'is among the most *dynamic* professions in society' (ibid: 2). On the other hand, L'Etang (2008: 41) sees public relations as an 'occupation' because it 'is not controlled' by qualification or membership to a professional body.

Theoretical framework

Some of the confusion around the professional status in public relations can be clarified by Emile Durkheim's writings (1957), which linked professionalism with common attitudes towards ethics, public relevance and accountability. Durkheim (ibid: 9) pointed out that trade and industry had no central body to ensure traditions were kept and common practices observed. Rather, he viewed business as a shadowy, vague sort of community that by its very nature was pitted against each other and as such there were only feeble ethical gestures 'for

the special occasion for which they were convened'.

Centrally Durkheim's writings shed light on a problem in the professionalisation of public relations. As an instrument of trade and industry, it seems to have developed a weak ethical culture where high standards are espoused but few breaches are brought to light and sanctions for wrong-doing are rare, with only a few complaints being dealt with each year (see GA 2002).

The discussion so far suggests *all* professions need a set of 'collective intentions' and 'coherent and consistent attempts to translate scarce resources – special knowledge and skill – into economic *and* social rewards' (see Larson 1977: xiii; Schudson and Anderson 2009: 90). These common understandings are expressed through work which allows a profession to attain market power. In turn, market power is enhanced through the development and reproduction of specialist knowledge, which has led to professions developing a capacity to produce their own producers through training and education. Market power is also enhanced through state sanction for an occupational group's monopoly. This relationship, however, presupposes some benefit to the broader community. Finally, professional projects usually impose mechanisms for ratifying this monopoly through licensing or some other bars to professional entry (Larson op cit: 15; Schudson and Anderson op cit: 95). Thus to claim professional status an occupation requires:

- a discrete body of knowledge and expert skills (a knowledge monopoly);
- ongoing education;
- a relationship with the state that presupposes some common good beyond profits;
- some professional structures designed to reinforce or maintain this monopoly such as self-governing bodies; and,
- a set of rules and/or conventions.

A number of studies have used these characteristics to map professionalism. Schudson and Anderson (ibid: 89) describe this as the 'trait approach' whereby a profession is treated as a model of occupational autonomy and self-regulation. Volti (op cit) adapts this approach, setting out six criteria which 'reflect general agreement on the key features of a profession'. These criteria are:

1. professional practice is based on '*specialised knowledge*' (ibid: 98);

2. professional knowledge that 'takes time, effort, and formal instruction' and whereby claims to expertise are formalised through an institution such as a university (ibid);
3. professional work has value to society as a whole and to the individual who makes use of professional services (ibid: 99);
4. distinctive roles and specialised skills of professionals confer power (ibid);
5. ethical standards of professionals apply to interactions with other members of the profession (ibid);
6. professions have a high degree of autonomy and self-governance (Volti op cit: 99).

We will return to Volti's approach later to interrogate whether the public relations professions in Australia and New Zealand reveal these traits. But deploying a 'trait' approach to audit professional culture only tells us what a profession 'pretends to be' – not what it is. Understanding of what a profession is only arises on examination of what professions *do* to negotiate and maintain their position (see Larson 1977: xii). Here the question of legitimacy becomes crucial because claims to professional knowledge and expertise are dependent on legitimacy (see Svensson 2006). Legitimacy relates to how a profession stakes its claim over stakeholders, i.e., 'the rulers are given the power to rule by the ruled' (ibid: 580). Increasingly professional legitimacy has been linked to issues of trust within occupations and confidence in their corresponding social institutions (ibid: 580, 581). Ethics and power therefore play an important part in professions staking authority over work tasks and developing expertise.

Legitimacy, therefore, must be earned internally (within the professional group) and externally with clients, competing professions and the general public. Here public relations have relied heavily on voluntary professional organisations such as the PRIA, the PRINZ, and more recently the GA to define and legitimise their claim to professionalism. Therefore, the starting point of our study is an examination of the social institutions designed to engender trust and confidence in public relations and then how they describe the work of public relations.

This enables identification of possible disconnections between 'what public relations does' and 'what it claims to do' and the rules put in place to promote professional ethics. The focus of study, therefore, moves away from a strict analysis of the social structures and professional traits of public relations, to look

at ways in which professions claim and maintain authority through online narratives. Part of its bid for legitimacy relates to setting professional boundaries – explaining what 'work' the profession does and does not undertake. At this juncture, internal and external struggles within the profession and between competing professions are important. Thus when looking at how the professional bodies describe their work, we look at what they claim to be and how they distinguish themselves from other professions, such as journalism and business.

This approach takes account of the views of sociologist Andrew Abbott (1988) who sees the starting point for any inquiry into professions to be the work carried out, rather than the occupational group and the structural markers of professionalism (see Schudson and Anderson 2009: 95):

According to Abbott (op cit), a profession is defined through the way in which the day-to-day activities of a professional group reveal links to professional knowledge, i.e., the unique way in which problems and tasks are defined; how these problems and tasks are defended from interlopers; and how the profession seizes new problems. A comparative analysis of the self-descriptive narratives of public relations will help reveal *some* of the inherent tensions emerging from public relations' claim to a discrete professional jurisdiction.

The professional project of public relations industry in Australia and New Zealand

To do this, we undertake a case study of the peak public relations' bodies in Australia and New Zealand, which play a central role in self-regulating the profession. Our analysis starts with an examination of the organisations' websites and how they explain:

1. public relations work;
2. public relations 'knowledge'.
3. rules and core ethical values.

Both the PRIA and PRINZ claim public relations is central to effective communication. But their narratives about its work, knowledge and values differ greatly: the PRINZ uses research into the core skills and competencies to explain what public relations is; whereas PRIA opts to define and explain what it is not.

PRINZ is a non-profit, incorporated society 'created to promote public relations and communication management in New Zealand,

and serve the best interests of the people who practise it' (PRINZ 2009). It has four key aims of providing:

1. wider recognition of the role of public relations in management;
2. higher standards of professionalism;
3. better qualifications for PR practitioners;
4. an effective forum in which members can share common interests and experience.

In line with aim (1) above, PRINZ's 2008 annual report (2008: 1) describes public relations as 'managing the communication process and managing relationships;' broadening public relations expertise beyond media relations and journalism. It aligns PR work with management indicating that 'public relations' draws from a broader knowledge base than just media relations. However, the PRINZ's 2008 Trends Survey indicates the main areas of work in which public relations practitioners are involved are media relations (65 per cent); corporate communications (64 per cent) and publicity (55 per cent). Public relations practitioners reported less involvement in reputation management (59 per cent) and community relations (41 per cent).

Drawing on narrative theory (Surma 2004, Herman 2009), these data suggest PRINZ is constructing a story about public relations to reposition its professional boundaries away from journalism and communication and closer to management. This focal shift provides a sound rationale for the profession's client orientation justifying an interpretation of 'public good' as enhancing client profitability and market share.

However, the shift towards management is not revealed in the approach to PR education in New Zealand. Educators rate writing skills (76 per cent), ethics (75 per cent), media relations (74 per cent), and research (70 per cent) as the most important aspects of public education. Practitioners are being educated for communication rather than management. With the exception of ethics, these aspects of public relations are highly practical. Employers agree that public relations education should have a strong practical focus (whereas educators believed education should promote an ability to think critically about public relations).

The PRINZ website emphasises the importance of qualifications and its 2008 annual report directly links members' improved qualifications to improved *status* for the industry. While professing higher professional standards, the Industry Trends study (2008) also suggests the

type of knowledge sought is practical, focusing on skills rather than broader contextual knowledge communication processes and methods or critical understandings that will challenge current paradigms. This study indicates that public relations knowledge is strongly linked to action and experience and is little more than mobilising (communication) skills to particular (communication) problems. Therefore, the work being carried out (and for which public relations practitioners are being trained) does not align with the management narrative. Rather, problems arise with the client oriented interpretation of 'public good' that have implications for professional ethics.

PRINZ see ethics as crucial to professional public relations. To achieve this goal, it provides a code of ethics and a 'complaints and ethics management service'. The code is a set of core values and the principles and standards to guide professional conduct, such as advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty and fairness. Its core principles relate to advocacy and honesty; balancing openness and privacy; disclosing conflicts of interest; encouraging compliance with the law and promoting professionalism.

The PRINZ's recommitment to professional ethics is highlighted by a 2006 survey, which revealed '96 percent of practitioners *want* to be regarded as professionals – *professions always have a code of ethics*' (PRINZ 2006, emphasis by author). Ease, efficiency, transparency and its capacity to promote trust are cited as reasons for enacting a code of ethics. The 2008 Trends Survey suggests that most practitioners (65 per cent) felt that the PRINZ code of ethics was relevant to their work but only 6 per cent indicated it was visibly on display in their workplace. Just 5 per cent indicated they had consulted the code for guidance. This suggests the code is important in promoting professional legitimacy but has limited practical relevance in the way public relations professionals go about their work. Instead of helping practitioners to understand the ethical object over which public relations practitioners are struggling (internally and externally), the PRINZ narrative tends to reinforce professional legitimacy.

PRIA invokes different narrative techniques to engender trust and confidence. These techniques tend to define the field of practice and thereby identify a community of users. They argue, public relations practitioners should 'fully understand the communication process'

and ensure 'communication is *clear, honest and unambiguous*' and 'easily understood by the respective target audiences'.

Like PRINZ, the PRIA stresses the management role of public relations. Moreover, the organisation is at pains to distinguish between public relations and 'spin', acknowledging 'critics of the public relations industry often refer to Public Relations practitioners as "Spin Doctors" – a pejorative term that implies a twisting of the facts to suit an organisation or individual and, somehow, bamboozle the audience'. PRIA is aligning its work more closely with communication. It points out what PR is not, thereby deflecting potential criticisms about the legitimacy of public relations as a form of communication. It does not distinguish itself from journalism, but some practitioners see journalism as a 'tool' of public relations (see Breit 2007: 6).

However, one common theme emerging in the descriptive narratives of both PRIA and PRINZ is ethics. Both organisations stress the importance of ethics to their professional project. The PRIA claims 'all members are required to make a personal, written commitment to a stringent Code of Ethics, governed by a senior group of practitioners known as the College of Fellows. Consultancy members are also governed by the Code of Ethics'. Their duties are to be:

- fair and accurate;
- act professionally including being loyal, complying with professional rules and improving professional knowledge;
- be law abiding;
- avoid conflicts of interest.

We now return to Volti's framework for a deeper interrogation of public relations' professional culture and its capacity to promote ethical communication.

Money can't buy you love – professionalism, ethics and public relations

Specialised knowledge or discrete expertise is essential in developing professionalism (Volti op cit; Abbott op cit). As the PRIA website acknowledges however, public relations knowledge is very general:

While the term seems rather simple, the craft of public relations has evolved to cover a myriad of tasks on behalf of governments, enterprises and individuals (PRIA/about us, 31 July 2009).

The PRIA adopts an interesting narrative strategy (described below) to restate its claim to a discrete body of knowledge. This testimonial, relating to a Return on Investment seminar by Mark Weiner, suggests the PRIA is seeking to prove to aspiring practitioners the value of public relations and its claim to a knowledge base. It states:

If you can't prove the value of PR and start contributing to organisational goals from a position of knowledge after participating in Mark's workshop, you couldn't have been paying attention (PRIA/events 31 July 2009).

This preemptive reproach to the reader suggests an internal struggle within structural and social relations of the profession.

In addition to being general; public relation's knowledge is 'thin' or experiential. Therefore it is difficult to corral, confirming observations that public relation's specialised knowledge is 'practical, experiential and dynamic' (Pieczka 2002: 322). This thin claim to expertise leaves the profession vulnerable to other professional groups such as 'lawyers, marketers, and general managers of every type, all eager to gain the management access and persuasive clout of the public relations professional' (Seitel op cit: 3).

Added to this, part of a public relations professional's expertise involves interacting with journalism, advertising, management and its client organisations and their discrete ethical problems and challenges. Therefore, expertise in public relations involves being able to diagnose ethical risks associated with related professions. However, this aspect is not acknowledged in the professional codes of ethics. The narratives around ethics (for PRIA and PRINZ) all focus on internal (professional) conflicts. They do little to assist professionals who might encounter broader ethical conflicts between different professions. These deficiencies and absences could (but rarely are) addressed in university education.

Volti argues (op cit: 98) 'a university-based training program that prepares individuals to be competent practitioners' is essential for any profession. However, we have noted the large gap in priorities between academics and employers identified by the PRINZ Trends Study. Where PR skills are treated as 'knowledge' in university programmes, public relations professional legitimacy is enhanced (internally and externally). Durkheim (1957) makes it clear that a competent practitioner is one who under-

stands his/her professional role in relation to other parts of society – not just other groups, but politically and socially. Therefore to enable universities to develop and embed within the curriculum understandings of public relations activity and its social relations, industry must keep a respectful distance. In Australia and New Zealand however, the relationship between PR industry bodies and academia is active and influential, especially in areas such as curriculum development and scholarships.

Obviously, the public relations industry recognises the importance of university education in maintaining professionalism, and yet the website narratives do little to differentiate 'knowledge' from 'training'. This distinction is made difficult by the fact that public relations' knowledge derives from experience and action. Notwithstanding this, the influence of major professional bodies on public relations education reflects what these organisations *think* works in the field rather than being based on studies that map the type of public relations work being undertaken. The practical effect of industry involvement in shaping university programmes is production of graduates who are normatively aligned with the public relations industry bodies.

'Ethics' therefore is an important area where universities can enhance professional knowledge, especially by expanding public relations curricula to look at the broader ethical considerations associated with its practices and the effect of the 'professional projects' on the moral space in which work is carried out (see Silverstone 2007).

The bifurcation of public relations' disciplinary heritage – communication (media studies) and management – also makes the profession vulnerable to external criticism because these academic traditions deploy different theoretical and methodological approaches. The resulting research tends to discount public relations' value to the broader community, highlighting its over-dependence and close relationship with clients. Abbott (op cit: 126) describes this condition as being professionally 'dirty' because professional knowledge is compromised by client demands.

This point resonates with Volti's third criterion, which requires the professionals' work to be of great social value (Volti op cit: 99). Communicating in ethical, effective and honest ways is of great value to both society and the individual practitioner – but the converse is also

true. Dishonest, ineffective and unethical communication is dangerous (Habermas 1995) and hence a major impediment to public relations' professional prospects.

As a narrative the PRINZ code of ethics emphasises the social orientation of public relations. By centrally locating human rights and public good in the code of ethics, New Zealand is going some way to expanding the professional project beyond its internal legitimacy. It is looking at how to engender and maintain trust with clients and the broader community. However, the success of the PRINZ approach is dependent on this organisation taking account of the external challenges to public relations professional authority. We have already acknowledged PRINZ's attempts to re-position PR's professional boundaries away from its struggle with journalism to its more comfortable coexistence with management. This has implications for the interpretation of the code of ethics, where the efficacy of the relationship to management displaces concerns about communication ethics. This approach allows public relations to remain somewhat invisible in debates surrounding communication/media ethics. Nor does it promote responsible PR unless the clients and hosting organisations also support ethical practices.

Volti's fourth criterion discusses that the professional responsibilities come with power (op cit: 99) and as a corollary, there must be 'elevated ethical standards of (the) profession (that are) embodied in a code of ethics' (ibid).

Thus we argue a broader communicative and cultural approach is needed to promote ethical public relations. Indeed, this would help deal with the ethical complexities when PR keeps 'corporations and their practices out of the public eye – while simultaneously keeping the focus of economic responsibility on government' (Davis 2006: 41).

This approach could also help to highlight ethical problems where PR silences and negates its critics. For example, this PRIA promotion (below) promotes Denise Deegan's book which derides activists as a public menace:

Activists can do untold damage to organizations – to its reputation, sales, profits, share price, employee satisfaction and more. So how should organizations deal with activists and pressure groups? Should they make efforts to take on board their criticism or take defensive action? (PRIA 2009).

Given the client/professional orientation of the PRIA code of ethics, these statements can intersect with other professional narratives (such as those expressed in the code of practice and the descriptions about PR work). These combined narratives foster an ethical culture with a strong internal orientation of distrust and devaluation of activists and civil society. This in turn can shape professional action (Silverstone 2007), which is seen as one of the key modifiers of professional knowledge and expertise (see Pieczka op cit). Thus we argue that statements such as these can be understood, not only in relation to its power and its willingness to adopt adversarial positioning to protect the interests of big business and government, but also as an attempt to fend off incursions into the professional knowledge base itself. However, according to Kozloff (1994: 73) another hallmark of narratives are predictability and patterns especially around the creation of personae of which 'hero' and 'villain' are key elements evident in this PRIA promotion. Seemingly the inclusion of works like Deegan forms a strategy whereby the work of activists is discredited and the work of public relations claims greater legitimacy (internally and externally) as a narrative.

We argue that public relations' claims to elevated ethical standards are considerably weakened by examples such as this and there is a need to reconsider its approach to professional ethics. Indeed, in 2001 the PRINZ appointed Hugh Rennie QC (2001: 20) to investigate allegations of breaches of professional ethics by two senior public relations consultants. His final report to the National Executive found that public relations could be characterised as advocacy that 'is more akin to the role of a lawyer (advising and then advocating as instructed) than the role of a communicator or journalist'. He recommended that limitations must be set. Here Rennie has looked to the 'work' to identify ethical practice and observed a disconnection between what the profession perceives as ethical and what is ethical. Therefore, we argue ethical codes need to be more strongly linked to the type of work that is being done.

The fifth criterion is that 'the ethical standards of professions also apply to interaction with other members of the profession' (Volli op cit: 99). According to the PRIA website, ethical public relations is concerned primarily with professional conduct and an individual practitioner's relationship with the profession itself; his/her clients and the PRIA. This, combined with the use of industry experts to oversee professional ethics, suggests

PRIA's approach comfortably meets this criterion. However, the relationship of practitioners with the public forms a relatively minor part of the 15-point code.

By contrast the PRINZ code appears to emphasise a practitioner's relationship with the public, making honest, transparent and accurate communication one of the core objects of ethical public relations. However, a closer study of the documents suggests the structural conditions in which these codes are enforced give the public very little power. Public relations employers and clients exercise the greatest power within the system of public relations self-regulation because they have:

- resources to directly control the actions of others through individual contracts with stakeholders;
- extensive institutional power through a commitment to representing and promoting the industry;
- employers and clients ostensibly control the labour market;
- extensive power to shape popular and industry discourse on what constitutes responsible public relations; particularly in moving its orientation from the communication outcome to the process (relationship management).

Volli's final criterion (op cit: 99) is that 'professionals are distinguished from other occupational groups by their ability to function with a high degree of autonomy and self-governance'. It is clear from the discussions outlined so far that both PRINZ and the PRIA, particularly, exist to serve the interests of practitioners and the public relations industry itself. PRINZ (Annual Report 2008: 1) sees its main goals as 'promoting excellence in public relations and communications work; advocating for practitioners; providing ongoing training and support for practitioners and providing a complaints and ethics management service for *business and organisations* using practitioner services'. Thus, the organisation acknowledges a weak nexus between public relations and the public, seeing its primary ethical responsibilities and accountabilities to business and organisations. In discussing how this criterion applies to public relations, it is absent on the peak industry websites that are so notable. There is no nuanced discussion of ethics and no discussion of breaches on either site.

In summary, an analysis of professional characteristics or traits from public relations' peak

industry bodies has shown the domain is powerful but does not have the elevated ethical standards that Volti (op cit) and Durkheim (op cit) argued were an important corollary for this privilege. Furthermore it has shown that there are ongoing internal and external struggles around its claim to 'specialist knowledge' but ultimately as an industry it is less interested in knowledge *per se* and more interested in using universities to develop training.

This fact highlights the need to look beyond the profession for ethical guidance. An overly internally-focused approach to ethics that targets relationships between practitioners and clients can contribute to and compound an ethically thin culture. There is recognition of this but rather than address the problem directly by adopting a more expansive approach to ethics, public relations seeks to re-position its professional boundaries through Global Alliance in order to substantiate and legitimise its claim to professionalism. This further internalises its ethical culture.

More importantly, it seems an ethical culture is developing within the public relations profession that is not linked strongly to the type of work that is being carried out. Rather it is closely linked to the rhetorical. Therefore the next section analyses the website of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management to investigate what professional and ethical standards are promoted in international public relations.

Global Alliance – public relations and professionalism

Global Alliance (GA) can be viewed as part of a professional project using narrative techniques to extend the jurisdiction of individual professional associations such as PRINZ and PRIA.

The website carefully frames GA's formation as a decisive and a proactive response to a range of pressures in the area that 'require global forums for discussing and adopting common positions' for the common good. These statements give the impression that 'PR' is a universal concept rather than a social construction invested with ideology and serving the interests of a particular group, specific to the conditions of modernity. This narrative also underpins early bourgeois humanist tradition which permeated trade and industry in early modernity (Habermas 1995: 9). Humanism is also apparent in 'mission' and 'vision' statements – both of which are included in the front matter of this website, although this is not uncommon

in contemporary organisations' self-descriptive material. This ideological orientation is evident in the first statement in 'Background' in its biblical references that imply a sudden manifestation or epiphany when GA was created as an object 'in a moment by a group of leaders from professional associations'. The 'story' reveals that at its core GA remains paradigmatically rooted to its earlier antecedents therefore reflects a typical relationship between society and public relations; one characterised by an inward, self-protective culture of distrust.

Another feature of 'Background' statement is its intent to create a dichotomy between legitimate and illegitimate public relations practitioners: 'Many non-professionals say they are in PR but their actions are damaging our reputation as a profession. We need to show our professionalism by means of Global Standards enacted by national associations' (GA/History, 28 July 2009). The significant aspect of this descriptive material is the intense desire of GA to 'show professionalism' in the area. The problems that beset public relations in its struggle to maintain professional status are not new.

Therefore, we argue, that GA is more accurately described as another attempt to develop credibility through dramatisation of rhetoric. This is a well established approach in public relations and one reason why Surma (2004: 9) argues that its texts are dismissed as 'spin'.

In a culture that demands that organisations present texts demonstrating their accountability and responsible and ethical practice, it can be conceded that organisations are easily tempted, even encouraged, to treat the narrative-making process as a marketing exercise, and to produce self-descriptive, self-supporting documents, whose priority or focus becomes to bolster promotional initiatives.

In embracing this focused agenda to develop professional credibility, GA must and does specifically address the issue of ethics. While there were no direct references to ethics in the 'Background' section, several other parts of the site do explore this. In addressing ethics as a key weakness in its professional credentials, GA can be seen as more scholarly and convincing than previous attempts to professionalise public relations. For example, it includes fictional case studies of ethical dilemmas which provide clear advice in relation to decision

making and action and in particular a 'Summary of the Enforcement of National Codes of Ethics/Conduct'.

Nevertheless, a closer inspection shows that much of the information is dated (produced in 2003) and soft on detail. For example, reporting on the enforcement of ethics it cites that the PRIA received an 'average of about three or four complaints a year involving allegations of improper treatment of employees, unfair practice in relation to other members and conduct likely to bring the profession and PRIA into disrepute'. PRINZ reported that it 'received one complaint in the last three years which, as a result of litigation, cost the PRINZ in excess of \$40,000' (see GA, Annexure C bolded in original). However, no explanation was given as to why the '44 Full Members, 10 Associate Members (including International Associations, Regional Confederations and Specialty Associations) and 12 Partner Associations (including three collaborator associations and nine contact associations, GA/Community, 28 July 2009) did not supply information.

Despite appearances of a more rigorous internal discussion of ethics on the GA website, a deeper exploration of ethics was not evident. Much of the information was descriptive and rhetorical rather than analytical. However apart from the Declaration of Principles – which emphasise broad social responsibilities in professional conduct and the reportage on enforcement – there was little substantive about this section. Rather, an over use of charts and tables in this section served as a metaphorical exchange creating the appearance of systemising knowledge in a coherent and structured way that in turn implied a legal compliance and greater attention to ethics.

The discussion so far has shown that GA, like PRIA and PRINZ, is focused largely on the occupational group and narrative relating to what the profession pretends to be rather than the work that is carried out. The PRINZ Trends Surveys map the work undertaken by public relations professionals. However, its narrative about work outlined on the PRINZ website does not directly correlate to the survey findings. This suggests the creation of GA is principally intended to bolster the stability, authority and legitimacy of public relations by creating the appearance of extended and porous professional boundaries beyond business, while simultaneously reinforcing its authority internally within one organisation. Use of communitarian references such as 'common', 'community' and

even 'landscapes' also help promote legitimacy. This can be viewed as the professional strategy that Abbott (1988) identified 'to manipulate their systems of knowledge in such a way that they can appropriate various problems falling under their jurisdiction'. For Global Alliance, the central project is the appearance of professionalism – and the crucial element that sets them apart from previous attempts at professionalisation is the hybridisation of the discourse within narratives in line with communitarian doctrines and the perceived need for greater attention to ethics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis indicates that public relations still has a number of impediments to attaining the professional status it seeks. Weaknesses within its professional culture emerge on three levels:

- the *work* being performed, which fails to address human problems that resonate with the broader community;
- the thin nature of professional *knowledge and expertise* being promoted;
- the *rules* put in place to promote ethical culture are weak.

Enforcement of ethics and a genuine engagement with critical values through a rigorous scholarly investigation into the area is a clear path to salvage professional status. In relation to this we argue that GA is part of a professional project that is an end in itself. In Foucauldian terms (1972) this is once again the authority being mapped and bounded within one discourse. Public relations is often criticised for its unethical practices, but the domain itself has largely been unquestioned within business and activist groups. According to Foucault, what we think and do has a normative relationship with society, which sets explanation, threshold and a designation of value. Therefore we argue that public relations must be considered in relation to other phenomena of the day, and in respect to ethics, it is wanting.

Our study suggests there is a disconnection between the ethical culture and work of public relations and that there is awareness of the need to address this within the occupation. Additional studies are needed to identify how to better align public relations work, knowledge and professional rules. Professional reform is needed; however, it needs to be based on evidence not rhetoric. In this universities play an important role. First in terms of the research that is undertaken around public rela-

tions. Greater attention should be paid to the alignment between what public relations practitioners do and the rules and cultures in place to guide them. Second, they play an important role in expanding professional knowledge in the area of ethics. Ethics education and training should go beyond practitioner-led perspectives that are overly focused on the internal structures and rules of the voluntary professional bodies. Our study suggests a broader, socially, culturally and inter-professionally oriented approach is needed.

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