

Should A Public Relations Code of Ethics Be Enforced?

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ABSTRACT. Whether or not a public relations code of ethics should be enforced, among others, has become one of the most widely controversial topics, especially after the Hill and Knowlton case in 1992. I take the position that ethical codes should be enforced and address this issue from eight aspects: (a) Is a code of ethics an absolute prerequisite of professionalism? (b) Should problems of rhetoric *per se* in a code of ethics become a rationale against code enforcement? (c) Is a code of ethics of any significance? (d) Is the ethical code enforceable, (e) Would the licensure system interfere with the freedom of expression of the practitioners? (f) Do PR practitioners choose to be ethical (if they do) because they have to be or because they want to be? (g) Would the public interest be virtually assured as a result of a public relations? and (h) Can education in ethics overcome the ethical problems in public relations?

KEY WORDS: code enforcement, code of ethics, freedom of expression, professionalism, public relations, public interest

J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) defined public relations as “the management of communication between an organization and its publics” (p. 6). Adopting a resource-dependence perspective, J. Grunig (1992) held that public relations practitioners play the central role of organizational boundary-spanner and perform duties of strategic management. The goal of public relations, thus, not only includes the dissemination of information, but also involves facilitating mutual understanding and resolving conflicts between an organization and its publics.

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As public relations increasingly crosses national boundaries and enters the international arena, there is no question but that ethical issues in professional practice are among the most challenging dilemmas confronting people today. A study indicated that 26 percent of businesswomen and businessmen face ethical dilemmas at work daily, 31 percent face ethical dilemmas at work weekly, and another 29 percent face ethical dilemmas at work monthly (David et al., 1990). In the field of public relations, the enforcement of ethical codes, among others, has become one of the most widely controversial topics, especially after the Hill and Knowlton case in 1992.

Susan Trento, the author of the biography of legendary public relations kingpin Bob Gray, maintained that the troubles surrounding Hill and Knowlton have tarnished the reputation of the entire public relations industry. She held that public relations practitioners often violate The Public Relations Society of America’s (PRSA’s) code of ethics because they “have little fear of punishment from the industry’s largest membership group” (*O’Dwyer’s PR Services Report*, 1992, p. 7). In other words, the fact that ethical code has not been enforced to control the behaviors of public relations practitioners might be the central problem.

Jim Little, serving his fourth term as chairman of PRSA’s Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS), however, indicated there are “limiting factors” that restrict BEPS’s action in the ethics area (*O’Dwyer’s PR Services Report*, 1992, p. 8). Little pointed out that the fact that not everybody belongs to the Society is the most obvious drawback to ethical code enforcement. Moreover, the fact that the PRSA’s membership is composed of individuals rather than organiza-



tions or companies further restrains the association from enforcing reprimand actions. "We can't deal with entities, censuring General Motors, *per se*," Little (p. 8) said. Similarly, Hutt maintained that violating the codes is not a "career threatening thing," inasmuch as the PRSA is a voluntary organization, and public relations members do not need a license to practice their vocation (*O' Dwyer's PR Services Report*, 1992, p. 9).

Little's and Hutt's statements raise an important issue of enforcement of an ethical code. Should the code of ethics be enforced?

This paper will address the issue of code enforcement from eight aspects: (a) Is a code of ethics an absolute prerequisite of professionalism? (b) Should problems of rhetoric *per se* in a code of ethics become a rationale against code enforcement? (c) Is a code of ethics of any significance? (d) Is the ethical code enforceable, (e) Would the licensure system interfere with the freedom of expression of the practitioners? (f) Do public relations practitioners choose to be ethical (if they do) because they have to be or because they want to be? (g) Would the public interest be virtually assured as a result of a public relations? and (h) Can education in ethics overcome the ethical problems in public relations?

I take the position that ethical codes should be enforced. My basic argument is that public relations has not yet become a mature profession, and it should "take the orderly, established steps to become an acknowledged profession" (Wylie, 1994, p. 3). I also suggest that enforcement of ethical codes should be an essential step toward achieving professionalism.

Objection 1: A code of ethics is not an absolute prerequisite of professionalism

Critics (Carr-Saunders and Wilson, 1933) challenged whether or not a code of ethics is an absolute prerequisite of professionalism. Wilson (1993) maintained that code enforcement is not a prerequisite of professionalism. He cited the other writers' opinions to support his argument. For example, he referred to the early works of Carr-Saunders and Wilson (1933) and Flexner (1915), indicating that these authors even did not

include ethical codes in their discussions on professionalism. In light of this argument, a code of ethics does not seem to be a valid indicator of professionalism.

In short, the critics suggested that if ethical codes are not critical for public relations to achieve the status of professionalism, the value of ethical codes would be questioned, not to mention the issue of code enforcement.

Reply 1

Public relations has not yet become a recognized, mature profession. How to advance the status of the public relations has been one of the topics that all public relations scholars and practitioners are most concerned of. Bernays (1980) maintained that gaining status and recognition for the "profession" of public relations would safeguard the public and the profession. I believe in the necessity and significance of ethical codes for public relations profession from two aspects.

First, responding to the argument that ethics codes are not an effective indicator of professionalism, I believe that a code of ethics is part of the standards that must be fulfilled for an "occupation" to be a "profession," especially for public relations. Abbott (1983) suggested five basic features of professional ethical codes: Universal distribution, correlation with intraprofessional status, enforcement dependent on visibility, individualism, and emphasis on colleague obligations. He pointed out that the enforcement of a code is one of the five basic properties for a profession. In the light of this argument, a code of ethics is an absolute prerequisite of professionalism. Drawing ample evidence from established professions, Wylie (1994) also indicated that examination and certification by a state, as well as oversight by a state agency that has disciplinary powers over the practitioner's behavior, are two of the four essential requirements for a profession. In other words, Wylie (1994) endorsed the need of an ethical code before examinations or oversights by a state or an agency could be conducted.

Second, public relations has long suffered its

negative image and reputation of lacking credibility as a profession. In order to resolve this problem, I believe in the importance of a code of ethics. In essence, credibility is a significant quality of any information distributor. Bok (1979) maintained that ethical codes often serve as the impetus for professional and public scrutiny. Hunt and Tirpok (1993) also claimed that ethics codes can help to gain international legitimacy, particularly in respect to ethical standards and social responsibility.

Although Wright (1993) opposed the idea of code enforcement, he acknowledged the value of public relations ethical codes in that they come with a sense of “charisma that enhances the professionalism and occupational self-worth.” Wright also referred to Appley (1948), suggesting that the field of public relations needs codes of ethics for helping society understand and adapt to change (p. 15). In the same line of argument, Hunt and Tirpok (1993) held that the creation and display of a professional code of ethics could be the most commonly utilized and the most effective method for a communication professional to maintain public credibility. Thus, they emphasized that a code of ethics is essential for communication professions.

In conclusion, I believe that ethical codes are indispensable in pointing public relations in the direction of achieving professionalism status. As Hunt and Tirpok suggested, if communication managers in organizations have a mechanism to help them speak out and proclaim to the public that certain unethical conduct is not the norm, public misperception towards the profession would be changed. On the contrary, giving up the idea of a universal ethical code is to concede to the public that public relations people accept some misbehavior as the norm for professional communicators. In a similar vein, Wylie (1994) suggested that public relations will not achieve professionalism through “self-anointment, or self-proclamation.” It should “take the orderly, established steps to become an acknowledged profession” (p. 3).

Objection 2: Codes of ethics are filled with trivial verbiage and conflicting themes

Critics (Johannesen, 1983; Wright, 1993) charged that the meaningless rhetoric and conflicting themes are fundamental weaknesses of ethical codes. Wright (1993) criticized that most ethical codes are filled with trivial verbiage, and that they can not even be regarded as meaningful tools for ensuring accountability. In a similar vein, Johannesen (1983) criticized the ethics codes as being irrelevant, impertinent, vague, and ambiguous. He also argued that the language of the code is often difficult to understand (Johannesen, 1988). Other criticism also included (1) the themes of the existing ethical codes are often conflicting with one another, and (2) The ethics codes results in confusion and condemnation among practitioners.

In short, critics (e.g., Johannesen, 1983; Wright, 1993) pointed out ample inherent problems of ethics codes. Again, the critics suggested that if the ethical codes are trivial, ineffective or even confusing, the needs for a code become an open question, not to mention code enforcement.

Reply 2

I acknowledge the problems described above. However, I argue that the problems of rhetoric *per se* should not become a rationale against code enforcement. Basically, my argument for the needs for code enforcement is not necessarily based on the existing code of ethics, but on the ones that can serve both the profession and society. In essence, ethical codes with conflicting themes, and the rhetorical problems such as irrelevance, inappropriateness, vagueness, and ambiguity, should be resolved by means of close scrutiny and open discussion. In fact, up to 1996, the PRSA Code was officially amended six times. Suggestions for additional changes are continuing (Bivins, 1993; Briggs, 1992).

Objection 3: A code of ethics is “simple window dressing”

Some scholars (e.g., Hunt and Tirpok, 1993) criticized the codes of ethics in public relations as being more cosmetic than any other things. The others claimed that ethical codes are virtually not valuable, and has little impact on public opinion regarding the integrity of a profession (Christians, 1984). Hunt and Tirpok (1993) pointed out that the codes are often criticized as being “simple window dressing,” inasmuch as people are not taking the code seriously (Wright, 1993). Olasky (1985) also maintained that public relations practitioners do not actually believe in the tenets prescribed by the codes. According to Olasky, the code has merely become “a tool for public display to promote an image of public relations practitioners as being ethical” (originally cited in Hunt and Tirpok, 1993, p. 5). Likewise, Christians (1984) not only criticized ethical codes as impractical and philosophically unsound, but he further contended that the codes cannot function as mechanisms for promoting accountability in mass communication.

In a word, the critics held the view that the ethical codes of public relations or communications do not achieve what they are designed for because practitioners do not believe them on one hand, nor do they take them seriously on the other. Wright (1993) adopted Hulteng’s (1976) view, suggesting that the codes wind up being most influential with conscientious and responsible practitioners and having limited effect on those who really need direction. He further commented that the public relations codes of conduct “protect neither the client nor the public” (p. 14).

Reply 3

In responding to the claim that public relations practitioners do not take the codes seriously, I take an opposition and contend the problems actually resulting from the fact that the code has not been enforced. Using Wright’s (1993) phrase, the critical problem with ethical codes is primarily that they “come without any teeth”

(p. 14). To delegate code enforcement would be a crucial means of resolving this chicken-egg stalemate. In other words, enforcing ethical codes give the codes more credibility, so they can be of greater benefit to practitioners and society.

Objection 4: The code of ethics is unenforceable

The views holding that ethical codes are unenforceable are primarily rooted in the concerns with the nature of membership and associations. The major arguments are fourfold: (a) The membership is composed of individuals rather than organizations or companies; (b) The voluntary nature of all the communication codes of ethics makes the codes unenforceable; (c) There is no mechanism to ensure compliance; (d) Professional accreditation programs have not made ethical codes impose greater accountability on public relations practitioners, and it seems impossible to change in Western society; (*O’ Dwyer’s PR Services Report*, 1992; Wright, 1993).

Wright (1993) maintained that the nature of voluntary membership makes the ethical codes unenforceable. He argued that unethical physicians and attorneys could be removed from their professions, but that is not the case regarding public relations practitioners. He stressed it is easy for a member charged with unethical conduct to dodge the issue merely by renouncing membership in PRSA. Since the person is no longer a member of the society, the organization has no authority to discipline him or her. Thus, Wright contended that the codes of conduct virtually are ineffective without some sense of overall commitment from individuals who practice in the field. In a similar manner, a speaker at the 1993 AEJMC meeting also criticized ethical codes as being unenforceable and having inherent problems. He said that the code is “only as good as those who subscribe to them, and don’t reward people for their ethical behavior” (quoted in Hunt and Tirpok, 1993, p. 2).

Reply 4

The problem that a code of ethics is unenforceable can be addressed in three aspects: enforcement mechanism, formal enforcement and licensure, and rewards.

Enforcement mechanism

I acknowledge the difficulty in code enforcement in view of the inherent problems in relation to membership and associations. I also agree with the point that the variability in code enforcement is dependent on the nature of memberships in the professional association and the ways in which the membership is obtained or awarded (e.g., voluntary, through credentials and so forth) (see Abbott, 1983).

Given the difficulty in code enforcement under the current circumstances, however, I argue against the idea that it is impossible to call for changes. Abbott's (1983) arguments have made this point even more clear. Abbott pointed out that, given a voluntary membership in a professional organization, if membership is tied to a credential, a designation, or a review of some type, a formal means of discipline and enforcement is indeed easier to establish and implement. In fact, the PRSA does have the mechanism for credentiality, designation, and a review system. It should not be a problem to take a further step towards a more effective mechanism.

Formal enforcement and licensure

For the directions of code enforcement, Abbott's (1983) suggestions of formal enforcement and licensure system are worthwhile considering for adoption. Among the various kinds of enforcing systems,¹ Abbott (1983) maintained that formal ethical codes or enforcement mechanisms are essentially universal in various professions and associations. Thus, he highlighted the importance of formal enforcement. He said:

Correlatively, large areas of professional function are served by "ethically questionable" practitioners. Informal enforcement of ethics among such

peripheral groups seems impossible. Only effective competition (driving them out of business) or monopolistic licensure (including them in the zone of formal enforcement) seems effective (pp. 862–863).

In a similar vein, Bernays (1979, 1980) suggested promoting state licensure and registration. Bernays (1979) maintained that government, in the case of licensing and registration, can protect the public from corrupt practitioners and also the profession itself. Bernays (1979) pointed out that various professional licensure systems have proven themselves for more than a hundred years. More specifically, he suggested that the future of public relations will be an acknowledged profession safeguarded by state licensing and registration (Bernays, 1980).

I also believe that an appropriate form of formal enforcement would help in pointing public relations in the direction of achieving professionalism status. The field of accountancy would be a good example for public relations. About 100 years ago, New York passed the first state law regulating the licensing of CPAs. It conducted the first CPA examination and held the first meeting of a board of accountancy. Other states followed New York's lead shortly thereafter, and accountancy has since maintained its status as a responsible profession of society. Similarly, Hunt and Tirpock (1993) concurred that ethical codes will have more teeth when they are associated with licensing. In fact, the licensing system could greatly contribute to resolve the accountability problem of the public relations profession, and provide its long-term benefits to society.

Rewards

In addition to the sanction methods suggested above, I also emphasize the importance of "rewards" as an enforcement mechanism. Olson (1965) added valuable insights in explaining the relationship between individuals and groups and the role of "rewards" on those relationships. He maintained that the groups in which members are likely to be directly rewarded by activities of the organizations are more likely to maintain their memberships. On the contrary, the groups

in which the members have greater difficulties in promising adequate rewards are less likely to maintain their memberships.

In a word, the codes of ethics in public relations associations are enforceable within the scope of its existing mechanisms. Formal enforcement, licensure system and rewards would be the appropriate directions to take.

Objection 5: The licensure system would interfere freedom of expression of the practitioners

As suggested in Bernays (1979) and in Hunt and Tirpork (1993), opponents of code enforcement would claim that a licensing system interferes with practitioners' freedom of expression. Likewise, communicators might consider code enforcement a violation of their rights (cited in Hunt and Tirpork, 1993, p. 8). For example, Johannesen (1983) and Bok (1979) held that voluntary ethical codes can serve to protect practitioners from bothersome government regulations. Others critics might claim further that licensure would make the profession a closed career and perhaps exclude competent men and women (discussed in Bernays, 1979).

Reply 5

Bernays' answers to the prevailing arguments should provide an excellent counter-argument. Bernays (1979) first emphasized that the freedom of expression is guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. He gave as an example that practicing (registered and licensed) attorneys do not hesitate to speak out. He thus contended that licensure does not limit the freedom of expression; it only limits the freedom of irresponsible actions and erroneous information. In the same line of argument, Bernays argued that the licensing system would not put any barriers on those qualified to pursue the profession. In essence, code enforcement would not result in any constraint on either practitioners' freedom of expression or entrance into the profession.

Objection 6: Public relations practitioners choose to be ethical not because they have to be, but because they want to be

The other argument against the idea of code enforcement rests on the belief that public relations practitioner are ethical not because they have to be, but because they want to be. Frank Gibson, Terence McCarthy, and Carl Byoir, in their opening remarks in the 1993 AEJMC meeting, maintained that the ethical codes adopted by the organization depend largely on the acceptance and compliance of members rather than enforcement (cited in Hunt and Tirpork, 1993). In a similar vein, Wright (1993) said that ethics basically is an individual issue. He stated, "it is up to individual practitioners to decide whether or not public relations is ethical" (p. 16). Wright also pointed out that with or without professional codes of ethics, most of the public relations practitioners will choose to be ethical because "they believe in themselves and want others to respect them" (p. 18).

Pratt, Im and Montague (1994) surveyed 449 PRSA members, and part of the results may further support Wright's argument (1993). Pratt et al. (1994) examined respondents' perceptions of four scenarios about public relations ethics and the chances that they would apply the theory of deontology to these situations. The results revealed that it is very likely that the respondents apply denotological principles to the tested scenarios. In other words, the results seem to suggest that people are inherently ethical, so there is no need to enforce a code of ethics.

Reply 6

I do not honestly believe that all people are altruistic, self-respecting, and self-disciplining, but rather that individuals are relatively more rational, self-serving and self-interested (not necessarily selfish). As suggested by many scholars, the rational individuals, based upon cost-and-benefit assessment, often would maximize their own interests and consequently and ignore the social (or aggregate) costs (Hardin, 1968; Schelling, 1978; Olson, 1965). This argument can be

further explained from the following three aspects: (1) situational ethics, (2) self-serving and self-interested individuals and (3) force, mutual coercion, and social contract.

Situational ethics

Although the Pratt, Im and Montague's study (1994) did show a positive tendency in individuals' application of denotological principles, this study also revealed that ethics among business people is "frequently not perceived in absolutist terms of right of wrong, but in relative shades of right and wrong" (Pratt et al., 1994, p. 259). In other words, public relations practitioners make decisions based on ethical relativism.

Pratt (1993) strongly criticized situational ethics, the dominant moral value in the decision-making process of U.S. public relations. David, McTier Anderson and Lawrimore (1990) had similar findings. They demonstrated that situational ethics, especially when conflicting interest is involved, would threaten ethical decision-making. David et al.'s study showed that, although 84% of the survey participants indicated that their employers emphasize ethical behavior, the percentage dropped to 63% if the behavior hurt profits.

Based on the above empirical findings, I believe that enforcement of a code of ethics is necessary because it would prevent subjectivism or individual relativism (Jaksa and Pritchard, 1994), and practitioners won't responded in different ways to different moral-ethical dilemmas.

Rational, self-serving and self-interested individuals

As Schelling (1978) pointed out, though people may care how the result all comes out "in the aggregate" (p. 24), their own decision would be typically motivated toward their own interest. Akerloff (1970) also revealed the issues of quality uncertainty and costs of dishonesty in the market. He indicated that "there is incentive for sellers to market poor quality merchandise (lemons), since the return for good quality accrues mainly to the whole group whose statistic is affected

rather than to the individual seller." In a similar vein, Olson reviewed the theories of common interest groups and pointed up the "free-rider" problems. He contended that unless the number of individuals in a group is quite small, or unless "there is coercion or some other special device to make individuals act in their common interest," otherwise, "rational, self-interested individuals will not act to achieve their common or group interest."

Force, mutual coercion, and social contract

Schelling (1978) suggested that the free market would require the intervention of some authority to set up a system of management. For example, many legal and institutional arrangements are designed to protect "the rights of people who might, though affected by a transaction, be left out of it" (p. 29). Moreover, explicit and implicit negotiations of "enforceable social contracts" (pp. 128–129) are also solutions to the stalemate, although Schelling indicated that these contracts would often be difficult to enforce. In a similar vein, Olson (1965) pointed up the importance of "force." He suggests that a latent group may also become effective by "force," that is through compulsion to participate, e.g. union shops or public authority to require uniform action.

Likewise, other scholars suggested that relevant problems could often be avoided by exercising some sort of force, mutual coercion, and social contract (Hardin, 1968; Schelling, 1978; Olson, 1965). Hardin (1968, p. 1244) maintained that science and technology could not solve the relevant problems. He argued that it would be a mistake to think that people can control such problems by an appeal to conscience. Hardin highly endorsed the power of "mutual coercion" – the means mutually agreed upon by the majority of the people affected, such as coercive laws and taxing devices.

In fact, enforcement of ethical codes is analogous to the concepts of "mutual coercion" or "social contract" suggested by scholars. In order to resolve the unfavorable effect that might result from rational, self-serving, and self-interested individuals, enforcing code of ethics in the field

of public relations would be one of the most effective methods.

Objection 7: Public interests would be virtually assured by the profession of public relations

Public interest is a topic that has been widely controversial in public relations ethics. The topic of public interest extends the previous debate on self interest into a wider scope of issues involving self interest, client interest, and public interests in the field of public relations (Bivins, 1987; Pearson, 1989; Ryan and Martinson, 1984).

One might use Newsom, Ramsey and Carrell's (1992) study and argue that public interest would normally be assured in the profession of public relations. Doug Newsom, Sirley Ramsey, and Bob Carrell (*pr reporter*, 1992), replicating a 1972 study, examined 370 professionals, 361 educators, and 174 PRSSA presidents on the subject of public relations ethics in 1992. According to this study, public interest would not be sacrificed at the expense of the client's or organization's interest under any circumstances. This study found that the forces that can exert ethical control over public relations are perceived to be (in order of influence): (1) public opinion, (2) clients, (3) public relations professional societies, (4) colleges and universities, and (5) government. The result suggests "public opinion" supersedes "clients" in controlling public relations practitioners' behavior.

Reply 7

I would be somewhat dubious about taking the stand on the position that the ethical requirement of the public relations profession would give priority to the public interest rather than that of the client or organization. As suggested in Bivins (1993), many public relations practitioners consider that the obligation of service to the client would be their primary responsibility. In fact, Newsom, Ramsey, and Carrell's study (*pr reporter*, 1992) also provide similar support for this argument. Newsom, Ramsey, and Carrell's study

demonstrated that practitioner's feelings about their responsibilities go to (in order of importance): (1) client, (2) client's relevant publics, (3) self, (4) public at large, and (5) media. Compared with the results in 1972, in which client was also first, but followed by public at large, self, media, and client's relevant publics, the study in 1992 indeed revealed that *client-related* interests have become public relations practitioners' principal concerns.

As far as the issue of public interest is concerned, the nature and *social role of the public relations profession* should be examined. Although I agree with J. Grunig and White's (1992) advocating of symmetrical communication as the best model for public relations practitioners to comply with, I recognize the prevalence of the advocacy role and press agency model in public relations practice. In the same vein, Barney and Black (1994) indicated that people often equate the social role of public relations practitioners with that of lawyer. They maintained that both are often regarded as advocates in an adversarial society, advancing their client's interest by distributing selectively favorable information about them.

Bivins (1993) posed four paradigms that might spell out the clear guidance of duties and obligations, or the social role, for public relations professionals.² Among the four paradigms, Bivins did not consider the first three paradigms appropriately depict the nature of public relations practice. The first paradigm suggests a high correlation between client's interest and public interest. Similarly, paradigm two and three pose close association between individual interest and public interest. On the contrary, Bivins (1993) argued that the fourth tenet can best describe the social role of public relations profession: "If public relations as a profession improves the quality of debate over issues important to the public, then the public interest will be served" (Bivins, 1993, p. 121). Bivins stated that public relations should develop articulate guidelines and a proper mechanism by which the issues important to society are defined and presented to the public for open, democratic debate. Apparently, Bivins did not assert that the nature of public relations would virtually hinge on public interest.

In sum, I would argue that the nature of public relations profession does not virtually, at least under the present circumstances, take care of public interest. However, I agree with Bivins (1993) in that public relations should “improves the quality of debate over issues important to the public” (p. 121) to take the accountability of public relations. Therefore, I propose to enforce a code of ethics in order to safeguard the public interests relating to the practice or public relations.

Objection 8: Ethics education can overcome the ethical problems in public relations

Some scholars and practitioners urge the enhancement of professional and collegiate educations in ethics instead of enforcing ethical codes (David, McTier Anderson and Lawrimore, 1990; Garrett, 1973; Pincus, Rayfield and Ohl, 1994; Pratt, 1994). Garrett (1973) suggested codes could be especially helpful to professional newcomers by educating them about moral direction and by sensitizing them to ethical dilemmas encountered in their field. More specifically, Hunt and Tirpok (1993) described in their article the ways that Frank Gibson (president of the Society of Professional Journalists) and Terence McCarthy (APR, partner in Agnew, Carter, McCarthy, Inc.) express their ideas about professional education in ethics:

Gibson pointed out the SPJ has no enforcement mechanism for its code, but tries to “encourage journalists through education” to adhere to the principles. . . . IABC puts the emphasis on the individual, according to McGrath, and like SPJ, emphasizes education of its members to understand the importance of upholding the dignity and the credibility of the profession by “encouraging the practice of honest, candid, and timely communications.” (p. 2)

Reply 8

I believe in the importance and necessity of education in ethics, but I value more the need for

code enforcement. First of all, I argue that although ethical education is basic and essential for promoting ethical behavior, obviously, there is a paucity of relevant education in schools at the present time. It will take time to observe concrete results of collegiate education in ethics, even if schools start extensive ethical educations immediately.

Education in ethics in schools

There is lack of evidence showing the condition of education in public relations ethics. I use a study concerning ethical education in business schools reference. David et al. (1990) study examined 150 business administration graduates who received their degrees between 1981 and 1985 and gained workexperience during the 1980s. Basically, the data showed the paucity of ethical education for the next generation of business leaders at schools. The major findings of this study, administered in late 1980s, were as follows (David et al., 1990): (1) Only 24% of respondents agreed that ethical issues were highlighted in their undergraduate business program. (2) Fully 92% of respondents indicated they never attended a business ethics seminar in college; 80% never had a course in business ethics; 92% never wrote a business ethics term paper; 75% never heard a faculty member lecture on ethics; (3) Only 15% agreed that their ethical values were influenced by business professors, and just 1% considered their ethics training in business school to be superior, and (4) Nearly three quarters (71%) of the respondents indicated that their opinion of the importance of business ethics has increased since graduation.

Another study conducted by Pincus et al. (1994) also revealed that public relations education has not been give any attention in business school curricula, not to mention public relations ethics. Pincus et al. examined public relations education and found that communication topics (including public relations) do not rate high in MBA programs. Pincus et al. suggested, if public relations faculty do not advocate the inclusion of public relations courses in MBA programs, the profession will never gain entry

into the highest levels of corporate decision-making.

Code enforcement and education in ethics

Secondly, I believe that code enforcement not only is more likely to resolve imminent problems, but it also can strengthen the effect of collegiate education and professional education in ethics. In fact, as suggested in Mednick (1996), basic professional education and continuing professional education would be intrinsic features in the system of licensure and regulation of a profession.³

In summary, various studies have shown the lack of ethical education in business schools and programs of public relations. I suggest starting to strengthen education in ethics in schools. The instruction of public relations ethics should be an integral part of management and public relations education. At the same time, code enforcement should also be enacted, inasmuch as it can enhance the effect of collegiate education and professional education in ethics.

Conclusion

Summing up the numerous debates surrounding the problems from various aspects, I believe that achieving status and recognition of public relations as a legitimate profession would benefit both the profession and society (Bernays, 1979). Enforcement of codes of conduct could not only act as a continual reminder of those behaviors that are unethical, unacceptable or situationally relative, but also is an essential step enhancing professionalism. In addition, a code of ethics is enforceable. The proposed ideas involving licensure, rewards, and formal enforcement could greatly contribute to resolve the accountability problem of the public relations profession, and provide its long-term benefits in public interest. I agree with strengthening ethical education at both of undergraduate and graduate professional levels. Moreover, I argue that code enforcement should also be enacted, inasmuch as it can

expedite the public acknowledgement of the importance and necessity of ethical education.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

¹ Abbott (1983) maintained that the professions that have enacted codes of ethics have developed various ways of enforcement. Some professions have no enforcement or disciplinary mechanism; while others are supported by enforcement at the national or state (or both) level. Disciplinary actions for violations of the codes range from formal and informal admonishments, and reprimands to suspension, revocation of membership or designation, and expulsion from the profession.

² The four paradigms include: (1) If every individual practicing public relations acts in the best interest of his or her client, then the public interest will be served; (2) If, in addition to serving individual interests, an individual practicing public relations serves public interest causes, the public interest will be served; (3) If a profession or professionals assure that every individual in need or desiring its'/their services receives its' their services, then the public interest will be served; (4) If public relations as a profession improves the quality of debate over issues important to the public, then the public interest will be served (Bivins, 1993, pp. 120–126).

³ According to Mednick (1996), the elements involved in licensure and regulation of a profession would include: education, experience, examination, continuing professional education, use of title, and definition of public accounting.

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