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Ethical Problems that Affect the Field of Public Relations

This document “Ethical Problems that Affect the Field of Public Relations” is intended to provide public relation practitioners information about the problems that the field of public relations has gone through and continues to be affected by. It provides the practitioners with background information of Anthony Franco and the reasons why he is considered to be the beginning of the down fall of the credibility of public relations as a field. The document focuses on the theories that influential proffesors representing various universities and chairman of major public relations firms have provided. It is important to keep in mind that the majority of the articles provided are based on theories that these people have come up with in consequence to the bad publicity that public relations itself has aquired through the years and that the articles are not based on experiments or empirical data for exception of a few case studies and some surveys. The dates the articles were written in varie but the earliest one is from 1985 when the Anthony Franco’s scandal broke out. The information is conformed of academic journals, commentaries, and periodicals. The goal of this document is not to scare practitioners away from the field but it is instead to open their eyes to the issues that have taken place so that they can make more informed decisions and hopefully begin to clear the name of public realtions and what it is in reality intended to do.

Bernays, Edward L. “Let’s Exclude the Incompetent and Unqualified From Public Relations”

*Public Relations Quartrly* 29.4 (1984): 31. Academic Journal. In the journal “Public Relations Quarterly” Edward L. Bernays a member of the National Capital Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America discusses according to him and the board the real reason why public relations is afflicted with such a bad name. He says that the cause of so much turmoil is because there are no limits or restrictions as to who can be a part of the public relations community. Simple things like “The PRSA admits members without qualification tests or the APR degree carries no legal sanction” (31) are proof that anyone could call themselves a “public relations specialist”. The article uses the analogy of a doctor and how when you see the sign M.D. is is automatically known that the doctor running that office has all of his qualifications , schooling and has signed a code of ethics ensuring that his practices follow strict guidelines set up in the medical world. On the other hand when you hear public relations practitioner the definition can mean many things and it doesn’t necessarily include a code of conduct.

This is important to my discussion on the ethical problems that affect the field of public relations because it provides the view of the ethical dilemmas directly from someone who is in the core of where the bad name of public relations began. Bernays discussion provides substance to the begging of a discussion that will last for over thirty years and is still ongoing.

Bivins Thomas, H. “Applying Ethical Theory to Public Relations.” *Journal of Business Ethics*  6.3 (1987): 195. Academic Journal. In the “Journal of Business ethics” Thomas H Bivins professor at the school of journalism in the University of Oregon provides the reader with a research paper about the importance of applying ethical theory to public relations. He begins his paper by providing information from recent research that has shown that public relations is split into two different roles which Dozier calls communication manager and communication technician. The research shows that “the communication manager is more concerned with planning and management than the communication technician, whose concerns are basically those of creating and disseminating information” (197). Separating public relations into those two separate roles provides the practitioners with more specific guidelines of what is expected of each one. In which the public relations manager has more responsibility when it comes down to ethics within the field and has to handle all situations with more objectivity than the public relations technicians. They also have to have a higher level of autonomy which means the public relations manager has to act as an advisor or a mediator within the field. The author proposes the discussion several ethical theories to the two roles of public relations. These include: deontology which means following the rules that have already been written within the field because of previous incidents. Another theory considered within the article is the rights and reciprocity theory which places the importance of a problem in the contract that the public relations advocate has with the client and the importance of fulfilling the client’s needs at all cost. The author gives examples of each theory by creating a placebo case in which the decisions made by the managers or the technicians can have grave positive or negative effect on one client putting the pressure of the morality of the decision on their shoulders. Larger organizations like PRSA have established moral guidelines for their practitioner to follow but in reality “the deciding factor is whether the prima facie duty to the client is out-weighed by an obligation to act on the behalf of a larger constituency.” This is important to my discussion on the ethical problems that affect the field of Public Relations because it provides the reader with an outlook on the theories that already exist within the field of public relations that are used to try to enforce ethics. He also brings to the conversation input from research done by Grunig and Dozier who are the pioneers of the most recent ethical theories of public relations. Bivins Thomas, H. “A Theory Based Approach to Public Relations Ethics” *Journalism Educator* 45.4 (1991): 39-44. Academic Journal. In the journal “Journalism Educator” Thomas H. Bivins professor at the school of journalism in the University of Oregon exposes the reader to different ways of not only making the field of public a relations more integral one but more importantly he advises educators on ways to teach their students how to make more ethical decisions before they even become a part of the community. He introduces the approaches of Cooper which “urges an integrated approach to teaching ethics including ethical theory” and DeGeorge which “explains that general ethical theory provides a careful and systematic approach to morality which finds parallels in ordinary life and discourse” (39). Following the introduction of others theories about ways that ethics could be taught he touches on three essential aspects that need to be considered before actually teaching ethics. He begins with a look at core concepts and related theories that need to be understood before any in-depth discussion of ethics can begin. Then he covers the most basic ethical theories that are relevant to the core concepts and finally he focuses on the context in which this theory- based approach should be taught. This is important to my discussion on the ethical problems that affect the field of Public Relations because it provides the audience with a view at the issue not only from the perspective of ethical issues that already exist but from the core of the problem. It’s important because in order to find the solution for the poor ongoing ethical decisions that practitioners have to make we need to figure out ways to mold them from before they are faced with real scenarios that will ultimately have real consequences. Devin, Rita M. “Rescuing PR’s Reputation” *Communication World* 24.4 (2007): 34-37. Periodical. In the journal “Communication World” Dr. Rita Marie Devin professor at Ryerson University brings to light some of the biggest flaws in the public relations community. She begins by stating that the “crisis begins from a significant gap between theory and practice in the profession” (34). Devin emphasizes the importance of separating the clients want to increase their sales and the role of the public relations firms. Nick Doulofl, public relations program coordinator at Ryerson University in Toronto, suggests that “the PR practitioner's role is not to increase sales but rather to build relationships and favorably predispose publics toward clients by securing good reputation based on good performance” (34). The article also emphasizes the importance of public relations coming up with a solution to handle the problems before they occur instead of “ex post facto damage control” (35). Another issue that is highlighted is the importance of the practitioner recognizing the quality of the clients they decide to represent. Some public relations practitioners live with the erroneous perceptions that everyone deserves representation public relations is not a constitutional right and it has the freedom to chose who it represents and who it doesn’t. By being picky with their clients firms can avoid being questioned for lack of moral ethics. Another important point brought up in the article is recognizing when a firm is participating fraudulent activities things such as “flogging” and “stealth-marketing”. This is important to my discussion on the ethical problems that affect the field of public relations because it provides clear-cut examples of issues that have arose over the years in public relations. It doesn’t only discuss people and specific situations but it gives an over view of some of the major issues that cause so much distrust by the public towards the public relations world.

Marken, G.A. “Will PR Industry Learn from the Media’s Troubles?” *Public Relations Quarterly*

48.3 (2003): 39-40. Academic Journal. In “Public Relations Quarterly” G.A. Marken president of Marken Communications inc. expresses the worries he has that public relations has gone down a road of no return “In our opinion the problem is that along the way in our struggle to raise our craft to the level of professionalism, public relations practitioners have lost touch with our roots” (39). The article reminds the reader that public relations practitioners began with a journalism background and thus they has a journalism code of ethics that they would abide by. Marken also reminds the leader that the importance being a good writer as a public relations practitioner is not second or third on a list it’s the core of their career field. He goes on to exposing the fact that public relations practitioners have stepped away from the “greasy research and writing” (39) and stepped into the study of “crisis management, positioning, cultural management, political and international science, and everything but what their field is really about” (39).

This is important to my discussion on the ethical problems that affect the field of public relations because it provides a more modern look at the issues that the public relations field continues to endure. It also gives the reader more insight on what public relations is supposed to be like causing the audience to step away from situation at hand and have a clearer look at the bigger picture.

Martinson, David L. “Ethical Decision Making in Public Relations: What Would Aristotle Say?”

*Public Relations Quarterly* 45.3 (2000): 18-21. Academic Journal. In the journal “Public Relations Quarterly” David L. Martinson professor in the school of Journalism and Mass Communication at Florida International University shows the reader the other side of public relations ethics according to one of the most influential philosophers of all time Aristotle. He highlights the importance for the public relations practitioner to always put the client first but he recognizes the difficulty of the task because they don’t only have to do the right thing but they also have to answer to the demands of their managers and their clients. The main focus of the article is to bring forward how important it is that the practitioner learns how to find the “mean” which is Aristotle’s term for finding the mid-point between the extreme wants of the managers and the clients and the right of the public to hear the full truth. This doesn’t mean that the PR practitioner should sit at middle ground but it means that he should choose which side to exceed at and the rest will take care of itself.

This is important to my discussion on the ethical problems that affect the field of public relations because it provides a different point of view to the development of the conversation at hand. Instead of trying to tell the practitioner how to become more ethical it strives to teach the practitioner how to make decisions whether “good” or “bad”.

Martinson, David L. “Is it Ethical for Practitioner to Represent ‘Bad’ Clients” *Public Relations*

*Quarterly* 44.4 (1999): 22-25. Academic Journal. In the journal “Public Relations Quarterly” David L. Martinson professor in the school of Journalism and Mass Communication at Florida International University poses the million dollar question whether it’s unethical to represent a “bad client.” The article uses examples to put the question in perspective. Some of the examples are as follows: if a public relations practitioner was asked to represent a tobacco company and he or she was against the use of cigarettes is it immoral to represent them? Or if an adult film company did the same is that immoral as well? It is important to recognize that it is not a matter of who the practitioner is representing it is more important to keep in mind that if the company is producing a legal product then if you don’t take their case the competition will have no problem with accepting it. “To lie for a client is not acceptable however, to honestly represent a client’s views into the market place of ideas even if the practitioner disagrees with those views poses a different perspective” (23).

This is important to my discussion on the ethical problems that affect the field of public relations because it provides the reader again with an opposing point of view of the majority of the articles listed on the bibliography. The conflict within the public relations practitioners to do right thing should be observed through positive output about the decisions that they face as well as through the decisions that may seem to be a bit more controversial within the field.

Plumley, Joe. “Ex-PRSA President Anthony Franco Gives Association Bad Public Relations.” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 4.1 (1989): 107-108. Academic Journal. In “The Journal of Mass Communication” Joe Plumley professor at the University of Alabama exposes the case of Anthony Franco and the influence it had on the PRSA code of ethics. In 1985 Anthony Franco who was the head of Michigan’s largest public relations firm, based in Detroit, had a meeting with top executives from Crowley, Miller and CO. a Detroit department store operator. They came to Franco so that his firm could help them prepare an announcement for an investor who was going to buy their company for more than it was valued for in the market. When Anthony Franco found out that the shares were going to go up once the purchase was complete he used his knowledge of the upcoming deal to buy the stocks at the original betraying confidence of his client. When the company found out about what Franco had done he denied the whole thing. Two years later when he was about to be named president of the PRSA the issue came back when he found out that Crowley was going to sue him. Fearing that the issue would go public he resigned the position for president and got out of the PRSA. The PRSA now was faced with a faulty code of ethics and even more bad publicity for the public relations society. After the incident they decided to increase their code of ethics from fourteen articles to seventeen articles in hopes that it may make a difference in future incidents. Anthony Franco was never charged for his immoral actions. This is important to my discussion on the ethical problems that affect the field of Public Relations because it provides the reader whit a cleat cut case of the major flaws within the public relations code of ethic. The case of Anthony Franco provides the conversation with proof that something has to be established providing guidelines and consequences for immoral actions within the field otherwise public relations will not be viewed in a positive light by the rest of the world. Saunders, Martha D. “Ethical Dilemmas in Public Relations: Perceptions of Florida Practitioners” *Florida Communication Journal* 17.2 (1989): 23-27. Academic Journal. In “Florida Communication Journal” Martha Dunagin Saunders professor at the University of West Florida conducts and open-ended questionnaire to discover the perceptions of ethical problems experienced by active public relations professionals. The questionnaire was sent to 180 randomly chosen members of the Florida Public Relations Association. The results reported in this study are based upon ninety-five useable responses to this survey. The responses of the participants fell into two major categories “the withholding of information and lying” (23). The results of this study tells us that simple solutions such as codes of conduct, are not enough to clear the name of this profession, “what is needed is a more rigorous debate based on real problems which occur in the practice of the profession” (27). The use of case studies similar to the one of Anthony Franco can come in useful when trying to teach the ethics behind public relations. This is important to my discussion on the ethical problems that affect the field of public relations because it provides the audience with more than a simple discussion about the importance of ethical practices within the public relations society. It provides feedback from people that are actually currently involved on making those decisions on a daily basis. And more importantly it provides the audience with real tangible evidence that can be useful to the furthering of the argument. Sharpe Melvin, L. “Avoiding Ethical Problems.” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 4.1 (1989): 113-117. Academic Journal. In the “Journal of Mass Media Ethics” Melvin L. Sharpe professor and coordinator of the public relations department at Ball State University evaluates the importance of establishing ethical guidelines for public relations practitioners, “a more strongly worded professional code that clearly addresses the problems faced” (114). Sharpe uses the case study of Anthony Franco, the president of the Public Relations Society of America. The author exposes the fact that there are no set guidelines on how to counsel public relations practitioner and not even the fear of the public view can control their actions. Furthermore, He goes on to say that even when he finds himself “assessing the ethics of their own actions” (114) he realizes that setting up strict rules and guidelines is only the beginning and even then there is no guarantee that they will be viewed as ethical. This is important to my discussion on the ethical problems that affect the field of Public Relations because it provides the reader with a set of hypothetical guidelines that could be helpful towards finding a solution to the problem. It also provides insight on how grave the problem has become and to the extent that it has traveled. It does this by mentioning one of the most famous cases of public relations fraud and the results of such incident. Strenski, James B. “The Ethics of Manipulated Communication” *Public Relations Quarterly* 40.3 (1995): 33-35. Academic Journal. In “Public Relations Quarterly” James B. Strenski chairman of Public Communications Inc. brings light to the issues in public relations from a new perspective. Strenski speaks of the issue of public relations and the emerging use of cyberspace. He brings into consideration the new ethical dilemmas that have arisen from using a world where everyone has access to pretty much anything. Scandals like the headlines that were recently made about the rescue of Capt. Scott O’Grady from Bosnian Serbs which were available to more than three million subscribers bring a certain amount of distrust proving that anything can be held private or confidential. “In a survey of 301 employers conducted by MacWorld, twenty-two percent of the respondents admitted to monitoring employee voicemail, e-mail, or computer files” (34). When the spread of new becomes so easy the need for public relations practitioners to stay on top of the game becomes even more essential. Not only do they have to be constantly in the know of what is going on in the cyber space in order to protect their clients they also have to make sure that when using the cyberspace to provide information to the public they continue to follow the same rules that were taught to them when writing things like a media release or a simple letter. This is important to my discussion on the ethical problems that affect the field of public relations because it brings up a new issue not discussed in the other articles of the conversation. Not only does it provide insight to the audience it gives the conversation a new point of view, so instead of the focusing only on the traditional ways of public relations it shifts to a more modern issue. Wylie, Frank W. “PRSA Officers and Board Were Irresponsible” Journal of Mass Media and Communication 4.1 (1989): 117-118. Academic Journal. In the “Journal of Mass Media and Communication Ethics” Frank W. Wylie Professor at California State University and past PRSA president writes a commentary about the Anthony Franco issue. He expressed openly that “the problems of public relations have been caused by the inept, the unscrupulous, and well-intended bunglers” (118). The reasoning behind his accusation was that after the trial of Anthony Franco it was revealed that he had discussed his SEC accusations with anywhere from one to three members of the board and even with the knowledge of those accusations Franco still became president for the PRSA. Wylie emphasizes that “if we do better, we may merit greater public confidence, but now, post-Franco; it will take a lot of doing” (118). This is important to my discussion on the ethical problems that affect the field of public relations because it provides more supporting evidence as to the serious implications that making wrong ethical decisions can have on a whole discourse community. Because of the actions of one man the name of the public relations field was stained and in order to clean up the mess it will take a lot of honest practice. It is also important because the commentary is coming from a past PRSA president, someone who was influential and participated in the making and refining of the PRSA Code of Ethics.