Agents of Conscience, Control and/or Compliance: The Roles of Australian Public Relations Practitioners in Organizational Value-Setting

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Abstract

The research explored the roles enacted by 30 Australian public relations and communication practitioners of 26 large organizations in the organizational value-setting process. Using a multifocal lens comprising the systems/functionalist, rhetorical/interpretive, and critical/dialectical perspectives, the research looks at role theory as a means of understanding individual and organizational values. The research reveals three agency roles enacted by practitioners namely--agent of conscience, agent of control and an agent of compliance. This paper argues towards a practitioner role as an agent of critical conscience and discusses the implications of this role for education and industry.

Keywords: public relations roles, ethics, organizational values

Introduction
Changing roles in a changing complex world

Public relations and communication practitioners now operate in a more complex and more turbulent environment resulting from natural disasters, terrorist threats as well as corporate scandals and rapidly changing new technologies. Global financial scandals as well as a worldwide trend towards economic rationalism have demanded businesses to be more transparent and accountable amid an increasingly legal and regulatory environment.

The ever-changing terrain of organizational environments continues to challenge the role of the Australian communication practitioner especially as information becomes a prime commodity in the global marketplace. As organizations continually adapt their internal structures, processes and relationships to economic and technological demands, so must their communication processes (Jones, et al., 2004). And for an industry that has been battling for decades to legitimise itself with its struggles for identity, definition, professionalism and acceptance, these complexities cause further tensions.

Coupled with these challenges, the public relations industry has consistently been attacked from different fronts including the popular media, in films (*The Corporation*), books (*Toxic Sludge is Good for You*), and websites (*PR Watch*). The attacks have been based on the unethical and sometimes, immoral activities undertaken by some public relations practitioners. Public relations tactics such as astro-turfing, the manipulation of the media, and the media training of corporate spokespersons appear in the realm of duties and responsibilities of modern public relations practitioners.

Seemingly, the definitions and foci of public relations may have contributed to this negative perception of the practice. While there is a great acceptance of the management function definition popularised by Grunig and Hunt (1984), it has not been without criticism (Leitch & Neilson, 1997; Weaver, 2001). The criticisms range from the definition's instrumentalist approach to the absence of the power dimensions particularly in the 'ideal' two-way symmetric public relations model. Interestingly recent contributions (Berger,

2005; Roper, 2005) to scholarship address these questions about power and the notion of the dominant coalition popularised by Grunig and his colleagues for the Excellence Study (J Grunig, et al., 1992; Dozier, et al., 1995; L Grunig, et al., 2002).

While earlier models of public relations practice may have allowed, even perpetuated, some unethical behaviour, it is not a practice that is going to be neither sustainable nor acceptable in the 21st century. Thus, a refocus on ethics and social responsibility is needed, from which the conscience role is explicated.

The sad part however is that these issues of ethical public relations practice are not necessarily new. In fact, several "fathers of public relations" including John W. Hill, founder of public relations consultancy Hill and Knowlton, have previously written and spoken about integrity, honesty and credibility as requisites of professional public relations practice (Heath & Bowen, 2002). Even Ivy Lee's Declaration of Principles attempted to clarify the question of whose interests the publicist served (Cutlip, et al., 2000).

Perhaps to further legitimise or aspire for a socially relevant role, public relations practitioners and scholars have discussed the public relations role as the organization's conscience (Ryan & Martinson, 1983; Burson, 1987 in Johnston & Zawawi, 2004; Judd, 1989; Pearson, 1989; Fitzpatrick, 1996; Bowen, 2002; Grunig, 2000; Cutlip, et al., 2000; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002), although no one has explored the conscience role in the context of their involvement in developing organizational values.

Calls for an organizational conscience role fall within the context of corporate social responsibility for which public relations practitioners have claimed some ownership (see for example, Gregory, 2003; Stoker, 2005; Thomas, 2002; L'Etang, 2003). Unfortunately, the drive towards ethical and socially responsible practice is still not the top concern among practitioners, educators and students (Berger & Reber, 2006). Instead, "gaining a seat at the decision-making table" and "measuring the value of public relations" took the top two spots on a list of most important public relations issues (Berger & Reber, 2006: 6).

One of the challenges facing communication educators is how to reduce the disjunction between academia and the practice. How can we guide and prepare future practitioners for careers that are socially relevant? How can we keep optimistic about an industry that seems to be saddled with self-doubt and wrong-footing? The question then that begs to be asked is, "Is there an ethical and socially responsible role for public relations/communication practitioners to enact within the 21st century organization?"

This paper intends to explore the extent to which communication practitioners are involved in setting organizational values, the levels of influence they have, how their unique positions within their organizations can offer them an opportunity to become change agents, and the ways in which they can further contribute not only to their organizations but perhaps, to society.

Using a Multifocal Lens for Public Relations Roles Research
While there has been a substantial number of research on public relations roles over the last 30 years (Pasadeos, et al., 1999), very little roles research have used qualitative methods of inquiry. Moreover, most roles research have used a predominantly managerial/functionalist perspective reflecting the bias of US-based research.

Recently, however, scholars using postmodernist, critical and rhetorical approaches in public relations research, have explored notions of public relations practitioners as organizational activists, change agents (Holtzhausen, 2000; with Voto, 2002; Berger, 2005) and whose primary motive is to cure (Terry, 2001). However, none have applied a multiple perspectives approach to public relations roles research.

Applying multiple perspectives in the public relations research opens up the field to the tensions and assumptions of conflicting and sometimes complementary paradigms (Trujillo & Toth, 1987). While some have cautioned scholars about the use of multiple perspectives in organizational communication research because of a tendency to not explain some assumptions (Deetz, 2001), others have urged the application of multiple or additional perspectives both in public relations and organizational communication research (Trujillo & Toth, 1987; Toth & Heath, 1992; L'Etang & Pieczka, 1996). Supporters of the multiple perspectives approach point to the value and benefits of the systems/functionalist (also referred to by others as instrumentalist, empirical-analyst), interpretive/rhetorical and critical perspectives. In a way, applying the multifocal 'lens' as a means of interpreting the data is already indicative of an interpretive approach (Cheney, 2000). A brief revision of the key concepts of each perspective is hereby presented.

A systems/functionalist perspective emerges from systems theory which defines a system as comprising four elements—objects, attributes, internal relationships among its objects, and an environment (Littlejohn, 1999). Basically systems theory assumes that an organism is a member of a system and to survive, it has to adapt to its environment. A system is said to have the following qualities: it is part of a whole and its parts maybe interdependent, reflects a hierarchy, possesses self-regulation and control, it interacts with its environment, aims for balance for its self-maintenance, adapts to change, and aims to achieve an end goal through different means (Littlejohn, 1999). Similarly the functionalist approach assumes that the "social world is composed of relatively concrete empirical artefacts and relationships" which can be measured and identified (Burrell & Morgan, 1979:26).

Interpretation is defined as "an active, discipline process of the mind, a creative act of searching for possible meanings" (Littlejohn, 1999:199). Interpretivism follows Cheney's (2000) description of its five elements--the social actor, the researcher, the situation, the 'text' and the research process. Because these elements are framed on how one makes sense of a phenomenon using a particular language, the interpretive approach is related to the rhetorical perspective. Moreover, rhetorical scholar Kenneth Burke has described research as an ongoing conversation (Cheney, 2000).

According to Heath,"rhetorical enactment theory reasons that all of what an organization does and says is a statement" (2001:4). Following this reasoning, the construction of organizational values statements is a rhetorical activity and if public relations practitioners were charged with being involved in the 'creation of organization', then it seems useful to understand the kind of involvement they have in the process.

Critical theory is a wide and expansive field and its origins can be traced to the ideas of Karl Marx's critique of the political economy, Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action and Michel Foucault's writings on sites of power (Mumby, 2001; Littlejohn, 1999). Various communication scholars have comprehensively traced the history and scope of this field which

also includes feminist approaches (Deetz, 2001; Heath, 1992; Littlejohn, 1999).

In particular, critical approaches that explore the notions of voice and diversity with a strong consciousness against hegemony or the assumed acceptance of dominant ideas were integrated in the analysis of this research (Mumby, 2001; L'Etang & Pieczka, 1996; Berger & Reber, 2006). Difference and dissensus is critical for dialogue, and dialogue includes a dialectical process where people from various sides challenge and oppose each other (Mumby, 2000). The focus on the organizational value setting process, rather than content, reflects a dialectical perspective (Benson, 1977) while the discussion on power, control and influence that the public relations practitioners wittingly or unwittingly enact in their roles reflects a critical approach.

This multiple perspectives approach builds on, rather than discounts, the existing research and adds to the understanding of public relations roles in this increasingly complex world.

To investigate potential ethical roles practitioners can enact, we look at organizational values and the process of organizational value setting.

Organizational Values: The Heart of Ethical Behaviour

Most communication practitioners are charged with the task of communicating organizational values and developing programs that support the implementation of new values. But not very many have been involved in the development of those values as US practitioner Elizabeth Howard observed (*PR News*, 2001).

Organizational values have been described as the DNA of any organization (Henderson & Thompson, 2003). If organizational values set the tone of employee behaviour within organizations, then establishing, creating and modifying values can be an extremely powerful function.

Because of this integrative function of organizational values, several scholars have suggested that organizational values become another means for management to control its employees (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985; Barker, 1999). By defining values and the corresponding behaviours considered important to the organization, management introduces an unobtrusive control mechanism from which employees' performances are evaluated and measured.

On the other end of the spectrum, organizational values have been found to be irrelevant rather than manipulative (Murphy & Davey, 2002). Employees' cynicism for management fads combined with a bland set of statements result in values which are not relevant, significant or even noticeable (Murphy & Davey, 2002:29).

But how do individuals develop values? And how do organizations develop values? How are individual values relevant to organizational values?

The notion of values is premised on a moral framework and has been described (Rokeach, 1968, cited in Murphy & Davey, 2002) as the "oughtness"—what does one ought to do? Some assume that organizational values are a collection of individuals' values within the organization. But usually it is the other way around. Organizational values are usually set by the organization's founders (Morley & Shockley-Zalabak, 1991), and these values and behaviours represent the persona of the company (Heath, 1992) which then attract certain employees to the company for recruitment (Sullivan, et al., 2002). Organizational values emerge from the shared realities expressed by

organizational members through myths, stories, mission statements, slogans, decisions and other communication rules (Shockley-Zalabak, 2002).

However when organizations mature or undergo structural change, organizational cultures also get reviewed. Organizational culture change programs provide an opportunity for organizational values to be revisited, renewed and re-created. During this time, people involved in the organizational change process also have the opportunity to reflect, explore possibilities, initiate new ways of thinking and doing within the organization. When values are being reviewed and/or being developed, individuals may need to go back to their personal value orientations (Shockley-Zalabak, 2002). Often organizations are looking for ways to 'align' individual values with organizational values, and vice versa especially during cultural change programs (Sullivan, et al., 2002).

During the organizational value-setting process, we then ask what role does the public relations practitioner enact?

The Power of Culture Creation

Contrary to practitioner Howard's opinion (*PR News*, 2001), some scholars suggest that public relations practitioners help create organizations through their discursive activities.

> Particularly in today's postindustrial and mass-mediated society, corporate communication specialists help to *make*—not just *announce*—what organizations are…Corporate communication specialists are in the business of producing symbols. They, much more than others in the organization, tell various publics "what the organization is". They shape identify, manage issues, and powerfully "locate the organization in the world of public discourse. (Cheney & Dionisopoulos, 1989:139)

Because organizational values are at the heart of organizational culture which dictates organizational behaviour, the people involved in the creation of values and culture can be perceived as powerful. Although power has been described as the "ability of individuals and groups to control and shape dominant interpretations of organizational events" (Mumby, 2001:595), power exists in all relationships most notably in work relationships (Spicer, 1997). Together with influence and authority, we ask how power can be used for ethical and moral agency.

In emphasizing the power and privilege corporate communication practitioners enjoy, Cheney and Dionisopoulos (1989) also remind practitioners of the social responsibilities associated with this privilege. Going to the heart of the organizational value setting process gives us an understanding of the potential roles public relations/communication practitioners may enact in influencing ethical behaviour among their organizational members.

Value Setting is part of Strategic Planning

Public relations scholars and practitioners following a systems/functionalist perspective see the importance of public relations' involvement in the strategic planning function. Several management textbooks (Robbins & Mukerji, 1990; Mintzberg, 1994) assert that the development of vision and mission statements, and value statements all form part of the strategic planning process. In the same manner, public relations educators incorporate this process in their curriculum with the aim of preparing future practitioners to become aware of the language and processes that senior management practise; and perhaps to prepare them to take a seat in the "boardroom table".

The Excellence Study asserts that excellent public relations is practised when the senior practitioner is a member of the dominant coalition (Dozier, et al., 1995). But what happens if and when the practitioners are on the boardroom table? Management theorists suggested the importance of three roles during the strategic planning process namely—the dialectical inquirer, the devil's advocate and the expert (Schwenk & Mitroff, 1982). These roles share similar activities with the organizational activist previously mentioned. Is it possible for public relations practitioners to integrate dialectical inquiry as part of their conscience role? The question of course remains whether practitioners have the power to choose their roles, and influence their organization's perceptions.

Methodology

To examine the roles public relations practitioners enacted during the organizational value setting process, I undertook in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 public relations and communication practitioners in Melbourne and Sydney between May 2004 and May 2005. The respondents represented 26 large organizations from various industries. All were in-house practitioners with responsibilities ranging from internal communications to community relations to corporate affairs. Because of the access issues outlined by Treviño & Weaver (2003), personal interviews are more feasible than surveys when the research topic is within the ethics area.

The interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes and were audio recorded, then transcribed. The data were then coded and analysed using thematic analysis and data reduction techniques (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data analysis revealed three agency roles enacted by practitioners.

Results and Discussion

The research results revealed that the 19 of the 30 respondents reported involvement in organizational value setting. However when their responses were analysed, particularly the stage at which they were involved and who they represented, three roles seemed to emerge. Most of the eleven respondents who reported not being involved in the process reasoned that values were set at the overseas head office.

Agent of Corporate Compliance

The agent of corporate compliance represents respondents who reported their involvement in organizational value setting occurred at the implementation and communication stage. They were responsible for producing communication materials and programs, and providing support for values that others have developed. They characterise their role to include a heavy component of 'word smithing'.

In Mandy's organization for example, the CEO led and facilitated the discussion and made very clear that the "values are not owned by HR" but by the CEO leadership team. In Tom's organization, the former CEO set the values because he "loved strategy, vision/mission stuff". The top down approach to value setting where the dominant coalition presents the organizational values to the employees demonstrates the importance of top management ownership of the value setting process.

In the top down approach, CEO and the leadership team develops the values and engages the communication practitioner's role to develop the program, communication strategy and materials necessary to ensure employees know and adhere to the values. As such, the communication practitioner's role is akin to the technician role in Broom & Dozier's manager-technician typology. Furthermore, the mindset that the communication practitioner's role is meant to serve the CEO and the leadership team reflects

a managerial/functionalist perspective. Laura who works in a large financial services organization further demonstrates this mindset. For example, when asked who should have the most influence in setting organizational values, Laura replied,"(The) CEO, because the culture of the organization reflects his vision, his values and it enables us to rally behind him and everyone buys in to those values, he sets the tone and style."

Agent of Concertive Control

Organizations with a participative culture often use values as a means of controlling their employees albeit in an unobtrusive way (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985; Barker, 1999). When the organization is usually very large and has a matrix structure, they tend to break tasks or goals to a project team. This team-based approach leads to members developing their own controls to discipline themselves. Usually these teams may undergo seemingly participative and democratic processes, but actually work under strict parameters. As such, communication practitioners tend to be involved in the different stages of the organizational value setting process—including the identification stage where they participate in focus groups or workshops. Communication practitioners who reflect this kind of involvement may be construed as agents of concertive control.

Kara on the other hand mentions how her company undertakes unobtrusive control measures in introducing new values to its employees.

> We're not doing a launch…it's infiltrating it…integrating it throughout the systems within the organization so that when we start to overlay explicit communication about the values, and they know they're measured on it as well rather than here's another story but nobody checks if I'm doing it right.

In undertaking participatory decision making, the employees go through a process of negotiated consensus of which the 'shared values' are the outcome. These values are then used to identify 'proper' behaviour that are acceptable and allow them to functional according to the expectations of the organization (Barker, 1999:39). These participative activities entail the communication practitioners to use their persuasive and sense making skills to their groups while working within the set parameters. As such, the agent of concertive control reflects a rhetorical/interpretive perspective.

Agent of Critical Conscience

Organizations that allow for healthy, robust debates and discussions at different stages of the value setting process reflect an ideal climate for an agent of critical conscience. Respondents found to be involved in the planning and management of the organizational value setting process indicate some potential to enact this role.

Similar to the organizational activist role (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; Berger, 2005), the critical conscience role engages the organization in dialogue, albeit in an organizational value setting process not too dissimilar from Pearson's earlier conception (1989). The role also draws on the dialectical inquirer/devil's advocate role referred to as critical in the strategic planning process (Schwenk & Mitroff, 1982).

Using the professionalism argument by Bivins (1989), the critical conscience role assumes that questioning one's organization is part of his/her professional, social and ethical responsibility. In this context, a practitioner who does not question the motives and decisions of one's company is regarded as being remiss of one's professional responsibility. While the critical conscience role may ultimately be viewed as a managerial/functional role

because its ulterior motive is to keep the company sustainable and operative, the process has involved dialectical and reflexive thinking that could lead to changes in the company's behaviour. When the critical conscience agent engages in dialectical inquiry, the organization is challenged to think reflexively of its policies and practices within the context of the community and society in which it operates.

Two respondents demonstrate that their power and influence in the organization stems from reasons other than participation in the dominant coalition and not the seniority of their position.

Sam, who is not a member of the Executive Team but has direct access to the CEO, demonstrates his extensive involvement in the process:

> Well the vision statement again was developed in a similar process. We got together some key people from the organization. We ran a series of sessions with a facilitator to identify the key elements of (company's) operations, its values, etc. So I was one of the key people involved in setting up that process and then being part of the process. The culture change manager and I were the ones who set that process up. (Sam)

Similarly Kim implied some leverage in her role as employee communication person in challenging some of the management's decisions.

> Possibly, I mean it's (the value statements) something I end up getting involved in anyway. Well, either I read it and I think that doesn't sound right so I'll go back and challenge it or do what I need to do. Yes, in my role as employee comms person, well I can sit back and say that as an employee I wouldn't be happy with that, that doesn't sound quite right, we need to write it a little bit better or direct it a little bit better. That's my job.

Similar to the results of the Excellence Study, this study found that the definition of the public relations/communication function by the practitioners and the dominant coalition impacts on the roles enacted by the practitioners in organizational value setting.

Conclusion

Using the multiple perspectives approach, this paper revealed three agency roles enacted by public relations practitioners. By focussing on practitioner involvement in the organizational value setting process, the three roles were explicated based on their structures and reporting relationships, the level and nature of their influences and interactions, and their perceptions of power.

What the research reveals is that most of our respondents enact roles as agents of compliance and control. These roles while workable do not reflect leadership roles which would allow practitioners to effect organizational change. The results also reveal that the respondents' own expectations and their perceptions of others' expectations of their roles, and their predominantly managerial/functionalist perspectives constrain their enactment of the critical conscience role. Presumably, practitioners have been socialised to be management functionaries and educators may have been complicit with their strong support of a predominantly managerial/functionalist perspective (L Grunig, et al., 2002).

Practitioners who choose to continue enacting compliance and control roles will perpetuate the public relations' image as a management functionary and thereby limit their ability to engender social change. However, practitioners can also choose to develop themselves as agents of critical conscience. Doing so requires that academia and industry work together to encourage practitioners to explore this role.

Educational institutions need to redefine their paradigms in teaching public relations as solely a management function. Additional perspectives need to be introduced in the teaching of public relations practice with particular emphasis on developing students' skills of analytical thinking, critical thinking and dialectical inquiry. These skills can be developed by providing simulations of projects which require problem solving, conflict resolution and negotiation where the quality of the questions asked are assessed equally along with the solutions to the problems. Furthermore, university programs need to seriously consider including ethics and moral philosophy as compulsory subjects rather than just as the final lecture in a public relations subject.

Industry can assist by embedding the dialectical inquiry activities as part of the communication practitioners' job descriptions. Doing so clarifies what is expected of the role and removes the barriers of fear and reprisal often accompanying vocal criticisms. Senior management's acceptance of the critical conscience role signals the organization's maturity and demonstrates their commitment to ethical and corporate social responsibility. Rethinking our own perspectives is an important first step.

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