

A Quantitative Examination of Ethical Dilemmas in Public Relations

By Don W. Stacks
University of Alabama

Donald K. Wright
University of South Alabama

□ *This research examined ethical responses of public relations preprofessionals to dilemmas they may face later in their careers. Subjects were required to respond to a request for information ordered suppressed by their employer. Results support earlier findings that students expect personal moral-ethical values to override organizational concerns. Implications of the findings are discussed.*

Ryan and Martinson (1984) reported a study in which public relations practitioners were asked to confront a moral-ethical problem. Their study examined problems associated with *individual relativism* (or *subjectivism theory*) applied to a request for information a sponsoring company or organization wished to suppress. Their findings suggested it might be advisable to adopt a moral-ethical theory of public relations, replacing the prevailing subjectivism theory with more emphasis on accountability than loyalty to higher authority.

The purpose of this study was twofold: first, to replicate and then extend Ryan and Martinson's findings. In particular we were interested in the notion of teaching ethics to future media practitioners. We reasoned that students would be a particularly good population because they (a)



are bombarded constantly by public relations practitioners and (b) have not had the professional experiences with which to make ethical judgments. In addition, we were concerned about the effect of teaching ethics to media students. It seemed Ryan and Martinson's findings could, if replicated, establish a basis for ethical training programs.

Facing Ethical Decisions

Although there once was a time when our society appeared to question whether ethics were cognitive, there is relative agreement today that ethics can be taught. Kohlberg's elaborate cognitive-developmental theory of moralization is the pacesetter of this accord (Kohlberg, 1981; Locke, 1979). Even before Kohlberg, however, there was strong support for teaching ethics (Kupperman, 1970; Shirk, 1965).

It would appear most media students are taught the ethical philosophy of objectivity but public relations students often are taught subjectivism along with objectivity. Subjectivism is a theory emphasizing individual relativism, positing that we are responsible for our own actions (Hare, 1963, 1952; Perry, 1976; Purtil, 1976). Actions by the public relations practitioner are those that he or she can live with. Further, it is apparent that each of us has a breaking point, a point beyond which we cannot go due to consciousness, dissonance. The crux of the matter is that two factors must be considered when examining the subjectivism position: needs of the practitioner (i.e., keeping the job) and needs of the public (as opposed to company needs).

A public relations practitioner faced with an ethical problem can make a judgment based on experience. The media student, however, does not have that experience base. Ethical choices learned must be found in the classroom. Whether media students are being taught ethics, however, has not been clearly established. Within the basic media sequence some treatment of ethics is probably studied, but to what effect? Part of this study seeks to answer that question.



Although students and practitioners in all aspects of mass communication claim concern for "the public good," public relations people and other media persons—journalists, broadcasters, and so forth—have long been at odds in interpretations of how to bring about such good (Cline, 1982; Raucher, 1968). It appears those who work in public relations generally view themselves as ethical and responsible, but many journalists and other media persons believe public relations practitioners have minimal ethics and morals (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985; Greyser, 1981; Grunig, 1976; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Moore & Kalupa, 1985; Newsom & Scott, 1985).

Reasons for this disagreement are many. Public relations today covers a wide range of concerns forcing practitioners to act constantly, and in all sorts of situations, including some where there is clouded judgment on what is right or wrong, good or bad, ethical or unethical (Wright, 1985).

Quantitative Studies

For decades, public relations practitioners have played a major role in providing the news media with much of the information they pass along to the mass public (Gans, 1980; Schudson, 1978). In his study of media people and public relations practitioners, Aranoff (1975) discovered differences in the perception of each other's "news values" which suggest existence of varying ethical perspectives. Empirical evidence concerning ethical judgments in the media and public relations, however, is relatively recent. Hulteng (1976), Swain (1978), Mills (1983), Goodwin (1983), Meyer (1983), and Hartley (1983) have all reported on quantitative surveys of journalists concerning ethical questions in journalism. In addition, Wright (1982, 1985a, 1985b, 1985c) empirically addressed the question of ethics and public relations practitioners.

Strains between perceived roles of objective journalists and subjective public relations practitioners has been addressed in earlier studies, where differences were found between public relations practitioners with previous news experience and those without such work (Wright, 1981).



This is important because many media students eventually enter public relations work simply because there are more employment opportunities available in public relations than in most other aspects of journalism and mass communication (Roepke, 1981).

Public Relations Ethics

Research reported here seeks to answer two questions posed by Ryan and Martinson (1984) which impact on the teaching of ethics. We reason that Ryan and Martinson's experimental materials offered a chance to compare responses of public relations practitioners and to extend their findings to students preparing for media professions.

Ryan and Martinson used as their stimulus material two hypothetical situations. In one situation public relations practitioners were asked to make ethical decisions about the firing of a football coach; in the other, decisions were required about disposing of nuclear wastes. Additionally, the situations were further broken into two subcategories in which either the organization involved is a public, non-profit organization or a private, profit-making organization. Ryan and Martinson hypothesized that public relations practitioners see major differences between public and private organizations and their public relations needs. They failed to confirm this hypothesis. Ryan and Martinson did find support for an hypothesis that responses to the situation dealing with a public's need to know (i.e., nuclear waste) would differ from those of a more private nature (i.e., firing of a coach).

Ryan and Martinson (1984) based their first hypothesis on the assumption that practitioners "see major differences between public relations for public and for private groups and institutions." Failure to support this hypothesis may have been due in part to practitioners' experience and of their having worked for both public and private organizations. The student, on the other hand, does not have this experience and may view the two situations more cynically; that is, the student (and consumer) may see major differences between private and public needs as far as public relations needs are concerned. Responses to



the situations will differ significantly depending on whether the situation is public or private. Further, those responding to the commercial interests will be less willing to be open with the public.

The second hypothesis posits that the degree to which the public relations person's response affects the general welfare of the public will impact on the ethical decision whether to be open with the public or not. Responses to the coach firing situation will differ significantly from responses to the nuclear waste situation, with those responding to the nuclear waste problem indicating a greater willingness to be open with the public.

Method

Respondents

Respondents were 109 students enrolled in basic communication courses at a large southeastern university. Students were enrolled in either the introductory mass communication course or in their first public relations course.

Independent Variables

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of Ryan and Martinson's four conditions (coach firing, public; coach firing, private; nuclear waste, public, and nuclear waste, private) across both courses. Each stimulus situation consisted of a vignette outlining an ethical dilemma faced by a public relations officer.

In the case of the coach firing, two vignettes outline a coach being relieved of duties, but given another position within the organization. In one vignette the coach is with a privately owned, semiprofessional team; in the other he is a coach at a small 4-year public institution. In both, the coach is popular with fans but has had continual budget problems. Each is given the choice of "voluntary" resignation and another position in the organization or fighting the organization's attempt to fire him while he is still under contract. Each decides to resign and the public relations officer is told to limit publicity (i.e., to tell the media only that the coach resigned for another assignment). In



each vignette the public relations person is contacted by a reporter on to the story and must decide how to react.

The nuclear waste vignette places the needs of the public against the needs of attracting research funding. In both cases a dump necessary for safe removal of nuclear waste is being closed. Notification of the dump's closing comes two days before legislation is to be enacted providing the organization with funding for important research. In both vignettes the public relations officer is told to make no announcement concerning the waste dump's closing, but a reporter later contacts the officer asking about the closing. The respondent is asked to respond.

Dependent Measures

All respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with seven statements on a 5-point Likert-like (*strongly agree* [1] to *strongly disagree* [5]) scale concerning the action to be taken. Additionally, respondents were asked to specify one of five possible outcomes for the public relations officer: delay the request, tell the real story, resign and not talk to the media, resign and talk to the media, or take some other action.

Our approach to the treatment of the dependent variable differs from that employed by Ryan and Martinson. We treated the response variable as an equal-appearing interval scale with a value of 3 as being *uncertain*. Ryan and Martinson employed a 4-part scale, with a midpoint response (*unknown* or *undecided*) removed from subsequent analyses.

Results

Manipulation Check

Because respondents were drawn from two different courses (introduction to media and introduction to public relations), tests for differences between courses were run. As noted earlier, although most media students end up with jobs related to public relations, there existed the clear possibility that the two courses may have influenced the results. No significant differences between courses were found for any dependent variable.



Table 1. Responses to Statements Outlining Possible Reactions to Requests to Suppress Information

Item	<u>Coach Firing</u>			<u>Nuclear Waste</u>		
	Private	Public	Comb.	Private	Public	Comb.
1	1.80	2.17	2.02*	3.50	3.03	3.22*
2	2.24	2.40	2.23	2.75	2.53	2.62
3	3.11	3.08	3.10	3.13	3.05	3.10
4	4.40	4.20	4.28	3.10	3.10	3.10*
5	3.60	3.63	3.62*	2.65	2.43	2.52*
6	1.92	1.60	1.73	1.60	1.80	1.72
7	2.36	2.00	2.15	1.95	2.00	1.98

Note Mean responses with * are significantly different. The larger the response, the more disagreement with the statement. Range: *Strongly Agree* (1) to *Strongly Disagree* (5).

Items

- 1 Officials obviously do not want the real facts publicized, and the public relations director should abide by those wishes.
- 2 The public relations director is justified in misleading the reporter because responsibility for that statement rests with others. The public relations person is simply acting as the others' representative much like a lawyer represents a client.
- 3 The public relations director is justified in misleading the reporter because he or she is merely protecting others.
- 4 The public relations director should abide by the wishes of the officials.
- 5 The public relations director is justified in telling the reporter the truth if he or she believes the officials are misleading the public.
- 6 The public relations director—if he or she thinks the real situation must be explained—should tell others involved in the situation about his or her own position before speaking to the reporter.
- 7 The public relations director—if he or she thinks the real situation must be explained—should sit down with the officials and try to convince them that all the facts should be released.

Hypotheses

Tests of the hypotheses used *t* tests on each statement. The first hypothesis, which predicted that responses would differ depending on the public or private nature of the situation, was not supported. The mean responses in Table 1



clearly indicate no real difference in perceptions of differences between the needs of corporate versus public relations. Support was found for the second hypothesis, which predicted differences based on public need to know. Significant differences ($p < .05$) were found for Statements 1 ($t = 6.30$), 4 ($t = 6.22$), and 5 ($t = 3.97$), while Statement 2 approached significance ($t = 1.30$, $p < .10$). As indicated in Table 2, those responding to the coach firing situation agreed that the public relations director should abide by the coach's wish not to reveal the real facts, while those responding to the nuclear waste situation were more uncertain about that same request from the dump site operator and officials.

Statement 4 asked whether the public relations director should comply with the wishes of officials, regardless of why the request was made. Again, those responding to the

Table 2. Percentages Recommending Each of Five Possible Responses to Requests to Keep Secret Reasons for Resignation

	College Coach	Pro Coach	Mean Percentages
Explain management's position to the media and go no further.	60.0	62.9	61.7
Give the media the real reason why the coach is moving to the front office.	4.0	5.7	5.0
Resign the position and do not talk with the media.	16.0	11.4	13.3
Resign the position and tell the media why the coach is moving to the front office.	4.0	0.0	1.7
Other.	16.0	20.0	18.3



firing felt the public relations director should abide by management's wishes. Those responding to the nuclear waste, however, were more uncertain (a mean response of 4.28 for the firing compared to 3.10 on nuclear waste).

Respondents to the firing disagreed with the statement that public relations directors are justified in telling the truth if they think officials and the coach are misleading the public. Those responding to the nuclear situation leaned toward agreement with the statement.

No differences were found between responses to the remaining statements, although responses to Statement 2 justifying the public relations director in misleading the reporter because he or she is only representing others, approached significance. Respondents to the firing agreed with the statement and those responding to the nuclear situation were more uncertain. All respondents were uncertain whether the public relations director is justified in misleading the reporter because he is merely protecting others. All respondents agreed the public relations director should tell appropriate officials before explaining the real situation. All respondents felt the public relations director should sit down with officials and try to convince them to release the facts.

Because there was a possibility that perceptions of situations may have been influenced by the public or private nature of the organization, each statement was submitted to a 2 (Public-Private) by 2 (Coach-Waste) analysis of variance (ANOVA). Significant interactions were obtained for Statements 1 and 6. When probed with Fisher's LSD test for multiple comparisons, Statement 6 failed to yield significant differences. Further analysis on Statement 1 failed to yield any further information as the means for the public ($M = 2.17$) and the private ($M = 1.80$) coach-firing situations did not differ, nor did the means for the public ($M = 3.03$) and the private ($M = 3.50$) nuclear waste situation differ.

Tables 2 and 3 present the results of the recommendations made if the public relations director failed to con-



Table 3. Percentages Recommending Each of Five Possible Responses to Requests to Keep the Closing of the Disposal Site Secret

	Medical School	Commercial Lab	Mean Percentage
Delay response to reporter's inquiry until laboratory officials approve release of information.	25.0	36.7	32.0
Tell press the real story about waste disposal site.	25.0	10.0	16.0
Resign the position and not talk with the media.	10.0	13.3	12.0
Resign the position and tell media real reason about the waste disposal site.	10.0	10.0	10.0
Other.	30.0	30.0	30.0

since the officials according to the public-private nature of the organization. Analysis of each situation by nature of the organization failed to yield any significant differences for either the coach firing situation or the nuclear waste situation. Thus, Hypothesis 1 cannot be supported either on the basis of the question of ethics or the actions recommended for the public relations director.

However, an analysis of recommendations yielded significant differences when examining just the coach firing and the nuclear waste situations, $\chi^2(4, N = 109) = 13.36, p < .01$, providing additional support for Hypothesis 1. As shown in Table 4, 48% felt the public relations director should go along with management's requests with 62%



Table 4. Percentages Recommending Each of Five Possible Responses to Requests to Keep Situation Secret

	Coach Firing	Waste Site	Mean Percentages
Explain management's position to the media and go no further.	61.7	32.0	48.2
Give the media real reasons.	5.0	16.0	10.0
Resign the position and not talk with media.	13.8	12.0	12.7
Resign the position and tell media why.	1.7	10.0	5.5
Other.	18.3	30.0	23.6

responding to the coach-firing situation recommending this action, whereas only 32% recommended a similar strategy for the nuclear waste. Only 10% thought the public relations director should tell the real story, with 5% responding to the coach-firing situation and 16% responding to the nuclear waste situation advocating that position.

Thirteen percent recommended that the public relations director should resign and not talk to the press (13% from the coach-firing situation and 12% from the nuclear waste situation); 5% recommended resignation and telling the real story (2% from the coach-firing situation and 10% from the nuclear waste situation). Twenty-three percent offered alternative recommendations (18% from the coach-firing situation and 30% from the nuclear waste situation).



Discussion

Ryan and Martinson (1984) discovered that public relations practitioners respond differently to various moral and ethical dilemmas, and reported that many believe they are accountable to "an authority higher than management." The study reported here provides some replication of Ryan and Martinson's results. The results also indicate that media students hold baseline ethical-moral postures similar to public relations practitioners studied previously.

However, it also appears that the experience practitioners have in decision-making situations helps them tackle decisions that must be made in the area of ethics and morals. We believe that students surveyed reflect the average student and that such students do not possess the same degree of ethical-moral decision making *confidence* discovered among practitioners by Ryan and Martinson.

Perhaps practitioners who regularly have to make decisions in many aspects of their daily jobs are much more adept at responding to ethical-moral decision making. The practitioner knows he or she must make a decision and that decision, after a time, reflects the possible problems associated with ethical-moral problems. The student, however, must deal with some idealized form of experience, perhaps responding "if this were to happen to me I'd respond ethically."

Based on student responses, it appears their ethical decisions may be made on guidelines less rigid than those held by the practitioner. If this can be further verified through research sampling both professionals and students, it would provide considerable support for the argument that ethics should be taught in university-based communication programs. That the results of this research support those of Ryan and Martinson suggests that an ethical-moral baseline may exist which needs further examination. At what level should ethics be examined? What effect would a course in ethics have on decisions such as those asked in this research? Would such results differ from those of practitioners?



Although our study's analysis of a 5-point Likert-like scale differs from those used earlier, we believe it safe to suggest that media students apparently do not feel as strongly about concealing information as do the public relations practitioners. Of course, the idealistic and more theoretical viewpoints of the media students were expected to be less pragmatic than those of the practitioners. Because of scale differences, the degree of this difference cannot be assessed but it might make for interesting future research.

All in all, the media students in general seem to react similarly to the practitioners; however, there are differences in the degree of agreement or recommendation. In attempting to discover if differences exist between general media students and those intending to emphasize public relations studies, we examined responses from each group; no significant differences on any ethical-moral statement or recommendation for action were found.

This study leads to a number of questions which could be tackled in future research. Do nonprofessionals vary in the way they see public relations practitioners working? Do they see moral-ethical differences in vignette and situation? How close to or far from each other are these perceptions? What is the effect of a course in ethics?

This study sought to expand Ryan and Martinson's (1984) initial research on public relations practitioners to students—future users and practitioners of public relations. Based on the findings, it appears that both practitioner and student have a baseline ethical-moral position. Although no direct comparison can be made between practitioner and student, decisions by the student reflect those of the practitioner. Future research should examine how and why such decisions are made by both groups.

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