

Disliking public relations: Democratic ideals and the habits of ethical communicators

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Abstract

The paper uses the “habits of ethical communicators” model (Rubin & Yoder, 1985) and Wallace’s (1955) assertions concerning values inherent to belief in democracy to reflect on a single case of public relations advice offered to a high-profile footballer facing public scrutiny over an incident involving group sex with a 19-year-old girl. The paper suggests an explanation for the enduring dislike of public relations. It argues that, although public relations is broadly consistent with notions of freedom of expression and access to information, privileging the interests of those represented by public relations ahead of a greater good is antithetical to core democratic values.

Introduction: Communication carries its ethics within itself (Wallace 1955)

This paper explores a link between deeply held values and dislike of public relations. In particular, the paper revisits Wallace (1955) to identify connections between values inherent in communication practices and values that he argued are inherent in democratic ideals, including freedom of expression and the pursuit of a greater good over one’s own interests. Wallace (1955, p. 5) argued that “communication inevitably must stand for and must reflect the same ethical values as the political society of which it is a part”. Although public relations accords broadly with democratic values of freedom of expression and access to information, the norms of practice can violate other fundamental democratic values, and may help to account for the often poor credibility of the profession. Wallace’s (1955) assertions were developed further by Rubin and Yoder (1985) in their articulation of the “habits of ethical communicators”.

The paper uses Rubin and Yoder’s (1985) habits, and Wallace’s (1955) assertions concerning the values inherent in democracy, as a framework for analysis of the ethics of public relations communication. This framework of principles and values is used to guide a “reading” of public relations advice provided on a blog by a high-profile public relations practitioner to help a disgraced football identity restore his reputation and return to work in television. A single case does not represent public relations practice generally, but this is a rare case of professional counsel, which would normally be given in confidence, made public. The application of the framework to the details of the case helps to illustrate and explore matters relating to the ethics of public relations communication. The authors are not aware of similar previous use of Rubin and Yoder (1985) or Wallace (1955).

Dislike of public relations

The future of the public relations industry appears bright. Textbook public relations extols symmetry in public communication and mutually advantageous relationships, and public relations can be lauded as an essential feature of a healthy democracy. In Australia, a recent study of 10 leading newspapers found that more than 50 per cent of stories are “driven by some form of public relations or promotion” (Bacon & Pavey, 2010). In the United States, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts a 24 per cent growth in the number of public relations specialists between 2008 and 2018 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

However, in the democracies where its practice is commonplace, it has been argued that “public relations” is synonymous with the subversion of democracy (Miller & Dinan, 2007, p. 11), spin, deception and incomplete truths, and “most people do not like it” (Moloney, 2006, p. 1). According to Moloney (2006), public relations has grown immensely alongside marketing and computing over the past 40 years but has not grown in corresponding respect or status. As Fawkes (2009, p. 37) says, the “frequent claims that public relations works for the benefit of society need to be scrutinised and challenged . . .”

The ironically poor reputation of public relations is widely acknowledged by practitioners, academics, journalists and others. Among scholars, Moloney (2006) refers to the poor state of public relations’ own public relations, and a bias among public relations agencies, business and academics away from using the words “public relations”. On one hand, public relations is synonymous with the ability to “[throw] . . . a party or [make] a splash in the social pages of a Sunday paper” (de Bussy & Wolf, 2009, p. 380), but it is also synonymous with deceit, manipulation and unscrupulous tactics. Students of public relations themselves see the profession as mostly about “lying, manipulation, covering up the truth, or ‘spin’ of a message into something positive” (Bowen, 2009, p. 407).

The poor reputation of public relations practitioners also influences the way practitioners present themselves. De Bussy & Wolf (2009) found that only one in five public relations practitioners use the words “public relations” in their job title. They reported that:

despite the positions of influence and comparatively high salaries, PR practitioners appear almost embarrassed to acknowledge their field of practice. Public relations, it may be said, is the profession that dare not speak its name. (de Bussy & Wolf, 2009, p. 380)

It seems that public relations people and their employers know full well the value of their contributions to the entities they represent, but “the more socially sensitive PR people have doubts about reduced status through association with PR and there is evidence of a flight from the term towards substitutes, which usually use ‘communications’” (Moloney, 2006, p. 20).

The most important question about public relationship is its relationship with democracy (Moloney 2006)

Karl Wallace drew heavily on Aristotelian ethics when, responding to what he perceived were very public abuses of democracy by Senator Joe McCarthy, he wrote his guide for teachers of communication, *An ethical basis of communication* (Wallace, 1955). Wallace felt that the nation’s obsession with anti-communist ends led to tacit indifference to evil communication means. To aid the evaluation of communication and communicators, he

argued a need for clearly stated ethical standards of communication “that could be freely used by expert and layman alike” (Wallace, 1955, p. 4). He said that respect for dignity and worth of the individual, and pursuit of a greater good ahead of one’s own interests, are values inherent to a society’s belief in democracy. Wallace explains that these values lead to beliefs in fairness of opportunity and law, freedom without endangering others, and freedom of expression and access to knowledge:

A democracy demands that knowledge be made available to all, rather than to the few, it requires that the sources and channels of communication be wide and diverse, rather than limited and one-sided. It cannot tolerate restriction and distortion. (Wallace, 1955, p. 6)

Public relations industry and academic advocates argue that the “free flow of information” is a desirable outcome in a democracy—that public relations plays an important role in “making the activities and views of organizations and other entities accessible to the public through the media” (Simmons, 2007, p. 35) and that it contributes to social development through the facilitation of debate between organisations and their key publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 2001; Wilcox et al cited in Fawkes, 2006, p. 33). However, democracy is best served when the source of information is clear, depth is explored and motives are discussed. Communicators who aspire to democratic values must always ask themselves if they have concealed information or motives that would damage their case (Wallace, 1955). This open, transparent notion of communication is antithetical to much public relations practice, which is contracted and paid for as the “voice or shout of organizations and groups, or sometimes of only one person, struggling for advantage in a competitive world” (Moloney, 2005, p. 552). As House (1977) says, individuals are prone to subjectivity based on the logic of their own perspective, and to assert simplicity where there is complexity.

It has been argued that persuasion is an essential function of public relations (Linning, 2004), (Pfau & Wan, 2006), and that public relations practitioner interests are frequently best served when the source of information and its motives are not disclosed or discussed. Linning (2004) goes so far as to say that public relations’ greatest asset is its ability to secure third-party endorsement when self-promotion would diminish credibility. Through their media release material, for example, public relations practitioners often seek and obtain the implied credibility of independent journalism. Journalists are frequently blamed for “media release journalism” but, as resources for news-gathering and source-checking diminish, the onus of democratic responsibility shifts increasingly to public relations not to take advantage of opportunities to present vested opinion as journalist-created news (Simmons & Spence, 2006). When sources are not checked or disclosed adequately, the information that flows from public relations is wont to favour the private interests of the entities that pay for public relations.

Rubin and Yoder (1985) argued that the human tendency to subjectivity makes ethics an important issue in the evaluation of communication. They drew on Wallace (1955) to articulate four “habits of ethical communicators”:

- the habit of “*search*” requires the communicator to explore the complexity of issues;
- the habit of “*justice*” requires the open presentation of information with “concern for distortion”;
- the habit of “*preferring public over private motivations*” requires the sharing of sources and disclosure of “biases that may influence positions”; and

- the habit of “*respect for dissent*” encourages the voicing of “opposing viewpoints and arguments” (Shockley-Zalabak, 2006, p. 122)
 - respect for dissent embraces the idea that one can advocate a position with conviction, while staying open to new information and alternative views (Rubin & Yoder, 1985)

Shockley-Zalabak (2006) states that the habits of ethical communicators are appropriate for most organisational communication contexts. Wallace (1955) said that ethical communication guides apply equally to all communicators, whether in politics, business or professions. The habits are used here to analyse a leading public relations consultant’s blog post at a time when there was much media and community attention on footballer behaviour towards women. The blog advice was neither solicited nor paid for and was made publicly available, so we can’t be sure that it would be the same as advice paid for and kept private. It is, however, a public example of public relations counsel that is typical in its advocacy of client interests, and serves as a useful focus for discussion and analysis here.

A public relations response to a high profile social issue

In April 2009, a leading Australian Broadcasting Corporation investigative current affairs program, *Four Corners*, investigated allegations that Matthew Johns, a high-profile sports commentator and former national team player, had, during his professional rugby league playing days seven years earlier, led an incident where he and approximately ten of his teammates had sex with one 19-year-old woman. Having become aware of the investigation, the commentator appeared on *The Footy Show* (a football news, commentary and comedy program hosted by former professional footballers including Johns) several days before *Four Corners* was due to be broadcast, and announced and gave his version of the incident. One journalist’s account read:

Mr Johns has admitted he and some other Cronulla Sharks players had sex with the woman at a Christchurch hotel while on a preseason tour in 2002, and he insists it was consensual.

Police investigated the incident but no charges were laid.

Speaking on the Nine Network’s *Footy Show* on Thursday night, Mr Johns apologised to his family.

“For me personally, it has put my family through enormous anguish and embarrassment and it has once again. For that I can’t say sorry enough”, he said.

“But the police did investigate the situation at the time, the allegation, and there was no charges laid.” (Barrett, 2009)

Johns’ appearance on the *Footy Show*, followed by widespread media coverage, and then the report on *Four Corners*, created a momentum that led to further interviews and extensive coverage in New South Wales and other parts of Australia throughout May 2009. There were numerous important issues raised, including the attitudes of footballers to women, the responsibility of the sport’s governing bodies and clubs, the responsibility of professional footballers as role-models, abuse of power, Johns’ failure to apologise to the complainant, and the notion of “consensuality” in such circumstances.

Behind the scenes, public relations experts were advising Mathew Johns, his employers, and the governing bodies and clubs involved. One public contribution came from public relations consultant and public relations blogger, Trevor Cook. Cook’s blog post for 13

May 2009 focuses on restoring Johns' "reputation, his earning capacity and his self-respect". It is titled "What Matthew Johns should do" (Cook, 2009). Few would be surprised that a public relations blog would focus on the restoration of Johns' reputation. This, surely, is what public relations people do. But what does the post tell us about public relations when viewed through Wallace's (1955) ideas and the prism of ethical communication habits?

There were many possible issues and angles to write about. Cook takes the position of advisor to Johns, offering reasoned advice mostly focused on achieving a positive reputation outcome for Johns. That he focuses on Johns' needs highlights the role of public relations as servant of private interests, rather than a greater, collective good.

There is little display of "search"—of exploration of what had by this point become a very complex issue. On the contrary, Cook cuts through days of outcry, accusations and speculation to focus on restoring Johns' reputation. He advises Johns to take the initiative with a "three-point plan": "Apologise"; "Make restitution"; and "Make a difference". The advice read:

What Matthew Johns should do

May 13, 2009—8:41 am, by Trevor Cook

Johns' reputation is a key part of his future earning capacity. At the moment his reputation is sinking faster than the Irish economy. Sydney talkback callers are ignoring the Budget to keep talking about Johns. Even his well-meaning supporters are doing him damage with arguments like: "sure group sex is disgusting but . . ." Instead of bunkering down in Broome, he needs to do something about it, and fast. Here's a three-point plan:

1) Apologise. He doesn't have to admit rape or anything illegal. But he does have to apologise, and publicly, for any hurt or damage the woman has felt as a result of this incident. We all do this. We do something without intending any hurt, but if we subsequently discover our actions have hurt someone we apologise for these unintended consequences. It's called accepting personal responsibility not just for our intentions but for the consequences. Only children can get away with "I didn't mean it". If he apologises he will help the woman and he will earn respect from fair-minded people. Because we all stuff up, what you do afterwards is what matters. The good guys accept responsibility.

2) Make restitution. He should do something to help the woman i.e. give her some money to help with medical bills or something. This will again help the woman, but it will also demonstrate that his apology is sincere, and meaningful.

3) Make a difference. He should offer to help an organisation that deals with abuse of women, perhaps one that deals with domestic violence or rape or the plight of abandoned mothers. Anything that will show that he "gets it" and that he is determined to change his attitudes. This should include working with the NRL to help change the culture among younger players.

The plan will be hard to implement. Many people will scoff, that's why he needs to do more than a few words on the footy show. But the issue will go away if he does these things and he will have his reputation, his earning capacity and his self-respect restored. Surely, that's worth the initial embarrassment. (Cook, 2009)

According to Wallace (1955, p. 7), the habit of justice is based on

respect for truth and accuracy and respect for fair dealing. Neither can be disassociated from communication in a free society . . . because the health and welfare of a free society depend upon the integrity of the communicator.

Cook's communication advice shows concern for the appearance of integrity only. Essentially, he advises Johns to manufacture his response—to express regret in ways he does not necessarily feel. This public relations advice might aid his redemption, but does society or democracy benefit from a redemption based on artifice?

Rubin and Yoder (1985) and Wallace (1955) were writing for audiences that mostly comprised teachers of speech and communication. Rubin and Yoder (1985) emphasise the communicative habit of sharing information and disclosing bias that may influence position. For Wallace (1955), it is the habit of prioritising public over private motivation that is at the heart of democratic values. As public relations communication advisor, Cook's strategic focus is on Johns' private motivation to restore his reputation. Cook advises Johns to "demonstrate that his apology is sincere" and "show" that he wants to change his attitudes by giving money to the victim and contributing to changing culture among young players. Cook's advice is based on awareness of public antipathy towards the football player culture and behaviours they had been made aware of. But with the understanding that Johns' true attitudes may not have changed, the understanding of public motivations for culture change and prevention of future similar incidents become instruments for achieving Johns' private motivations.

The advice offered to Johns is also at odds with the fourth habit of ethical communicators, "respect for dissent" (Rubin & Yoder, 1985), which holds that an individual or organisation can advocate a position with conviction, while staying open to new information and alternative views. This assumes that the organisation or the individual is open to evolution of their own position. However, Cook's advice suggests that Johns cannot publicly assert an unchanged position with conviction, and achieve his private ends. He can only appease the prevailing, dissenting views. It can be argued, then, that this public relations advice recommends public appeasement for the sake of one person's public image, over and irrespective of personal evolution through reflection and understanding of dissenting views.

Discussion

We might reasonably argue that, at the time the blog was posted, Johns was being attacked by a bloodthirsty media that did not care about innocence, guilt or justice. They simply wanted stories and Johns the celebrity footballer was a useful villain. It seems reasonable to argue that, overwhelmed as Johns would have been by such scrutiny, he was entitled to advocates focused on his interests and expert at symbolism and pithy messaging. Whether he ever followed Cook's advice or not, within a year Johns was back on television, this time hosting his own show.

The paper here has been limited to a single case that may or may not be representative of general public relations practice. However, as an example of public relations communication, it is valuable as an illustration of apparently reasonable counsel that prioritises private motivation over public interest. In siding with the private, this instance of public relations advice is antithetical to deep-seated values that are integral to the democratic aspirations articulated by Wallace (1955). In other ways, the advice has also been shown to be inconsistent with Rubin and Yoder's (1985) habits of ethical communication. If Wallace's (1955) assertions concerning deep-seated democratic values apply today, and Cook's advice illustrates at least one approach to public relations practice (that may well be representative given his experience in the field), the analysis here may help to explain dislike of public relations, and serve as a useful model

for consideration in further research into ethical public relations practice. It may well be a sign of the efficacy of public relations practice that demonstrates sound consideration of public interests and client or individual interests, together with the habits of search, justice and respect for dissent, is a soundless component in the machinery of democracy. Perhaps it is the public manifestations of the more client-focused practice of “spin” public relations that somehow make their way into the public eye, further contributing to its poor image and public distrust.

Individuals and organisations are prone to view and evaluate situations through their own particular prisms of self-interest. Public relations practitioners, in pursuit of their strategic objectives and paid to advocate, are prone to reduce even the most complex debates to a client’s preferred focus, and to see and communicate only the positives concerning the entities they represent.

Even if PRs adopt a case-by-case ethical evaluation, they have to decide whether they are morally comfortable with this imbalance. If not, they should leave public relations work. (Moloney, 2005, p. 11)

It has been said that public relations might mitigate the perception of self-interest through pro bono work or by making its services more available to less well-resourced organisations and groups (Moloney, p. 2006). Fawkes (2009) explores notions of deep, honest self-reflection by the public relations profession. She says she doesn’t envisage “mass therapy”, or that public relations will “find God”, but that public relations should seek to situate its authority in a concept of society (Fawkes, 2009, p. 37).

Rubin and Yoder’s (1985) habits have been shown here to be a useful tool for evaluating the public relations advice offered to Johns. Future studies should perform similar analyses on larger, representative samples of public relations communication, and explore the utility of the habits with professionals, experts and lay people. The privileging of private client interests over public good seems irreconcilable with Wallace (1955). Future conceptual research should be undertaken to deepen understanding of the relationship between public relations and democratic values, and concepts of democracy that differ from Wallace (1955).

Perhaps the dislike of public relations can be mitigated by changes to practice that more closely resemble those of the habitually ethical communicator, exploring the complexity of issues, openly sharing information and sources, disclosing biases and encouraging dissent. But if we accept that some of the dislike of public relations derives from privileging private over public interest, then the dislike will be enduring. Despite what the public relations textbooks promote, the structures, traditions and habits of public relations practice are often at odds with habits of ethical communication, habits which in themselves could help earn respect and credibility for the profession.

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