

Public Relations Journal Vol. 7, No. 3
ISSN 1942-4604
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Is Ghost Blogging Like Speechwriting? A Survey of Practitioners About the Ethics of Ghost Blogging

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Abstract

Based on the support of 71.1% of the public relations practitioners in our online survey (total $n=291$), there is a general consensus in favor of undisclosed organizational ghost blogging, provided that the ideas for the content come from the stated author and the stated author gives content approval. Moreover, about half of the practitioners in our sample who had organizational blogs (53.7%) indicated that the blogs were not written by their stated authors. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the practice is not necessarily ethical just because many practitioners believe it is and just because many practitioners are engaging in it. This study explores reasons to support undisclosed organizational ghost blogging and reasons to reject it, so practitioners can make an informed decision until more research can be conducted to determine whether audience deception is occurring and to determine whether radical transparency provides a strategic advantage with regard to ghost blogging disclosure.¹

A recent survey of public relations practitioners showed that about half (54 percent) of the 1,616 respondents believe that blogs *are* somewhat or very important to their public relations efforts, and most of the respondents (80 percent) believe that blogs

¹ The authors thank the International Public Relations Research Conference committee for recognizing this study with the Jackson-Sharpe Award, and we thank the Jackson-Sharpe Award sponsors, Likely Communication Strategies and Jackson Jackson & Wagner, for their support.

Special thanks also goes to the Public Relations Society of America for assistance with data collection.

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should be at least somewhat important if not very important to their public relations endeavors (Wright & Hinson, 2011). Considering the importance of blogs to many public relations professionals, it is not surprising to also learn that practitioners want to know more about how to “engage in a meaningful and transparent manner” online, and they want to learn more about social media policies that minimize risk and maximize effectiveness (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011, p. 327).

Although online practices such as astroturfing² have been established as unethical, considerable debate exists in the practitioner community about whether organizational ghost blogging is ethical (Paine, n.d.). *Ghost blogging* refers to the practice of writing blog posts on behalf of someone else who is stated as the author, and it can occur with or without disclosure of writing assistance³.

In this study, we differentiate organizational blogs from personal, organization-aligned blogs. An *organizational blog* officially represents an organization, such as General Motors’ FastLane blog (2011), which addresses the company’s products and services, in addition to “important issues facing the company” (para. 1). A *personal, organization-aligned blog*⁴ is a blog that is intended to solely represent the author’s opinions and not necessarily the employer’s positions, even though the author’s employer is mentioned on the blog. For example, IBM (n.d.) has a Web page that lists all IBM bloggers and states

As they’ll tell you themselves, the opinions and interests expressed on IBMers’ blogs are their own and don’t necessarily represent this company’s positions,

² Astroturfing occurs when public relations practitioners attempt to create the appearance of grassroots support by engaging in communication without revealing that they represent their employers (Young & Cook, n.d.). This strategy often involves paying others to engage in the communication. See Sweetser (2010) for a case study about astroturfing.

³ The idea that ghost blogging can occur with or without disclosure is based on Fleet’s (2009) discussion of the topic.

⁴ The term *personal, organization-aligned* blog is based on a discussion by Defren (2010).

strategies or views. But that doesn't mean we don't want you to read them!

Because they do represent lots of business and technology expertise you can't get from anyone else. (para. 1)

This study is focused on organizational blogs, specifically those in which executives are listed as the authors, even though the blogs are really written by other people.

Through an online survey, we explored public relations practitioners' views of ghost blogging acceptability to discover whether the public relations industry has crystallized behind a set of disclosure and transparency standards and whether there are distinctions in positions on this issue based on work setting or demographic characteristics.

Literature Review

Conversations about organizations happen online, and it is important for organizations to be aware of those conversations and participate in them (DiStaso et al., 2011; Teich, 2008). In fact, most public relations practitioners in a recent survey reported that they had found inaccurate information about their organizations in online chatrooms (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009). In addition to monitoring and participating in conversations outside of an organization's social media sites, companies such as Starbucks have found that it is advantageous to host conversations on their own blogs (Gallicano, 2011). Doing so allows organizations to prioritize stakeholders who want to directly engage in dialogue with them (Gallicano, 2011).

On a related note, a primary reason why organizations have blogs is to cultivate relationships with stakeholders (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kent, 2008; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Teich, 2008). Specifically, interactive blogs can ultimately result in trust and satisfaction (Kelleher, 2009; Terilli & Arnorsdottir, 2008; Yang & Lim, 2009), and they can be used to develop a personal connection with readers, encourage positive attitudes

toward the organization, and increase readers' intentions to promote the organization through word-of-mouth communication (Terilli & Arnorsdottir, 2008; Yang & Kang, 2009).

There are several other reasons why organizations have blogs. Blogs can be used to develop an organization's image (Gilpin, 2010), frame issues (Gilpin, 2010; Kent, 2008; Terilli & Arnorsdottir, 2008), and establish thought leadership (Terilli & Arnorsdottir, 2008), which can help with attracting new clients and helping to retain current clients (Porter, Sweetser Trammell, Chung, & Kim, 2007). Blogs can also increase an organization's media coverage through *media catching*, which occurs when journalists contact organizations because of content on the organizations' social media sites (Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010). In addition, blogs can be used during organizational crises to meet stakeholders' demands for frequently updated information (Coombs & Holladay, 2010).

There are several challenges to maintaining organizational blogs. One challenge is the time blogging requires (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011), which includes listening to the blogosphere, positioning blog posts within the context of previous conversations by bloggers and readers, generating a steady stream of engaging material, and responding to readers' comments. Also, an organization runs the risk of confronting online criticism by having a blog, and bloggers can be significantly constrained by their regulatory environments in terms of what they are allowed to communicate (DiStaso et al., 2011). There are also risks that an organization should be able to prevent with a good editing chain, such as the risk of providing information that is inaccurate, inappropriate, or confidential (DiStaso et al., 2011). Another challenge that can be overcome is employees' need for additional knowledge with regard to strategically using social media and measuring its impact (DiStaso et al., 2011; Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009).

Best Practices for Organizational Blogs

An organization should first begin with its objectives for the blog and make sure the audiences mentioned in its objectives are likely to follow the blog (Paine, 2011; Teich, 2008). Organizations should evaluate their blogs' success based on their objectives for it (Paine, 2011). Objectives should always specify audiences, and common audiences for CEO blogs include “employees, customers, investors, communities, regulators, and competitors – both current and future” (Terilli & Arnorsdottir, 2008, p. 5). It is important to create conversations in ways that interest audiences rather than pontificating about key messages or merely advertising products (Teich, 2008; Terilli & Arnorsdottir, 2008).

Organizations should also determine appropriate topics for the blog, a regular schedule for updating the blog, in addition to the blog's voice and tone (Teich, 2008; Terilli & Arnorsdottir, 2008). It is important for bloggers to create an intimate, personalized tone and conversational voice that encourages readers to get the sense that they are getting to know the author and getting a behind-the-scenes view of the organization (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Terilli & Arnorsdottir, 2008; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Xifra & Huertas, 2008).

In addition, studies have shown that overall, organizations need to do a better job than they are currently doing of using social media for two-way communication, as opposed to using it to merely broadcast information (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). A recent analysis of 45 CEO blogs concluded that nearly all of them embraced two-way communication; however, the study only made this conclusion based on whether readers had the ability to comment, rather than identifying statements in the blog that encouraged readers to leave comments and identifying two-way interaction in the comments section (see Terilli & Arnorsdottir, 2008). Organizations should engage in two-way communication on their blogs by asking readers for their opinions (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005) and responding to readers'

comments. The social media content itself must be compelling enough to inspire reader interaction, as well (Hovey, 2010; Yang & Lim, 2009).

Quality two-way communication reflects the five features of dialogue that Kent and Taylor (2002) described. *Mutuality* refers to having a collaborative philosophy. Organizations can achieve *propinquity* by discussing issues that affect stakeholders before decisions are made and by being accessible. *Empathy* results from creating an atmosphere of support, focusing on mutual understanding, and acknowledging the value of others. Quality dialogue also involves *risk* when organizations disclose information and are receptive to change. Finally, *commitment* occurs when organizations are honest and forthright and when organizations seek to understand audiences as opposed to treating them as opponents who they are trying to defeat.

Bloggers with a high readership demonstrate competence and often refer to other sources to add credibility to their arguments (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). In addition, popular bloggers contextualize their contribution to the blogosphere by providing links to what others have had to say about the topic at hand, and there is frequent reciprocation with linking to others who have linked to them (Teich, 2008; Terilli & Arnorsdottir, 2008; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). Popular bloggers also reveal their own talents while praising others (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005).

Ethical Considerations Regarding Organizational Ghost Blogging

Members of the public relations community should be familiar with the idea of achieving transparency by revealing their identity and motivation in public communication (Bivins, 2009). Public relations practitioners need to meet the standard of *substantial completeness* by providing the information a reasonable person would need to make an informed decision (Rawlins, 2009). They should consider questions based on Bowen's (2005) Kantian model for ethical decision making, such as whether they would accept the decision if they were in the reader's shoes. The question remains as to

how deep the disclosure needs to be – is it enough for people to identify a CEO with a blog, or do they also need to know that the ideas and content approval come from the CEO, but he or she did not write the blog post?

The most commonly used ethics policies and regulation guidelines in the public relations industry – PRSA, WOMMA, SMBC, and the FTC – emphasize disclosure (Sweetser, 2010), although they do not specifically address whether organizational ghost blogging should be disclosed. PRSA has given tacit endorsement, however, through two articles in *Tactics*, which is one of its publications. The first article was a question and answer column about whether ghost blogging is ethical. The author expressed that organizational ghost blogging is ethical, provided that the executive is involved in the creation of the post, the executive gives final approval of the product, and the blog post is not misleading (Subveri, 2010). The second article was about how to engage in effective ghostwriting, it explicitly mentioned ghost blogging as an example, and it emphasized the importance of getting feedback from the executive (O'Brien, 2011). Despite PRSA's current position on the issue, the organization believes that it is important to find out what practitioners think, as expressed by its willingness to recruit participants for this study.

Proponents for organizational ghost blogging use the same reasons that others have offered for ghostwriting speeches. Executives tend to lack the time and skills, and authenticity can be achieved by having them provide the main ideas and give final approval (see Sledzik, 2009; Subveri, 2010, for ghost blogging and see Auer, 1984; Einhorn, 1981; Riley & Brown, 1996, for speechwriting). After all, an organizational blog or speech is really about the organization, writers often possess as much core knowledge about the topic as the stated author, and an executive should use writers just as he or she uses other specialists for running the organization (see Defren, 2010; Nerad, 2010, for ghost blogging and see Einhorn, 1991, for speechwriting). Furthermore,

audiences are sophisticated and likely expect that someone has assisted the executive with the endeavor (see Nerad, 2010, for ghost blogging and see Riley & Brown, 1996, for speechwriting).

The debate about ghost blogging, however, is not so easily resolved. Critics of undisclosed organizational ghost blogging assert that the rules for social media differ from the rules for traditional tactics (Fleet, 2009; Harte, 2009). Blogging is a personal relationship-building medium. After all, “When did outsourcing your relationships become okay?” (Fleet, 2009, para. 5). Furthermore, ghost blogging can result in audiences making poor assessments of an executive’s skills and the organization’s future (Terilli & Arnorsdottir, 2008). Also, if audiences expect the stated author to be the real author, then ghostwriting deceives audiences and is therefore unethical (see Fleet, 2009; Harte, 2009, for ghost blogging and Bormann, 1956, for speechwriting). Notably, most case studies about unethical online practices involve concealing information (Martin & Smith, 2008).

In a climate where concealing information often results in a crisis due to exposure by the online community, there is a movement among professional communicators towards radical transparency (Beal & Strauss, 2008). In a public relations context, the term *radical transparency* is a philosophy for doing business that refers to putting transparency above all other competing values, with the exception of disclosing information that violates regulations or ethical principles. The idea is that radical transparency can result in increased trust, which can go a long way toward relationship building, especially given that corporate blogs are trusted by only 16% of the people who read them (Bernoff, 2008). This percentage climbs to 39% for people who have blogs themselves; however, this number is still low (Bernoff, 2008). Radical transparency is likely to only result in a competitive advantage when an organization is ethical and competitive in the marketplace. Otherwise, radical transparency could result

in people avoiding an organization due to its unethical practices or rejecting it because it is not a wise investment.

The practice of radical transparency can include but is not limited to “spill[ing] information in torrents, posting internal memos and strategy goals, [and] letting everyone from the top dog to shop-floor workers blog publicly about what their firm is doing right – and wrong” (Thompson, 2007, para. 8). Radical transparency also includes revealing policies for the organization’s operations (Anderson, 2006), which includes sharing the practices behind ghostwritten blogs or avoiding ghost blogging all together. In addition, radical transparency can involve inviting stakeholders’ input into organizational policies (Anderson, 2006); the resulting dialogue can contribute to the creation of an environment that supports ethical decision making (Bowen, 2004). Thompson (2007) described how Zappos practices radical transparency under the leadership of CEO Tony Hsieh:

A company-wide wiki lets staff members complain about problems and suggest solutions. Hsieh and other executives work at desks sprinkled among the banks of customer-service phone agents (“Anyone can hear our conversation,” Hsieh said when I called). If customers can’t find the shoes they want at Zappos, agents are encouraged to point them to other stores. (para. 15)

Clive characterized this level of disclosure as seeming “freakish” to some executives but commonsense within the philosophy of radical transparency (para. 15).

Radical transparency has gained traction in the public relations community. In a keynote address at the Institute for Public Relations’ annual dinner, Richard Edelman (2011) emphasized four principles for public engagement based on the example of former Johnson & Johnson public relations chief Bill Nielson, and one of the principles was to “practice radical transparency” (para. 4). In a PRWeek article, Ketchum president Rob Flaherty (2011) stated, “The era of radical transparency and instant mobilization is upon us and, as with every other sweeping change in society and communications, it’s

important for us as counselors to be ready to advise management on the implications” (para. 9). This sentiment was also expressed by Bob Pickard, president and CEO of Burson-Marsteller Asia Pacific. He commented, “We live in a time where there would be radical transparency and companies are unsure of how to proceed from here” (de Vera, 2011, para. 6).

In the spirit of radical transparency, communicators have suggested several alternatives to undisclosed organizational ghost blogging. Instead of having a CEO as an author, an organization could have a different employee serve as the author, or even a group of employees could be responsible for the organizational blog (Beal & Strauss, 2008; Fleet, 2009). Another option is for the executive to use a social media tool that he or she has time for rather than a blog, which tends to be particularly time consuming (Fleet, 2009). A third option is disclosure. Fleet (2009) offered this example: “I don’t write these posts, but I do read them and I stand behind them” (para. 8). Holtz (2011) offered a disclosure that included the fact that the content comes from the executive:

Welcome to my blog. Several times each week, I articulate my thoughts to Mary Jones, who runs communications for the company, and she posts them here ensuring that I make the points I want to make. But rest assured, while Mary makes me sound better, the messages you read are mine; they come from my heart and I read all the comments myself. (para. 3)

Despite these alternatives, a content analysis of CEO blogs suggested that ghost blogging could be widespread for organizational blogs that are purportedly authored by CEOs. The study revealed that out of 45 CEO-attributed blogs, 40 did not identify writers or editors other than the CEO (Terilli & Arnorsdottir, 2008). Given the time constraints of CEOs, it seems doubtful that most of them authored the blogs themselves.

Research Questions

Terilli and Arnorsdottir's (2008) content analysis provides initial evidence that undisclosed organizational ghost blogging is the norm; however, more research is needed because the sample was limited to only 45 blogs, and it is possible that the CEOs actually authored the pieces. Research is needed to discover the extent to which agreement exists about the professional acceptability of ghost blogging practices, especially considering the vibrant debates online (see Defren's 2010 post, which drew 60 comments and 106 tweets; Fleet's 2009 post, which generated 47 comments; Harte's 2009 post, which resulted in 70 comments; and Sledzik's 2009 post, which attracted 25 comments).

To investigate ghost blogging, we developed a multi-item scale that reliably and validly describes practitioner perceptions of ghost blogging acceptability. We then used this scale to explore the following research question:

RQ 1: Do public relations practitioners approve of undisclosed organizational ghost blogging?

Next, we looked for differences in ghost blogging acceptability across several dimensions through a second research question:

RQ 2: Do public relations practitioners' views about the acceptability of undisclosed organizational ghost blogging depend on age, gender, industry, the number of people employed in the practitioner's organization, or whether the practitioner's organization engages in ghost blogging?

Because extant literature suggests that professional norms are developed, in part, on the basis of one's understanding of how common a given practice is (e.g., Brinkmann, 2002), we also investigated a third research question:

RQ 3: Do public relations practitioners' views about the acceptability of undisclosed organizational ghost blogging depend on how common they believe the practice is?

Finally, we wanted to discover whether public relations practitioners are following best practices for ghostwriting in the context of blogs, so we posed the following research questions:

RQ 4: According to public relations practitioners who engage in ghost blogging, how often does the content come from the stated author?

RQ 5: According to public relations practitioners who engage in ghost blogging, how often does the stated author provide content approval?

Method

Following Institutional Review Board approval, the data for this study were collected through an online survey that was hosted on Qualtrics. Convenience sampling was used by partnering with the Public Relations Society of America. PRSA sent a recruitment email on our behalf and a follow-up email to a random sample of 3,609 members. A second follow-up email could not be sent due to PRSA's transfer to a new database system. Students and educators were excluded from the sample, and a screening question was also used at the beginning of the survey to disqualify students and educators from participation. No participants expressed that they were students or educators in response to the screening question. The survey was active for a 12-day period between September 20 and October 1.

The survey questions can be found in the Appendix. To understand how common a practitioner perceived ghost blogging to be, respondents evaluated four questions, such as "I think it's *common* for an organization to have blogs that list executives as the author, even though they are really *written by someone else*."

In support of a proposed ghost blogging acceptability scale, respondents evaluated four statements, such as, "I think it's *okay* for an organization to have blogs that list executives as authors, even though they are really *written by someone else* as long as the ideas come from the executives and the executives approve the message."

All questions related to perceptions of ghost blogging as a common practice and as acceptable practice were placed on 5-point Likert scales in which higher scores indicated higher levels of agreement. In addition, several questions were used to ask about any experiences the respondents had with ghost blogging. Other questions were devoted to demographics.

Of the 3,609 emails that were sent, 468 people viewed the email and 318 people participated in the survey. Questionnaires missing responses to five or more questions were deleted, resulting in an analytic sample consisting of 291 completed survey questionnaires. The total response rate (calculated by dividing the number of completed questionnaires by the number of e-mails sent) was 8.1%, which is an expected response rate for a survey that does not have an incentive. Response rates for other surveys of public relations practitioners have been 5.6% for Kang (2010); 11.9% for Porter, Sweetser, and Chung (2009); and 14% for Porter et al. (2007).

Below is a table that depicts the respondents' demographic information. Percentages are approximate. The years used in this study for categorizing generations (as shown in the table below) have been commonly used (e.g., Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010; Winograd & Hais, 2009).

Table 1

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

| Variable | Category | % | <i>n</i> |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|------|----------|
| Gender | Female | 61.5 | 179 |
| | Male | 36.8 | 107 |
| Generation | Not indicated | 1.7 | 5 |
| | Silent (born 1925-1945) | 1.7 | 5 |
| | Baby boomer (born 1946-1964) | 45.7 | 133 |
| | Generation X (born 1965-1981) | 42.6 | 124 |
| | Millennial (born 1982 or later) | 9.3 | 27 |
| Organization size | Not indicated | 0.7 | 2 |
| | 1 to 12 employees | 26.8 | 78 |
| | 13 to 50 employees | 10.7 | 31 |
| | 51 to 200 employees | 15.5 | 45 |
| | 201 to 1,000 employees | 12.0 | 35 |
| | >1,000 employees | 35.1 | 102 |
| Work setting | Agency | 19.2 | 56 |
| | Corporate | 33.3 | 97 |
| | Government and Military | 16.8 | 49 |
| | Nonprofit and NGO | 23.4 | 68 |
| | Other | 7.2 | 21 |

Research in this domain is in its iterant stages; thus, few reliable measures exist.

Therefore, the proposed ghost blogging acceptability scale was constructed based on a review of extant research and professional community commentary on public relations blogs in this area of interest. The blogs were located through a Google blog search with “ghostblogging” and ghost blogging” as the search terms. The five-item scale was constructed using the response means ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.92$). The measure demonstrated acceptable reliability, $\alpha = .84$.

Respondents were invited to add comments about ghost blogging at the end of the survey to avoid limiting practitioners’ contributions to the closed-ended questions we asked. There were 68 comments, which resulted in a total of 5,028 words. While reading all comments, five overall categories emerged: reasons why undisclosed organizational

ghost blogging should be accepted, reasons why this practice should not be accepted, the conditions under which the practice should be acceptable, the role public relations practitioners fulfill for ghost blogging, and blanket statements in support of the practice or against it without substantive information. The unit of analysis was the sentence, and all comments were placed into one of the five categories. During the process of sorting, comments were arranged by a bolded theme within each category.

Results

RQ 1: Views of Ghost Blogging

Most participants (71.1%) agreed or strongly agreed that it is acceptable to engage in undisclosed organizational ghost blogging, as long as the content comes from the stated authors and the stated authors give final approval. A substantial number (20.7%), however, disagreed or strongly disagreed, while only a small number of practitioners were neutral on this question (see Table 2).

Table 2
Views about Ghost Blogging

| | Strongly disagree (1) (n, %) | Disagree (2) (n, %) | Neutral (3) (n, %) | Agree (4) (n, %) | Strongly agree (5) (n, %) | M, SD |
|--|------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------|
| I think it's <i>okay</i> for an organization to have blogs that list executives as authors, even though they are really <i>written by someone else</i> , as long as the ideas come from the executives and they approve the message. | 15 5.2% | 45 15.5% | 24 8.2% | 150 51.5% | 57 19.6% | 3.65 1.12 |
| I think it's <i>okay</i> for an organization to not disclose the | 36 12.4% | 74 25.4% | 51 17.5% | 105 36.1% | 25 8.6% | 3.03 1.21 |

| | | | | | | |
|--|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| agency's assistance with writing <i>blog posts</i> under a client's name. | | | | | | |
| As a standard practice, any ghostwriting of employer executive or client executive blogs should be publicly disclosed. | 18 6.2% | 101 34.7% | 64 22.0% | 83 28.5% | 25 8.6% | 2.99 1.11 |
| I think it's <i>okay</i> for an executive to have a staff member write comments in reply to readers' comments on the executive's blog without a disclosure statement that it is a staff member responding on behalf of the executive, as long as the ideas come from the executive and the executive approves the message. | 34 11.7% | 69 23.7% | 24 8.2% | 136 46.7% | 28 9.6% | 3.19 1.24 |
| I think it's <i>okay</i> for an executive to have a staff member write comments in reply to <i>other people's blogs</i> without a disclosure statement that it is a staff member commenting on behalf of the executive, as long as the ideas come from the executive and the executive approves the message.* | 41 14.1% | 87 29.9% | 37 12.7% | 104 35.7% | 20 6.9% | 2.91 1.21 |
| *Note: 2 missing responses, 0.7% of total response category | | | | | | |

A more divisive question for respondents was whether an organization needs to disclose a public relations agency's assistance with writing blog posts under a client's name. Nearly half the of the participants (44.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that an organization did not need to disclose an agency's assistance with writing blog posts under a client's name, compared with 37.8% who disagreed or strongly disagreed.

A question that asked about whether organizational ghost blogging should be disclosed – without the details that an executive would provide the content and approve the blog post – resulted in a split of opinion, with 37.1% believing in disclosure and 40.9% believing that disclosure is not necessary.

The next question asked about the practice of having staff members reply to readers' comments on the executive blog. Respondents were told that in this scenario, the content would come from the executive and the executive would approve the ghostwritten comments. Slightly more than half of the participants (56.3%) agreed or strongly agreed that ghostwritten comments are acceptable, compared with 35.4% who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this practice.

Another question asked about ghostwritten comments; however, the comments would be placed on other people's blogs. Provided that the stated author provided the content and gave content approval, 42.6% of respondents found this practice to be acceptable, and 44% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this practice.

RQ 2: Influence of Demographics and Other Variables on Views

Independent samples *t* Tests were used to determine if perceptions of ghost blogging acceptability differed by gender and by whether practitioners actually engage in ghost blogging. In the first test, it was determined that there was a very slight difference among the genders in that women ($M = 3.20$) scored slightly higher than men ($M = 3.09$) on the ghost blogging acceptability scale, $t(282) = 0.91$, $p < .05$, meaning that they were

slightly more likely to believe that ghost blogging is an acceptable practice. In the second test, a fairly substantial difference in perceptions of ghost blogging acceptability was observed between those who engage in ghost blogging or work for an organization that engages in ghost blogging ($M = 3.55$) and those who do not ($M = 3.05$), $t(287) = 3.97$, $p < .01$.

Next, one-way ANOVA tests were used to determine if differences in the perception of ghost blogging acceptability existed between work setting, age, or size of the organization. In each case, no significant differences were observed. Specifically, there was no difference between work setting and perceptions of ghost blogging acceptability, $F(6, 282) = 0.73$, $p = .63$; there was no difference between organization size and perceptions of ghost blogging acceptability, $F(4, 284) = 1.86$, $p = .12$; and there was no difference between age (measured in terms of one's generation) and perceptions of ghost blogging acceptability, $F(3, 283) = 1.66$, $p = .18$.

RQ 3: Influence of Commonality on Views

Multiple regression analysis was used to discover the relationship between practitioner perceptions of ghost blogging acceptability and practitioner perceptions of how common ghost blogging is. Because the exploration of the differences in means indicated that those who engage in ghost blogging scored substantially higher on the ghost blogging acceptability scale, such individuals were controlled for in the regression model. To that end, the variable was dummy-coded so that those who did not engage in ghost blogging were assigned a 0 and those who did engage in ghost blogging were assigned a 1. The initial regression model, inclusive of only the variable describing the use of ghost blogging, significantly predicted 5% of the variance in scores on the ghost blogging acceptability scale, $R^2 = .05$, $F(1, 285) = 15.39$, $p < .01$.

The addition of the variables measuring practitioner perceptions of ghost blogging as a common practice significantly improved the model, $\Delta R^2 = 0.11$, $F(4, 281) = 8.94$, $p < .01$, in that the final model accounted for approximately 16% of the overall variance in the ghost blogging acceptability scale, $R^2 = .16$, $F(5, 281) = 10.58$, $p < .01$. As shown by the standardized betas presented in Table 2, the strongest individual predictor of scores on the ghost blogging acceptability scale was the variable that measured whether the organizations that respondents work for engage in ghost blogging. However, as a group, practitioner perceptions of ghost blogging as a common practice accounted for substantially more variance than the sole measure of whether respondents' organizations engaged in ghost blogging.

Table 3

Summary of Nested Hierarchical Regression Analysis for the Use of Ghost Blogging and Perceptions of Ghost Blogging as a Common Practice Predicting Ghost Blogging Acceptability Scale Score

| Predictor | Model 1 | | | Model 2 | | |
|--|----------|-------------|----------|----------|-------------|---------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>SE B</i> | β |
| Constant | 3.05** | 0.06 | | 1.04** | 0.35 | |
| Use of ghost blogging | 0.50** | 0.13 | 0.23 | 0.45** | 0.12 | 0.21 |
| Common to have a ghost blog | | | | 0.21** | 0.07 | 0.18 |
| Common to not disclose written by someone else | | | | 0.17* | 0.07 | 0.14 |
| Common to ghost blog response to reader comments | | | | -0.03 | 0.06 | -0.04 |
| Common to ghost blog responses on other's blogs | | | | 0.16* | 0.07 | 0.15 |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

RQs 4 and 5: Ghost Blogging Practices

Of the respondents, 41.6% ($n=121$) had at least one executive blog. Slightly more than half of the respondents who had blogs (53.7%, $n=65$) indicated that their blogs were not written by their stated authors. Thus, not enough participants had organizational blogs that were ghostwritten to make the results to research questions four and five meaningful. Consequently, the findings are reported with extreme caution and only provide a glimpse into ghost blogging practices. As shown in Table 4, nearly a third of the respondents (27.7%) expressed that the ideas for the blog content always come from the stated author, and most respondents (61.5%) expressed that the ideas sometimes come from the stated author. Content approval for the blog by the stated author is consistently given for the overwhelming majority of respondents (84.6%).

Table 4

Ghost Blogging Practices

| | Always comes from the stated author (1) ($n, \%$) | Sometimes comes from the stated author (2) ($n, \%$) | Rarely comes from the stated author (3) ($n, \%$) | Never comes from the stated author (4) ($n, \%$) | M, SD |
|--------------------------------|---|--|---|--|--------------|
| Ideas for the blog content: | 18 27.7% | 40 61.5% | 5 7.7% | 2 3.1% | 1.86 0.68 |
| Content approval for the blog: | 55 84.6% | 4 6.2% | 5 7.7% | 1 1.5% | 1.26 0.67 |

Comments Section

Reasons for accepting ghost blogging. Most participants who expressed that undisclosed organizational ghost blogging is acceptable emphasized the importance of content approval by the stated author and explained that executives lack time and writing skills. For example, one participant wrote

Even though executives can be competent as leaders of their respective organizations, it's common for them not to have the skill set or time to carefully plan and compose any public statement. ... I'm sure each CEO does not have an expertise in each discipline and relies on his/her experts. Public relations should be treated in the same sense.

This quote also offers an explanation that public relations practitioners are specialists that a CEO should rely on, just as he or she relies on specialists from other departments.

Many participants who approved of ghost blogging compared it to speechwriting and other tactics: "Ghostblogging by specialized writers on behalf of executives is no different from speechwriting or article writing for executives. Executives cannot personally perform every function in an organization."

Some practitioners who approved of the practice focused on the importance of assisting with messaging:

Quite frankly, sometimes it is the PR department that keeps the executive on track and on message. I've often reminded the executives what their company goals and objectives are and what the strategy is. WE are the lens that keeps the organization and the top executives focused.

In addition, some practitioners focused on the idea that the executive blog is really about the organization:

I think the one thing that probably should have been and is not addressed here is the role of the CEO as the spokesperson for the company. ... They owe it to their shareholders to put forth the best company image.

A couple practitioners explained that audiences are not being deceived because they should expect that professional communicators assist executives:

All forms of executive-bylined organizational communication products are near-universally presumed to have been ghost written by some professional

communicator, paid and charged to assist busy executives with writing chores so as to free these managers to lead their organizations, while also ensuring that public communications are timely, frequent, clear and compelling.

Reasons for rejecting ghost blogging. Most participants who rejected ghost blogging focused on transparency, integrity, and honesty as guiding values, and several mentioned that ghost blogging without disclosure was disingenuous:

I believe that it should be transparent that the thoughts and ideas in the blog are those of the executive, but that executive may indeed rely on the professional communicators in the organization to assist in assuring clarity of those thoughts and ideas.”

Another participant noted, “Integrity is the cornerstone of honest communication, and to essentially fabricate the source of a blog - or comments made on behalf of an individual - is deceit, plain and simple.” Expressing concern that audiences were being deceived, another respondent commented, “I do think the public feels lied to, horrified sometimes to learn that most of what is presented is written/conceived by staff who live behind a curtain.”

A small group of practitioners explained that ghost blogging is not an ideal practice because it is not as effective and because organizations face the risk that someone will expose the ghost blogging:

I think that you lose something with the ghost-writing as far as how the exec relates to the employees. AS an employee I would appreciate and likely read the blog much more if I knew that it was actually written by the person in question.

Another practitioner explained, “I think this creates a risk for the individual or organization that is using a ghost blogger or ghost tweeter should this practice be discovered.”

A handful of other practitioners focused on the idea that blogs are a relationship-building medium: “Social media is personal. Blogging should be done in the first person with the author clearly identified.”

Conditions under which ghost blogging would be acceptable. Several practitioners weighed in on the conditions in which undisclosed organizational ghost blogging would be acceptable, which ranged from never accepting the practice to having the executives write the first draft or having practitioners write the first draft that the executive then edits. Some people also noted that ghost blogging is acceptable except for writing comments on other people’s blogs. The following quote is an example of a comment from someone who believes that the executive should draft the blog: “At our firm, we insist that the author write the blog. We will provide guidance on direction and good grammar. We will track responses and ask for the appropriate response to be written by the client.”

The role of public relations. Many practitioners discussed the role of public relations in the process of contributing to an executive organizational blog: “As advisors for tone and intent, appropriateness and policy, we perpetuate the conversation. As communication planners, we gather data to feed into our broader communication program.”

Discussion

Results of the Research Questions

Based on the support of the large majority of participants (71.1%), there seems to be a general industry consensus in favor of undisclosed organizational ghost blogging, provided that the content comes from the executive and the executive provides content approval, although a substantial minority disagrees with this practice. When a similar question was asked that did not include the mitigating factors of content

involvement and approval by the stated author, respondents were almost evenly divided in their opinions about whether organizational ghost blogging should be disclosed.

There is also a substantial difference in opinions about related practices, such as whether to disclose a public relations agency's assistance (more practitioners said that it does not need to be disclosed than those who stood by disclosure) and whether ghost blogging can be extended to ghost commenting on the stated author's blog or ghost commenting on other blogs, even when the content comes from the stated author and the stated author provides content approval. There was more support for ghost commenting on the stated author's own blog than support for ghost commenting on others' blogs. Practitioners might be less inclined to accept ghostwritten comments because responses to comments are central to the process of personally building relationships and because readers might be less likely to expect that even the comments have been ghostwritten.

We found interesting results about the second and third research questions. A practitioner's generation, work setting, and size of the organization did not play a role in the degree to which he or she accepted ghost blogging. Although women were slightly more likely to accept ghost blogging, the result was too small to be an important difference. Thus, practitioner opinions about this issue do not vary across simple demographic categories and are, instead, a product of a complex approach to professional ethics. We did find, however, that people who engage in ghost blogging or who work for an organization that does are much more likely to find the practice to be acceptable, and people who think the practice is common are more likely to find it acceptable.

The final two research questions asked about the practices that practitioners follow for ghost blogging. To explore these two research questions, we narrowed down the sample to only participants who have organizational blogs that are ghostwritten. In

the process of narrowing down the sample, we discovered that 41.6% of the respondents have blogs, and we learned that about half of the respondents' organizational blogs were ghostwritten (53.7%, $n=65$); however, a substantial number were not (38.8%, $n=47$).

Because we did not have a high number of respondents who engage in organizational ghost blogging, the sample was not large enough to generate meaningful insights about the extent to which the ideas for a blog come from the stated author and the extent to which content approval comes from the stated author. Nevertheless, the only academic study we could find about ghost blogging was a content analysis of 45 CEO blogs (Terilli & Arnorsdottir, 2008), and the current study contributes to preliminary research about ghost blogging practices by revealing the results of 65 organizational blogs that are ghostwritten without disclosure.

The results were not bleak, but there is room for improvement. The ideas for the blog content always came from the stated author for nearly a third of the blogs, and the blog content sometimes came from the stated author for more than half of the blogs. Combined, 89.2% of the respondents expressed that the content at least comes from the stated author some of the time. Even more importantly, content approval for the blog always came from the stated author for 84.6% of the respondents, and while it is good to see that the vast majority are doing this, it is concerning that six executive blogs are rarely or never approved by their stated authors. In addition to these research questions, the comments section of the blog provided insights about reasons for and against ghost blogging.

Reasons for and Against Ghost Blogging

This is the first academic study to comprehensively explore reasons for and against undisclosed organizational ghost blogging. Terilli and Arnorsdottir's (2008) study is the only published academic study that has mentioned the debate, and it provided

only two reasons in favor of blogging (i.e., time and writing skills) and one argument against it (i.e., misleading audiences about a CEO's skills and a company's future). The parallels between the literature review (which was based on an educator's blog, practitioners' blogs, academic speechwriting literature, and Terilli and Arnorsdottir's study) and the comments section of this study suggest that the primary arguments on both sides of the debate have been captured by this study.

Many participants focused on executives' limited time and writing skills as reasons to support ghost blogging (see Sledzik, 2009; Subveri, 2010, for the use of these reasons for ghost blogging and see Auer, 1984; Einhorn, 1981; Riley & Brown, 1996, for the use of these reasons for speechwriting). Respondents also discussed how the blog was really about putting the best face on the organization, how practitioners often have a better idea than executives do of what the blog content should be, and the idea that practitioners are specialists that executives should rely on, just as they rely on other specialized departments (see Defren, 2010; Nerad, 2010, for the use of these reasons for ghost blogging and see Einhorn, 1991, for the use of these reasons for speechwriting). Respondents offered different views as to whether audiences expect the stated author to have written the blog post, which reflects the online debate about this point (see Fleet, 2009, versus Nerad, 2010). Arguments against ghost blogging included the importance of transparency, integrity, and honesty, in addition to viewing blogging as a personal relationship-building channel (also see Fleet, 2009, and Harte, 2009, for these arguments). In addition, practitioners noted that ghost blogging was not as effective as having an executive write his or her own blog posts, and exposure of ghostwriting could result in a loss of trust (also see Fleet, 2009, and Harte, 2009, for these arguments). The only reason mentioned in the literature review that was not included in the comments section of this study is that undisclosed organizational ghost

blogging could result in an incorrect assessment of a CEO's skills and a company's future (Terilli & Arnorsdottir, 2008).

Implications, Limitations, and Considerations

In the comments section, public relations practitioners frequently compared ghostwriting for blogs with ghostwriting for speeches; however, this comparison breaks down if content approval does not happen with each blog post. With speeches, an executive has reviewed the content by virtue of at least delivering it. The same control is not in place for ghost blogging, so it is up to practitioners to ensure that content approval always takes place. If an executive is traveling and does not have time for content approval, someone can update the blog to express the reason for the delay in posting content or, even better, a guest blogger can contribute a post to avoid disrupting the delivery of content.

This study lends empirical support to previous studies (e.g., Brinkmann, 2002) that have demonstrated that viewing a practice as commonplace influences whether the practice is viewed as ethical. The only logic behind this connection is that if a practice is commonplace, then perhaps the audience is aware of it and is therefore not deceived. Without audience awareness though, a practice is not ethical just because it is common.

Although there was a general consensus in favor of ghost blogging by the respondents (with a vocal minority opinion), it should be noted that because there is no sampling frame for randomly surveying the broad community of public relations practitioners, the findings cannot be generalized within a certain margin of error. Furthermore, because the results come from a sample of PRSA members, the results should only be seen as providing insight into the beliefs and practices of U.S. practitioners. More research is needed to explore this issue from the perspectives of practitioners from other countries, especially considering the global nature of large organizations.

Also, despite the general consensus in favor of ghost blogging, the question of whether the practice is ethical hinges upon whether readers find the practice to be acceptable and whether they expect an executive organizational blog to be ghostwritten (see Riley & Brown, 1996, for these points about ghostwriting speeches). This missing information would provide insight into whether practitioners' requirements for substantial completeness with regard to ghost blogging have been met just by having the content come from the stated author and by having the stated author provide content approval or whether a disclosure statement is needed about a public relations practitioner's assistance (see Rawlins, 2009 for a discussion of substantial completeness). Similarly, discovering this information would enable practitioners to know whether they are doing the right thing and whether dignity and respect are maintained for the audiences, which are key questions in Bowen's (2005) Kantian model for ethical decision making.

Thus, future research needs to explore the opinions and expectations of people who read executive blogs to discover whether audiences are being deceived or not (see Einhorn, 1981, for a call for this type of research in the context of ghostwriting speeches). Given the research reported by Bernoff (2008) about the low trust audiences place in corporate blogs, audiences could very well expect that ghost blogging is occurring. Nevertheless, it should be noted that even if audiences are not deceived, the lack of a disclosure statement contributes to the current climate of eroded trust regarding the authenticity of executive blogs (see Bernoff, 2008). Radical transparency could be the solution to the problem identified by the Institute for Public Relations (2011) regarding the need to restore "reputation in an environment of extremely low trust" (para. 3). If radical transparency is not adopted, this study makes the point that it is imperative for the stated author to always provide content approval for each blog post, and the blog posts must reflect his or her views.

A pressing question for public relations practitioners to consider is how effective undisclosed ghost blogging is (a question raised by Paine, n.d.) and whether a ghostwritten blog could be more effective than it would otherwise be by including a disclosure statement like the ones modeled in the literature review by Fleet (2009) and Holtz (2011). Experimental design research is needed to discover the effectiveness of radical transparency by comparing respondents' reactions to a ghostwritten blog with a disclosure statement versus a ghostwritten blog without one.

Until an audience survey and experimental design research is accomplished, public relations practitioners can weigh the arguments for and against undisclosed organizational ghost blogging, and they consider the alternatives to this practice, which are offered in this study.

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Appendix:

Survey Questions

The questions below were asked on the survey. People who worked for public relations agencies had slightly different wording on the questions seven and eight, which talked about agency help; these questions were asked from an agency perspective rather than a client perspective. The informed consent and screening question do not appear here.

1. Does your employer have at least one executive blog?

Yes

No

Skip logic: If no is selected, the survey jumps to question nine.

2. Are all of your organization's blogs *written* by their stated authors?

Yes

No

I don't know

Skip logic: If yes or I don't know is selected, the survey jumps to question nine.

3. Is there public disclosure that the executive blog(s) is *written* by someone other than the stated author?

Yes

No

I don't know

5. Content approval for the blog:

- Always comes from the stated author
- Sometimes comes from the stated author
- Rarely comes from the stated author
- Never comes from the stated author
- I don't know

6. Ideas for the blog content:

- Always come from the stated author
- Sometimes come from the stated author
- Rarely come from the stated author
- Never come from the stated author
- I don't know

7. Does a public relations agency help you with writing executive blog posts?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Skip logic: If no is selected, the survey jumps to question nine.

8. Does the organization disclose the public relations agency's help in writing executive blog posts?

- Yes

- No
- I don't know

Questions 9-17 had the following answer options: strongly disagree, disagree, neither disagree or agree, agree, and strongly agree.

9. Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement:

“I think it’s *common* for an organization to have blogs that list executives as the author, even though they are really *written by someone else*.”

10. “I think it’s *okay* for an organization to have blogs that list executives as authors, even though they are really *written by someone else* as long as the ideas come from the executives and they approve the message.”

11. “I think it’s *common* for an organization to not disclose a public relations agency’s assistance in writing blog posts under the client’s name.”

12. “I think it’s *okay* for an organization to not disclose a public relations agency’s assistance in writing blog posts under a client’s name.”

13. “As standard practice, any ghostwriting of employer executive or client executive blogs should be publicly disclosed.”

14. “I think it’s common for an executive to have a staff member write comments in reply to readers’ comments on the executive’s blog without a disclosure statement that it is a staff member responding on behalf of the executive.”

15. “I think it’s *okay* for an executive to have a staff member write comments in reply to readers’ comments on the executive’s blog without a disclosure statement that it is a staff member responding on behalf of the executive, as long as the ideas come from the executive and the executive approves the message.”

16. “I think it’s *common* for an executive to have a staff member write comments in reply to *other people’s blogs* without a disclosure statement that it is a staff member commenting on behalf of the executive.”

17. “I think it’s *okay* for an executive to have a staff member write comments in reply to *other people’s blogs* without a disclosure statement that it is a staff member commenting on behalf of the executive, as long the ideas come from the executive and the executive approves the message.”

18. In what segment of the public relations community do you practice?

- Agency
- Corporate
- Government/Public Sector
- Military
- Nonprofit

- NGO
- Other

19. How many people does your organization employ?

- 1-12
- 13-50
- 51-200
- 201-1,000
- Greater than 1,000

20. In what year were you born?

- 1945 or earlier
- 1946-1964
- 1965 to 1981
- 1982 or later

21. Please indicate your gender.

- Male
- Female

Thank you so much for your help.

Feel free to add additional comments about your opinions regarding ghost blogging.