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TRENDS

Trends in Public Relations: Exploring the Role of Ethics as it Relates to Social Media and Crisis Communication

Does public relations finally have its seat at the executive table? According to Steve Barrett of PRWeek, “The premise that inhouse [public relations] pros, and the agencies that support those inhouse teams, are an intrinsic part of the business and organizational planning process is no longer in doubt” (2016, para. 7). The chief executive officers who Barrett interviewed and who spoke at PRWeek’s annual conference, including Cleveland Clinic’s Toby Cosgrove, Girl Scouts of America’s Sylvia Acevedo and Big Machine Label Group’s Scott Borchett, understand the value of the PR function and lean on it heavily. Barrett claims, “the value PR brings to the table is undisputed” (2016, para. 8).

Now that public relations theoretically has its seat at the table, practitioners must use it effectively, which means having a handle on two of the most necessary, and challenging, elements of the practice, social media and crisis communication, and doing so in an ethical manner. St. John and Pearson (2017) suggest, “The need for ethical crisis management and crisis communications continues to be as pressing as ever” (p. xi). Yet, although the need for “how to effectively engage with publics via both traditional and social media in different types of crises with different forms of communication channels has been a critical question for both media professionals and communication scholars,” the theory-grounded research is scarce (Austin & Jin, 2017, p. 1). Four recently published books address this gap in the research by tackling significant issues—crisis communication, reputation management, social media, and ethics—in today’s practice of public relations. Two of the books (*The Moral Compass*, edited by Brigitta Brunner, and *Social Media and Crisis Communication*, edited by Lucinda Austin and Yan Jin) are volumes with contributions from familiar names across the discipline of public relations. In their debut book *Crisis Communication & Crisis Management: An Ethical Approach*, St. John and Pearson position ethical inquiry at the center of all aspects of crisis management by challenging readers to consider themselves moral agents. In the fifth edition of Kathleen Fearn-Banks’ *Crisis Communication: A Casebook Approach*, the effect of social media on crisis communication is enhanced while emphasizing the ideals and principles of doing what is fair and honest. All four of these books include a mix of theory and practice using case studies to illustrate the challenges facing the practice of public relations today. Let’s take a deeper dive into each book to better understand how they might impact teaching and research in public relations particularly, but also the broader field of strategic communication.

Fearn-Banks, K. (2017). *Crisis communications: A casebook approach (5th ed.)*. New York, NY: Routledge

Kathleen Fearn-Banks, a professor of communication at University of Washington, does not disappoint with the fifth edition of her popular crisis communication book. The book provides an insightful look into the practice of crisis communication management by applying theory to practice. The first five chapters provide a solid foundation for the fascinating field of crisis communication with an emphasis on the effect of social media. Fearn-Banks explains:

Crisis communications demands that one uses the best crafted message delivered by the most effective method to the precise public (audience). This has not changed. What has changed is the fact that social media make it possible for faster communication than traditional methods and to a very precise, often chosen, public. Whereas we used to have a “golden hour” to disseminate crucial information about a crisis, now we have a “golden few minutes” before publics expect information. In fact, publics generally

want information before it is available. The message still needs to be carefully written—mistakes on social media can live forever—but social media encourage rapid and frequent two-way communication between an organization and its segmented publics, without a gatekeeper. Social media can build positive relationships with these publics” (p. 1).

However, Fearn-Banks stresses that social media has not changed the demand for ethical and professional standards. A section on the Five Ws of public apology for celebrities and businesses has been added to the crisis communication theory chapter, while advice on avoiding multicultural crises has been included in chapter 3, which outlines communications to prevent crises. Chapter 5 specifically focuses on social media in crisis communications with the following: “Social Media in Organizational Communication: Thoughts, Tips and Tactics”; “Mini-Cases Studies in Social Media Crisis”; “Social Media Etiquette for Organizations and Individuals”; and “Online Communities and Crisis Communications.” Fearn-Banks also supplements several dated chapters with commentary from experts in social media who explain what could have been done if social media existed during the crises. In keeping up with the crises of the world, she added the following new case studies: “Police Departments and Community Trust” (community relations); “The Oso Mudslide in Washington” (natural disaster, media relations, community relations, government relations); “School Shootings: Communications to and for Children” (community relations and media relations); “Ebola Strikes Liberia – Firestone Strikes Ebola” (international/foreign); and “Nut Rage and Korean Airlines” (international/foreign). As in previous editions, three crisis communications plans are included in the appendices and all have been revised to include new technology. This descriptive approach to crisis communication management is grounded in theory; it includes both classic crisis communications case studies (e.g. Johnson & Johnson and Exxon) with recent case studies. It is a valuable resource for students, faculty, and practitioners interested in exploring the field of crisis communications.

St. John, B., & Pearson, Y. (2017). *Crisis communication & crisis management: An ethical approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

St. John and Pearson put ethical inquiry at the forefront of the discussion in their book. The authors underscore the importance of reflection when dealing with the complexity of moral issues related to crisis management and crisis communications. St. John and Pearson note:

Much to the chagrin of people who study ethics in depth and take seriously the view that ethical inquiry is important, ethics is often distorted or ignored by individuals or organizations seeking to achieve goals deemed more important, such as preserving or bolstering one’s reputation, making money, or gaining power (p. xii).

Thus, the focus is on a more deliberative approach toward crises that instills awareness of ethical concerns for the moral agents involved. The authors explain,

Our aim with this volume is to offer a starting point that will promote the ethically sound management of crises. Unethical behavior by a malevolent actor may precipitate a crisis or interfere with its resolution, but this is often not the case. A great deal of unethical behavior stems not from malevolence but from things like moral myopia, ignorance, or naïveté. An individual may be highly intelligent or talented in one or more areas yet fail miserably as a moral agent (p. 11).

The book is divided into three sections: “An Ethically Grounded Approach to Crisis Management”; “Case Studies”; and “The Future of Ethics and Crisis Management.” The authors provide a solid foundation for the integration of ethical theory and crisis management by defining key concepts and identifying relevant theories in the first three chapters. In chapter 1, St. John and Pearson define a crisis as “an event that is often unexpected, inherently disruptive, and greatly determined by the stakeholders of an institution” (p. 3). Ethical considerations for monitoring social media are highlighted in chapter

2, and chapter 3 explores frameworks, including consequentialism, nonconsequentialism, virtue ethics, and feminist approaches, for ethical decision making in the context of crisis management. The case studies included in section two are divided into the following categories of communication: health, environmental, advocacy, strategic, government, science, and technology. Students should recognize a handful of the cases, including “Apple and Workers’ Rights Abuse” and “The Costa Concordia Shipwreck,” but others may be unfamiliar. Yet, all present thought-provoking issues to consider. Each case study includes five sections: “Ethics Up Front”; “What Happened”; “For Deliberation”; “Putting It All Together”; and “Discussion Questions.” Additionally, St. John and Pearson include key features to supplement the cases. For example, David Guth, associate professor at University of Kansas, lends his perspective for the “Professional Voice” to the “Monsanto’s Defense of its Patented Seeds” case study by offering alternative paths for the company. The final section of the book offers a brief look forward by dissecting Shannon Bowen’s research on communication professionals and the dominant coalition. The authors conclude:

We have demonstrated throughout this volume that, contrary to the motives and practices described by Bowen’s study, communications professionals can and should make *good use of opportunities* (e.g., occasions to preserve or promote morally legitimate interests of previously unacknowledged stakeholders) presented by crises or emerging crises, without also acting *opportunistically*” (p. 197).

This book is relevant and appropriate for strategic communication students at both the undergraduate and graduate level. The approach is slightly different than the Fearn-Banks book because it does not describe the process of developing and delivering a crisis communications plan but it encourages students to critically and ethically analyze multiple crises that they may encounter in their professional practice.

Austin, L., and Yan, J. (Eds.) (2017). *Social media and crisis communication*. New York, NY: Routledge

There is no doubt that social media influences the practice of crisis communication across different organizations and industry areas. This volume, edited by Lucinda Austin and Jin Yan, provides a unique and timely contribution to how social media is impacting crisis communication. The authors write:

How to effectively engage with publics via both traditional and social media in different types of crises with different forms of communication channels has been a critical question for both media professionals and communication scholars. Crisis communicators facing high-stakes threats have an increasing need for evidence-based guidelines for crisis information to ensure the safety and welfare of publics and organizations and aid in crisis recovery (p. 1).

Given that this is the first book to comprehensively cover the joint topics of social media and crisis communication as a specialty applied communication area, the chapters cover a wide breadth of topics, including current/emerging issues in social media and crisis communication, overviews of dominant research streams, emerging theories and frameworks, areas for special consideration (including characteristics of crises, organizations, audiences, and communication), future directions, and applications in specific areas of crisis, including health, disaster, corporate, nonprofit/philanthropic, political, sports, and other specific crises. The authors used a variety of perspectives such as theoretical, empirical, review, and case study perspectives.

Not only do distinguished scholars in the field of public relations, such as Glen Cameron (social mediated crisis communication), Timothy Coombs (situational crisis communication theory), Shannon Bowen (ethics), Dean Kruckeberg (stakeholder awareness), Bruce Berger (public relations leadership), William Benoit (image restoration), and Patricia Swann (public relations management), contribute their voice to this volume but there are a handful of future scholars who make their publishing debut. This vast

collection of work illustrates the diffusion of social media as it relates to crisis communication, and provides a variety of global and international perspectives with authors based in countries including Belgium, China, Denmark, England, Finland, Hong Kong, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, the United States, and more.

Given the breadth of topics, this book appeals to a wide variety of audiences—students, practitioners, and scholars. This book should be on your shelf if you are teaching or researching social media and/or crisis communication. Not only will it inform your research, but many of the chapters can be used as supplemental readings for both undergraduate and graduate courses in strategic communication.

Brunner, B. (Ed.). (2017). *The moral compass of public relations*. New York, NY: Routledge

This edited volume by Brigitta Brunner, professor in the School of Communication and Journalism at Auburn University, centers on four areas of public relations' conscience in order to examine its role in morality and citizenship: civic professionalism, corporate social responsibility, ethics, and public communication. The book includes 15 chapters over three sections: "Moral and Civic Responsibility and Strategy"; "Moral and Civic Responsibility in Theory and Practice"; and "Moral and Civic Responsibility in the Digital Age." Brunner explains,

While many researchers call for focusing on ethics in public relations, they concentrate on ethics in relationship to how people do their jobs. However, the ethics and values of individual practitioners are not enough to serve the public interest in a responsible way; the field of public relations must support idealistic values such as contributing to informed debate, developing mutual understanding, and using collaboration to work for societal good (p. 1).

Similar to the way in which St. John and Pearson want to move moral agency to the focus of crisis communication management, Brunner takes ideas that have long been the public relations repertoire but gives them a polished perspective. This volume is an "attempt to resolve the uncertainty over public relations' moral and civic obligations to society" (p. 1). Brunner used the introduction to remind readers of the value of public relations in society by providing a brief digest of three key areas—corporations, organizations, and society; ethics, morals, and values; and public interest and civic responsibility—to set the stage for the forthcoming chapters. She concludes, "when public relations works in the public interest it demonstrates its moral integrity, professionalism, and commitment to civic responsibility" (p. 7). One interesting essay included in this volume is Michael Kent and Maureen Taylor's "Building an Ethic of Responsibility: Dialogue and Communitarianism as Public Relations Archetypes" because it suggests that while social media gives public relations the ability to bypass media gatekeepers and speak directly to key audiences, it also returns the practice to the early days of public relations that were focused on one-way, amoral, journalistic-in-residence practices. This seems to present an interesting struggle for current practitioners.

Like Brunner, I am hopeful the contributions in this book will bring about "discussion, debate, dialogue, though, and future research so these important ideas and concepts can ultimately better inform our body of knowledge and practice," particularly at a point in time when public relations plays a key role in all aspects of society (p. 9). This volume sheds light on key questions plaguing the field of public relations and will inform both teaching and research in the area of public relations.

Reference

Barrett, S. (2016, October 14). PR's value proposition is now undeniable. *PR Week*. Retrieved from <http://www.prweek.com/article/1412337/prs-value-proposition-undeniable>

Ethics Elsewhere

This feature offers briefs of ethics-related published scholarship in other fields, such as business ethics, environmental ethics, moral psychology, and neuroethics, to expand our understanding of how to think about ethical issues. The approach here is intentional to include scholarly research in cognate fields that complement media ethics research.

Chell, E., Spence, L. J., Perrini, F., & Harris, J. D. (2016). Social entrepreneurship and business ethics: Does social equal ethical? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 133(4), 619–625

The editors of this special issue explore the ethical nature of social entrepreneurship and businesses. They question whether social businesses are inherently ethical. Through collecting information from ethical and entrepreneurship perspectives, the authors found that even though social entrepreneurs may have good intentions, their pursuit to acquire capital or overcome other obstacles may result in unethical behavior. The authors leave the reader with fascinating questions about what it means to be a social entrepreneur and how social enterprises, particularly in a capitalist society, can be ethically funded while promoting the greater good for society.

Kaptein, M. (2016). The battle for business ethics: A struggle theory. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 1–19

In this article, the authors discuss the challenge that organizations face when striving to become ethical, especially in the face of internal and external temptations. This article seeks to develop a theory of struggle that provides insight about when struggle is needed and the outcomes that result from the inherent struggle of trying to be ethical. According to the author, without the presence of struggle, ethics gaps will take form, and the larger the ethics gap, the more struggle will be needed in order for an organization to be ethical. Using the Struggle Theory presented by the author, organizations can be viewed as ethics battlefields, where employees are motivated to keep fighting to act ethically in spite of temptations. In addition, the author suggests that using the struggle theory helps present a more balanced approach to ethics, as it shows ethical norms as dynamic, shedding light on the challenges involved with implementing new ethical norms.

Gino, F. (2015). Understanding ordinary unethical behavior: Why people who value morality act immorally. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 3, 107–111

In this article, the author discusses recent articles about behavior ethics and moral psychology on ordinary unethical behavior. According to the authors' findings, there are two types of research that have dominated the field, including research about people deliberately acting unethical and research about people unknowingly engaging in unethical behavior. Because unethical behavior can have damaging effects, the author suggests that morality is dynamic, meaning that people do not always act consistently in different situation, and even though people strive to be ethical, they have the ability to fail to be ethical in all situations.

Teper, R., Zhong, C. B., & Inzlicht, M. (2015). How emotions shape moral behavior: Some answers (and questions) for the field of moral psychology. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 9(1), 1–14

In this article, the authors explore how emotions affect moral behavior. According to the authors, the field of moral psychology has only considered moral judgments independently, with very few studies actually studying how emotions affect moral decision making. As one of the first studies to analyze emotion's role in moral behavior, this article draws upon empirical evidence from other studies to help explain how affective experience

drives moral action. The authors suggest that affective processes can impact moral transgressions, and they encourage future research to develop a theory to explain how emotions influence moral behavior.

Tobia, K. P. (2016). Personal identity, direction of change, and neuroethics. *Neuroethics*, 9(1), 37–43

In this article, the author discusses the story of Phineas Gage, a person who miraculously survived an iron spike penetrating his skull. According to the story, Gage was tremendously different after the accident, which suggests that he essentially lost his personal identity or true self. In light of the story, the author suggests that the direction of change, whether it being an improvement or a deterioration, can affect neuroethical judgments. Additionally, the author encourages people to consider the ways in which good and bad changes affect attributions of personal identity, especially since neuroethical decisions involve cognitive enhancements or deteriorations.

Olteanu, M. D. B. (2015). Neuroethics and responsibility in conducting neuromarketing research. *Neuroethics*, 8(2), 191–202

Given that neuromarketing research, or research studying the brain and consumer choice using brain scanning technology, has increased in popularity over the past decade, this article examines the ethical issues surrounding the use of people as subjects in neuroimaging studies. Because companies may not have the subject's best interest at heart, the author proposes a number of guidelines that neuromarketers should follow to ensure ethical behavior. Implementing ethics committees, protecting vulnerable populations from being subjects, and obtaining consent from participants are just a few suggestions that the author provides to encourage ethical neuromarketing.

Note

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