

Ethics 2.0: Social media implications for professional communicators

This paper examines ethical implications in the use of social media by professional communicators. Using its research into the experiences of New Zealand practitioners, it identifies major ethical challenges for the profession. It also illustrates how social media intensify ethical issues that public relations has struggled with in the off-line world. At the same time, it shows how social media open opportunities for increasing practitioner influence on organisational ethics in ways long desired by traditional practitioners and recently advocated by public relations academics. It concludes that, despite enabling a lack of transparency and easier deception, social media can help public relations both improve ethical communication with stakeholders, and gain a greater ethical leadership role.

Key words: public relations ethics, social media, ethical conscience, professional communicators in New Zealand

Background

Social media are revolutionising the way organisations communicate with their stakeholders. Activists, customers, employees, and other interested individuals have been able to gain access to organisations and to get their voices amplified in new, and less costly, ways. At the same time, managements, and those communicating on behalf of managements, have been able to reach out to many new publics and at least engage them in organisational discourses, if not dialogue.

Over the last decade, articles, books, and conference papers have tried to assess the implications of the technological revolution for public relations (e.g., Croft 2007; Duhé 2007;

Gillin 2007; Hallahan 2005; Hiebert 2005, Hyojung and Reber 2008; Scott 2007; Taylor and Kent 2010; Wright and Hinson 2008; Xifra and Huertas 2008). Some attempted to identify how the new tools could change how practitioners would carry out their jobs; and others focused on the pace of adoption of the new technologies. Some recommended strategies for using the new tools, while others analysed the dialogical nature of websites, blogs, and social media. However, amidst all the literature, discussions of possible abuses of the technology to manipulate, mislead, and incite public opinion remained rare.

Kirk Hallahan's pioneering chapter related to social media as 'the new frontiers of ethics and responsible advocacy' (2006: 108). More recent books on online communication provide more concrete ethical guidance. Brown's (2009) *Public relations and the social web*, for example, includes a short chapter on the new ethics, and mentions new codes offered by organisations such as the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) in the UK. The main ethical concern of those codes is around transparency and the disclosure of identity online: 'The CIPR Code identifies a number of issues such as "astroturfing"...which is the practice of falsely creating the impression of grassroots support.... The concept of full disclosure is important here because if you clearly identify who you are you can't "astroturf"' (ibid: 73).

Philips and Young go so far as to identify ethics in internet public relations as 'critical to survival' (2009: 91) for organisations and warn that 'untruths, half truths, hype and extravagant claims become reputation time bombs' (ibid: 91) in the new communication environment. In addition, Philips and Young note that: 'Crucially, social media brings greater possibility for interaction with a wider audience, with different expectations, norms and vulnerabilities. The implications of these changes need to be considered in terms of managing both internal and external relationships' (ibid: 222).

Employee relations offer another important challenge for professional communicators. Philips and Young (ibid) suggest that organisational communicators develop a 'clearly stated policy' to guide employees about their rights to use social media in the workplace, the impact of personal publications on organisational reputation, employees' ethical usage of social media, and other issues (ibid: 227-228). Organisations have to develop new policies to try to control

publicity, avoid public embarrassment, protect client privacy, and ensure the filing of records and transparent systems.

Related issues have also surfaced in communication industry publications (O'Brien 2009) and the general media. Examples include reports about organisations hiring public relations agencies to distribute messages online signed by fake 'innocent' bloggers (flogs) or Tweeters (Gogoi 2006; Weaver 2006), social media campaigns bypassing the off-line media editorial process by bribing young and inexperienced online publishers (Barry 2009; Brunell 2010), and abuse of social media anonymity to disguise identities, and to avoid disclosure of remunerations received in return for publicity, or relationships of publishers to interest groups or front groups (Coates 2007).

This paper investigates old-new ethical issues through the experiences of public relations practitioners. Drawing from evidence from practitioners employed at the new frontier of social media and faced with ethical dilemmas on a daily basis, it identifies the current major ethical topics on the profession's agenda and considers their implications for practitioners.

Legitimizing dialogue, ethical conscience, and mutuality

Legitimizing dialogue

This is not entirely unfamiliar territory: 'Public relations as a practice and as a field struggles with issues of social legitimacy, and connections to propaganda' (L'Etang 2009: 14). To be able to operate, organisations need to be accepted and approved by their stakeholders and society as legitimate and responsible entities. Practitioners use communication to achieve organisational legitimacy and the unethical behaviour of management or of public relations as a management function could result in legitimacy gap (Quesinberry 2005: 486) that could put the organisation's survival at risk.

However, we agree with others that the responsibility of public relations practitioners should go beyond survival issues. Bowen (2005: 294), for example, observes that, through such activities 'as public affairs and lobbying, issue management, political communication, corporate communication, military communication, investor relations, and activist communication,' public relations helps shape society and that this 'power to influence society means that public relations holds enormous responsibility to be ethical' (ibid: 294).

Before social media enabled organisations to conduct such direct and engaging conversations with stakeholders, Pearson (1989: 128) usefully linked ethical public relations with the notion of a dialogue:

Corporate public relations departments... are charged with the responsibility of managing the moral dimension of corporate conduct. This is because dialogue is a precondition for any legitimate corporate conduct that affects a public of that organisation... This is the core ethical responsibility of public relations from which all other obligations follow.

To set out conditions for dialogue Pearson (ibid: 125) cites Habermas (1970, 1984). Burlinson and Kline (1979) further interpret Habermas to offer prescriptions that remain relevant to the ethical challenges presented by contemporary dialogue tools:

1. participants must have an equal chance to initiate and maintain discourse;
2. participants must have an equal chance to make challenges, explanations, or interpretations;
3. interaction among participants must be free of manipulations, domination, or control;
4. participants must be equal in respect to power (Burlinson and Kline 1979: 423).

In line with Kline's first two prescriptions social media offer an opportunity for a dialogical pattern of communication between organisations and their stakeholders. However, reports on the manipulative and controlling usage of social media by organisational communicators indicate that we cannot assume that social media are automatically dialogical in nature.

Ethical conscience

Bowen (op cit: 296) expects public relations practitioners to act as the 'ethical conscience of their organisations' and to morally influence management and employees. Practitioners should not just represent management, but also wider stakeholders and be 'seen as naturally filling this organisational role because of their expertise in relationships building, conflict management, reputation management, and communication with publics' (ibid: 296-297). Serving as 'the ethical conscience' in this way would involve practitioners in training management and internal publics in ethics, and consulting about ethical aspects of management decisions.

In reality, however, public relations practitioners have little, if any, training in ethics, and their job descriptions rarely mention the role in maintaining ethics. In general, management does not seem to expect this service from public relations. Moreover, the profession has a negative reputation for unethically manipulative behaviour and titles such as 'spin doctors' and 'manipulators' are common in public discourse. Many incidents of irresponsible and deceptive practice support this negative image. Brown (2009) opens his chapter on 'the new ethics' by saying:

The public relations Industry has never been particularly celebrated for its ethics. In fact, we PR people are right up there with politicians and journalists in terms of how our honesty is perceived. To some extent, we only have ourselves to blame and in part it is because we allow the line between public relations, advertisers and publicists to become blurred (ibid: 67).

Critics of public relations perceive practitioners as part of a management team representing powerful organisations with access to significant resources. This advantage enables powerful organisations to control the public discourse via their public relations employees, and to corrupt the 'marketplace of ideas' in self-interested efforts to reach their objectives.

Coombs and Holladay (2007: 29) critically analyse the inherent tension for practitioners:

PR professionals are obligated to represent the interests of their clients. The concern for balancing the needs of society and the needs of clients produces a tension that may be difficult to manage. PR professionals may find it challenging to function as the 'conscience of the organisation' when the organisation is their employer.

The position of ethical conscience of the organisation faces other large challenges. For example, practitioners are not often included on the board and have limited influence on management decisions and so: 'they may not be able to truly let their conscience be their guide' (ibid: 44). Nevertheless, Coombs and Holladay (op cit: 32) do not see the situation as hopeless and advocate moral PR conduct inspired by an 'ethics of care'.

Mutuality

In the public relations literature on ethics, scholars tend to use two main philosophical

approaches: teleology, with a focus on the outcomes of the action; and deontology, which is based on duty, a system of obligations, and rights (see Bowen 2004, 2005, 2010; Hallahan 2006). Coombs and Holladay (2007) suggest a third approach called the ethics of care, which focuses on 'interdependence, mutuality, and reciprocity' (ibid: 32). The ethics of care recognises the importance of the web of relationships and thus 'fits well with our view of public relations as managing mutually influential relationships within a web of stakeholder and organisational relationships' (ibid: 32). As part of those ethics, Coombs and Holladay (op cit) advocate 'listening' as morally essential: 'Public relations practitioners must listen and utilize two-way communication to be ethical. Two-way communication sets the stage for mutual influence' (ibid: 48). This mutuality lies at the core of the greatest opportunities for public relations but listening is still not evident in practitioner discourses, let alone as having an ethical dimension.

Clearly public relations scholars have high expectations for ethical practice. The following research reports on how New Zealand professional communicators live up to scholar expectations and their experiences and ethical challenges in the new communication environment.

Social media and ethics in New Zealand

New Zealand is a useful location for such research because of the country's high ethical standing. The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), which is published annually by Transparency International (the global coalition against corruption), compares over 180 countries. The score of each country indicates the perceived level of its public-sector corruption. The 2009 index ranks New Zealand at the top of the index list as the least corrupted nation in the world (CPI 2009). Moreover, the number of practitioners who are members in the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) is also relatively high and this signals at least an espoused commitment to that organisation's code of ethics. This relative 'clean' environment provides a useful field for researching ethical issues since local practitioners would be expected to care about, and be sensitive to, ethical issues, and to identify deviations and corruption of ethical norms. It offers a useful benchmark for future comparative studies on ethics and public relations.

Ranked 22 out of 30 OECD countries, New Zealand is also defined as a developed country.

Although the adoption of the internet in general has spread relatively rapidly, the growth and use of broadband has been slow by international standards. Access to high-speed broadband lagged behind in the last two decades because of geographical conditions and market structure (Oram 2010) but by June 2009 the total number of broadband subscribers exceeded 1 million, or almost a quarter of the population. (Statistic New Zealand 2009). A national survey conducted by Attitude New Zealand reported in May 2010 that 78.8 per cent of New Zealanders aged 15 to 65-plus used Facebook. Twitter and YouTube were used by much smaller proportions of less than 2 per cent (Attitude New Zealand 2010). New Zealanders' use of social media also featured in an international study called the World Internet Project. According to this report, 13 per cent of New Zealanders maintain their own website and 10 per cent publish a blog (Smith et al. 2008: 313).

The New Zealand public relations industry is estimated to include several thousand practitioners, of whom 1,380 were members of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand in 2010. The pace of adopting social media as a communication tool has picked up only recently, in the last three years, but is growing. In 2009, Pursuit PR agency, as part of its international partner's Text 100 Global Survey, conducted a survey of New Zealand bloggers. Stephen Knightly (2009), the Director of Pursuit, reported in June 2009: 'only 67 per cent of bloggers (and we surveyed reasonably high-profile bloggers) have had contacts from PR representatives in the last six months. Only 30 per cent say they have contact at least weekly'.

A new professional group, which provides social media consultancy services to organisations, has recently appeared on the communication industry map. They are small, often individual-run operations that prepare tailor-made social media programmes for clients.

Research approach

To identify ethical issues, new and old, experienced by practitioners in the current environment, the authors conducted three interviews with practitioners who used social media professionally. Based on insights into potential ethical issues from those interviews, the authors organised two focus groups with communicators who had experience in using social media on behalf of organisations. Focus groups were chosen as a good way to listen to, and learn from, relevant people. Ethical behaviour

is a sensitive topic and hard to measure in any method. Nevertheless, the openness and the willingness to be self-critical in comments cited below offer evidence that the focus groups did encourage participants to share experiences.

Participants were selected by a purposive sampling method, mainly from a 2009 list of 37 members of the PRINZ in Auckland who expressed interest in social media when asked about it by PRINZ. The snowballing technique of sampling was used when members on the list referred the researchers to other practitioners who were using social media. The general population of users of social media among New Zealand public relations practitioners was limited during the research period (February-March 2010) and so the 21 participants in two focus groups provided a reasonable representation of relevant professionals at the time.

The first focus group was conducted with 13 participants in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city and business centre. The second focus group, which was conducted in Hamilton, the fourth largest city and a centre for rural farm services, contained eight practitioners. Both meetings were scheduled for one hour but lasted two hours because participants were keen to share their experiences. The University of Waikato's ethics codes were used to protect participant rights and, as part of that, the purpose of the focus group was explained in writing, in the oral introduction, and processes were put in place to protect participant anonymity.

Participant profiles

In the Auckland group, six of the participants were independent consultants (or worked for a private public relations agency), three worked for government, and one worked for a professional association. Two worked as independent social media consultants. Those who specialised in social media reported spending 75 to 100 per cent of their time on social media communication. Most of the other participants estimated 5 to 35 per cent of their working time was spent communicating via social media.

Amongst the eight participants in the Hamilton group, four practitioners were independent consultants or employed by a PR agency and spent from 15 to 50 per cent of their time on social media communication. One participant worked for a higher education institution, another one worked for an NGO, and two others for a company.

The focus group discussions

The discussions were facilitated and recorded by the authors. The same protocol was used in both groups and included nine major questions. Participants made many comments and shared experiences that did not always respond to the questions or directly relate to ethics. They sometimes spoke not as professional communicators but as individual participants in the social media conversations. Nevertheless, those comments were sometimes relevant to the purpose of this research.

The recorded discussions were transcribed and participant responses were analysed mainly by identifying significant ethical issues, dilemmas, and experiences in the social media environment.

Findings

The findings tended to cluster around the following issues:

Loss of control

A strong sense of loss of control over the organisation's message underpinned the discussions. Organisations had previously tried to speak with one voice and control the timing for the dissemination and the content of their message. The public relations practitioner was the vehicle for coordinating and strategising the organisational voice. In the new communication environment every employee is a potential publisher, and organisations are scrutinised by customers and stakeholders more closely and more quickly with fewer filters than before. Accordingly, there was less control. This was illustrated in practice by participant W's example: 'At a prize giving [event] two minutes after the prize giving it is all over the internet . . . so the organisation didn't really have the chance to take it through our normal channels.'

Practitioners also expressed concern over loss of control around employee relations. They expressed confusion about employee rights in relation to using social media and publishing information that might impact on the organisation. One communication co-ordinator for a non-profit organisation reported this concern around volunteer relations:

W: Big portion of our staff are volunteers and members, they are not paid employees...Two things that have come up in recent times: the first one is around privacy and what they can and can't say around [clients, who have privacy rights]. How do you regulate that as an organisation? And the

second thing is messages that go through social media versus us putting out communication about things.

Participant A described related difficulties in convincing management to use social media tools within the organisation: 'They [the board] are really worried that it is going to be a place to complain...we are starting to develop a policy around what we actually let staff post.'

The sense of loss of control was also obvious in discussing customer relations, especially in serving customers' complaints. Social media enable an easy and rapid spread of negative reviews and complaints so that practitioners have no time to check negative reviews before they are published and read by millions. Participant descriptions of their experiences exposed conflicting feelings. They welcomed social media dialogues as an opportunity to build relationships, but at the same time they lamented the loss of control over the message and the timing of its release.

Pearson's (1989) dialogue theory identified the dialogue between organisations and stakeholders as an essential dimension of professional public relations ethics. This study of practitioner engagement with social media actually reveals a tension between their need to develop a dialogue with organisational stakeholders and expectations that they manage the dialogue on behalf of the organisation. The effort to control actually pulls public relations towards less ethical practices than the pull towards dialogue. In effect, in increasing the pressure for a more dialogical approach, and less controlling approach, social media hold the promise of being a positive influence on the profession's ethics.

Transparency

In both focus groups the major issue mentioned in relation to social media ethics was transparency. Social media allow anonymity and a changing of identities that opens it to abuse, manipulation, and confusion. Communication campaigns designed for social media may take advantage of these conditions of easy concealment or masking to create false impressions.

Transparency is a major prerequisite for trust in the message and includes three issues: identity, remuneration, and relationships. In the off-line environment, professional communicators' codes of ethics insist that practitioners make full disclosure of who they are representing, who is paying for their communication services, and the nature of their relationships with the

sponsor. As a result: a news release has to carry the logo of the organisation; sponsorship has to be disclosed; and journalists are required to mention that their travel expenses were paid by a company, or that they were embedded with troops by army spokespeople.

To conduct ethical public relations practitioners make a commitment to avoid the use of front groups, but ghost-writing, for example, is a legitimate off-line public relations function used by speech writers. Now, however, social media campaigns are using amateur online publishers, such as bloggers, to deliver pro-organisational messages. Those web publishers, unlike journalists in traditional media, are not committed to ethical codes and tend not to disclose information about sources of payment for what they published.

Participants resented the fact that executives expect communication consultants to engage in online conversations on their behalf:

K: it is not my opinion – it is your [the CEO's] opinion that people want to hear. They want to talk to you; they don't want to talk to me pretending to be you.

J: I have actually refused work based on the fact that I was required to ghost type and I just was not prepared to do that.

One participant, whose work involves promotion of television programmes, described the organisational pressures:

O: I tweet and blog as a dog [a star of a children TV show]...we sell a lot of marketing around character blogs...They [programme sponsors] ask us to do certain things and they pay a lot of money for it. So how do you tell these little kids or whoever is reading the blog that their favourite puppy likes this kind of food when actually you know that it is eating something else?...Somebody is telling you you've got to do it. So you make the dog sit there and eat the dog biscuits and then you say: I have been eating such and such, and then it becomes true. I don't personally want to sit there and say 'I'm enjoying this' if it is not actually eating it, or it has never eaten it.

On the other hand, practitioners have to contend with fake identities used by communicators from competing companies to slander their organisations. Another participant experienced the false identity issue as a victim:

P: I've ended up in situations where the person on the other side is claiming to be a customer and in fact turns out it is actually someone working for another company [competition]. And that gets very sticky then...especially when they don't make it clear and it gets in the media as customer says 'company sucks' but, in fact, it is a competitor not a customer. I find it quite difficult to deal with...I can see how you could quite easily come along and decide, right, well I'm going to set up several fake identities and I'll now support my cause.

Tensions between the private and the professional

Another strong theme was the tension between the private and the organisational sphere. Practitioners said they were not sure what they should say on private online publications in case they jeopardised their commitments to the organisations they served and the brands they promoted.

Ethical training and ethical conscience of the organisation

Participants were surprised by a question relating to the scholar's expectations that they would take responsibility to ethical training and serve as the 'ethical conscience' of the organisation (Bowen 2005). They were simply unaware of this expectation. They saw themselves as already having to deal with many challenges and so would not consider adding such a serious task to their list of responsibilities.

One participant, a communication manager, reported that her organisation had a policy which was quite permissive:

P: We have got 1600 staff in the building. Every one of them wants to be an advocate. Why am I going to stop them? Why don't I give them the skills and the training and the tools to actually go out there and sell the brand and be on message?

P's argument responds to Bowen's (2005) expectations that public relations practitioners should take responsibility and function as the ethical conscience of the organisation. If social media move practitioners towards the training of employees, then there is the opportunity to set up a programme that will include ethics.

Codes of Ethics

Questions about the need for new professional codes of ethics stirred emotional responses from the social media consultants. They strong-

ly resented the idea of a code of ethics because that implied an external authority regulating their individual online freedoms. To them a code meant accepting external impositions.

C and J went so far as to resent the idea of a professional association:

C: I don't want to be a member of anything. I don't want to be part of anything. The joy of social media to me is that it is individuals, it is grass-root democracy, the communities are organic and they form naturally, but I don't want anyone to own it or structure it or tell me what is right or wrong.

P: you are the anti-social social media communicator? [laughter]

J: ... I would rather jump off a building than be [a member of an association], especially have these people as my spokespeople or claim that they were. It would be like, no. Just flat no.

These social media consultants were ready to consider a code of ethics only when presented with the example of the Word of Mouth Marketing Association code. This is an open online document to which members are encouraged to contribute all the time. To this idea the social media strategist responded:

C: If it is a Wikipedia style thing then yes, I would like it. But as soon as there is a chairperson or a vote or a speech then I don't want to go.

Most of the participants were members of PRINZ and thus committed to its code of ethics from the pre-social media era, but they had not entered into discussion with the social media consultants.

Libertarian discourses about online radical democracy represent new challenges for public relations as a profession seeking legitimisation. New social media consultants become part of the public relations function but are unaware of ethical responsibilities when they act on behalf of an organisation. This trend will become an obstacle to public relations aspirations to function as the 'ethical conscience of the organisation' (Bowen 2005).

Social media and change opportunities

One participant in each group spoke about social media as an opportunity to change management's attitude to ethics and to elevate the

professional communicator's status within the organisation. For example, the Director of Communication of the University of Waikato and former President of PRINZ, Lisa Finucane, said:

we have to be more ethical in how we behave because it is too easy to be caught out...

[We say to our employers] you can't do it [expect public relations practitioners to cover up for management failures] any more... That is what we have been saying we stand for over many years. You can't be any less than honest because as you know it is much easier to be found out... I think it [social media] is great for us...we can take a much stronger lead role.

In the other group, Catherine Arrow, Chartered Public Relations professional and specialist in digital communication, said: 'From a practitioner perspective, we have always been charged with advocacy, honesty, transparency and acting in the public interest – all included in the professional public relations associations' codes of ethics'. She went on to argue that:

Social media channels allow us to listen and engage more closely than ever before. In today's operational environment we inevitably become the internal advocate within the organisation, prompting change on behalf of the stakeholder, as well as being the external advocate for the organisation. Inevitably, this will mean practitioners will face ethical challenges as they present the stakeholder view to the organisation – a clash of 'public interests' if you will.

Not all participants saw the opportunity the same way. One participant, who did not wish to be identified, said he was serving political campaigns in which he had one commitment – to the client's success: 'We get things done so when it comes to social media when it is running a campaign with an agenda or a certain cause, then we will do what it takes to get a message out there'.

Discussion

Social media intensify ethical challenges familiar to those that professional communicators encounter in the off-line world. Ethical issues around organisational transparency were, and are now even more, a major concern. The loss of control over organisational messages, the time of distribution, and employee communication seem to be part of new communication world.

On balance, changing the practice to adapt to the new realities is likely to favour raising the profession's ethical standards.

As they make progress in adopting the new communication tools, New Zealand public relations practitioners currently seem to be confused, with regard to their organisation, about the rights and wrongs in online communication. The confusion is also manifested in their difficulty in drawing a line between private and organisational discourses.

However, some New Zealand practitioners also identified the new communication environment as a long-awaited opportunity for the profession. For them, this arises because the new communication environment increases organisational dependency on trustworthy communication with stakeholders. They felt empowered to provide advice about the ethical conduct of the organisation. In effect, they suggest that, once the management realised that the new reality would not allow cover ups, practitioners would be expected to deal with the ethical challenges for the sake of the organisation's survival. They would thus be supported to practise ethical public relations from the outset.

In terms of contemporary academic thinking, there is a significant deficiency in the focus groups – no one mentioned the use of social media for 'listening'. 'Listening' is about letting stakeholders' voices and concerns be heard before decisions are made and it is further enabled by social media. It is a major component of a dialogue and of Coombs and Holladay's (2010) ideas about an 'ethics of care' for guiding public relations practitioners (p. 32). The fact that participants did not welcome social media as a tool for listening to stakeholders' concerns indicates that dialogue issues are lower on the agenda than control issues.

There are positive examples of public relations using social media to help act as the social conscience of the organisation. The 'Ethical Idol' project, conducted for Cisco by a creative team from mPower Communications at the Network Inc. (Atlanta), aimed to raise ethics awareness among Cisco's 50,000 computer-using employees. In order to engage and excite employees about a new code of ethics, mPower Communications developed an 'Ethics Idol' training project. It is an interactive cartoon-based parody of American Idol, the popular television reality show. In it, animated employees sang about their ethical dilemmas and more than 10,000

employees participated as the new ethical code was well received (Singer 2008).

Incorporating social media tools into public relations professional services simultaneously opens opportunities for ethical conduct and presents risks for unethical practices. According to participants in these New Zealand focus groups, social media both increase the options for open dialogues between organisations and their stakeholders, and decrease public relations control over the message. However, they did not report the use of social media for increased 'listening' of organisations to their stakeholders. On the evidence of this research, the practitioners have not recognised 'listening' as a major asset of social media for improving ethical conduct and organisational legitimacy in public relations.

Conclusion

Even on the evidence of a relatively transparent society such as New Zealand, social media expand and intensify old ethical dilemmas. Participants, especially the veterans, could point to similar situations in off-line communication. But, according to this study, problems that were rare in traditional media are now a daily experience.

Social media provide organisations with dialogical tools that can enhance effective listening. We see the role of public relations practitioners as facilitating and opening the organisations to the new relationships. According to New Zealand practitioners interviewed in this research project, the ideal set by Coombs and Holladay (2007: 48) – that practitioners 'must listen and utilise two-way communication to be ethical' – would involve many challenges: to take responsibility and use social media to listen to stakeholders as part of a dialogue; to train employees and management; and to represent stakeholders' interests within the organisation. Social media could empower public relations practitioners to become ethical leaders of their organisations. By using the new communication environment to guide the organisations into increased transparency and social responsibility, and to listen to stakeholders concerns, public relations practitioners could elevate the status of the industry and enrich the role they play within organisations and in society.

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