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A Plea for PR Ethics Research

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A plea for PR ethics research

Kati Tusinski,
Research Chair

As people who have attended Bill Babcock's workshop can attest, some of the best events at AEJMC take place before the conference even officially begins. This year I attended a two-part workshop hosted by the Public Relations Division and sponsored by The Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication at Pennsylvania State University and Business Wire.

In the first session, Restoring Public Trust in Business: A Pre-Convention Dialogue, Roger Bolton presented the results of a major new study entitled "The Dynamics of Public Trust in Business: Emerging Opportunities for Leaders," which was released by the Business Roundtable Institute for Corporate Ethics and The Arthur Page Society. The report identifies new approaches that will better enable leaders to proactively build trust. Specifically, it recommends concrete actions that business leaders can take with respect to building mutuality, balancing power, and creating trust safeguards. Bolton provided a brief overview of the study and presented attendees with ideas about integrating the study into the classroom.

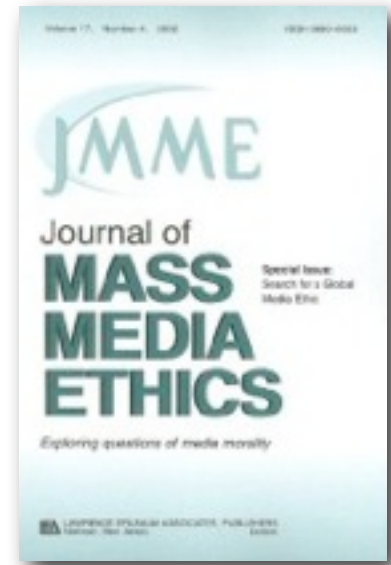
The second part of the workshop, Lessons in Corporate Social Responsibility from Practitioners and Educators stood out to me because it was the first (and only time

thus far in my academic career) that I had heard the terms corporate communication and social justice mentioned in the same sentence. At Marquette University (a Jesuit institution), social justice is at the heart of the university's mission, so when Steve Young, senior vice president at Wainwright Bank, spoke about the company's commitment to issues of social justice I was ecstatic. Wainwright's commitment to a progressive agenda demonstrates that corporations can engage in ethical business practices while still making profits. In my opinion, Wainwright is an exemplar of corporate social responsibility.

But how is this all related to research, what this column is supposed to be about? A deeper examination of issues, such as the ethics of stakeholder engagement, the connections between trust, corporate social responsibility and reputation, and the ethical implications of social media, are fertile areas of research for media ethics scholars interested in public relations. In the past 10 years, only 15 articles, seven of which were published in 2005 as part of a special topics issue on exploring ethics in public relations, have been published in the Journal of Mass Media Ethics.

At this year's convention, there were a number of papers presented in the Public Relations Division that meet the content requirements of JMME. Even though public

relations scholars have other outlets (e.g. Journal of Public Relations Research and Public Relations Review) for their research, I encourage my peers who examine issues related to public relations ethics, corporate social responsibility, trust and communication to consider submitting their work to JMME. Furthermore, I hope this piece might have sparked an idea for a future research study or a special call for next year's convention. I welcome any and all suggestions of how we can encourage and promote research that focuses on the intersection of ethics, trust, and corporate behavior.



The ontological status of the "unethical analysis"

Shannon A. Bowen, Syracuse
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A renowned media ethicist recently criticized an article¹ that I published, because I employed the term "ethical analysis." He argued that this erroneously implied that there is also an "unethical analysis." This comment begs the question: Is there such thing as an "unethical analysis"?

I would argue that unethical analyses are conducted more commonly than are ethical analyses. Everyone is familiar with the Enron collapse, so that case makes a useful example. Executives in Enron such as Andrew Fastow, Jeff Skilling, and arguably Ken Lay, engaged in explicitly unethical analyses. Their decision making was not done in familiar ethical terms, such as promoting the public good, creating virtue, upholding duty or moral principle, or creat-

ing a just or caring outcome. Their decision making factors were based on what might be called an "unethical" analysis. Researchers^{2,3} who closely studied the case determined that Enron's principles used factors such as, "Innovate at all costs" and, "How can I maximize my own gain at the cost of others?" or, "How can I deceive stockholders about the amount of debt the company has?" or even, "How can I charge a higher price for this electricity; potentially by routing it out of state before sending it back in-state with a tariff?"

Such questions demonstrate many of the components of analysis we recognize in moral philosophy; they set a clear priority in the objective, a consistent means of analysis, offer a yardstick for determining what is "good" (financial gain, in this case), and show a quality of rigor in the analysis, as opposed to apathy. These men were engaging in a self-serving and biased form of

moral analysis that we can call an "unethical analysis."

As ethicists, we spend so much time pondering the good and determining what is right, true, and so on, that we often forget the other side of the equation. We don't focus on how people arrive at decisions that are unethical. Perhaps we should spend more time exploring those concepts? Enron gives us a clear case of avarice, uncontrolled ambition, and deception for personal gain, decision making factors Kant labeled "prudential self-interest."

What about the cases that are less obvious, in which there are gray areas and compelling arguments on each side? Might some of these situations be complicated by unethical analyses? In Newton's law of mechanics, every action has an equal and opposite reaction. If ethical behavior is one side of that equation, should we focus time and attention on also studying the unethical