

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

College of Communication Faculty Research
and Publications

Communication, College of

2007

We Have All Been Here Before

John J. Pauly

Marquette University, john.pauly@marquette.edu

William R. Burleigh

Marquette University

E. W. Scripps

Marquette University

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/comm_fac



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pauly, John J.; Burleigh, William R.; and Scripps, E. W., "We Have All Been Here Before" (2007). *College of Communication Faculty Research and Publications*. 190.

https://epublications.marquette.edu/comm_fac/190

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Communication Faculty Research and Publications/College of Communications

This paper is NOT THE PUBLISHED VERSION.

Access the published version via the link in the citation below.

Journal of Mass Media Ethics, Vol. 22, No. 2-3 (2007): 225-228. [DOI](#). This article is © Taylor & Francis (Routledge) and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). Taylor & Francis (Routledge) does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from Taylor & Francis (Routledge).

Commentary 3: We Have All Been Here Before

John J. Pauly

J. William and Mary Diederich College of Communication, Marquette University

William R. Burleigh

J. William and Mary Diederich College of Communication, Marquette University

E. W. Scripps

J. William and Mary Diederich College of Communication, Marquette University

Ethical lapses abound in the Wal-Marting Across America case, and they are not hard to find. Once again (as so often in their profession's history) public relations practitioners disguised the provenance of documents they had created or commissioned. Recruited to help a controversial corporation manage its relationships with online critics who have denounced the stinginess of Wal-Mart's wages and health insurance benefits and the aggressiveness of its political lobbying, a highly regarded agency recommended a feel-good story of life on the road. When called to account for his firm's deceptions, the agency's president, Richard Edelman, acknowledged "our error in failing to be transparent about the identity of the two bloggers from the outset" (2006) but did not actually apologize for choosing

that strategy in the first place—that is, he treated the ethical failure as tactical rather than strategic. Indeed, Edelman's admission, in that same October 16 blog entry, that his agency “designed” the cross-country tour for Working Families for Wal-Mart directly contradicts the claim that blogger Laura St. Claire (2006) made in her final October 12 entry: that the idea for the trip was hers, and that the tour “just sort of came together.” Meanwhile, ethics codes proved toothless both before and after the fact. The code developed by the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA; 2005) did not prevent a prominent agency from behaving in a way that the code explicitly discourages. Even after the violation became public, the code provided no real sanction or corrective, beyond a promise from all sides to keep on talking.

At times the case has resembled a comic opera. The blogosphere uncovered the Wal-Mart/Edelman deception with ease. The trek across America barely lasted 2 weeks, and ended with all of the early postings taken down from the Web site. And the project created its share of personally embarrassing moments: for Richard Edelman, who had previously championed the principles of online transparency and responsiveness and was now being judged by the ethical standards he had helped to craft; for Steve Rubel, the Micro Persuasion blogger and social media guru whom Edelman had hired in February 2006 to help Wal-Mart devise sophisticated word-of-mouth campaigns for consumer clients (but who says that he was not at all involved in planning the Wal-Mart campaign); and for Jim Thresher, the *Washington Post* photographer whose work for the blog violated the newspaper's freelance policy and who was ordered by *Post* executive editor Leonard Downie, Jr., to remove his photographs from the Wal-Marting Across America Web site.

And yet some features of this case warrant further discussion. Concerns about the ethics of commercial blogging inspired the WOMMA (2005) code. (The group's name adds yet another comic touch to the case.) WOMMA's code includes three very sound principles that ought to have guided Edelman away from trouble. WOMMA suggests that honesty of relationship, opinion, and identity ought to guide corporate marketing campaigns. These principles are necessary although not entirely sufficient because they mostly invoke principles of honesty in advocacy and information transfer, rather than more deeply relational ethical principles such as listening, dialogue, or caring. But the WOMMA principles offer a useful starting place for discussions of the ethics of Internet marketing.

The case also raises interesting questions about the emerging social and political structure of the blogosphere. The operating assumption has been that the Internet resembles an open range, across which opinions flow freely without having to squeeze through the gates of editing and distribution. Certainly online information flows quickly and widely, but much of it flows through channels that large organizations have dug. Nor is it clear that the Internet always liberates opinion. At least one blogger (Taylor, 2006) has complained that some bloggers have accepted Edelman's explanation of his agency's behavior at face value. The familiar yearning for influence and social acceptance, which has shaped journalists' relationships with official sources for decades, has begun to shape bloggers' relationship to power, too. And some journalists have begun to report more comprehensively on the politics of influence in the blogosphere. For example, a recent issue of *The New York Times* (Glover & Essl, 2006) documents 13 presumably independent bloggers who in the recent election cycle received thousands of dollars to promote a particular candidate, but did not reveal their business ties to the candidate.

We should also think more deeply about the theoretical implications of corporate information and marketing campaigns. Much theory about the ethics of public relations continues to be framed in terms of advocacy and rights—that is, the right of an organization to defend its views and interests in the court of public opinion. In practice, however, this approach allows organizations to dodge any requirement of responsiveness (beyond answering an argument with an argument). The advocacy model might work if the opposing parties could match each other's intellectual and economic resources. But such is rarely the case. Sensing this unequal distribution of intellectual, cultural, and financial capital, we have turned in a spirit of hope to the Internet to even the odds. The Wal-Marting case suggests that such a balance may never arrive. The final posting of blogger Laura St. Claire (2006) expresses outrage at the ways in which Wal-Mart's critics fill the media with misinformation about the company. She argues that she and Thresher have been criticized, "Because we dared to write positive things about Wal-Mart. The people who hate Wal-Mart couldn't argue with anything we said—we were writing about real people and telling true stories."

St. Claire's appeal to the truth of her homespun (and spun) narrative raises one last theoretical issue. Should we assume stories to be automatically true if they are our stories, spoken in our voice, told about true and simple folks, and delivered with elaborate shows of genuineness and passion? Once again, our ethical theory focuses more on matters of information and truth—accurately representing the entire range of facts or representing reality in a verifiable way or avoiding lies. But cases such as this demand stronger theories of the ethics of storytelling. What does it mean when Wal-Mart, a quarter trillion dollar plus global company, traffics so freely in the rhetoric of rural simplicity? The iconography of the Wal-Marting Web site, like the company's advertising and branding, picked up this tone; for example, one frame featured an old-style "woody" station wagon with an Airstream trailer hitched behind.

In the United States, we allow great constitutional privilege and leeway to even the most extravagantly preposterous forms of corporate storytelling. We have agreed to minimize the legal means that can be used to control such rhetoric. But just as we hold one another accountable for the stories we tell (for the stereotypes we perpetuate and the gossip we inflict), so we ought to hold powerful corporations more ethically responsible for the stories they tell. Wal-Mart would be a good test case for such a theory.

References

- Edelman, R. October 16 2006. *A commitment* October 16, http://www.edelman.com/speak_up/blog/archives/2006/10/a_commitment.html
- Glover, K. D. and Essl, M. December 3 2006. *New on the web: Politics as usual*, December 3, 13New York Times.
- Laura. October 12 2006. October 12, http://walmartingacrossamerica.com/The_final_word.
- Taylor, D. October 16 2006. *Edelman screws up with duplicitous Wal-Mart blog, but it's okay?* October 16, 2005. <http://www.womma.org/ethics/code/>