Taking the Ethics Test

Young Kim
Marquette University, young.kim@marquette.edu

Taking the ethics test

Young Kim outlines a model for assessing the overall integrity of your message which spans the 'what', 'how' and 'when' of communications

I n public relations, ethics has been regarded as a critical issue and a vital principle[1]. From a philosophical and scholarly perspective, ethics may be defined as the study of what is right or wrong, fair or unfair, just or unjust; in a word, morality[2]. Public relations professionals are aware of the importance of ethics and have created and maintained a code of ethics to guide organisations toward ethical practices[3]. Despite these efforts, companies frequently have to deal with crises caused by unethical public relations practices.

Cases in point
Recent examples such as the scandals in American financial organisations (e.g., Enron, WorldCom), as well as crises in foreign companies operating in America (e.g., Toyota), have shown the importance of ethics in crisis communication[4]. In the early 2000s, Enron and WorldCom faced similar crises as a result of unethical financial practices; however, each company's crisis communications affected its reputation in quite different ways. Ultimately, Enron's reputation was damaged more than Worldcom's[5].

The Toyota recall crisis also demonstrated the importance of ethics when dealing with a crisis[6]. Between 2009 and 2010, Toyota Motor Corporation, the world's largest car maker, faced the most challenging crisis in its history when allegations arose that sudden unintended acceleration could bring about a fatal accident[7]. As it turned out, there was no evidence related to electronic problems in Toyota vehicles, yet the unethical crisis communication used during the incident damaged the company's reputation in the eyes of the American press and the public[8].

Thus, ethics are essential in crisis communication and must be taken into consideration in all public relations practices. Research about crisis communication ethics has received relatively little attention compared to other areas of communication or public relations. Surprisingly, not one study dealing with this topic appears in the totality of published studies from 1991 to 2009[9]. This gap between crisis communication and the importance of ethics was therefore the impetus for me to develop an ethical test.

Establishing ethical principles
I examined literature related to crisis communication, including theories, models and strategies, and established ethical principles in terms of what, how, and when essential elements must be employed for effective and ethical crisis communication, resulting in transparency, two-way communication, and right-time (TTR) test. The TTR model consists of the three principles: transparency (what), two-way symmetrical communication (how), and right-time (when). The TTR Test defines the moral boundaries of crisis communication and serves as a set of action-guiding principles spanning both moral consequences and effectiveness in dealing with a crisis.

Transparency (What)
The first principle of the TTR Test is transparency. Transparency is a measure of the degree to which organisational actions and decisions are ascertainable and understandable by a party interested in those actions or decisions[10]. It involves "the willingness and responsibility to try to give a meaningful and accurate account of oneself, or of circumstances in which one is involved"[11]. Nonetheless, the concept of transparency is not limited to just availability of information but also involves active participation in acquiring, distributing and creating knowledge[12]. Since there is always new information to gain or disclose as well as another side to every story, transparency is "an unending process" [13].

However, transparency in the TTR Test is a more specific standard value which organisations must show during a crisis than literal transparency in the ethics literature, because such disclosure of information should be required for responsible decision-making[14].

Transparency must be combined with trust and truthfulness. In public relations, trust can be operationalised as an organisation "doing what it says it will do"[15]. Specifically, trust is the belief that an organisation will do its utmost to meet stakeholders' expectations of the organisation, in particular, to reduce levels of uncertainty and stress for both stakeholders and victims in a crisis[16]. To maintain trust and to ensure that stakeholder expectations can

be met, an organisation must consider what stakeholders think about the organisation. In times of crisis, it should be truthful about its circumstances[17]. As recent cases including Enron, WorldCom, Nike and Toyota have shown, trust and truthfulness are essential for crisis communication. While Enron and Toyota did not meet stakeholders' expectations and lost public trust, Nike and WorldCom maintained that trust through their truthful communication[18].

Further, the concept of trustworthy transparency embraces being honest, candid and factually accurate from an ethical standpoint[19]. Transparency is an organisation's willingness based on responsible decision making to disclose information on its business, social and political activities, leading to a responsible openness of information that means "stakeholders can see what the organisation is doing and understand the reasoning behind its actions"[20]. In order to be transparent, public relations practitioners must acknowledge and respect the need for information and the interests of those with whom they communicate, consider the harm that may result from communication, counsel clients and employers to "tell the truth," and balance constituent interests with organisational interests[21]. Transparency in the TTR Test encompasses trust, truthfulness, candour, honesty and openness.

Two-way Symmetrical Communication (How)

Two-way symmetrical communication has provided the ethical base for public relations[22]. Since two-way symmetrical communication fosters understanding among all parties involved, it is considered as the ideal goal for which public practitioners must strive[23]. In practical models and theories of public relations ethics, use of two-way symmetrical crisis communication strengthens the conceptual base of the TTR test because it is based on a way of satisfying a moral duty to engage in dialogue[24]. Furthermore, two-way symmetrical communication plays a pivotal role as one of the principles of responsible advocacy in public relations[25].

Two-way symmetrical communication is basically assumed to include "telling the truth," "interpreting the client and public to one another," and "management understanding the viewpoints of employees and neighbours as well as employees and neighbours understanding the viewpoints of management"[26]. Its goal is to foster understanding and communication rather than to persuade the public and other stakeholders, and therefore, "exchange

information based on dialogue," as well as to create "balance between the organisation and public"[27]. Two-way symmetrical communication forms the basis of excellent public relations practice. According to Grunig, "excellent organisations 'stay close' to their customers, employees, and other strategic constituencies"[28].

In short, two-way symmetrical communication is characterised by the willingness of an organisation to listen and respond to its key stakeholders' concerns, interests, and actions; that is, using this form of communication can satisfy the organisation's moral duty to engage in dialogue[29]. Moreover, symmetry is an inherently ethical form of communication[30]. Two-way symmetrical communication can be achieved through ethical responses based on truth-telling and an understanding of all viewpoints during a crisis, which logically implies transparency. Therefore, two-way symmetrical communication in the TTR Test refers to a basic concept: it focuses on "an ethical response to a crisis"[31].

Right-time (when)

The old adage concerning the key principles of crisis communication, "tell it all, tell it fast," supports the notion that "when information gets out quickly, rumours are stopped"[32]. It seems as if promptness or immediacy, is a general rule in public relations practice. In1986, Johnson and Johnson Company was able to terminate a crisis relating to allegations of poisoned Tylenol quickly, limiting the damage and restoring credibility by providing the public with prompt response[33]. Also, the 1995 fire of Malden Mills in Massachusetts and a 1998 fire of Cole Hardwoods in Indiana demonstrated that an immediate response is a very important aspect of an effective, ethical crisis response, as it reduces uncertainty and stress amongst stakeholders and victims[34].

"This gap between crisis communication and the importance of ethics was the impetus for me to develop the ethical test"

Footnotes

1 Bowen, S. A. (2004). Expansion of ethics as the tenth generic principle of public relations excellence: A Kantian theory and model for managing ethical issues. Journal of Public Relations Research, 16(1), 65-92; Ki, E. J., Choi, H. L., & Lee. J. H. (2012). Does ethics statement of a public relations firm make a difference? Yes it does!! Journal of Business Ethics, 105(2), 267-276.

2 Palenchar, M. I., & Heath, R. L. (2006). Responsible advocacy through strategic risk communication. In K.R. Fitzpatrick, and C. Bronstein (Eds.), Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy (pp. 133-153). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

3 Bowen, S. A. (2004). Expansion of ethics as the tenth generic principle of public relations excellence: A Kantian theory and model for managing ethical issues. Journal of Public Relations Research, 16(1), 65-92; Ki, E. J., Choi, H. L., & Lee. J. H. (2012). Does ethics statement of a public relations firm make a difference? Yes it does!! Journal of Business Ethics, 105(2), 267-276.

4 Gower, K. K. (2006). Truth and transparency. In K.R. Fitzpatrick, & C. Bronstein (Eds.), Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy (89-105). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Piotrowski, C., & Guyette, R. W., Jr. (2010). Toyota recall crisis: Public attitudes on leadership and ethics. Organisational Development Journal, 28(2), 89-97.

5 Wright, D. K. (2006). Advocacy across borders." In K. R. Fitzpatrick, and C. Bronstein (Eds.), Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy (pp. 171-190). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

6 Piotrowski, C., & Guyette, R. W., Jr. (2010). Toyota recall crisis: Public attitudes on leadership and ethics. Organisational Development Journal, 28(2), 89-97.

7 Kell, J. (2011, January 4). Toyota sales drop 5.5% in Dec; 2010 sales slide from 2009. The Wall Street Journal. com. Retrieved from http://online.wsj.com/article/BT-CO-20110104-709115.html; Liker, J. (2011, February 11). Toyota's recall crisis: What have we learned? Harvard Business Review. org. Retrieved from http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/02/toyotas_recall_crisis_full_of.html

8 Piotrowski, C., & Guyette, R. W., Jr. (2010). Toyota recall crisis: Public attitudes on leadership and ethics. Organisational Development Journal, 28(2), 89-97.

9 Avery, J. E., Lariscy, R. W., Kim, S., & Hocke, T. (2010). A quantitative review of crisis communication research in public relations from 1991 to 2009. Public Relations Review, 36, 190-192.

10 Gower, K. K. (2006). Truth and transparency. In K.R. Fitzpatrick, & C. Bronstein (Eds.), Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy (89-105). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

11 Cotterrell, R. (1999). Transparency, mass media, ideology and community. Cultural Values, 3(4), 414-426.

12 Cotterrell, R. (1999). Transparency, mass media, ideology and community. Cultural Values, 3(4), 414-426.

13 Cotterrell, R. (1999). Transparency, mass media, ideology and community. Cultural Values, 3(4), 414-426; Gower, K. K. (2006). Truth and transparency. In K.R. Fitzpatrick, & C. Bronstein (Eds.), Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy (89-105). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

14 PRSA Code of Ethics. (2016). PRSA.org. Retrieved from http://www.prsa.org/aboutprsa/ethics/?utm_campaign =PRSASearch&utm_source=PRSAWebsite&utm_medium=SSearch&utm_term=ethics

15 Ledingham, J. A. (2003). Explicating relationship management as a general theory of public relations. Journal of Public Relations Research, 15(2), 181-198.

16 Seeger, M. W., & Ulmer, R. R. (2001). "Virtuous responses to organisation crisis: Aaron Feuerstein and Milt Cole." Journal of Business Ethics, 31, 369-376.

17 Gower, K. K. (2006). Truth and transparency. In K.R. Fitzpatrick, & C. Bronstein (Eds.), Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy (89-105). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Fitzpatrick, K. (2006). Baselines for ethical advocacy in the "marketplace of ideas. In K.R. Fitzpatrick, & C. Bronstein (Eds.), Ethics in public relations: Responsible Advocacy (pp. 1-17). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

18 Gower, K. K. (2006). Truth and transparency. In K.R. Fitzpatrick, & C. Bronstein (Eds.), Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy (89-105). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; McHale, J. P., Zompetti, J. P., & Moffitt, M. A. (2007). A hegemonic model of crisis communication. Journal of Business Communication, 44(4), 374-402; Piotrowski, C., & Guyette, R. W., Jr. (2010). Toyota recall crisis: Public attitudes on leadership and ethics. Organisational Development Journal, 28(2), 89-97.

19 Cotterrell, R. (1999). Transparency, mass media, ideology and community. Cultural Values, 3(4), 414-426; Gower, K. K. (2006). Truth and transparency. In K.R. Fitzpatrick, & C. Bronstein (Eds.), Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy (89-105). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; PR Coalition. (2003). Restoring trust in business: Models for action. Corporate communication international.org. Retrieved from http://www.corporatecomm.org/pdf/ PRCoalitionPaper_9_11Final.pdf.

20 Gower, K. K. (2006). Truth and transparency. In K.R. Fitzpatrick, & C. Bronstein (Eds.), Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy (89-105). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

21 Fitzpatrick, K. (2006). Baselines for ethical advocacy in the "marketplace of ideas. In K.R. Fitzpatrick, & C. Bronstein (Eds.), Ethics in public relations: Responsible Advocacy (pp. 1-17). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Place, K. (2010). A qualitative examination of public relations practitioner ethical decision making and the deontological theory of ethical issues management. Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 25, 226-245.

> "In order to be transparent, public relations practitioners must acknowledge and respect the need for information and the interests of those with whom they communicate"

Most research and case studies to date have focused on 'the initial response to a crisis' during the post-crisis phase. Unfortunately, there are currently no studies related to crisis communication that cover every crisis stage. The focus tends to be aimed at promptness or immediacy as the best way to conduct crisis communication, which makes it easy to overlook follow-up crisis communication with stakeholders[35].

Promptness or immediacy needs to be considered with more care when applying it to the life cycle of a crisis. An immediate or prompt response is obviously important, especially when it comes to post-crisis communication; however, crisis communication is essential at every crisis stage. Ethical crisis communication should continue throughout the life cycle of a crisis, which includes all three stages: pre, during, post[36]. Timeliness of communication is one of the factors critical to satisfying all stakeholder groups[37], and the more unpredictable the state of an event or the external environment, the more critical a timely response becomes[38].

Reynolds and Seeger[39] also urge timely communication, not just in terms of the immediate release of information to the public, but also recognising the emerging differences in communication exigencies and audiences at every crisis stage. Furthermore, the finding that the form of the crisis response, including its timeliness and consistency, is more powerful than crisis communication strategies based on denial, diversion, excuse, justification and concession at generating trust and relationship commitment, highlights the importance of timely communication[40]. Above all,

establishing the "right time" to circulate information is crucial to the effective transmission of messages. Crisis information should reach, in a timely fashion, every person who is at risk and wants to be informed[41]. Consequently, "right-time" in the TTR Test refers to the timing of communications and a prompt response throughout the life cycle of the crisis.

Taking the test

The TTR Test is a new ethical model for effective crisis communication drawn from three common variables from crisis communication literature and practices (what, how and when). The TTR Test has the potential to be a useful tool for simultaneously understanding effectiveness and ethics in public relations practices by helping PR professionals to develop solutions for unethical practices as well as to establish an effective crisis communication strategy. Furthermore, the application of the TTL Test to public relations enables practitioners to advance the communication profession as well as be effective and socially responsible[42].

YOUNG KIM

Young Kim, PhD is assistant professor in the Department of Strategic Communication at the J William and Mary Diederich College of Communication, Marquette University

young.kim@marquette.edu

22 Bowen, S. A. (2004). Expansion of ethics as the tenth generic principle of public relations excellence: A Kantian theory and model for managing ethical issues. Journal of Public Relations Research, 16(1), 65-92; Bowen, S. A. (2005). A practical model for ethical decision making in issues management and public relations. Journal of Public Relations Research, 17(3), 191-216; Fitzpatrick, K., & Gauthier, C. (2001). Toward a professional responsibility theory of public relations ethics. Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 16(2&3), 193-212.

23 Bowen, S. A. (2004). Expansion of ethics as the tenth generic principle of public relations excellence: A Kantian theory and model for managing ethical issues. Journal of Public Relations Research, 16(1), 65-92.

24 Bowen, S. A. (2005). A practical model for ethical decision making in issues management and public relations. Journal of Public Relations Research, 17(3), 191-216; Grunig, J. E., & Grunig, L. A. (1996). Implication of symmetry for a theory of ethics and social responsibility in public relations. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association, Chicago, IL.

25 Fitzpatrick, K., & Gauthier, C. (2001). Toward a professional responsibility theory of public relations ethics. Journal of Mass Media Ethics, 16(2&3), 193-212.

26 Grunig, J. E., &Hunt, T. (1984). Managing public relations. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

27 Grunig, J. E., &Hunt, T. (1984). Managing public relations. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

28 Grunig, J. E. (1992). Communication, public relations, and effective organisations: An overview of the book. In J.E. Grunig (Ed.), Excellence in public relations and communication Management (pp. 1-28). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum Associates.

29 Bowen, S. A. (2005). A practical model for ethical decision making in issues management and public relations. Journal of Public Relations Research, 17(3), 191-216.

30 Grunig, J. E. (1992). Communication, public relations, and effective organisations: An overview of the book. In J.E. Grunig (Ed.), Excellence in public relations and communication Management (pp. 1-28). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum Associates; Grunig, J. E., & White, J. (1992). The effect of worldviews on public relations theory and practice. In J. E. Grunig (Ed.), Excellence in public relations and communication management (pp. 31-64). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum Associates; Huang, Y. H. (2004). Is symmetrical communication ethical or effective? Journal of Business Ethics, 53, 333-352; Roper, J. (2005). Symmetrical communication: Excellent public relations or a strategy for hegemony? Journal of Public Relations Research, 17(1), 69-86.

31 Gower, K. K. (2006). Truth and transparency. In K.R. Fitzpatrick, & C. Bronstein (Eds.), Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy (89-105). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Fitzpatrick, K. (2006). Baselines for ethical advocacy in the "marketplace of ideas. In K.R. Fitzpatrick, & C. Bronstein (Eds.), Ethics in public relations: Responsible Advocacy (pp. 1-17). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

32 Seitel, F. (2007). The practice of public relations (10th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

33 Seitel, F. (2007). The practice of public relations (10th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

34 Seeger, M. W., & Ulmer, R. R. (2001). "Virtuous responses to organisation crisis: Aaron Feuerstein and Milt Cole." Journal of Business Ethics, 31, 369-376.

35 Coombs, W.T. (2015). Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding (4Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

36 Coombs, W. T. (2010). Parameters for crisis communication. In W. T. Coombs, and S. J. Holladay (Eds.), The handbook of crisis communication (pp. 17- 53). Malden, MA: Willey-Blackwell; Coombs, W.T. (2015). Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding (4Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications; González-Herrero, A., & Pratt, C. B. (1996). An integrated symmetrical model for crisis-communications management. Journal of Public Relations Research, 8(2), 79-105.

37 Strong, K. C., Ringer, R. C., & Taylor, S. A. (2001). The rules of stakeholder satisfaction (timelines, honestly, empathy). Journal of Business Ethics, 32, 219-230.

38 Sillince, J. A. (2002). A model of the strength and appropriateness of argumentation in organisational contexts. Journal of Management Studies, 39, 585-618.

39 Reynolds, B., & Seeger, M. W. (2005). Crisis and emergency risk communication as an integrative model. Journal of Health Communication, 10, 43-55.

40 Huang, Y. H. (2008). Trust and relational commitment in corporate crises: The effects of crisis communicative strategy and form of crisis response. Journal of Public Relations, 20, 297-327.

41 Wei, J., Zhao, D., Yang, F., Du, S., & Marinova, D. (2010). Timing crisis information release via television. Disasters, 34(4),1013-1030.

42 Johanessen, R. L., Valde, K., & Whedbee, K. E. (2008). Ethics in human communication (6th ed.). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.