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Ethical Decision Making and Reputation Management in Public Relations

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ABSTRACT
To support members who frequently grapple with ethical issues, a number of PR professional associations developed models for ethical decision making that they make available to members for reference and professional development purposes. However, the models put forward are, clearly, inadequate for tackling more complex ethical issues. The purpose of this study is thus to supply theoreticians and practitioners with conceptual tools for more effectively thinking through this complexity in ethics decisions. In meeting this objective, we initially set out a conceptual framework that comprises the model's field of application and theoretical underpinnings, as well as advanced techniques for weighting, balancing interests and managing reputation. In tandem with the theorization, we look at some applications for the conceptual framework through case studies.

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Levels of standards in ethics

In public relations, as in other professions, ethical issues generally arise from a gap with the standards that define an action's acceptability. These standards belong to distinct but related levels: the legal, deontological, moral, and ethical levels. The gap's symptoms are expressed in various ways. Personally, ethical problems can create fairly profound discomfort as a result of inner conflict. They can also lead to interpersonal conflicts that highlight differing values or diverging visions of the world or interests. A number of ethical issues also concern the sometimes challenging reconciliation of institutional standards, which are universal in scope, and occasionally rigid and slow to change, and individual standards that lie within unique and varied paths.

The ethical issues that arise from a conflict with legal standards, and therefore with the legislation enacted by societies' legitimate authorities (governments, corporations, public and private institutions, etc.) are resolved through an interpretation of legal texts in the framework of a hearing or more or less formal extra-legal mediation process. In terms of legal standards, the gap is especially critical for individuals insofar as it is frequently accompanied by sanctions (financial compensation, community service, prison, etc.). Deontological problems are akin to problems within the legal arena. Deontological standards are also placed in codes (codes of ethics or professional conduct) and, depending on the professional associations that enforce them, disciplinary sanctions are stipulated for members that do not follow them (CIPR, 2012; CPRS, 2011a; IPRA, 2011; PRSA, 2000).

Although the terms *morality* and *ethics* have similar etymological meanings, one from Latin (moral → moris → mores), the other from Greek (ethics → ethos → ores), the contemporary academic literature tends to differentiate between them (Grunig, 2014; Ricoeur, 1992; Velasquez, 1991). For the purpose of this article, *morality* will be defined as a set of standards that are imposed on an individual through his or her affiliation with a social group (nation, family, etc.). Moral standards, therefore, arise from a historical process, often influenced by religion, in which they are

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Table 1.

OPTION A: OBEY THE BOSS	OPTION B: STAND UP TO THE BOSS
Consequences = people affected + intensity + probability	Consequences = people affected + intensity + probability
Maintain loyalty and good relationship with the boss. High probability.	Strains in the relationship with the boss. High probability.
I keep my job with the company. High probability.	I lose my job with the company. Medium probability.
Discovery of the lie and negative impact on the company's reputation. High probability.	Preserve the company's reputation. Fairly high probability.
Public health issues as a result of company inaction. Medium probability.	Mitigation of public health impacts. Medium probability.
Civil suits due to breaches of environmental legislation. High probability.	Prevention of civil suits. Very high probability.

crystallized and transmitted intergenerationally through repeated social interaction (in particular, education; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Blumer, 1986; Durkheim, 1974). In this sense, moral standards are sometimes explicitly codified (in sacred texts, for example) and sometimes not. However, in all cases, they are heavily internalized by the members of the social group they apply to. As a result, the gap between an individual's actions and the morality of the group to which he or she belongs will also be penalized based on the interpretation of a specific moral code. In some cases, the moral sanction can be extremely severe (torture, death, etc.) and in others not as harsh (discrimination, stigmatization, etc.). However, it always takes the form of a rejection or rebuke that can be hard for the person it is aimed at to endure.

Ethics: beyond law, deontology and morality

To varying degrees, these levels of standards shape ethics in public relations. Yet some of the questions that arise for public relations professionals in the course of their duties cannot necessarily be resolved by solely looking to legal, deontological or moral standards. On the contrary, some such questions have their own specificity. Analysis there is not founded on an interpretation of written or codified standards that are then applied to individual cases. Nor will such questions lead to formal, tangible sanctions. However, questions such as these constitute the core of the ethical challenges experienced by public relations professionals and the organizations for which they work.

These questions center around three pillars that must guide ethical analysis and the resulting actions: (a) teleology (such as the search for the good), (b) procedural aspects (such as the rules of justice or fairness), and (c) personal qualities (like virtues). The first pole is generally associated with consequentialist ethics, inspired by utilitarian philosophy (Bentham, 2000; Mill, 1863; Parsons, 2004). The second pole is, instead, concentrated on the deontological theories inspired by Kant's philosophy (Bowen, 2004; Kant, 2003; Rawls, 1971). The third pole relates to the theories of virtue passed down by the philosophers of Ancient Greece, particularly Aristotle (Aristotle, 2004; Harrison, 2004). These three poles are incorporated into the decision-making model set out in this article. They characterize the specificity of what we could call the *field of ethical standards*. Resolving this type of problem does not involve interpreting a code, but instead relies on intuition, on occasionally complex analysis or reasoning that is based on the characteristics of a rational, independent agent (the decision maker) who is guided by freely acquired values or principles that attest to his vision of what is good, evil, or just. Understood in this way, ethics has a distinct reality, but is also located at the core of the other levels, because the standards that derive from law, deontology, and morality are also driven by the search for what is good and just.

A number of situations faced by PR professionals relate specifically to ethics: career orientation; the choice of a brand strategy; relations with colleagues, suppliers, and other stakeholders; charitable activities; corporate social responsibility; and so forth. PR professionals have no ready-made solutions taken from the articles of a code for these kinds of problems. On the contrary, they must identify options, weigh consequences, and find strategies for implementing solutions that must reflect their own values, or their organization's. A mistake will not necessarily lead to sanctions, except perhaps the burden of a conscience troubled by regret.

Issue

To support members who frequently grapple with ethical issues, a number of PR professional associations developed models for ethical decision making that they make available to members for reference and professional development purposes (PRSA, 2001). In contemporary public relations, "ethical competence" is now considered a core skill in good professional practice (CPRS, 2011b; GAPR, 2016). However, as we show, the models put forward are clearly inadequate for tackling more complex ethical issues (L'Etang, 2004).

For example, the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA's) Ethics Decision Making Guide proposes six steps in decision making: (a) Define the specific ethical issue and/or conflict; (b) identify internal/external factors that may influence the decision; (c) identify key values; (d) identify the public who may be affected by the decision and define the public relations professional's obligation to each; (e) select ethical principles to guide the decision making process; and (f) make a decision and justify. The steps the model identifies intersect with the stages found in other models in applied ethics (Wellington, 2009). They include analyzing the problem itself, and its consequences and constraints (particularly financial and legal), as well as the values or principles that must guide the decision. In general, a mechanism for justifying the decision with an appropriate rationale is added to the analysis and decision-making phases.

Failing further detail, the models offered to PR professionals do not provide all the conceptual tools for thinking through more complex issues. Influenced by Sullivan (1965) and Grunig (2001, 2014), among others, these days, public relations ethics argues for a professional practice that is based on symmetrical communication (dialogical) and a concept of loyalty that strives for a better balance between the interests of the client (or organization) and those of other stakeholders, particularly the public (partisan values vs. mutual values). In ethical decision making, such complexity manifests itself in at least three important areas: (a) ranking of consequences by impact and uncertainty, (b) balance of interests, and (c) management of the truth and reputation risk.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is thus to supply theoreticians and practitioners with conceptual tools for more effectively thinking through this complexity in ethics decisions. In meeting this objective, we initially set out a conceptual framework that comprises the model's field of application and theoretical underpinnings, as well as advanced techniques for weighting, balancing interests and managing reputation. In tandem with the theorization, we look at some applications for the conceptual framework through case studies. In conclusion, we synthesize the key points and look at further avenues for research into these matters.

Field of application of the model

The decision-making model presented in this section applies to all components of the PR professional's job in which ethical issues are likely to arise: interpersonal relations, organizational issues and external relations with stakeholders. To the usual variables in applied ethics decision making, such as analyzing the options and their consequences, this model adds variables that are of particular importance in public relations, i.e., the truth (defined later) and reputation risk. In general, decision-making models incorporate four levels: analysis, decision making, implementation/strategy, and evaluation/justification. For brevity's sake, only the first two levels are explored in detail. The other two levels are dealt with more briefly.

Foundations of the model

Most of the decision-making models proposed in applied ethics are fairly similar in terms of their basic stages. First, the material facts are set out, then the dilemma/problem/question requiring a decision is identified. From there, the decision maker identifies the available options, along with the positive and negative consequences associated with each option. The assessment of the consequences considers the parties (people, organizations, etc.) affected by the selection of an option, as well as the factors that act as constraints on the decision. Such factors include material constraints (financial and physical, for example), and intangible constraints (such as legal, deontological or moral standards). These stages are common to most problem-solving procedures (Restructuring Associates, 2008), in ethics and elsewhere. What differentiates ethical decision making is the importance given to emotion, on one hand, and principles or values, on the other.[1] This is why it is also necessary, in ethical decision making, to link the choices made by the decision maker to the target values or the principles that guide him. Every ethical decision must be lived with or justified, which means resorting to these values or principles, among other things.

Advanced weighting techniques

Essentially, once decision makers have pinpointed the ethical issue and drawn up a list of available options, they must then weigh the positive and negative consequences associated with each option. The evaluation is a qualitative one, as the following case elucidates:

> Case #1: You are a communications officer at a chemical plant located on the town's main river. One day, you discover that the town's wastewater management system is out of order, and that thousands of litres of toxic products have gone into the river. The fines called for by law are huge, and negative media treatment would have a considerable impact, if the media find out. Your superior quickly tells you that he wants to get a jump on the matter and set up a press conference that would misleadingly minimize the gravity of the situation. Cynically, your boss even wants to expand the firm's philanthropic endeavors to improve its brand image in the community. Your loyalty and environmental conscience face a tough challenge. What will you do? Follow instructions or object?

In this case, the options available to the decision maker (communications officer) are simple and provided in the statement of the case: either follow the boss's instructions or object. To assess each option's consequences, we put them in a Table 1.

Analyzing this case requires a qualitative comparison of the consequences, their impacts and probability. The exercise is quite feasible when the problem is not too complex, i.e., when measuring the impacts and probabilities is relatively straightforward. This case is fairly simple, even though it features a few difficulties. Clearly, obeying the boss has major short-term advantages, particularly in terms of the relationship. At work, it is best to maintain good relations with the boss. However, obeying him will lead to very harmful and highly probable impacts for many stakeholders. The risks of legal action (because of the breach of environmental legislation) and harm to reputation are decisive here. In such a situation, a PR professional has no choice but to resist the boss's demands. Of course, carrying out the decision (Option B) would require a strategy for maintaining good relations with the boss. Painting an accurate picture of the situation would no doubt be a first step in the right direction.

That being said, if we add further complexity and include several options, and several levels of impact and probability, it becomes extremely difficult for a decision maker to arrive at a clear and rational choice. As the amount of information to process increases, it becomes more and more difficult to break it down with the help of qualitative concepts (Farmer, 2015). In a complex environment, the best way to aggregate data to foster ethical decision making is to initially quantify the impact (or utility) of the consequence and its probability. One way to do so is to assign a monetary value to the consequence, by asking, "How much money would I be prepared to spend to have this consequence occur, or prevent it?" Decision makers can reply with an amount (for example $1,000 or $1,000,000). They then assign a probability to the consequence on a scale of 0 to 1, in which 1 is *an event that has a 100% chance of occurring* and 0 is *an event that has a 0% chance of* *occurring* (0.5 = 50%; 0.75 = 75%, and so forth). Using these figures, it is much easier to compare the consequences and measure the total utility of the options (for the method's details, see Farmer, 2015). It is a simple matter of multiplying the impact (monetary value) by the probability. This yields what applied ethics commonly calls expected utility (Mongin, 1997).

It is also possible to take it further, and quantify both a consequence's desirability, and the decision maker's attitude toward risk. These parameters can be useful in decision making, as they nuance some aspects of a consequence's global utility. Desirability is associated with the decision maker's personal wish to have a consequence materialize, or not, beyond its intrinsic utility independent of the decision maker. For example, in Case #1, the decision maker's (PR professional's) desire to please the boss to get a promotion could, in some cases, influence his judgement and prompt him to be complicit in the lie. Factoring in the attitude toward risk certainly helps make more informed decisions in many of the ethical issues PR professionals face, but this datum is harder to calculate.

Some applied-ethics decision-making models turn the analysis of an option's consequences into a comparison between lotteries, in which the values aggregate all data relative to impact, probability, desirability, and risk (Farmer, 2015). Generally speaking, however, to assess risk tolerance, a decision maker must ask how prepared he or she is to suffer an option's drawbacks to reap its benefits. A more risk-tolerant decision maker is often more motivated by the hope of a big gain than held back by a fear of negative consequences. Conversely, a more conservative decision maker is much more sensitive to the losses attendant on riskier decisions.

Another factor that adds complexity to the weighting of consequences lies in whether there is a need to consider *indirect* and *remote* consequences in making the decision. In analyzing the options, there are frequently consequences whose impact and spatial-temporal development are harder to predict. This generally occurs when a consequence has no immediate effect, but for which multiple causes add up to create an impact in the somewhat distant future. In public relations, evaluating such consequences appears to be tied to the reputation management strategy implemented by the PR professional. This strategy, in turn, can be tied to a closer analysis of networks and their reputational impacts (Yang & Taylor, 2015). We deal with this question later in this section.

Balancing interests

As we stated earlier, in making decisions, the need to achieve a better balance between the interests of the client and those of other stakeholders is currently a very strong trend in public relations ethics (Health, 2006; Kent & Taylor, 2002). This principle can be very difficult to apply, particularly when a public relations professional is working for an organization whose customer base (and reputation) are not yet established. In this case, in fact, the financial burden of each decision becomes harder to bear. In theory, it is easy to say that an ethical decision should not only favor the client's interests (Gauthier & Fitzpatrick, 2001) but must, on the contrary, balance the client's interests against those of all stakeholders. In practice, however, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve this ideal (Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Waddington, 2013).

In economics, cooperative game theory provides an interesting theoretical framework for dealing with this type of problem. It proposes a set of criteria for guiding decisions toward stable alliances between stakeholders. Unlike deontological approaches, which may fall into the trap of high-flown morality by disregarding maximization of personal interest as an unavoidable criterion in decision making, game theory helps understand how cooperation emerges, even in contexts in which each stakeholder seeks their own interest. In John Rawls' theory of justice (1971), for example, which lies within the current of Kantian ethics, the *maximin* rule secures the interest of all stakeholders. According to this rule, decision makers must identify the worst consequences for each option. They then select the option with the least bad adverse consequences. However, as Harsanyi (1975) showed in his famous critique of Rawls' theory, this decision-making rule often yields completely irrational choices, in part because it does not consider the events' probabilities, or the maximization of their global utility. For stakeholder cooperation to be stable over time, it must consider each party's interests, including financial interests, of course, and attempt to balance them. In other words, it must adopt certain rules of justice or fairness.

To produce such equilibrium, cooperative game theory (Binmore, 2005; Nash, 1950) sets out some criteria whose meaning is essentially formal (mathematical), but which can still be readily translated into plain language. In assessing his options, a decision maker who hopes to balance the interests of all stakeholders must ask four questions: (a) Does the option I'm choosing make collaboration (or solidarity) among stakeholders more advantageous (more desirable or profitable, etc.) than defection? (individually rational solution criterion); (b) is there an alternate option that allows at least one stakeholder to increase utility without diminishing utility for others? (Pareto optimality criterion); (c) if I put myself in another stakeholder's shoes (particularly the stakeholder who could be disadvantaged by the decision), will I still think that the decision rule selected is, overall, the fairest? (symmetry or reciprocity criterion); (d) am I selecting my preferred option solely in comparison with the other available options? (criterion of the independence of irrelevant alternatives). Considering all of these criteria will help the decision maker balance the interests of all stakeholders, select the most stable (because mutually advantageous) options, and nuance an analysis based only on the decision maker's interests. Indeed, these criteria add certain considerations pertaining to the equality of stakeholders (the symmetry criterion, for example) to the utility metric we showed earlier, and take into account their will to increase their own personal utility in decisions that affect them.

For a more concrete grasp of how these criteria can be incorporated into ethical decision making, let us look at a famous example of a consortium of multinational pharmaceutical firms that, in the 1990s, was grappling with a serious dilemma with respect to the organization's corporate social responsibility. Faced with this dilemma, they came up with a remarkable response for rebuilding their reputation. Their action was subsequently seen as the exemplar of a vision of social responsibility that was detached from simple profit-seeking and, therefore more respectful of other stakeholders' rights (Blowfield & Murray, 2014; Fields, 2012).

> Case #2: In 1998, a consortium of pharmaceutical firms sued the government of South Africa and Nelson Mandela. They wanted to prevent the distribution of generic HIV drugs. The generics sold for 98% less than the original drugs. The companies claimed they simply wanted to protect their intellectual property. However, some accused them of trying to control prices and depriving the poor of access to the drugs. In the end, the consortium dropped the suit and Jean-Pierre Garnier, president of one of the pharmaceutical firms that finally agreed to sell its drugs very cheaply, made a remark that made a lot of waves: "I don't want to lead a company that only takes care of the rich. Our company's primary goal must always be public health."

Clearly, the decision made by Garnier and GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) was not first and foremost based on seeking optimal profit and was seemingly motivated by concern for the interests of Africa's poor. This decision meets all of the criteria set out in cooperative game theory. It is individually rational, because the agreement gives populations the benefit of much broader access to drugs that improve their quality of life, while allowing the drug companies to avoid a costly suit and maintain good relations with a very lucrative market of several hundred million people with the highest prevalence of HIV in the world. Here, the drop in price is at least partially offset by the volume of sales. It is Pareto optimal, because none of the stakeholders can increase their utility (by lowering prices further or raising them) without causing a loss for the other party, jeopardizing the stability of their alliance. It is also symmetrical, in that the parties can switch positions without challenging the relevance of the rule of sharing. Lastly, it meets the criterion of independence, as the ranking of options did not depend on options that were not available (such as a bribe).

However, it is important to note that it would no doubt have been much more difficult for a company with less well-stocked coffers to make such a generous decision. In agreeing to lower prices, the drug companies undoubtedly reduced their profit margins in the short term, but they had the wherewithal to wait to recoup these losses over the long haul. This is not the case for smaller companies, which often do not have the capital to get through a storm of this magnitude without going under. In the latter case, a completely disinterested approach will harm their interests; such an approach does not meet the first criterion for a stable equilibrium (individually rational approach).

Truth and the management of reputation risk

As we have shown, multiple factors must be considered in ethical decision making. However, from a public relations perspective, every ethical decision comes with some type of reputation management. In other words, in an ethics decision, managers are charged with analyzing the financial aspects, and the organization's lawyers are responsible for the legal aspects. Amongst all of these factors, the management of image and reputation risk are what, first and foremost, fall within the PR professional's sole purview. With the internal and external communications strategies he institutes, a PR professional affects stakeholders' (employees, customers, suppliers, media, general public, etc.) perception of the organization (Doorley & Garcia, 2011; Hutton et al., 2001). This aspect of the ethical analysis is critical. In a field study conducted with communications agencies in the London, England, area a few years ago, interviews with managers showed that reputation has a decisive impact on the internal and external factors that ensure a company's longevity and even growth (Baxter, 2006). Internally, reputation helps attract and retain the best employees and suppliers. Externally, it draws the best customers and generates loyalty. In the end, reputation generally has a positive impact on the company's profitability and overall performance.

Reputation results from a signal that provides information about the company's type (or personality). As a result, it structures its interactions with stakeholders (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Kreps & Wilson, 1982; Spence, 1973). An organization's ethical behavior can, therefore, be seen as *reputation building*. From a PR perspective, we can even go so far as to say that, fundamentally, reputation is more important than ethics, because reputation is what lives on in stakeholders' memories once the organization has made its decisions. Here, Grunig (1992) was right to say that a PR professional can personify an organization's "ethical conscience" insofar as he manages its reputation (see also Bowen, 2008; Neill and Drumright, 2012). For the purpose of our ethical decision-making model, we postulate that reputation management must be based on two other variables: trust and truth. In fact, having a good reputation is equivalent to building confidence in oneself. Conversely, having a bad reputation is equivalent to generating distrust. To generate trust, it is important to deploy the truth to attest to the qualities we have. Thus, by understanding how the truth works on trust and how trust creates a good reputation, a PR professional can add one more conceptual tool to the ethical decision-making model presented in this article.

Fundamentally, the concept of trust always involves the following model: A (receiver) trusts B (signaller) to perform an action X (Furlong, 1996). There are two agents in this diagram: B, the *signaller* (the agent sending a signal about his type), and A, the *receiver*, i.e. the agent who receives B's signal about his type and decides whether or not to trust him. Trust is always granted in relation to a specific action X, but not necessarily in relation to action Y or Z. For example, I can decide to trust my mechanic to fix my car (X), but probably not to fix my tooth, which I broke playing baseball (Y). Agent A assesses the opportunity to trust B based on three primary criteria: (a) the gain (G) he expects to make in trusting B, (b) the probability (p) that B will act honestly, and (c) the effort (E) he must make (in terms of oversight or investigation, for example) to guard against the risk of B actually being dishonest. Therefore, if (G-E) * p seems greater than the potential loss generated by the fact of not trusting B,[2] then A will trust B to do X.

In general, however, the PR professional works for B, and therefore for the agent that is signalling its type to A. From B's point of view, other factors also need to be taken into consideration. He must know what reputational capital B has amassed (How have our organization's actions been judged to date?). He must assess the cost of the signal (advertising, for example) he must send to A to earn his trust. To assess the cost correctly, it is also useful to establish how risk tolerant A is, because the more risk averse an agent is, the more information he needs before trusting (and the higher the cost of sending the signal will be). Lastly, B must remember that, in sending a signal to A, he is revealing a portion of the truth about himself which, in some circumstances, could make him more strategically vulnerable to customers, competitors, and other stakeholders. In this context, the truth, which can be defined as a match between the signal and the type (and his various characteristics), must make it possible to maintain a fair balance between the ability to build A's trust and protecting B's basic interests. Customarily, we say that lying or hiding the truth is immoral and contrary to the public relations code of conduct. But it is also clear (and we all regularly see it in our own lives) that telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth can have dramatic consequences for an agent's basic interests. There can, thus, be a perfectly reasonable ethical justification for certain lies and many half truths (Bok, 1999).

In short, incorporating truth, trust, and reputation into decision making can be expressed as follows: To manage reputational risk suitably, B must ask whether, to transmit some of the truth about his type, he can find a cost-effective signal (that is, the signal costs less than the benefit produced) while building a relationship of trust with A and doing the utmost to prevent B's competitors from producing a cost-effective signal that reveals a type that is harmful to B's interests (Gambetta, 2011). In other words, within the ethical decision-making model set out in this article, the management of truth and reputational risk intervene as a ranking or weighting factor for the decision maker's options. That is, once the decision maker has done a rigorous, exhaustive analysis of the consequences and sought to balance the stakeholders' interests, he or she must now ask which of the most promising options offers the best reputational support by applying the reasoning set out earlier in this section. Given how essential reputation is for public relations, this must be the deciding factor in the final decision. This formulation may seem somewhat abstract, but the case discussed in the next section will apply the various aspects of the ethical decision-making model.

Global application of the model to a case

To learn how to use the conceptual tools described earlier, let us look at a new case, inspired by actual facts.

> Case #3: You were recently named Communications Director for the Orange Party. A social democratic party, the Orange Party has never formed the government in Parliament; unable to take power, it has been content to act as an effective opposition party. However, this fate seems to be in the process of changing: the party's leader, J.D., has delivered a noteworthy performance on a famous public affairs show on national television. Meanwhile, the government's leader has publicly announced that the next election will be held in 6 months. In your first few meetings with the leader's inner circle to draw up the campaign strategy, you find out something that floors you: your boss, the leader of the Orange Party, has cancer, and it has spread. It has metastasized to his bones and, according to the specialists, he only has 18 to 24 months to live. Given the seriousness of the issue, the whole team asks you to keep this information strictly to yourself. Stunned, and very sad, you go home to think about what to do next. You know that J.D.'s popularity is the only thing that can allow your party to win the next election. As a PR professional who has always demonstrated professional integrity, however, you think the public has a right to know they will be voting for a sick leader who will not be able to shoulder all of a Prime Minister's duties. Yet the Conservative Party has been in power for 10 years now. In your opinion, it would be good for the country's democracy if the Orange Party had the opportunity to implement a political program that, in your view, is more progressive. Your team and boss are counting on you. The public seems nervous about the looming election campaign. In the next few weeks, all the reporters in the country will be after you, and many will certainly ask you about your leader's health, as he seems thinner. … What will you do?

This is an especially interesting case because it highlights the critical importance of communications strategy and reputational risk management in ethical decision making. Here, the PR professional has two choices: either he agrees to help in a cover-up, or he advises the inner circle to be transparent about the leader's health. Aside from the PR professional (decision maker), the primary stakeholders in the decision are the leader, J.D., and his party, the other parties, the media, and the public. In the context this case illustrates, it is especially important for the signals sent by J.D. and his party to generate public confidence, as it is, in the end, the public that will decide.

Choosing either option will have many positive and negative consequences for all stakeholders. The biggest consequence is, clearly, the outcome of the election, which could allow the Orange Party and its leader to make history and institute a government program that it sees as innovative and very good for the country's development. In drawing up the list of consequences associated with each of the two options, it will no doubt be possible to come up with a relatively clear choice. For example, the party's inner circle could think that revealing the actual state of the leader's health would destroy his chances of taking power, as the public would think he was unable to govern. From a balance-of-interests perspective, this decision could be justified by invoking a need for democratic rotation (given that the Conservative Party has been in power for 10 years), the common good (benefits of the Orange Party's program for the public) and respect for political personalities' privacy. This vision of the balance of interests makes it possible to go beyond the interests of the Orange Party alone to take the interests of other stakeholders (if that is possible in the game of politics…) into consideration, and arrive at a relatively stable solution. Wanting to hold the information back is individually rational, because it in no way calls into question J.D.'s ability to govern, and therefore to win the election. It also abides by the reciprocity principle, as the strategy is based on certain principles, such as democratic alternation and respect for privacy (which is protected by law), that apply to all of the stakeholders symmetrically (nobody would be disadvantaged if they switched their roles). Nor is the decision based on options that are not available to the other parties. Lastly, the strategy can be considered Pareto optimal if one deems that sharing the information (the disputed resource here) follows principles such as respect for privacy that cannot be violated without causing greater harm to society by depriving individuals (including politicians) of a fundamental right.

However, this reasoning, which is simultaneously ethical and political, does not sufficiently account for reputation risk management, an unavoidable factor here. As we have said, reputation is what persists over time and, as the saying goes, "the future lasts a long time." In this case, it is possible to conceal the state of the leader's health; however, in spite of himself, he will send a contradictory signal about his type (people like him and think he's honest, but he looks thinner, although nobody knows why). This situation, in which too little of the truth is disclosed, could harm the party's reputation, and thus media and public confidence in the party. This risk is, moreover, increased by the strong probability (according to the doctors' prognosis) that the leader will die during his term in office. If he does, the media and the other parties will no doubt investigate, ruining the leader and party's reputation for integrity for a long time.

If we abide by the previously stated rule of thumb on reputation management, it would no doubt be better for the PR professional to advise the leader and his inner circle to give the public more information about the leader's health, without disclosing all the details about the prognosis, given that this will be reassessed from time to time. This way, the Orange Party transmits information that does not cost much and maintains transparency, without damaging the public's trust in J.D.'s ability to exercise power. The primary gain (the Orange Party gets elected), therefore, remains highly probable. Moreover, with a skillful use of the truth to partially describe his type, the Orange Party's leader prevents competing parties from revealing the details about his health and hurting his party's interests. Of course, the competing parties could still disclose some information on the prognosis, but this information is relatively costly (they have to investigate) and there is a strong risk of a boomerang effect. In fact, the public and the media would no doubt see an attempt by the competing parties to stand in for the doctors and speculate on the chances that J.D.'s health will deteriorate while he is in office ill as a vile and unbecoming partisan attack. In other words, in this case, the PR professional must be courageous and advise J.D.'s inner circle to call a press conference at which he will say more about his health. The option of concealing the truth is, for all of the above reasons, to be ruled out.

Thus, in this model, the various parts of the ethical analysis (analysis of the consequences, balance of interests) must be seen as components of reputation management, an essentially pragmatic view. For the PR professional, doing the right thing means acting in such a way that stakeholders have a positive perception of his reputation (or his client's). Fundamentally, law, deontology, morality, and ethics are a matter of image. The moral or legal sanctions stemming from professional fault are only possible if an action is perceived as wrong. The notion of good that acts as a benchmark in ethical analysis in public relations is, therefore, never completely separate from the gaze that may or may not give value to that good. To be good is to be seen as good. This is why any ethical analysis by a PR professional must, in the end, deal with the imperatives of reputation management.

Conclusion

The model proposed here is a synthesis that borrows in equal measures from philosophy and thinking in economics. Some may find this astounding, insofar as the general belief is that ethics is too pure to lower itself to a consideration of notions that seem incompatible with it, such as the idea that personal interest guides most action. Yet this is a proven fact. People, like organizations, most frequently act to serve their own interests (Hobbes, 2008). The model set out here, however, teaches that it is imprudent, and even counterproductive, to act in a way that is solely egocentric. The model explains the avenues from which an ethic of shared interest in public relations can emerge.

Of course, some aspects of this model may seem tougher to grasp. But this seems to be the price to pay for dealing with highly complex issues. The method used in this article is a top-down method: Although it is based on observations of actual behavior, it still involves creating a theoretical model that is then applied to a case study. For this reason, it would no doubt be very interesting, in a later study, to follow the path carved out in economics by researchers like Daniel Kahneman. To test the model's validity and efficiency would involve seeing how, based on direct observation of social interactions in organizations, agents (in this case PR professionals) construct ethical decisions and the degree to which these constitute appropriate solutions to the problems those professionals encounter. Such a study would no doubt be challenging due to the experimental design it would entail, but it would probably make it possible to wrap up a major chapter in the academic literature on public relations.

Notes

1. Differentiating between these two notions is not always easy. For the purposes of this article, a principle is defined as a very general (and primarily intellectual) rule that guides action, whereas a value is defined as a form of personal *preference* (so partly emotional) that determines the purpose of the action. Here, for example, "helping someone who is in danger" and "never talking to strangers" can be considered principles. A value is, instead, a given state of the world that is achieved through an agent's interaction with his environment. In this sense, "justice," "integrity," and "transparency" are the ends (goals) of the people for whom these values are important.
2. Mathematically, the formula for calculating the loss is stated as follows: $(1\text{-}p) * L$, where L is the loss associated with the fact that B is not trustworthy. To decide to trust, therefore, A will do the following calculation: $(G\text{-}E) * p > (1\text{-}p) * L$ (Furlong, 1996).

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