Bridging Public Relations to Social Cohesion

Finding a Higher Social Value that Positions Public Relations & Communications Management
for the Regulated Professions

To: Canadian Public Relations Society

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Barriers to entry in public relations are low. You need a licence to drive, fish and pilot a plane, but no occupational licence or exam-based certification is required to practice PR. Without a regulated professional organization to certify, license, and enforce ethical conduct, practitioners resort to voluntary designations (APR) and voluntary engagement with PR associations that struggle for purpose and members.

Many PR associations promote a code of professional standards that is expected to guide ethical conduct. But they are generally unenforceable, apart from the odd member expulsion and negative headline. In contrast, some professional associations have the government-sanctioned authority to strip a practitioner of their licence to practice, for a specific time or permanently, creating a strong incentive to comply with standards of conduct. Canadian law societies, colleges of physicians, and CPA associations regulate the practice of law, medicine and accounting in this way.

Regulated practice and licensing is a worthy destination for public relations that binds practitioners to a code of professional standards at the risk of penalty. PR shops burnishing the images of dodgy foreign leaders, misrepresenting the truth, disseminating fake news, or generally comporting themselves in a questionable manner eclipse the higher social value of the practice and reinforce the perception that public relations is unfit for the professions.

Yet public relations societies around the world have lived up to many of the qualifications of the professions, including specialized training and expertise, designations, an in-depth body of knowledge and research, occupational membership, independent counsel, a service orientation, and codes of professional standards or ethics.

Lacking, however, is a theory of professional ethics for public relations – a foundation for practitioners to judge right from wrong in their practice.

Scholars have debated a foundational theory of ethics (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001; Barney & Black, 1984), arguing that adherence to some higher social value derived from the public relations practice is necessary for principle-based reasoning. This elusive higher value would have to be relevant to the roles of advocacy or collaboration.

Notions of good will, formed through organization and public integration (Bernays, 1952), or the advancement of democracy through individual moral authority and informed rationale decision-making (Bowen, 2010), are too broad for public relations to lay claim. Journalism and law, for example, are equal to the task in fostering good will and democracy.

The search for a unique and overriding value need not stray too far. Explicit in the term public relations is the vocation's core function - to manage relationships with publics. This paper argues that "social cohesion" may be the higher social value derived from the public relations practice, as manifested in organization-public relationships.

The concept of social cohesion refers to consensus, participation, and diversity, and to the "peaceful dialects of groups with different beliefs and cultures in a free and democratic society." (Verhoeven, p. 124, 2008). Its goal is a reduction in societal disparities and inequalities, and the strengthening of social relations and bonds. It describes the "connections and relations between societal units" (McCracken, 1998 in Berger-Schmitt, 2000); and is understood as "the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper" (Stanley, p. 5, 2003).

Social cohesion is not about sameness and homogeneity of thoughts and actions. Rather, it is about social involvement, cooperation, recognition and belonging, political participation and legitimacy, as well as engagement and inclusion (Stanley, p. 7-8, 2003).

In the lead up to the Brexit deadline, British PM Theresa May argued that social cohesion was of national importance. She said, "there has not yet been enough recognition of the way that a Second Referendum could damage social cohesion by undermining faith in our democracy" (The Guardian, 2019).

Verhoeven (2008) calls out the lack of scholarship on the connections between PR/communications management and social cohesion. Could social cohesion be the distinct and overriding social value undergirded by organization-public relationships that informs principle-based decision-making? As modeled in the Institute for Public Relations' code of conduct, PR practitioners' capacity - to respect human rights, foster understanding and dialogue, come forward with transparency, illuminate the debate with truthful and accurate information, avoid improper influence over key stakeholders, and recognize and engage disparate publics - forms the trusting relationships and bonds that shape the building blocks of civil society. The machinery of the social order could not function without agreeable (and disagreeable) organization-public relationships, formed by either advocacy or collaboration.

In this essay, public relations advocacy is understood as a persuasive strategy to bend the external environment to an organization's self interests; whereas the role of collaboration is to comply and conform an organization to the external environment through relational interactions. Unbridled advocacy can be troubling when PR practitioners operate outside codes of professional standards. The same could be said of

the other professions were it not for the operational framework that binds these professionals to ethical conduct. Licensing laws, government oversight, regulation, and professional ethics mandate and motivate compliant behaviour.

Situating the role of advocacy in the regulated professional, instead of the communicator, may make the advocacy function more palatable. Principled advocacy could then be understood in terms of both persuasive or relational strategies and tactics that bridge interests between organizations and publics. Look to the other professions for illustrations of the service orientation of principled advocacy.

The mainstream professions today share in common a service to the public good. Academics and scientists advance our understanding of people and the world around us. Physicians and healthcare workers advocate for public health. Lawyers uphold legal rights. These professions not only uphold the public good, they are steadfast advocates for organizations and individuals to whom they are contractually bound. Add to this list public relations practitioners, who also advocate for clients, and in so doing, bridge publics' interests and form organization-public relationships that undergird social cohesion. Even the Canadian definition of public relations (Flynn, Gregory & Valin, 2008) concludes the pursuit of both the public interest and organizational goals can co-exist.

The advocacy of an attorney for a client, of a physician for a patient, or of a clergyman for a soul – to the exclusion of others - in no way diminishes the public service orientation of these professions. On the contrary, advocacy, as the act of pleading for, or representation, is the noblesse oblige inherent in these professions. The higher

values of legal rights, health, and salvation are realized from the advocacy for and pursuit of client, patient, and spiritual interests.

Public relations may achieve its higher ordered value of social cohesion by advancing principled organizational-public relationship formed through either advocacy or collaboration. Further research into the relationship between public relations and social cohesion may help illuminate a path forward to a foundational theory of ethics for public relations, and remove an obstacle to regulated PR practice and the professions.

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