

Defining Public Relations

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Abstract

Public relations has come a long way. Forming to what it is today, it's main goal is to build mutually beneficial relationships with the company and its public. In this paper, I will be explaining PR's ontology, epistemology, axiology, teleology, ethics, and it's place in my own worldview. These aspects formed my own definition of public relations which is, *Public relations is the practice of building trusting relationships between organizations and their publics by using strategic, transparent, and ethical communication to influence society.*

Defining Public Relations

Introduction/Definition of PR:

Whenever I mention that I am studying Public Relations, I am either met with confused faces, or questions to what it is. Many people today struggle with the idea of Public Relations, or PR. Looking in the past, PR has gone through various forms with people defining it in different ways due to society's new generations and digital advancement. Some of these definitions revolved around Public Relations being a mix of marketing, communication, journalism, and advertising. Although some of these aspects play roles revolving around PR careers, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defines PR as, “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (PRSA 2018). Through outside reference, personal experiences, and my own perspective, I have developed my own definition of Public Relations. *Public relations is the practice of building trusting relationships between organizations and their publics by using strategic, transparent, and ethical communication to influence society.*

Ontology: What Is It?

In order to fully grasp and understand the meaning and complexity of Public Relations, it's ontology must be understood. Ontology, according to Thomas Hofweber, defines it as, “encompass problems about the most general features and relations of the entities which do exist” (Hofweber 2017). Furthering the explanation, Robert Stevens states ontology, “is the study or concern about what kinds of things exist - what entities or 'things' there are in the universe” (Stevens 2001). What is exactly PR, or what does PR do, and why does PR exist? These

questions must be answered and understood to comprehend what Public Relations is at its core and essence.

Within the study of Public Relations, it is absolutely necessary to understand that it is a relational practice, to be able to work with people. At its core, PR is the practice of building trusting relationships between organizations and their publics. When speaking about the practice of building relationships one is to, “aim to create a mutually beneficial relationship with the customer that extends beyond the initial purchase” (Fontanella 2020). Audience loyalty is crucial in what public relations is, as professionals are the ones to keep that loyalty in check. Stated by Sarah Chambers, “By meeting and exceeding expectations consistently, companies can start to build a relationship with customers” (Chambers 2018). It is absolutely necessary as a PR practitioner to work with people, have strong social skills, and value trust in relationships. Pursuing public relations is working well with people, and creating a healthy work environment between clients is the result of so. Having precise social skills within audience and organization interaction can make outcomes memorable, leading to loyalty. Building relationships with trust is what makes the audience dedicated to a company, as caring for both parties can benefit each. This is what public relations at its core is, creating trusting relationships to gain loyalty between the audience and the organization.

Now known that public relations is the practice of building mutually beneficial, or trusting, relationships between a public and audience, it is important to know what is not. Public relations' ontology has been questioned as it is a grown field of study for, one of the fields being marketing. The definition of marketing is stated as, “the process of examining an industry's buyers, the products these buyers want, and where they are currently getting it” (Becker 2018).

PR is not marketing, as it does not specifically focus on the public's relationship in return after a technique is launched. Marketing is reaching the numbers or desired audience, while PR works to gain or keep their trust. Although vital in PR, public relations is not the study of communications. According to Masters in Communication their field of study is defined as "academia that examines the process of human communication, including the creation, delivery, and receiving of both verbal and non-verbal messages" (Masters in Communication 2017). Instead of studying how to convey messages in general, PR looks to communicate a loyal relationship between the organization and the brands. One of the most compared fields of study to public relations is journalism. According to the American Press, journalism is defined as "the activity of gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information. It is also the product of these activities" (American Press 2020). While journalism finds the story and tells the truth, public relations, on the other hand, does get the attention a journalist's work needs. Journalism needs the duties of PR, that the "communications expert can be a lifeline: for facts and figures and basic information-gathering" (Hobsbawm 2003).

Epistemology: How Do We Do It?

After understanding what public relations is, in order to understand how it is carried out, it's epistemology must be understood. Epistemology, defined by Philosophy Basics, "is the study of nature and the scope of knowledge and justified belief. Analyzing the nature of knowledge and how it relates to similar notations such as truth, belief and justification" (Philosophy Basics 2018). In other words in regard to public relations, how is public relations done, how is public relations done correctly? Within the definition of PR, the epistemology is the skills one obtains to perform building those trusting relations between the organization and their public.

Understanding the epistemology of public relations, one must learn how it is properly done, with strategic, transparent, and ethical communication in order to influence society.

Strategic communication, defined by Ryan Duel of PRSA, “is the merging of public relations and marketing, and to some degree of advertising,” or in simpler form, “using business-like practices to further build relations with the public” (Duel 2018). In the field of PR, not only is it important to build a relationship with the public and organization, but implement strategic, or smart ways in gaining benefits from each other. As public relations is the process of building trust, “trust is the by-product of transparency” (Rangwala 2017). In many aspects of business, it is typical for an organization to want to “cover up” or avoid their mistakes out of the public’s eye. When transparent communication is added, “employees will be more engaged and committed to the company” (Salem 2019). Not only are employees more engaged with the vision, the public, hearing these transparent efforts will grow more into a relationship with an organization’s vision.

Along with strategic and transparent communication, public relations is done with ethical communication. Ethical communication is “predicted upon certain business values, such as being truthful, consies, and responsible with one’s words and the resulting actions” (Mandelbaum 2019). Not only is communication done strategically and truthfully in building a relationship between the organization and their audience, but is done to the company’s highest standards of virtues. Every sense of communication is done with responsibility in the public relations world, staying true to their values of trust and maintaining loyalty.

Axiology: What are the Values of PR?

Establishing both the ontology and epistemology of public relations, public relations has certain key values that must be upheld. Axiology is the study of value, and “it’s goal is to answer

questions related to both ethics and aesthetics” (Compelling Truth 2011). Public relations holds key values up to a high standard, these being longevity, honesty, and human dignity. These values make up public relations, and how building meaningful and beneficial relations happen. Connecting back to public relations’ epistemology, its axiology explains why these skills are needed and valued.

Within my definition of PR, I connected public relations’ core value of longevity to the skill of using strategic communication. Longevity should be a core goal in the field as PR professionals strive for maintaining a relationship between an organization and its public. Longevity is defined within a business as, “a primary task of strategic management...defining the relevant planning cycles and to think about how to manage from one to the next” (Davis 2014). Public relations works to keep a loyal relationship between the organization and public, striving for longevity, connection back to PR’s definition of being strategic in their communication. To create longevity with strategic communication, public relations must relentlessly focus on the needs and wants from the customers. As the public benefits the company, the company must do the same as, “if customer's needs change, how quickly can you move to fill in the gap?” (Commercial 2020).

The public relations field of study also has the core value of honesty, which can capture both transparent and ethical communication. Honesty and integrity is the “foundation of leadership,” (Tracy 2016) and being truthful through actions and words will help build and maintain the relationship between the organization and their public. Relating back to the longevity of the relationship, there will not be a future connection if honesty is not held to a high standard. Losing trust between either sides of the business relationship will result negatively in

all aspects without trust. Humans value honesty, and PR professionals who work in the field will understand that it comes before anything else.

The key value of human dignity, along with honesty and longevity, plays a large role in the axiology of public relations. PR works to maintain the core value of respecting human dignity, bringing it back to PR's definition of ethical communication. Human dignity is defined as that, "each person is worthy of honor and respect for who they are, not just for what they can do" (Neal 2015). When looking at the goal and purpose of public relations, to build trustful relationships between an organization and their public, it is important to understand that each customer values their dignity. It is important as a profession to not look at the public as numbers, but as people, who value their dignity as much as one does themselves. Unlike marketing or other aspects of sales or business, PR does not look at the public or organization as numbers, but as individuals. Public relations professionals stand by their clients, and companies, where ethical communication is at stake. PR is the make or break of the trust between the two, and it is a social responsibility to value each individual's human dignity.

Teleology: What is PR's End Goal?

The end goal of public relations, or public relations' teleology, is that professionals are to ethically influence society in the business world. Society encompasses humankind and their cultures as a whole, and public relations professionals are to ethically influence them. In all aspects of public relations, the financial district, political, sports, nonprofit, corporate, agency, etc. ethics are number one rule to obtain. Public relations, those who build relationships with the public, would not exist without ethical treatment. These treatments are - truth, honesty, and transparency, and the list could go on.

Public relations is defined as using strategic and transparent communication to ethically influence society. A relationship, a healthy one, would be nothing without these fundamentals, which all fall under ethics, which all aspects of PR should have as their foundation. By using ethical communication, as people, public relations is “proving the true nature of communications,” (Masters in Communication 2017) which is to tell the truth. Public relations upholds the role of truth, enrapturing ethical communications and human dignity, tying it’s teleology with it’s axiology. Without this, no relationships between individuals or businesses would happen, which is why public relations has their end goal to ethically influence society. All three of these communication aspects lead to public relations influencing society with ethical practices. The public is not manipulated in any sense, as PR is done with these three values, yet taken into account, an organization valuing their business and caring for their needs.

Ethics:

Most people in our society should have these same ethical commitments based on how one was raised by their parents or at school. Especially as children, humans are taught to share, and love another. This could be taught by parents, or at school, where everyone is taught to get along, or live in peace. The golden rule, for example, is something that is naturally taught in school, to treat others the same way one would want to. World peace is something that most of our society wants, and having trust between companies and their audience could easily fall under that. It is the ethical matter of giving quality manners to each other. There shouldn’t be a difference between a public relations professional’s worldview, ethics matter, and we are taught the core values of them from the beginning of life. Society raises everyone this way, like learning the golden rule, and striving for peace.

One of the most helpful things to understand as upcoming PR professionals is that everything is done with purpose to gain trust and loyalty, whether that is responding in a crisis, or how a company is viewed towards the public. This ethical value of building beneficial relationships contributes to the ability to provide ethical counseling to senior leadership. This can be proven when public relations successfully gain long term customers with loyalty through media and quality service. Especially with digital media, senior leadership in an organization may not understand it's benefits in building a trusting relationship. People nowadays value personal connection, usually digitally, and this is the most efficient, and ethical way to do so.

The historical development of public relations relates to the ethical development and commitments of our profession, as back then relationships between companies and the public were not exactly trusted. Yellow journalism and propaganda play a major role in history when it comes to advertising or influencing the public. As public relations came about, it became their duty to earn this trust back from the public. Public relations introduced caring for the public, wanting a connection with them as much as they wanted from a company. As the public relations field grew, companies better dealt with crises and provided quality service, as it is the relationship with them that drives the company. Now, if an organization went back into their history of propaganda and unethical influence, there would be no benefit to themselves either.

Christian Worldview

Public relations' axiology and teleology, valuing longevity, honesty, and human dignity to in the end influencing society, align with my own worldview. Simply put, public relations is the practice of giving your trust to another person, similar to a friendly relationship. The biblical themes of grace and peace reside in the practice of public relations, building ethical and truthful

relationships between the organization and their audience. In Galatians 6:2 humans are to, “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Humanity was created to enjoy the world provided, meaning that to enjoy it, living in harmony is key. Whether that is world peace, relationships, or connection within a community, humans naturally want that dependence in society. Philosophically saying, “the human individual...is not a lone traveller... He is a part of the world interacting in various ways' ' (Spirkin 2020).

As upcoming PR professionals, we understand that in all the work we do, our faith and what we have learned ethically through society comes first. We are to learn to be truthful and responsible without losing relationships between others. Relationships in the business/public relations world are exactly the same as a relationship or partnership between two people. It should be based on trust and transparency. PR is so important and needed greatly in a world where it is so easy today to unethically influence society. With the digital online world, we see so many scandals happening because one side of a relationship was taken advantage of. I find that the art and science of PR can go unnoticed sometimes, but it is always there.

Conclusion:

While studying PR, one already knows their duty, which is to give a beneficial relationship, and if one doesn’t they do not know PR’s core values. A fiduciary relationship is meant to provide trust and beneficiary between in public relations sense, an organization and their public. This comes with an ethical or moral obligation to society as we are the people who are to gain satisfaction from the public to the company. This includes quality of products, service, and relationship. A company wouldn’t exist without a loyal, interested, or even dedicated audience. Providing a fiduciary relationship is a moral obligation to society as it allows

and promotes peace between people. Companies are essential to a society in providing needs, and, or wants to the general public. This relationship of trust is crucial, as without it, there is no peace between others. It is our moral duty to do this, to keep the peace as much as possible in a world where there is not enough of it. It is up to the public relation professionals to manage this relationship, giving their ethical backgrounds.

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