



Ethical convergence, divergence or *communitas*? An examination of public relations and journalism codes of ethics

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ABSTRACT

In a fully functioning society, citizens need information about economic, social, and political issues. The news media perform this function. Citizens also need to engage in relationships with all sorts of economic, social, and political organizations. Public relations helps to create, maintain and change these relationships. Journalism and public relations are the foundation of a fully functioning society. This article explores the extent to which journalism and public relations professionals share foundational values. We compare the codes of ethics from 33 countries (66 public relations and journalist associations) looking for both convergence and divergence in ethical values. Our findings suggest that the two professions share core values such as professionalism, expertise and moral standards. The codes agree on the individual qualities that encourage professionals to act ethically. The codes diverge, however, on each profession's view of its role in society. Journalists continue to emphasize duty to the public in their codes of ethics whereas many public relations codes focus on duty to the client or organization. Yet, this study found an evolving set of ethical codes in public relations that brings public relations and journalists closer together acknowledging their *communitas* roles in a fully functioning society

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The relationship between the public relations' social functions and journalism institutions have been the topic of many articles, books and commentaries (Bivins, 1993; Curtin, 1999; Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008). Each side tells a different story about the relationship.

Journalists see their role as a watchdog over government and business interests (White & Hobsbawm, 2007) while perceiving public relations' role as representing powerful interests in the public sphere (Salter, 2005). The narrative behind this story is that, as professions, public relations and journalism have different functions in society. The journalism profession serves the broader, public interest while public relations works for more specific interests.

The public relations' side of the story that describes the relationship between the two professions is a bit different. In this story, the public relations function provides information to the media and groups that contribute to the public understanding of issues (Bivins, 1993; Curtin & Boynton, 2001; Heath, 2006; Sallot, Steinfatt, & Salwen, 1998; Taylor, 2001). Public relations also helps organizations adjust their actions to meet societal expectations. The logical conclusion to this story is that public

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relations is a foundational part of society and it works with media institutions and other groups to provide information and relationships to the public.

Which story is most accurate? Over the last decade, changes in the media such as the social media newsroom reflect the increasingly blurring boundary between public relations and journalism (Zerfass & Schramm, 2014). At the same time we see dramatic changes also taking place in the practice of journalism as citizen journalists now provide significant amounts of local, national and international news (Dahlgren, 2013; Haas & Steiner, 2006; Holton, Coddington, & de Zúñiga, 2013). The media industry is changing and some of the foundational functions of journalism have been challenged by economic forces.

Over the last decade, the practice of public relations has also changed. We see new trends of public relations practice emerging around the world (Yang & Taylor, 2013). Public relations is taking on larger societal roles (Heath, 2006; Ihlen and van Ruler, 2007; Sommerfeldt, 2013; Taylor, 2010) and there is a movement toward a more reflective, societal view of public relations (Bentele, 2004; Raup, 2004). Additionally, the rise of social media has provided public relations practitioners with new tools and tactics to directly participate in public discourses minimizing the reliance on media gatekeepers.

Considering the paradox of the two professions' roles, some questions arise. Are the two professional fields as different as we have been lead to believe? Is it possible that the gap between journalism and public relations' ideal of ethical practice is actually quite small? Do they share any core ethical values that show that both professions are necessary functions in a fully functioning society? We believe that overtime, through globalization and by changes in the fields of journalism and public relations, convergent values exist that link public relations and journalism more closely than previously discussed. The purpose of this study is to compare the codes of ethics from 66 public relations and journalism national associations looking for convergence and divergence of ethical values. The findings provide an updated description of how both fields view their ethical roles in society and their relationships with the other profession.

The first section of the article explores the relationship between public relations and journalism as each profession seeks to advance professionalism. We also elaborate on the Fully Functioning Society Theory (FFST) as a theoretical framework to expand our understanding of public relations' and journalism's societal functions (Heath, 2006; Taylor, 2010). The second section reviews how codes of ethics guide public relations and journalism practices. Today, many professional associations have codes of ethics that provide normative values influencing practice (Canary & Jennings, 2008; Yang & Taylor, 2013). These codes of ethics provide a picture of the accepted norms and practices of professionals. The third section of the paper reports the triangulated results of three research methods: Centering Resonance Analysis (CRA), factor analysis, and case studies. Our study examines the linguistic network structure of 66 codes of ethics and presents case studies of convergent and divergent codes of journalism and public relations ethics in specific countries. The final section of the paper discusses the results and explores the convergent, divergent and *communitas* roles of public relations and journalism in a fully functioning society.

1. The binary of two professions

1.1. *Conflicting metaphors in society*

A quick look at the dominant metaphors that guide our understanding of the relationship between journalism and public relations suggest a complex but one-sided view. Gandy (1982) called public relations' generated materials "information subsidies" and warned journalists about relying too heavily on materials that were created by governments, businesses and consultants. For journalists to perform their role in society, they had to minimize their reliance on public relations provided content. In Gandy's view, public relations activities do not seek to serve the public interest, instead they serve the interest of the powerful and resource-rich. The job of the journalist is to tell the *real* story to the public. Along this line, Gans (1979) described the relationship between media and public relations as a type of "tango" where public relations professionals "lead" journalists. White and Hobsbawn (2007) have characterized the media-public relations relationship as "conflict" driven. Carlson (2009) described the relationship as a 'duel, a dance and domination' of public relations power and influence over journalism.

Metaphors matter because they influence how people understand one thing in relation to another (Reddy, 1979). Metaphors can influence research assumptions and research design. Many studies reify that a binary or problematic relationship exists where journalism serves the public and public relations serves the interests of the powerful (cf. Gandy, 1982; Sterne, 2010). The assumptions behind the long held perception of a binary relationship are rarely interrogated and have not been revisited in light of changes in both the public relations and media industries. Public relations researchers continue to ask professionals about their relationships with media and conclude professionals provide information to journalists because they see it as helping communicate important information to the public (Sallot et al., 1998; Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2011). Likewise, journalism researchers continue to study how much of news content is generated by public relations efforts (Anderson & Lowrey, 2007). Looking at the situation in the UK, Lewis et al. (2008) called journalism a "compromised fourth estate" and noted that the "quality and independence of the British news media has been significantly affected by its increasing reliance on public relations and news agency material; and for the worse!" (p. 18). Yet, in many parts of the world, journalists perform public relations activities and public relations professionals create news and information content for publics.

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