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Public relations, ethics, and social media: A cross-national study of PR practitioners

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to expand the public relations body of knowledge on two levels: firstly, it presents findings from empirical studies on PR practitioners' attitudes to ethical and unethical practices on social media. Secondly, it compares practitioners' attitudes to specific ethical issues in social media in two different socio-cultural environments—New Zealand and Israel. Its major goal is to identify practitioners' current attitudes toward ethics in societies that are ranked differently on international lists comparing levels of democracy in different countries. The findings from online surveys conducted in both countries imply that PR ethics is linked to the culture and social environment in which practitioners function. The article identifies practical ethical challenges in public relations practitioners' use of social media.

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1. Introduction

As no study has so far examined public relations ethics beyond the borders of a specific socio-cultural environment, key questions remain unanswered. Social media is indeed a global tool of communication but are practitioner experiences with social media ethics universal, or do they depend on the values of the local market in which they function? Can arguments about the use of social media by public relations practitioners relate to the global industry while based on findings from the US or the UK? Is PR ethics independent from the local business community's ethical values?

[Sriramesh \(2009\)](#) advocated "cross-national studies of public relations using the same research protocol... to assess similarities and differences in public relations practice, further enhancing the body of knowledge" (pp. 920–921) and cautioned that: "Such projects would also be appropriate for scholar educators of different countries to collaborate" (p. 921). In this article, we take such a cross-national and collaborative approach to learn about practitioner views on professional ethics, especially via social media platforms, in New Zealand (NZ) and in Israel.

Our evaluation of cultural dimensions in public relations research follows criteria suggested by *The Global Public Relations Handbooks* ([Sriramesh & Verčič, 2003, 2009](#)). They advocated the use of societal factors such as the political, cultural, economic levels and media freedoms of countries to examine how specific public relations professional environments differ from each other and, given the typology of the two cultures under our investigation, we followed this advice. We limited the approach to the concept of nation culture ([Hofstede, 1980](#); [Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010](#)) and used comparative indices on the level of specific dimensions of culture (i.e., democracy, freedom, and transparency) in countries around the

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world. By deploying these indicators, the research was able to undertake a comparative study of the expected level of respect for ethical conduct among practitioners in two national cultures: New Zealand and Israel. We contend that the use of international comparative scales that measure democracy as a research tool for evaluating the function of public relations makes an original contribution and opens pathways for further research along similar lines.

The Fraser Institute Index of Human Freedom 2012/13 ranks 123 countries around the world based on the measurement of components of security and safety, of freedom of movement, of freedom of expression (including press freedom), and of freedom of relationships (Vásquez & Štumberger, 2012, p. 58). This index placed New Zealand as number one, or effectively the freest society on the globe. On the same index Israel was ranked closer to the bottom of the list as number 105 ().

The 2014 World Press Freedom Index, published by the Reporters Without Borders organization, ranked New Zealand as 9th out of its 180 countries and Israel around the middle as 96th:

The 2014 World Press Freedom Index spotlights the negative impact of conflicts on freedom of information and its protagonists. The ranking of some countries has also been affected by a tendency to interpret national security needs in an overly broad and abusive manner to the detriment of the right to inform and be informed. This trend constitutes a growing threat worldwide and is even endangering freedom of information in countries regarded as democracies. (World Press Freedom 2014)

This comment provides an explanation for the gap between Israel and New Zealand as the former is consistently involved in violent conflict and the latter has long been essentially peaceful.

A similar gap between New Zealand and Israel is evident on another of the rankings, that of Transparency International, whose Corruption Perceptions Index measures the perceived levels of public sector corruption in 175 countries and territories. In the Corruption Perceptions Index, New Zealand ranked second in the world in perceptions of transparency in the public sector and Israel 37th out of the 175 countries on the list (Transparency International, 2014).

Drawing from the results of such credible international organizations, this comparative study considers the consistent gap between New Zealand and Israel with respect to their level of democracy, the range of their freedoms, and perceptions of corruption. While both countries are democratic and economically developed, the consistent gap between New Zealand and Israel on indices relevant to professional ethics is significant. We built on this difference in the development of the article's hypothesis. As New Zealand consistently rated higher in holding respectful norms toward human freedoms and organizational transparency, we hypothesized that New Zealand public relations practitioners would express stronger reservations about deviations from what was considered by the industry's code of ethics and professional norms as ethical and fair. On the other hand, we theorized that Israeli practitioners, in a context of lower norms, might feel more ready to compromise, or be cynical, on ethics.

To explore this further, we used the indices as specific measures of culture to develop our research questions around the hypothesis that, in a more democratic and less corrupt environment, practitioners would be more aware of the ethical norms and would be more likely to identify unethical practices and find them unacceptable. It is important to note that we did not try to measure all relevant cultural dimensions of each nation, since a comprehensive analysis of a national culture would require substantially more research (see e.g., L'Etang, 2004; Toledano & McKie, 2013). Neither did we attempt to measure actual unethical practices. Clearly such practices are not reported openly and would be difficult to trace in social media posts. Nevertheless, we contend that our investigation's focus – on practitioner perceptions around what they might consider ethical practice in social media – provides significant and useful insights into current challenges for the industry and demonstrates the link between national environment and practitioners' professional values.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Public relations and culture*

According to Sriramesh (2010), the idea that public relations is culturally relative started to inspire scholarly research only recently: “studies have attempted to link public relations with culture only in the past 15 years” (p. 698). This late development is surprising since the relationship between public relations and culture is evident in a number of ways including the major one that “culture (both societal and corporate) can be viewed as an ‘environmental variable’ that influences public relations practice” (p. 698). Nevertheless, research since 2000 contested previous assumptions that certain “generic principles” – drawn almost exclusively from the U.S.-based Excellence studies – could simply be augmented with “specific applications” (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p. 538) from other countries. Research on the ways public relations is practiced in different cultures, beyond the ethnocentric views of American scholars, has been published in two edited volumes of The Global Public Relations Handbook (Sriramesh & Verčič 2003, 2009), in an edited collection of chapters on Public Relations and Communication Management In Europe (Van Ruler & Verčič, 2004), in a book on Public Relations in Asia (Sriramesh 2004), in a history book on Public Relations in Britain (L'Etang, 2004), in a study of Israeli public relations (Toledano & McKie, 2013), in International Public Relations (Curtin & Gaither, 2007), and in Global Public Relations (Freitag & Quesinberry Stokes, 2009).

Clearly, the impact of globalization and the need of public relations practitioners to communicate organizational message around the world stimulated interest in researching the specific features of public relations in different cultures. But questions remain: for example, should a public relations practitioner working in Asia “follow local norms and help the organization

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