

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Public Relations Review



Introduction



This special issue of Public Relations Review is the result of a Research Colloquium held in Madrid, Spain in September 2014 in conjunction with the World Public Relations Forum. The theme of the Forum and the Research Colloquium, both organized by the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management was, “Communication with Conscience,” The co-editors of this special issue, Judy VanSlyke Turk and Karen B. Sanders, co-chaired the Research Colloquium at which this essay was one of the keynote introductory presentations.

Corporate and organizational conscience has never been a more important issue than it is today. Corporate wealth has never been greater than it is today, and this is an issue of rising concern. Corporate CEOs have never earned more than they earn now. And the disparity between CEO income and the rest of the corporation's employees has never been larger. All this has been detailed in French economist [Thomas Piketty's](#) best-selling book, *Capitalism in the Twenty-First Century*. Piketty says the rich few are getting far richer while most of the rest of us are getting poorer.

This certainly could be a recipe for crisis in corporate relationships. It could lead to resentment. This kind of disparity has even led to hostilities that only armed conflict could put down. It has happened before in history and even in the recent past.

However, I don't think highly paid CEOs are particularly conscience-stricken about these incongruities, even though they could pose a threat to their relationships with their employees, their customers, some shareholders and the general public. They can easily say, “It's not me; it's just the way a corporation conducts its business.”

So what about having a conscience? And what is the role of public relations in corporate or organizational conscience?

I was academically trained as an historian and specialized in public relations history. In my book *Courtier to the Crowd* [Hiebert \(1966\)](#), I documented the history of PR's early development, largely by examining the life and work of Ivy Lee. He was the first to use the phrase “public relations” to describe the work he did. In the endeavors of Ivy Lee, you can see the beginnings of what we have come to call “social responsibility,” although he never used that term.

For example, in 1906, when the American public was increasingly angry at the railroad industry because of its very poor safety record (ten of thousands were injured or killed each year in railway accidents), Lee became the advisor to the Pennsylvania Railroad. It was one of America's largest railway companies, and one with a very bad accident record. The railroads were being widely criticized in the press, and the public was clamoring for more government control. Lee didn't send out press releases saying how good the Pennsylvania was or covering up its accident record. Rather, he advised the railroad to install more safety equipment. Lee's critics, of course, said he wasn't really trying to save people's lives; he was only trying to keep the government from nationalizing the railroads.

Social responsibility, or public relations with conscience, can of course simply be seen as self-serving. Or be a cover-up of more serious social exploitation. These are concerns we have to grapple with.

As you can imagine, I've seen a lot of research about public relations over the past 40 years of editing *Public Relations Review*. We're now getting more than 300 manuscripts submitted each year, and overall the total number published can be counted in the thousands. Much of what I know about public relations is based on the knowledge I've gained from all those analyses.

I think we can all agree with the Canadian Public Relations Society, which adopted the following definition of our field in 2009: It is “the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals, and serve the public interest.” Public relations is about relationships, not about promoting and selling, which are the functions of marketing and advertising.

This definition also assumes that public relations' use of communication is for the organization, which hires a manager to manage its relationships through public communications. Communicating our own personal thoughts as public relations practitioners to the world is not what we consider public relations. Rather, the role of public relations is to be the strategic communications manager, the spokesperson, for the organization. Thus, it's not our personal conscience that we're talking about here. It's the client's or employer's.

Can a corporation have a conscience? A good question, one that's not easy to answer. But a recent decision by the United States Supreme Court, by a 5 to 4 vote, said yes. (Not a very clear-cut decision, by the way.) The case, *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*, concerned a company that said it had conscientious objections to a government mandate that it provide contraception insurance for its employees.

Whether we agree with the American court here or not, I think most of us accept the notion that organizations and corporations have a right to policies of their own, within the law. And I think we would agree that professionals hired to manage relationships have an obligation to accept those policies. . . or move on. As far as individual conscience is concerned, I think public relations professionals have a moral dilemma when their own conscience is out of sync with the employer's or client's policies. I've always counseled my students to go to work only for clients whose positions they believe in.

Conscience itself is a tricky thing. Consider conscience from a religious perspective. All religions, even organized atheism, give credence to conscience, or knowing the difference between right and wrong. But all religions are not on the same page about right and wrong, which brings us to the problem of moral absolutism versus moral relativism. Often in world history, a higher authority established right and wrong. If a person's conscience led them to speak out against the authorities, it cost them their freedom, or even their lives. This was true of religions as well as governments, and still is for some religions and some political systems (i.e., the old Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, North Korea and the Islamic State come to mind.)

Some religions have less freedom of conscience than others. Many of us might be conscience-stricken about committing murders in a suicide bombing, but there are radical Islamists who regard such acts as a guarantee of life in heaven. By the same token, though on a completely lower order, there are corporations that go about their business in honest and honorable fashion, and there are others which trim the truth, or stonewall in a crisis, and some which lie outright. And one might say that paying huge salaries to CEOs at the expense of workers, or denying women contraception medication, are unconscionable acts.

The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church says it most clearly: "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. . ." The notion that conscience is an individual matter is a fairly recent construction (even in the Catholic Church) and has never been universally accepted. In the past and in some societies today, right and wrong were determined by the state or by one's religion. I think we can say that moral authority over a person's conscience changed considerably in the modern era, with the emergence of scientific methods to arrive at truth, the rise of democratic societies that challenged central authority and the reformation of the Christian religion that dominated Europe.

John Milton, the great English poet, radical Protestant and a product of the Renaissance and the "Enlightenment," made perhaps the most eloquent statement about the new role of conscience in seventeenth century public life in his great essay, "*Areopagitica*" (1644). The British crown and the Church of England had declared that divorce was immoral. Milton's essay, "*Areopagitica*," was his argument that he had a right to his own conscience about divorce and the freedom to express his thoughts without licensing or the threat of censorship.

"Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties," Milton wrote.

The right to exercise his own conscience: that was the key to Milton's freedom. Now the American court has ruled that corporations have the same freedom to determine what is right or wrong for them. This makes the subject of corporate conscience all the more important.

It took another 150 years after Milton before freedom of conscience became part of the rising movement of democracy. In 1789, freedom of individual conscience became enshrined in the American constitution's very first amendment that guaranteed the right to petition the government for redress of grievances, and guaranteed the four freedoms of speech, of the press, of assembly and of religion. This all had echoes of John Milton. My ancestors, whose religion was similar to Milton's, came to America for that freedom. They had relatives who had been burned at the stake because their conscience was different from the authority's.

Three recent research papers that deal with conscience and social responsibility in public relations are worth noting in this introduction to this special issue. One was published recently in the *Journal of Public Relations Research*, and the other two will be published in the *Public Relations Review*. These three papers reveal that public relations has *not often* played a key role in corporate conscience.

Shannon Bowen, then a professor at Syracuse University now at the University of South Carolina, used in-depth interviews and focus groups of practitioners to ask whether they acted as the ethical conscience of an organization or counseled the CEO on ethical concerns (2004). Her report was somewhat positive, but not completely so. Here is what she found.

Some said they were happy to defer ethical questions to the *legal department* and made strong arguments for that position. Some said they lacked sufficient credibility with the CEO to argue against the legal people. Some said financial concerns override ethical issues. These practitioners argued that *the law and finance offices* had *legal* or *numerical* data to support their positions. As one said, "I am not on board with this idea of public relations being the ethical conscience of an organization. . . We just need to be professionals—and leave it at that."

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/138689>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/138689>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)