

# Toward an Ethical Framework for Advocacy in Public Relations

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The ultimate aim of this article is to help develop a systematic ethical framework for advocacy in public relations. It reviews selected literature on public relations, professional ethics, advocacy, rhetoric, and persuasion to propose 10 criteria for ethically desirable advocacy. It is argued that these criteria are the starting point for developing an ethic of advocacy in public relations. Although the literature review is not exhaustive, it is sufficient to show that there are arguments to be made in favor of the persuasive–advocacy function in public relations. It also provides sufficient background from which to draw a set of ethical parameters for advocacy. The literature forms the basis of a 2-part inquiry into: (a) whether persuasion is a legitimate public relations function; and, (b) whether it can be performed to high ethical standards. A model for ethically desirable advocacy is proposed as one means for answering these 2 questions in the affirmative.

For the purposes of this discussion, *advocacy* is defined as the act of publicly representing an individual, organization, or idea with the object of persuading targeted audiences to look favorably on—or accept the point of view of—the individual, the organization, or the idea.

It is a basic premise of this work that advocacy is a central function of public relations.<sup>1</sup> This contention is supported in Barney and Black (1994), Bivins (1987a), Bernays (1971, 1928), Cutlip (1994), Gordon (1997), German (1995), Hamilton (1989), Nelson (1994), McBride (1989), Miller (1989), and Sproule (1991) to name a few. A second premise is that public relations practitioners are uncomfortable with their roles as advocates, principally because literature and education on

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<sup>1</sup>Although the advocacy function is the focus of this inquiry, the discussion is not meant to imply that advocacy is the only function of public relations, simply that it is a central one.

mass communication in general—and on public relations in particular—has conferred moral superiority on objectivity at the expense of persuasiveness (see Barney & Black; Dozier, J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1995; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992; J. E. Grunig & White, 1992; J. E. Grunig, 1992; Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Martinson, 1997; McBride).

A third premise explored is that persuasiveness in communication is not inherently wrong and that, in fact, rhetoric—the art of persuasive communication—has a long history as a vital contributor to free debate in democratic society. This contention is supported by writers as diverse as Wardy (1996), Barney and Black (1994), Heath (1992), Miller (1989), and Bernays (1928). Arising from this is an argument that public relations practitioners need to reconcile their roles as advocates for self-interested causes with their roles as facilitators of social communication to mature as true professionals. Only once this is done can public relations build an ethical philosophy, without which public relations cannot hope to earn status as a true profession. The object here is to make a start toward developing this ethical philosophy.

## DUBIOUS ROOTS: SETTING THE CONTEXT

Like all communities of scholars, academics in public relations disagree on much; but a general undercurrent in the literature is agreement that the practice has much still to prove as it strains toward recognition as a true profession (e.g., Cutlip, 1994; J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig, 1992; Hunt & Tirpock, 1993; Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Leeper, 1996; Martinson, 1996, 1997; McBride, 1989; Pratt, 1993; Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995; Wright, 1989).

The history of exaggerated propaganda that helped lure early settlers to the United States and to colonize the west, the incendiary missives that helped fuel the American Revolution and later the Civil War, and the ingenious, if not truthful, press agency of P. T. Barnum in promoting his circus acts (Cutlip, 1995), provide ample evidence that public relations' birth follows dubious pre-20th century parentage.

In this century, the two self-styled “fathers” of public relations, Ivy L. Lee and Edward L. Bernays,<sup>2</sup> did much to give the practice legitimate form as they took on clients whose contributions—both good and bad—to life in 20th century North America are well known. However, despite their initial and spectacular successes in raising public relations from the art of the snake oil salesman to the calling of the

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<sup>2</sup>Although Edward Bernays has been recognized by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) for his contributions to the practice, the Society does not acknowledge him as the “father” of public relations, despite persistent self promotion to this effect (John F. Budd, Jr., APR, Fellow, PRSA, personal communication, January 14, 1999; Joe S. Epley, APR, Fellow PRSA, personal communication, January 14, 1999).

true communicator, their legacies to the practice are not purely positive. Late in their careers, both Lee and Bernays took on clients with clearly reprehensible values, thus exposing themselves and their work to public criticism (Cutlip, 1994; Tye, 1998). By the times of their respective deaths, the two founders of the modern day practice seemed to have inadvertently sabotaged much of the good standing they had achieved for their budding profession (see Cutlip; Tye).

In the years since Lee and Bernays, the subject of ethics in public relations has received varying degrees of attention from scholars (e.g., Barney & Black, 1994; Bivins, 1987a, 1987b, 1989a, 1989b, 1992; Botan, 1997; Cutlip, 1994; Dozier et al., 1995; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig, 1992; Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Martinson, 1997, 1996, 1995; McBride, 1989; McElreath, 1993; Pearson, 1989a, 1989b; Pratt, 1993; Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995; Sledzik, 1996; Wright, 1989). Still, little has resulted in the way of a firm professional grounding on which to build an "ethic" of public relations.

Indeed, observers—both within and outside the practice—may be forgiven for wondering if the term, *public relations ethics*, is an oxymoron (see McBride, 1989; Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995). However, public relations and professional ethics theorists seem to agree on one point: Ethically defensible behavior is a necessary condition of professionalism (Bivins, 1989a; Ehling, 1992; Goldman, 1980; J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig, 1992; Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995).

### THE IDEAL OF DIALOGUE

Public relations scholars seem divided on whether advocacy is a legitimate function of today's practitioner. Edward Bernays' writings clearly support the use of public relations counsel to advance ideas and organizations—even to change the course of fashion and personal hygiene (Bernays, 1971; 1928). However, contemporary scholars have begun to eschew the use of persuasion in favor of a more balanced process popularly termed two-way symmetrical communication (Dozier et al. 1995; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992). In this process, the communicator of the message may be just as likely as the intended audiences to change perceptions or behaviors.

The symmetrical process implies that the receivers of the messages are valued equally with the message originators; thus, in the terms of classical moral philosophers (see Kant, 1785/1976), audiences are regarded as ends-in-themselves rather than as means toward ends. The result is a process that many of today's scholars believe meets a higher ethical standard than the traditional forms of one-way communication, such as press agency and information dissemination; or even two-way asymmetrical communication, which uses intelligence about audiences to more effectively target persuasion techniques (Dozier et al., 1995; J. E. Grunig, 1992; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992; Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Pearson, 1989a; Susskind & Field, 1996).

The two-way symmetrical theory of communication pioneered by such writers as J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) and Dozier et al. (1995) is bolstered in earlier work by Kruckeberg and Starck (1988), who see public relations' prime function as helping to restore America's much lamented loss of community feeling. These writers see public relations practitioners as the mediators between organizations and their public. The result of this mediation is that all parties benefit, and that no one party attempts to control the perceptions and ideas of the other.

A later pair of writers (Susskind & Field, 1996) give further credence to J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992), Dozier et al. (1995), and Kruckeberg and Starck (1988), when they assert that "mutual gains" communication is the only means by which organizations can effectively secure and maintain the trust of their publics. These writers maintain that, for public relations to be effective in highly controversial environments, the best method of communication is a give and take situation in which organizations display openness, honesty, sincerity, and willingness to change course if necessary.

Another writer draws parallels between the two-way symmetrical model of communication and the theory of discourse ethics espoused by philosopher Jurgen Habermas (Leeper, 1996). Habermas views all moral action as communicative and, further, he asserts that dialogue—not monologue—is essential to humans understanding each other (Leeper). Leeper concludes that Habermas' theory is compatible with the two-way symmetrical model. This confirms Pearson's (1989a) suggestion that Habermas' distinction between monological and dialogical rationality mirrors what he calls "the tension" between two public relations approaches: two-way asymmetrical communication (of which the object is to use information about audiences to manipulate them) and two-way symmetrical communication (of which the object is mutually beneficial discourse).

Pearson (1989a) makes an important augmentation to J. E. Grunig's and L. A. Grunig's (1992) and Dozier et al.'s (1995) theory of the most ethically desirable type of communication when he proposes a set of "prescriptions" or "rules" for ethical communication. These rules would apply equally to all participants in the communication process; that is, an organization and its public. Essentially, Pearson advocates that all parties agree to conditions of communication to make the exchange mutually satisfactory. Then he suggests regular, independent audits to ensure that the rules are being followed, and that all parties remain satisfied throughout the process. Furthermore, Pearson (1989b) asserts that corporate public relations departments are, in effect, the moral keepers of their organizations inasmuch as they are the departments that prescribe how dialogue with the organization's public will be carried out. He concludes that managing communication systems between organizations and their public so that they are as close as possible to the highest ethical standards of dialogue is "the core ethical responsibility of public relations from which all other obligations follow" (p. 128).

## THE REALITY OF PERSUASION

Although many public relations practitioners and scholars feel uneasy with—or even go so far as to reject—the role of persuasion in public relations (e.g., German, 1995; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992; Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988), others accept attempts to sway public opinion as a given (e.g., Barney & Black, 1994; Bernays, 1928; Hamilton, 1989; Miller, 1989; Sledzik, 1996). Hamilton (1989) wrote,

The “bottom line” of any public relations/advertising campaign is the extent to which the project affects the behavior(s) of the target public. Ultimately, the actions of the target public produce the pay-off for the client and/or company. (p. 323)

This writer’s assumption echoes the mind set of Edward Bernays (1928), whose stated intention was always to influence behavior.

McBride (1989) goes so far as to assert that until public relations practitioners learn how to be comfortable with their roles as advocates, they can never hope to be considered professionals. She blames an over emphasis on journalistic principles in public relations education programs. This instills in aspiring public relations counselors a higher regard for journalistic objectivity than for public relations advocacy. McBride (1989) believes these programs turn out public relations practitioners who launch their careers already at a moral deficit with the belief they are ethically inferior to journalists. She concludes,

Public relations must accept a commitment to the ethics of persuasion to reduce a crippling inferiority complex and advance understanding of the profession by its practitioners as well as the public. (p. 5)

Wrigley (1998) agrees, “Some would argue that until public relations admits—and embraces—its persuasion and advocacy role, it will always be apologizing for not being objective” (p. 10).

Sproule (1991) helps explain the advent of public relations as a practice with a mandate entirely separate from that of journalism. He suggests that as the newspaper industry grew in North America, so did the tendency for people and organizations with deep pockets to buy the types of news coverage they sought. This occurred despite a widely-trumpeted but often-ignored journalistic ideal of objectivity. McBride (1989) argues that the corruption of journalistic objectivity was a principal motivator behind the entire practice of public relations. She believes organizations and individuals unable to have themselves taken seriously by a biased—and sometimes bought—media were forced to employ their own advocates who specialized in ensuring that their messages were given widespread distribution. Sproule adds that although the corrupt presses of the 19th century have been largely reformed, the need for advocacy lives on.

Although J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) maintain that pure, two-way symmetrical communication is still the most ethically desirable form of public relations, and that it is the most conducive to organizational excellence, they concede that practical public relations continues to rely on persuasion—at least to some extent. Thus, they have revised their original model to bring it from the realm of “normative theory,” which sets out how public relations should be done, to the province of “positive” theory, which describes how public relations is actually done. Their revised model of “professional public relations” allows for a continuum on which two-way asymmetrical communication exists as the least desirable, “mixed motive” communication sits somewhere in the middle, and true, two-way symmetrical communication is the most desirable, both in terms of ethics and effectiveness (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 312). In a later work (Dozier et al., 1995), this model is revised again so that the mixed motive zone on the continuum becomes the “win-win zone” where the parties interact and negotiate in a true, two-way process that is marked by the acknowledged self-interest of each party. The extreme ends are undesirable because they are overbalanced either in favor of an organization or its publics.

## PUBLIC RELATIONS ADVOCACY AS RHETORIC AND PERSUASION

The occupation of advocacy and the art of persuasion are nearly as old as history itself. It may be argued that the first public relations practitioners were those people in ancient Greece known as sophists and rhetoricians who were usually paid to argue causes before the masses in an effort to sway opinion on matters of public interest (Christians, Rotzoll, & Fackler, 1991).

In a review of the connections between scholarship in rhetoric and scholarship in public relations, Toth (1996) suggests that rhetoric is an inherent property of public relations. Toth examines definitions of rhetoric that suggest the rhetor may be either the individual responsible for public relations in an organization, or the organization itself. In both these cases, the term *rhetor* is symbolic and represents an entity advancing a point of view in a public forum. In Toth’s analysis, there is nothing about the practice of rhetoric and the craft of the public relations practitioner that suggests attempts to persuade others are inherently unethical or less deserving of professional respect than J. E. Grunig’s and L. A. Grunig’s (1992) model of two-way symmetrical communication.

In fact, in expounding on the work of R. L. Heath, Toth demonstrates that this academic’s definition of rhetoric, hence his view of persuasion, is not antithetical to the model of two-way communication as a symmetrical process. Heath adopts a definition put forward by Donald Bryant, “The function of adjusting ideas to people and of people to ideas.” This definition, Heath (1992) believes, “makes a com-

mitment to discover truth and acknowledges the organic interaction between people and ideas” (p. 24). Heath asserts that rhetoric—thus, public relations as rhetoric—is essential to the free exchange of, and fair competition among, ideas in society. However, he adds that public relations as rhetoric may be at its best when it is part of dialogue; when it is used as a means to search for truth or to critically examine social conventions.

Miller (1989) asserts, “Effective, ethically defensible persuasion and effective, ethically defensible public relations are virtually synonymous” (p. 45). He goes on to link what he considers a natural human tendency toward persuasion with what he considers another natural human tendency: the drive to control one’s environment. Miller explains the sense in which he uses “control” is strictly “amoral.” All humans seek control over their environments when they do such instinctive things as seek warmth, shelter, and food. Persuasion is an attempt to seek symbolic control and stems from this same primal need to make our environments as amenable to us as possible. From this, it follows that public relations is a process aimed at exerting symbolic control over specific aspects of the environment: “Whenever control of the environment hinges on the attitudes and behaviors of others, attempts to control these attitudes and behaviors are inevitable” (p. 47). In Miller’s view, the need humans have to exert symbolic control of their environments by persuading others to share their viewpoints is a logical necessity of human existence; no social, economic, or political interaction lacks this motivation.

Neither Miller nor Heath absolves rhetoric or public relations of moral responsibility, however. Although Miller (1989) considers persuasion inherently amoral, he also says that the morality of persuasive acts should be judged on the ends sought by the message and the means used to achieve that persuasion. In addition, Heath (1992) holds that truthfulness must still be an unbending ethical requirement of public relations. Falsehood, he says, leads to misinformed judgments, and this runs counter to the legitimate role of rhetoric in society.

Wardy (1996) discusses the distinction between “dialectical” debate and “rhetorical” debate according to the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Although Socrates (as interpreted by Plato) decried rhetoric as a means of cleverly arranging words to manipulate audiences, Aristotle believed that the best rhetoric could be successful precisely because it was truthful. According to this ancient philosopher, the truth would always prevail.

Socrates was not so confident in this respect. For this reason, he was a believer in dialectic, a process in which philosophers would freely debate ideas with no motive to win. Their sole purpose would be to come closer to truth by floating ideas and having others critique them. This spiraling process of setting up arguments only to have them torn down and replaced by new arguments would eventually reveal truth. The participants would be motivated strictly by their desire to further clarify concepts, rather than by the prospect of winning or causing another to lose. For both Socrates and Aristotle, truth was the ultimate goal of social debate. How-



ever, where Socrates believed only the truly objective process of dialectic could achieve enlightenment, Aristotle believed there was a role for rhetoric and the art of persuasion as well—contingent of course on the belief that the most effective rhetoric was always that which spoke the truth (Wardy, 1996).

Brownstein (1974) explains Aristotle's reasoning for rhetoric as "the counterpart" to dialectic. In Brownstein's opinion, Aristotle accepted that dialectic was the best process for achieving objective truths that transcend society. However, he believed that for the purposes of arriving at practical truths on which individuals could act, rhetoric was the best method. Brownstein (1974) presents Aristotle's argument this way:

This is a rhetoric the ultimate aim of which is to produce solutions and not merely persuasion; it deals with matters not resolvable by logic alone and therefore its means cannot be reduced to formal logic [i.e. dialectic]; it is impelled and guided by self-interest rather than by an impersonal desire for the Good and the True; its model is an assembly of men [*sic*] deliberating together instead of an orator declaiming to a mob or a teacher lecturing to students; and the smallest rhetorically ... significant unit will be the exchange rather than the speech. (pp. 20–21)

Thus, according to Brownstein, Aristotle's ideal of rhetoric required a free exchange of ideas, not merely a one-sided argument. Inherent in this exchange would be the drive by all parties to persuade.

## DEVELOPING A MODEL FOR ADVOCACY

Up to this point, the review of literature reveals that there is an argument to be made for advocacy as a legitimate function of the public relations practice, and that it may well be possible for practitioners to take on the advocate's role without sacrificing the moral good. The following sections assume this argument is true and focus on developing a framework that can help practitioners and academics evaluate the ethical acceptability of advocacy as a way of ensuring that it meets high ethical standards.

The literature review yields a number of themes that will be developed here as criteria for the ethical practice of advocacy and persuasion. These criteria are used to derive a theoretical model (or framework) for public relations advocacy at its most ethically desirable. The model is necessarily arbitrary, because it is based only on the writers cited here. It may, therefore, omit some ethical standards by which advocacy and persuasion could be judged. Nevertheless, the review of the literature is broad. It includes writings on public relations, professional ethics, advocacy, rhetoric, and persuasion. Thus, it should at least provide a starting point for setting ethical standards of advocacy in public relations.



Public relations theorists have often looked to law as an operational framework (Pearson, 1990). The legal profession has already defined advocate and counselor roles, which roughly parallel the roles that public relations practitioners play; and practitioners represent organizations and ideas in the so-called court of public opinion (Barney & Black, 1994). For these reasons, the ethics of legal advocacy are heavily—but not exclusively—relied on in this article as a potential parallel standard for the ethics of public relations advocacy.

Ten criteria for ethically desirable public relations are proposed in the following paragraphs.

### TEN CRITERIA FOR ETHICALLY DESIRABLE ADVOCACY

#### Evaluation

This is detached, or objective, evaluation of the issue–client–organization before determining whether it merits public relations advocacy.

Nelson (1994) asks to whom the public relations advocate's loyalties ultimately lie; to the self, the employer, members of the local community, the local media, a broader segment of society, "or even to a higher power" (p. 227). He notes that although the act of persuading others is a necessary part of public communication, and although the role of advocate assumed by the public relations practitioner is entirely consistent with First Amendment rights, the practice of public relations advocacy continues to draw criticism. This is particularly so when firms take on unpopular or reprehensible clients and causes. With the legal model as a guideline, the advocate's loyalties must be with the client, regardless of the perceived rightness or wrongness of the cause (Goldman, 1980). However, this thinking runs counter to that of public relations scholars and practitioners who believe that the advocate's primary loyalty must be to the best interests of society. (See more on loyalty/priority next.)

Martinson (1994) considers where social responsibility fits into public relations when he rejects the notion of self-interest in communicating with audiences. Martinson (1994) describes "enlightened self-interest" as willingness of an individual or organization to forgo a present benefit in return for a greater benefit later in time. However, says Martinson (1994), even though some public relations thinkers may view enlightened self-interest as a needed compromise between serving the client's or employer's interests exclusively and serving only the public interest, this ethic is flawed because it continues to view the world from the perspective of self-interest only. Martinson argues that persons genuinely interested in practicing public relations will also be committed to the realization that parties to communication share basic needs, and that meeting these needs honors their humanity (Martinson, 1994). Ethical public relations, then, becomes a process for ensuring that the

communication needs of all parties are met. Clearly, this approach requires more from the practitioner than strict adherence to the client's point of view; it requires recognition that other parties to the communication have rights as well.

Using the legal profession as a model, Bivins (1987a, 1987b) shows public relations practitioners a potential way out of the impasse between self-interested advocacy on the one hand and the fundamental rights of audiences on the other. He breaks the practice into two major roles: advocate and counselor/advisor. The former has persuasion as its primary purpose. The latter aims for objective observation and analysis of the client's or employer's situation and prescription of solutions. In the former case, the advocate owes his or her first allegiance to the client or employer. In the latter case, the counselor may be justified in taking interests other than the client's or employer's into account. Using these two roles as the basis, Bivins (1989b) argues that public relations advocacy can be practiced professionally, hence ethically, if and only if the practitioner has properly conducted his or her role as counselor first. That is, the practitioner must apply the objectivity of the counselor to determine first of all whether a particular client or issue merits his or her services as advocate. If the evaluation yields an answer in the positive, the practitioner is justified in assuming the role of advocate in which the client's or employer's interests are the first priority (see also Bivins, 1987a).

### Priority

Once the public relations practitioner has assumed the role of advocate, the interests of the client or organization are valued above those of others involved in the public debate.

Goldman (1980) wrote that, as far as the law allows, it is an entrenched value of the American legal profession that it is a lawyer's duty to vigorously represent the interests of his or her client. This is based on the assumption that, if every lawyer provides the same single-minded representation, all parties will be equally served. To provide less than full advocacy is to short-change the client. Goldman notes that although a lawyer, as counselor, may advise a client on the ethical implications of certain courses of action, a lawyer is not obligated to resign over moral disagreement. In fact, in criminal cases, not only is it ethically permissible to advocate for a client whose objectives are unethical, it is required—if resigning from the client would prejudice the case.

Civil cases require slightly less loyalty from the lawyer, who may resign if he or she disagrees with the client's direction or ethical standards. Nevertheless, the same principles of vigorous advocacy apply to the lawyer who chooses to represent a client in a civil case.

Goldman wrote:

It appears that from the point of view of the [American Bar Association] Code that, as long as legal restrictions do not apply, a lawyer has no obligations whatsoever to persons whose interests may clash with those of his client, no obligations to respect the moral rights of such persons unless these are explicitly protected by law. (Goldman, 1980, p. 95)

Goldman's (1980) inquiry into the ethics of legal advocacy is part of a larger work on professional ethics in general. He wrote that pursuit of the core values of a profession can sometimes be at odds with general social values, but that this does not necessarily mean the practitioner is morally wrong. He examines the concept of "differentiation" of professions and suggests that in cases where professions are "strongly differentiated" from the rest of society, there may be some argument for operating from a set of moral standards apart from those of the general populace. The vigorous advocacy required of lawyers is one such example; another is the perceived duty of doctors to sometimes avoid telling patients the truth (Goldman, 1980). Although society may not always be at ease with these types of ethical decisions, we—at least tacitly—consent that these isolated activities are necessary for the general good of all.

In a vein similar to Goldman's differentiation argument, Ellin (1982) favors what he calls a "parallel" morality where professionals draw their ethical guidelines from the nature of their professions. He examines this concept through the relationship of professional to client, which he argues is "fiduciary" (a relationship of trust in which the professional is believed to be the best judge of the client's interests). In this case, he says, there can be a justifiable conflict between "ordinary" and "professional" obligations to the point at which the morality of a person's actions as a professional does not mirror the morality of his or her actions as an individual. Thus, Ellin allows the professional some latitude in determining the extent to which he or she is prepared to advocate for his or her client.

Applying Goldman's (1980) principle of differentiation and Ellin's (1982) parallel morality to public relations would seem to yield a conclusion that the practitioner owes the client or employer at least some degree of loyalty, or priority, when participating in public discourse.

## Sensitivity

This is the balancing of client priority on the one hand, with social responsibility on the other.

The principle of full advocacy in an adversarial legal system seems to be generally accepted by society as the best means by which to protect the rights of both victims and wrong-doers, and as the best and least biased means for finding the truth in a given situation. However, Goldman (1980) identifies what he considers

the point at which the principle breaks down on moral grounds. It is the point at which advocacy advances the interests of a client with full knowledge that the client is in the wrong, and with full knowledge that advancing the client's interests is detrimental to the interests of others:

The adversary process with full advocacy cannot be most conducive to truth-finding or decision on strict legal merits when one side, the side that knows it is on the short end of the truth or the law, is systematically involved in thwarting those outcomes. (p. 116)

If Goldman is right about the moral breaking point in a court of law, then his conclusion must carry even more force in the court of public opinion. Here, the judges (targeted public) are vulnerable to outright manipulation because they are generally less sophisticated than the advocates. They have no authority to demand or enforce ground rules for debate, and they have no recourse to legal protections from undue influence by advocates. Nor is there a guarantee that arguments on all sides will be presented with equal expertise. Just as Goldman finds the argument for differentiation wanting, Ellin's (1982) argument in favor of a special professional morality also breaks down at this point. In the case of public relations advocacy, targeted public may not be aware that a special morality exists for the advocate; therefore they also may be unaware that a public relations advocate's arguments are lopsided.

Nevertheless, it is still possible to argue that, once the practitioner has taken on the job of advocating for a client or idea, he or she is morally obligated to make that representation to the best of his or her ability, using whatever methods are possible to help advance the case. To do less would be to breach the client's trust (see Goldman, 1980; Ellin, 1982). However, if we accept Goldman's arguments that there are points—even in the legal system—where the morality of full advocacy breaks down, we may conclude that there are points in public relations advocacy where the morality of representing a client's or organization's ideas may not be ethically defensible. Although lawyers may take—and be granted by society—more latitude in representing their clients in a legal system where every adversary can be assumed to have equal resources, public relations practitioners cannot be granted that same latitude. Often, public relations advocacy serves organizations that have far more resources than the audiences to whom their messages are directed or the groups they are advocating against (see German, 1995).

Barney and Black (1994) observe that the First Amendment only guarantees the right to free and open discussion; it does not guarantee “equity in public discussion.” However, they suggest public relations practitioners could operate “under an injunction that one has a moral obligation to society that sometimes transcends obligation to client” (Barney & Black, 1994, p. 241). Although their particular discussion is about the limits of truthfulness, presumably this type of injunction could apply to the conduct of public relations in general. Thus, it might enjoin practitio-

ners to be sensitive to the possibility of overmatching opposing advocates in terms of resources and expertise, and it might require practitioners to ensure the methods they employ do not constitute undue influence on the judges, the targeted public.

### Confidentiality

This is the protection of the client's or organization's rights to confidentiality and secrecy on matters in which secrets are morally justified.

Goldman (1980) reviews the requirement of confidentiality between lawyers and their clients. The American Bar Association Code requires that confidential client information not be used to a client's disadvantage, or for the lawyer's own purposes (Goldman, 1980, p. 98). A breach of confidentiality is considered a breach of trust. This type of guaranteed secrecy is considered necessary if the lawyer is to have free access to the information he or she needs to advocate fully and effectively for the client. If the legal framework is a fitting analogy for public relations, it might be argued that a similar type of "practitioner-client privilege" be observed.

However, having found the argument for full advocacy unsatisfactory for lawyers, Goldman (1980) also finds the argument for confidentiality wanting. He asserts that any wrong done by a breach of confidence must be weighed against more serious wrongs that could occur if the breach were not made. For example:

It cannot be right to help achieve or acquire for a client what he does not deserve at the expense of moral rights of others solely on the ground that he has expected and trusted you to do so. (p. 135)

Goldman suggests the breach of trust problem could be avoided by a simple disclaimer at the beginning of the lawyer-client relationship: Discovery of incriminating facts could affect the way the lawyer approaches his or her advocacy role. Goldman admits this approach also has shortcomings, but he asserts the disadvantages are preferable to allowing perpetuation of wrongs through keeping of secrets that can result in damage to others (Goldman, 1980).

Gonsalves (1986) wrote of the moral obligations involved in keeping secrets. He defines a secret as "knowledge that the possessor has the right or the duty to conceal" (p. 292). According to Gonsalves, one has a duty to conceal a "strict" secret, a secret that has been revealed by the possessor in confidence, which the receiver has promised not to reveal. However, he says this only applies to promises that it is morally right to make. (Presumably, a public relations practitioner would not be morally obliged to keep a company's illegal activities secret because it would have been morally wrong to promise secrecy in the first place.)

Where one has the right to keep a secret, deception to deflect the prying attentions of others may be justified, says Gonsalves. This writer says the only time one is released from a duty to keep a morally justified secret is if the secret has already been otherwise revealed, or if consent to reveal the secret can be supposed.

Using Goldman's (1980) and Gonsalves' (1985) reasoning as a basis, the fourth criterion for ethically desirable advocacy becomes confidentiality. According to this criterion, public relations practitioners would be free to promise protection of legitimately confidential information, such as employee records, trade secrets, and matters of national security. However, they would be obligated to point out that the promise does not apply to actions or intentions that are illegal or potentially damaging to others.

### Veracity

Veracity is full truthfulness in all matters. Deception or evasion can be considered morally acceptable only under exceptional circumstances when all truthful possibilities have been ruled out; this implies trustworthiness. It is beyond the scope of this research to delve into the meaning of truth as an abstract concept. However, some attempt will be made in the following paragraphs to deal with a narrow interpretation of truth as it may be applied to the practice of public relations and the art of persuasion. The *Gage Canadian Dictionary* (Avis, Drysdale, Gregg, Neufeldt, & Scargill, 1983) provides the following definition of truth: "The quality or property of being in accord with fact or reality; ... a fixed or established principle, law, etc."

The first part of this definition applies to discussion about whether particular statements or impressions given by organizations are reflected in fact—whether these impressions are truthful. The second part applies to whether the public dialogue entered into by organizations employing public relations practitioners strives toward uncovering some greater societal principle or truth.

Martinson (1996) reviews the debate over whether a public relations practitioner who functions as an advocate also can be truthful. He considers the thinking of Michael Ryan, whose thought he paraphrases this way:

Much of the negative comment about contemporary public relations could be significantly reduced if practitioners would abandon the advocacy model and simply insist on full, honest disclosure. (p. 44)

Martinson (1996) interprets Ryan as saying that by taking on the advocacy function, public relations practitioners are already indicating that they consider their clients' or employers' interests paramount, and that audiences are relevant only insofar as they can be manipulated.

On the other side of the argument, Martinson quotes Kenneth Andersen (1983) as advancing the concept of “ethical persuaders,” whose goal is to bring about “voluntary change in the attitudes or actions of ... receivers” (Martinson, 1996, p. 44). He refers also to James Jakska and Michael Pritchard, authors of *Communication Ethics: Methods of Analysis*, whose writings appear to support Andersen’s. Martinson says these writers distinguish persuasion from indoctrination and coercion, noting that the latter two do not allow a significant degree of choice in the receiver. Consequently, ethically defensible modes of persuasion would not rely on tactics that remove the receiver’s choice of whether to accept the persuader’s argument (Martinson, 1996). Taking this reasoning to its logical conclusion would suggest that ethically defensible advocacy would not resort to deceit because misconstruing or omitting important facts would amount to depriving the receiver of significant choice.

Despite the value he places on truthfulness, Martinson (1996) does not espouse a strict application of truth-telling for public relations practitioners. Rather, he adopts a model of “substantial completeness” in which the communicator is concerned more with “what needs to be communicated to achieve genuine understanding” (p. 45), rather than whether or not certain facts should be revealed, withheld, or given a certain color. Thus, substantially complete information need not disclose every detail of a particular situation, only enough to satisfy the information requirements of a reasonable mind. Taken in this light, Martinson’s substantial completeness argument could bridge the gap between secrets one is morally obligated to keep and those that the practitioner has no right to keep.

Martinson (1996) admits that there will always be communicators concerned with how to manipulate the truth without actually telling lies. However, he says, “The public relations practitioner wishing to communicate ethically must adopt truthfulness as a norm” (p. 45).

Put in admittedly idealistic terms, one might suggest that the practitioner attempting to truthfully persuade should *genuinely* believe that he or she is assisting the receiver in attaining that which the receiver already implicitly seeks and is in the receiver’s interest. (emphasis in original; p. 44)

Makau (1991) argues for the principles of “veracity and fidelity.” Veracity refers to truthfulness, whereas fidelity refers to the keeping of promises. These principles are based on a belief that “... effective public communication depends at least in part upon an audience’s trust in the speaker or author’s sincerity and goodwill” (p. 115). Makau says these principles are flexible because there are times when promises may rightly be broken and when deception is justifiable. However, the conditions for these exceptions are extremely limited.

Makau (1991) refers to the writings of Sissela Bok (1978), who examines various types of lies and circumstances under which these lies are generally considered



acceptable. For example, “paternalistic lies” told with the intention of protecting the sick or dying are allowed by society, as are “white lies” told to avoid injuring receivers’ feelings with the unvarnished truth. However, Bok concludes, even these lies are fundamentally damaging because they deprive the receivers of the right to make informed choices.

Bok (1978) examines the many types of lies and deception that society has invented, from outright and inexcusable lies to evasion, euphemism, suppression, and exaggeration. Even gestures designed to lead astray, or changing of the subject mid-conversation can be designed to lead away from the truth. In many respects, Bok suggests, society consents to being lied to, and to lying.

The social incentives to deceit are at present very powerful; the controls, often weak ... It would be wishful thinking, therefore, to expect individuals to bring about major changes in the collective practices of deceit by themselves. (p. 244)

Bok advances what she calls the “principle of veracity,” which considers as its underlying premise that lying is wrong and that truth-telling is always desirable. She explains the principle this way:

In any situation where a lie is a possible choice, one must first seek truthful alternatives. If lies and truthful statements appear to achieve the same result or appear to be as desirable to the person contemplating lying the lies should be ruled out. And only where a lie is a *last resort* can one even begin to consider whether or not it is morally justified. (emphasis in original; 1978, p. 31)

Although Bok admits that the principle of veracity does not necessarily override all others, and that it is not always appealed to, she points to its functional utility by outlining the concept of trust:

I can have different kinds of trust: that you will treat me fairly, that you will have my interests at heart, that you will do me no harm. But if I do not trust your word, can I have genuine trust in the first three? ... *Whatever* matters to human beings, trust is the atmosphere in which it thrives. (emphasis in original; 1978, p. 31)

Jensen (1997) says that lying and deception can be detrimental, not only to the people being deceived, but to the tellers of the lies as well. Lying and deception indicate disrespect for audiences by limiting their choices for making informed decisions, but they also limit the liar’s choices by potentially trapping him or her in a web of lies to cover the first one. Lying also limits the liar by engendering incremental loss of self-respect, says Jensen.

Bok (1978), Jensen (1997), and Makau (1991) all assert that the act of communicating carries with it, not only the obligation to tell the truth, but the obligation to keep a promise together with the concept of trust. In the act of speaking (or com-

municating) the communicator implies a promise to tell the truth. When the speaker (or communicator) lies, not only has he or she violated the time-honored principle of telling the truth, he or she has broken the implied promise to tell the truth. Thus, he or she is untrustworthy on two counts (Jensen). The veracity criterion attempts to cover both truthfulness and trustworthiness.

### Reversibility

If the situation were reversed, the advocate–client–organization would be satisfied that it had sufficient information to make an informed decision.

Martinson (1996) still could be accused of allowing communicators too much latitude in their individual interpretations of the truth. The criteria for determining whether information is substantially complete would still be set by the individual practitioner. It is conceivable that although a communicator may truly believe that the information he or she is providing is in the receiver's best interest, the information is, in fact, manipulative.

One way Martinson (1996) gets around this problem is by applying the principle of "reversibility." He says the communicator must ask him or herself if, as the recipient of the communication, he or she would still consider it to be substantially complete, with enough information to allow for an informed decision on whether to accept the communicator's argument.

The principle of reversibility may be stated many ways, but at its most succinct, it follows the adage, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." A public relations practitioner might rephrase this to read, "communicate with others as you would have them communicate with you."

The concept of treating others as one would one's self is not restricted to religious teachings. It also has foundation in classical philosophy, such as the writings of Immanuel Kant. This 18th century philosopher argued that individuals should be treated as "ends," not simply as means toward someone else's ends (Kant, 1785/1976, p. 47, 429). This principle was encapsulated in Kant's "practical imperative": "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only" (Kant, 1785/1976, p. 47, 429). This type of respect for individuals would naturally lead to treatment of others as one would like to be treated. For the public relations practitioner, this principle would include reversibility, the sixth criterion for ethically desirable advocacy.

A further reinforcement by Kant of the reversibility concept is his better-known "categorical imperative," which goes as follows: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant, 1785/1976, p. 38, 421). At the level of public relations practice, this imperative would translate into taking only those actions of which practitioners would be willing to be on the receiving end. Thus, in the case of information about a particular issue, a practitioner would be obligated to picture him or herself as the

audience and to ask the question whether sufficient information had been provided to allow informed choice on the part of the receiver.

### Validity

All communications on behalf of the client or organization are defensible against attacks on their validity.

Despite care with truthfulness of arguments on behalf of client organizations, public relations efforts still can fall prey to faulty logic. Thus, closely related to the veracity criterion is the criterion of validity: Arguments presented by public relations practitioners must be based on sound reasoning.

Leeper (1996) reviews philosopher Jurgen Habermas' four criteria for establishing validity in social discourse: comprehensibility, truth (coinciding with fact), rightness (appropriateness of the utterance for the hearer), and truthfulness (sincerity in addition to merely coinciding with fact). Leeper says Habermas' theory of communication means that every speaker (and presumably every communicator) must be ready to respond to challenges to any one of these aspects of the validity claim. Presumably, inability to successfully defend any of these aspects would undermine the validity of the communicator's argument.

So, if we accept Habermas' requirements, we might add to our criteria for ethical persuasion the expectation that audiences will challenge the information communicated to them, and that the communicator should be able to legitimately defend against such challenges. If he or she can do so, the communication is demonstrated to be both truthful and logically valid. In fact, truth is a necessary condition for validity.

Jensen (1997) discusses how appeals to emotions rather than to reason can limit the capacity to make informed decisions. Although he admits that, in some instances, communicators find it necessary to appeal to emotions to jolt audiences into listening, or to convey their own depth of feeling on an issue, Jensen does not condone the use of emotion over reason to win an argument:

The ethical concern around the issue of reason and emotion is rooted in the ethical standard that whatever furthers our *humanness* is highly ethical ... two characteristics of humanness are the ability to reason and the ability to use symbols for communication .... To permit emotion to override reason (in communication) is to dehumanize and hence to be ethically low .... When emotional appeals substitute for sound reason and logically supported claims, ethical quality is likely to be low. Emotional arguments ... unfairly exploit human weaknesses. (emphasis in original; parentheses added; pp. 96-97)

Jensen's reasoning suggests that public relations practitioners should not rely on emotional appeals to gain audience sympathy, because this type of reasoning does not rely on factual arguments; instead, it relies on a form of manipulation.

## Visibility

Visibility is clear identification of all communications on behalf of the client or organization as originating from that source.

Sproule (1991) deals with the criticism that institutional persuasion essentially undermines democracy because of a certain amount of stealth involved in planting and orchestrating the dissemination of opinion that masquerades as news, or as the views of persons other than its originators. He says there are virtually no limits imposed on methods of institutional persuasion, ranging from advertising aimed at children to political campaigning. In effect, it would seem, society consents to being manipulated through communication. Sproule notes that public relations pioneers like Edward Bernays and Ivy Lee defended institutional persuasion that clearly identified who the originator of the persuasive message was. Lee claimed a policy of never distributing news releases on behalf of his clients without making clear the originator's identity (Cutlip, 1994; Sproule). However, there is evidence that although Bernays espoused a similar ideal publicly, his surreptitious actions on behalf of numerous clients demonstrated otherwise (Tye, 1998).

Notwithstanding continued freedom for large organizations to influence audiences, critics of modern public communication continue to claim that institutions infiltrate their ideologies into the public mind through five major instruments of social influence that are "ostensibly politically neutral" (Sproule, 1991). These are news, government agency communication, education, entertainment, and religion. However, adds Sproule, critics on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum claim manipulation by the other of the innocent masses, and the debate shows no sign of waning. Perhaps the continuing debate is an indication of the truth of earlier assertions by Edward Bernays and Ivy Lee; namely, that advocacy and dissemination of propaganda contribute to the healthy functioning of democracy, in which all opinions are heard and considered—regardless of their origin.

In practical terms for the public relations practitioner, Sproule's (1991) study of institutional persuasion may show that the use of persuasive techniques is not necessarily wrong in a society where all participants have, theoretically, equal access to organs of public communication. However, given the arguments earlier for veracity, reversibility, and validity, it seems also a given that for public debate to be truly fair, originators of persuasive messages must be clearly identified to their audiences.

It would be difficult for an organization to argue that it was being truthful (Veracity) in a public relations campaign if it kept its identity secret. By the same token, an organization could not argue that it was practicing the Golden Rule (Reversibility) in a debate in which it hoped to gain advantage by failing to reveal itself. Furthermore, if an organization could not claim to be truthful nor to stand the test of reversibility, it would seem unrealistic to expect it to stand the test of validity. Thus, visibility becomes an important component in ethically desirable communication.

## Respect

This is regard for audiences as autonomous individuals with rights to make informed choices and to have informed participation in decisions that affect them, as well as willingness to promote dialogue over monologue. German (1995) suggests that one test for Habermas' ideal of communicative action, or true dialogue, is to measure the extent to which the communication allows the public to offer alternative points of view. If the message promotes discussion and achievement of rational consensus, then it meets the test for communicative action and, by implication, is ethically acceptable. However, German appears doubtful if public relations can ever aspire to this level of public dialogue. She raises the issue of balance of power and espouses the belief that, "When corporations engage in public communication, it is monologue" (1995, p. 293). She further asserts that public relations is about gaining power in that it reflects the interests of the "dominant powers" in society at the expense of individuals' rights to choose and to make informed decisions.

Writers on Habermas' theory of communication (e.g., Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Leeper, 1996; Pearson, 1989a, 1989b) note this philosopher's emphasis on social dialogue and the function of communication as a means to carry on that dialogue in a way that can help society advance. This is closely related to the suggestions of writers on rhetoric (e.g., Heath, 1992; Toth, 1996; Wardy, 1996) who suggest that the most ethically desirable rhetoric is that which respects its audiences as autonomous individuals who are capable of making well-formed decisions based on complete information.

All of these authors are talking, to varying degrees, about respect for the receivers of communication. Kant's "practical imperative," which enjoins individuals to respect others as ends in themselves rather than as means to ends (see Reversibility section), adds further weight to this ninth criterion.

## Consent

Communication on behalf of the client or organization is carried out only under conditions to which it can be assumed all parties consent.

Pearson (1989a, 1989c) wrote about the value of rules and coorientation as communication concepts. Rules refer to the conditions—either implicit or explicit—under which the debate takes place. In any given situation the parties in a debate may or not be aware of rules, and they may or may not conform to them. Nevertheless, every debate can be evaluated based on rules. Coorientation refers to how the parties relate to each other with respect to the rules and the subject of discussion. In other words, each party's contribution to a discussion can be evaluated based on whether it conforms consciously or unconsciously to rules. In addition, each party has a specific orientation with respect to those rules, to the subject matter, and to the other party.

Each party's orientation becomes coorientation when the parties interact. Hence, rules and coorientation become important to communication and public relations.

In Pearson's (1989c) ideal state, all parties to a communication are aware of, and follow, the same rules. In addition, they are aware that each is doing so. They also agree on how to discuss the rules and change them if necessary. In this case, "congruency" (conformity to common rules) and "accuracy" (knowledge of each other's orientation) are both high, says Pearson (1989c, pp. 361–363). Less desirable are situations in which one or both of congruency and accuracy are not high. For example, parties may assume they are operating according to the same ethical rules (accuracy), but they may actually be operating to differing standards (congruency). If the point comes when it appears the rules need to be changed, there is likely to be little agreement on how to do this. Inevitably, resolution of the original issue will be less than satisfactory under these conditions.

Without referring to Pearson, Susskind, and Field (1996), suggest a practical means for achieving high accuracy and congruency with six principles of "mutual gains communication":

- Acknowledge the concerns of the other side.
- Encourage joint fact finding.
- Offer contingent commitments to minimize impacts if they do occur; promise to compensate knowable but unintended impacts.
- Accept responsibility, admit mistakes, and share power.
- Act in a trustworthy fashion at all times.
- Focus on building long-term relationships. (pp. 37–38)

These authors have developed an approach to communication for organizations involved in emotion-laden community and environmental issues. However, it can be argued that these principles are applicable to varying degrees in all communication between organizations and their public because they seem to meet J. E. Grunig's and L. A. Grunig's (1992) and Dozier et al.'s (1995) requirements for two-way symmetrical communication. All of these principles are aimed at building trust between the communicating parties and at involving all parties as equals in a debate. Achievement of these objectives assumes mutual agreement to the six principles at some level, whether or not they are explicitly stated at the outset. Even the term, *mutual gains communication* suggests the discussion has high levels of congruency and accuracy. Common to both Susskind and Field and Pearson is an underlying principle— whether stated or not—that for communication to be satisfactory, all parties to the debate must know and agree to the ground rules.

Thus arises the tenth criterion for ethically desirable public relations: consent. Consent here implies that there are rules, and that the parties to the discussion are aware of them. The less ambiguous this consent is—the more clearly articulated are

TABLE 1  
10 Criteria for Ethically Desirable Public Relations Advocacy

<i>Ethically Desirable Criterion</i>	<i>Definition</i>
1. Evaluation	Detached or objective evaluation of the issue–client–organization before determining whether it merits public relations advocacy.
2. Priority	Once the public relations practitioner has assumed the role of advocate, the interests of the client or organization are valued above those of others involved in the public debate.
3. Sensitivity	Balancing of client priority on the one hand with social responsibility on the other.
4. Confidentiality	Protection of the client’s or organization’s rights to confidentiality and secrecy on matters for which secrets are morally justified.
5. Veracity	Full truthfulness in all matters; deception or evasion can be considered morally acceptable only under exceptional circumstances when all truthful possibilities have been ruled out; this implies trustworthiness.
6. Reversibility	If the situation were reversed, the advocate–client–organization would be satisfied that it had sufficient information to make an informed decision.
7. Validity	All communications on behalf of the client or organization are defensible against attacks on their validity.
8. Visibility	Clear identification of all communications on behalf of the client or organization as originating from that source.
9. Respect	Regard for audiences as autonomous individuals with rights to make informed choices and to have informed participation in decisions that affect them; willingness to promote dialogue over monologue.
10. Consent	Communication on behalf of the client or organization is carried out only under conditions to which it can be assumed all parties consent.

the ground rules and mutual agreement to them (Pearson’s principles of congruency and accuracy)—the more ethically desirable is the communication process.

### MODEL FOR ADVOCACY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

The ten criteria outlined earlier are presented in Table 1. A one-word descriptor is given in the left-hand column, and the corresponding definition is provided on the right. No attempt has been made at this stage to give any attribute priority over another.

This, then is the suggested model for ethically desirable advocacy in public relations. If practitioners meet all of these criteria, they should feel comfortable knowing that, in their advocacy functions, they have met high ethical standards; if they do not meet any of the criteria, they should awaken to the probability that their ethical standards are far too lax. Practitioners can judge how much remedial work their standards require by the number of criteria they meet.



These ten attributes of (or criteria for) ethically desirable advocacy support the assertion that advocacy in public relations can be defended on moral grounds. The criteria are consistent with the codes of ethics of such organizations as the Public Relations Society of America, the International Association of Business Communicators, and the International Public Relations Association (see codes in Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Nevertheless, the model remains to be tested. Further research is needed to determine the practical applicability of the criteria and whether this list is complete and appropriate as it applies to the advocacy function.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although this research has not been exhaustive, it has been sufficient to answer two basic questions in the affirmative: a) whether persuasion is a legitimate public relations function, and b) whether it can be performed to high ethical standards.

Most practitioners know intuitively that the advocacy function itself (thereby, public relations) is neither good nor bad. Rather, it is the way in which the function is carried out that makes the difference. This article sets out a preliminary framework for ethically desirable execution of the advocacy function, so practitioners can draw on a set of objective criteria to gauge the ethical desirability of their actions. Although this framework is consistent with codes of professional practice, it attempts to go a step further by providing some philosophical basis for determining the rightness or wrongness of actions. The framework shown in Table 1 sets out broad categories that can provide philosophical contexts within which to weigh decisions.

The 10 criteria given here provide at least a starting point for the systematic development of an ethic of public relations advocacy. If such an ethic can be derived for one aspect of the practice, it follows logically that similar frameworks can be developed for other aspects of this budding profession. Only with these types of philosophical bases will public relations practitioners be able to engender the degree of occupational respect reserved for true professionals.

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