THE ARTHUR W. PAGE CENTER
for integrity in public communication

Instructor's Guide: Examining Principles for Ethical Public Relations
through Social Media

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Lessons from the Arthur W. Page Center for Ethics and Integrity in Public Communication

Rationale:

Recent ethical issues have garnered national attention, such as organizational representatives altering the content of their organization's Wikipedia page, companies hiring paid bloggers and reviewers to write on behalf of their products and services, and political candidates hiring individuals to post comments about them in varying social media. The addition of new media types has created more ethical debates and a shifting view of ethics for many students, calling attention to the need for discourse on principles for communicating ethically through social media. Public relations textbooks frequently cover topics such as ethics principles for public relations and public relations writing; however, little attention has been given to how new media has changed the public relations landscape and what contemporary ethical considerations should be made in the converged online media environment – where less ethical guidance exists. This lesson will allow students to examine best practices for public relations ethics in a new media environment and will explore ways to approach these ethical gray areas.

Overview:

To complete this module, it is assumed students will have some prior knowledge of social media and ethical communication through their studies and prior readings. Students will examine best practices for ethics in new media through analyzing trends in best practices as stated by the exemplary professionals interviewed in the Arthur Page Oral History Collection. Students will respond to in-class discussion questions and written essay questions to reflect upon what they have learned through these sources. After completing this course module, students will be able to: identify best practices for ethical communication and apply these best practices to communication through new media channels, understand how social media creates unique ethical challenges for public relations practitioners, and examine how to address these challenges.

Learning Objectives:

Upon completion of this course module, students should be able to:

1. Describe best practices for communicating ethically.

2. Apply ethical best practices to communication through new media channels.

3. Compare communication through traditional and new media channels to understand ethical challenges unique to new media.

Module Activity:

To achieve the above learning objectives, students will be asked to complete an assignment involving the Arthur Page Oral History Collection. Activities will include the following:

1. Students will be asked to watch selected video clips in the Arthur Page Oral History Collection on the topics of "PR and Technology" and "Ethical Decisionmaking/ Behavior" and draw out themes from the interviews regarding ethical decisionmaking and the use of online communication and social media.

2. Students will then respond to a series of essay questions tying themes from the interview responses back to best practices in ethical communication and critically examining considerations for ethical decisionmaking and behavior through the use of new media.

3. **Students will complete a journal entry and be asked to prepare one discussion question for the class regarding the interviews.**

Module Activity Part 1: Watch Video Clips and Develop Themes

The Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communications maintains a publicly available Oral History Collection, featuring interviews with over 30 public relations luminaries on topics such as ethics in public communication and corporate responsibility. Students will be asked to watch portions of these interviews related to the topics of "PR and Technology/Change" and "Ethical Decisionmaking/Behavior." Video clips for "PR and Technology/Change" and "Ethical Decisionmaking/Behavior" can be found on the Page Center Website under the Ethics in Public Relations videos.

Students will be asked to watch the following short video segments, listen to the audio files, and/or read the interview transcripts. Students should take notes on any themes they observe from the selected interview clips regarding ethics and social media:

- Shel Holtz and Neville Hobson, of The Hobson & Holtz Report on FIR - Marcia DiStaso's research about PR and Wikipedia
- Angela Buonocore
- Peter Debreceny
- Cordelia Donovan
- Dan Edelman
- Al Golin
- James Grunig
- Bruce Harrison

- Ray Jordan
- Marilyn Laurie
- Maril Macdonald
- Bill Margaritis
- Alan Marks
- Kelly McGinnis
- Bill Nielsen
- Tim O'Brien
- Helen Ostrowski
- Ron Rhody
- Emmanuel Tchividijan

Module Activity Part 2: Essay Questions

After watching the selected video clips, listening to the audio clips, or reading the interview transcripts, students will be asked to reflect upon the major themes related to ethics in the use of social media for public relations. Students will be asked to respond to the following essay questions, providing 1-2 page double-spaced responses for each question.

1. According to the interviews, how has the development of new or social media created additional challenges for the ethical practice of public relations? Compare these ethical challenges to those faced through traditional media, such as print or broadcast.

For Instructors: Several interviews note the challenges that emerge with the rapid spread of information and misinformation in an online environment, as well as the shifting voice of media from professional journalists to citizens as journalists through blogs and social media.

2. Based upon these interviews, what guidelines would you recommend for organizations wishing to communicate ethically via social media? Develop a list of ethical principles you believe to be important and describe why you have deemed each principle of importance.

For Instructors: Interviews note the importance of general ethical principles, regardless of social media use or not. Interviews suggest an increase in the importance of the human element in online communication and the increased need for transparency and credibility, as so much information is readily available online, and the need for engaging in dialogue via social media platforms.

3. The first interview link with Holtz and Hobson discusses research on organizational Wikipedia entries and how representatives edit (or not) their organizations' Wikipedia entries. After listening to this interview and/or reading the transcript, what are some of the ethical implications of public relations representatives editing their organizations' Wikipedia articles? Do you believe representatives should be allowed to edit their organizations' entries? Why or why not?

For Instructors: Wikipedia's guidelines prohibit organizational representatives from editing their organizations' Wikipedia entries, although they can engage in the discussion page with editors of the entry regarding factual errors. Students should be encouraged to offer their opinion on Wikipedia's policy, based upon the interview discussion.

Module Activity Part 3: Journal Entry and Discussion Questions for Class

Students will be asked to write a 2-3 page journal entry that offers their reflections, opinions, and questions connecting the Page Center interviews with their personal experiences and observations with public relations and social media. Students will be asked to critique the discussions in the interviews on ethics in social media, offering personal opinions about them and posing questions that can further discussion. At the end of their journal entry, students will be asked to write one discussion question to be posed to the class regarding the interviews.

Students should be prepared to ask their discussion question during the following class period as part of class discussion time. Discussion questions must encourage the class to think deeply and engage with the topic of ethical principles and challenges for organizations when communicating via social media.

For Instructors: Encourage students to bring their discussion questions to the following class period and allow time for discussion in class. If the class has a large number of students, have students submit their discussion questions online through learning management software, such as Blackboard or Moodle, and select a few specific questions prior to class to bring forward for discussion during class time. Journal entries can be paper-based or collected online via learning management software. Journal entries should not be shared with the class, unless the students provide permission to do so, as students might feel uncomfortable having their personal experiences and reflections shared.

Additional Resources on Ethical Principles for Communicating via Social Media

The following supplemental resources may be used to provide students with a background on professional codes of ethics and guidelines for ethical strategic communication through social media and traditional media. Instructors may wish to include these resources as part of the essay question assignment or part of the class discussion on ethics principles.

The Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communications. (2013). *The Page Principles.* Available from: http://pagecenter.comm.psu.edu/index.php/about-the-page-center/the-page-principles

Institute for Public Relations. (2012). *Ethical standards and guidelines for public relations research and measurement*. Available from: http://www.instituteforpr.org/iprwp/wp-content/uploads/Ethical-standards-and-guidelines-for-public-relations-research-ver-1.1.pdf

International Association of Business Communicators. (2013). *IABC Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators*. http://www.iabc.com/about/code.htm

Public Relations Society of America. (2013). *PRSA Member Code of Ethics*. http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/CodeEnglish/index.html

Word of Mouth Marketing Association. (2012). *Social Media Marketing Disclosure Guide.* http://www.womma.org/ethics/sm-disclosure-guide

Word of Mouth Marketing Association. (2009). *WOMMA Code of Ethics*. http://www.womma.org/ethics/womma-code-of-ethics

Word of Mouth Marketing Association. (2013). *Privacy Guide*. http://www.womma.org/ethics/privacy-guide