



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

Lucinda L. Austin, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, School of Communications, Elon University  
*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. 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:**

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 complete an assignment involving the Arthur Page Oral History Collection. Activities will include the following:

1. 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. 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. Complete a journal entry and 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. You 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.

Watch the following short video segments, listen to the audio files, and/or read the interview transcripts. Take notes on any themes you 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 Debreceeny](#)
- [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, reflect upon the major themes related to ethics in the use of social media for public relations. Please 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.
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.
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?

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

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

### **Additional Resources on Ethical Principles for Communicating via Social Media**

The following supplemental resources may be used to provide you with a background on professional codes of ethics and guidelines for ethical strategic communication through social media and traditional media.

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>