

Blogging, Ethics and Public Relations: A Proactive and Dialogic Approach

By Peter M. Smudde

Do you “blog”? Does your CEO “blog”? To “blog” is to continually post one’s own ideas, opinions, Internet links (including those for other blogs), and so on about things on one’s own website, which is called a “web log.” Combine these two words to get “blog,” which can be used as either a noun or a verb. The collection of all 9 million blogs in cyberspace (Baker & Green, 2005) is called the “blogosphere” (p. 57). So much has been published in the mainstream media, especially in business and related publications over the past year. The impetus for this is pundits who’ve designated 2005 as “The Year of the Blog” because of blogs’ ubiquitous presence and influence.

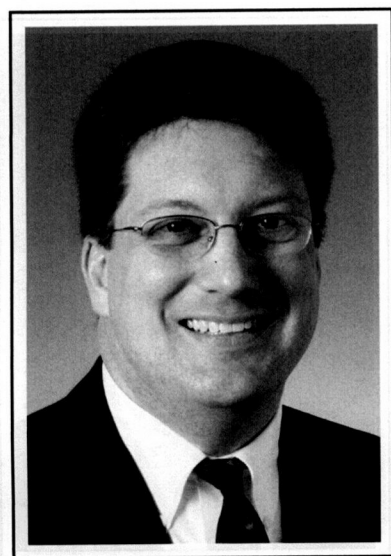
Public relations practitioners can take a reactive stance toward a blogger’s assessments about an organization or issue, and practitioners can take a proactive stance with bloggers. A report by Bacon’s

(2005) summarizes well blogging’s tactical possibilities and practical matters for public relations covered in many articles published within the last 12 months and beyond (e.g., Albrycht, 2004; Fernando, 2004; Guiniven, 2004; Sturaitis, 2004; Trufelman & Goldberg, 2002).

With all this information on what blogs can do and for what public relations outcomes, what’s missing is a definitive ethical view of blogging for public relations purposes. In short, if blogging can be a viable public relations tactic, how can public relations professionals do it ethically? The short answer is that public relations practitioners can establish blogs and use them ethically as an additional, proactive tactic. The long and better answer is the substance of this article, and it will cover blogs and blogging basics, public relations purposes for blog types, basic dimensions of ethics for public relations, and an ethical perspective for public relations blogging.

Basic Background on Blogs and Blogging

Blogs are perhaps the single largest realm of self-expression and free speech on the Internet, and many are high-traffic websites. The essence of blogs is dialog — that blogs invite people to engage in a conversation about myriad topics. So many blogs exist now and cover vast arrays of topics that there are websites that index them by subject matter, like www.globeofblogs.com, and websites that provide search engines about blogs, like Technorati and PubSub. Anyone with the savvy to create and maintain a blog can publish his or her ideas to which all the world can access and respond. Software is available to setup and maintain blogs, and certain popular websites that host blogs, like Google’s Blogger, offer free hosting for basic blogging services (cf. Holland, 2005).



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Certain blogs have been responsible for breaking stories that turned out to be big news, like the DrudgeReport's story about President Clinton's escapades with Monika Lewinski (Bogosian, 2001). Others set the public record straight, like the bloggers whose own investigations proved Dan Rather's report on President Bush's National Guard service wrong (Bacon's Information, 2005; Holland, 2005; Kirkpatrick et al., 2005). Yet most blogs aren't so "successful," as they tend to lack the kind of broad appeal to or interest among readers, post infrequently, link to other blogs sparingly, and offer weak opinions that are wanting of passion, evidence, and other hallmarks of credibility (Levy, 2005).

From a public relations standpoint, blogs can be a blessing and a curse. In the simplest of terms, if blogs say good things about your organization, it's a good thing; if not, it may not be a good thing. Either way word is getting out, and the challenge is managing perceptions and outcomes from all these sources.

Public Relations Blogging

Again, I'm not talking about pitching stories to bloggers and the ethical issues that go with it. I'm talking about creating and maintaining blogs for public relations purposes. All told there are four basic types of blogs according to Bacon's Information (2005), all of which public relations can partake. I'll focus on the organizational context for these blog types, which grows out from their more common uses, but refrain from spelling out very specific things that could be done with each blog type. To lay out such specifics would take away from the fun of designing blogs for proactive public relations purposes; however, I will mention some general ideas along the way.

Personal blogs — Someone creates and maintains a blog to express her or his personal convictions, observations, suggestions, and other matters about selected topics that interest her or him. Prime topics from an organizational standpoint would include a company and its performance, management and its decisions, corporate culture, recent news, product/service offerings, employee benefits, comparisons to the competition, and others. Personal blogs can be created by anyone, including organizational members, who are typically below those in top management (Haskel & Martin, 2004; Kirkpatrick et al., 2005; Zeller, 2005). Most frequently a personal blog is set up and run independently — all by someone on her or his own time and nickel. Sometimes organizations, like Sun Microsystems, Microsoft, and Maytag (Roush, 2005), encourage employees to become bloggers "for debate, free association, and collecting input

about projects" (Roush, 2005, p. 38). The content is virtual word-of-mouth communication that is typically opinionated and replete with links to other Internet sources. These characteristics make personal blogs perhaps the most potent type, because, depending on the blogger's agenda and attitude, subjects covered in the blog could be helpful or hurtful to the company's image, reputation, news, and other aspects.

Topic or industry blogs — These blogs focus on the nature, history, developments, trends, and players in a given subject area or industry. These bloggers tend to be authoritative and influential representatives of a subject area or industry, with a credible track record of experience, knowledge, and success. They also have a strong following of disciples who actively follow and pass along the bloggers' thinking. These bloggers can play an important role of guru or statesperson on issues that matter to those inside and outside the blogosphere. In this way these blogs function nearly like an ongoing white paper or keynote speech — as if to impart sage wisdom to others who, for example, need or want to know what the state of the subject is, where it's going, and what stands to be gained or lost with or without proper action being taken.

Publication-based blogs — As outgrowths of established media outlets, these blogs foster dialog about subjects of interest to the parent publications' readers. Typical bloggers are editors, reporters or free-

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lancers who follow a subject area closely and want to benefit from the greater knowledge of the masses who would be willing to share that knowledge (Beeson, 2005; Mitchell & Steele, 2005; Tanner, 2005; Wasserman, 2004). Immediacy of stories is key, as these blogs serve news-gathering purposes. Bloggers may take advantage of other blog types to research and develop news stories, and, thus, these blogs help organizations (in part) to take the pulse of the news environment.

Corporate blogs — A hybrid of the personal blog, these blogs are fairly new and feature the insights, assessments, commentary, and other discourse devoted to a single company. Key bloggers are corporate executives, including board members (Clarke, 2004; Jones, 2005a; Nash, 2005; Steinert-Threlkeld, 2005). Of special note is the potential use of blogs

for investor relations: Boards of directors could use the technology "to get their message out, and at the same time provide a forum for shareholders to offer informal input to their elected board representatives" (Jones, 2005b, p. 14). The corporate-blog communication is typically much less free-wheeling than personal blogs, but the presence of top management makes this blog type attractive and useful, as it presents an "inside view from the top" of what's going on. In public relations' corner is the idea that the executive has the necessary *ethos* to speak credibly on behalf of and about the organization. Also in PR's corner is the problem of bias. That is, even though the executive is credible, he or she has a vested interest in the propagation of the faith about the organization. Skepticism thus will always be a prevailing attitude toward any corporate/executive blog, and it may well be tempered by glee when corporate details (for better and for worse) come out.

Grunig (1993) explains that "the choice and use of symbols to communicate impressions of an organization" is a vital and ethical part of public relations (p. 129; emphasis added). Blogging is one such choice. ("Podcasting" could become another choice. It is very new and similar to blogging. It involves people creating their own radio programs that are downloaded from a blog or wireless connection through an iPod or iTunes subscription [Farivar, 2005; Levy, 2004].) With this foundational understanding about the types of blogs and what public relations professionals can do or expect from them when used proactively, we can begin to see ethical dynamics toward using blogs ethically for public relations purposes.

Basics of Ethics for Public Relations

Ethics involves thinking about morality, moral problems, and moral judgments. Frankena (1973) asserts that such philosophizing arises when we are directed by traditional rules and beyond a stage when those rules are internalized such that we are "inner-directed" to think in critical and general terms, thereby achieving "a kind of autonomy as moral agents" (p. 4). Accordingly, Frankena argues that moral philosophizing proceeds along three complementary paths: (1) descriptive empirical inquiry, which may be a historical or scientific explanation or theory of phenomena of morality, (2) normative thinking, which involves asserting judgment or giving reasons for a judgment about what is good or right in a particular case, and (3) analytical, critical, or meta-ethical thinking, which involves answering logical, epistemological, or semantic questions about moral phenomena. When considering ethical issues of public relations, all three kinds of moral thinking are appropriate.

As interconnected participants in an environment, organizations must consider their own actions and plans for action in light of their constituencies and other organizations. Descriptive, normative, and analytical thinking about public relations ethics is essential. The reasons is, as Harris (1993) tells us, "One of the best paradigms for showing how the [organizational] culture provides the direction or tools to deal with uncertainty is ethics... Because most organizations must make a profit and be careful 'not to give away the store' when conducting business, members can be faced with serious ethical dilemmas" (p. 266).

Whether informing employees about policies, managing an issue, publishing an annual report, or setting up a blog, organizations continually weigh ethical considerations about their communicative actions. As Conrad (1993) points out, "It is through discourse that individuals develop their own views of morality; through discourse that organizations develop and inculcate core values and ethical codes; and through discourse that incongruities within individual and organizational value-sets are managed and contradictions between the value-sets of different persons are negotiated" (p. 2). Theories about organizational communication ethics would at least help people sort out what is ethical communication and what is not. There is an ample array of sources on ethics for public relations and organizational communication available (e.g., Conrad, 1993; Curtain & Boynton, 2001; Gower, 2002; Jaks & Pritchard, 1994; Johannesen, 1990; Seeger, 1997; Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995).

An Ethical Approach to Public Relations Blogging

Communication with internal and external stakeholders must conform to and uphold ethical principles. Matters of blogging ethics are only implied or addressed in a cursory way in articles that deal with the big-picture matters of truth, legal issues, and influence of blogs on audiences. These articles mention blogs' "unvarnished and pure" (Bacon's Information, 2005, p. 2) coverage of topics; working relationships with bloggers; and the use, credibility, and biases/attitudes of blogs. Indeed, much has been written about ethical dimensions to blogging, and they focus on journalistic dimensions (e.g., Beeson, 2005; Mitchell & Steele, 2005). The topic of the ethics of public relations blogs and blogging has not been directly addressed in any articles, except in terms of the implications of blog content or when referencing the idea of honesty and safeguarding organizational information.

This latter category of content brings blogs close to commercial messages and may, thus, call upon legal scrutiny, especially if "false or unsubstantiated

statements of fact or comparisons” are made (Lazar, 2005, p. 6). Realize that the law and ethics can and do go together. (See Gower [2002], Moore et al. [1997], and Parkinson et al. [2001] for general information about the relationship of the law to public relations. Legal counsel about blogging should be sought for particular applications of the technology as a public relations tactic.) So it’s prudent here to consider legal matters for blogs, which according to Lazar (2005, p. 6) include but are not limited to:

- Disclosing information (i.e., is it material information that risks the company’s competitive position or places it in violation of federal laws, like those under the auspices of the SEC, especially the Sarbanes-Oxley Act and Regulation FD)
- Viewing blog content as advertising (i.e., if a blog is company-sponsored, it’s very possible that any statements about products and services could be subject to the same rules for advertising)
- Paying for blog content (i.e., bloggers could be viewed as paid endorsers, not independent commentators, and be subject to certain FTC regulations about endorsements)
- Controlling content (i.e., liability may lie with the company for the content of any blog created and maintained by any person of any rank, whether or not the blog was setup independently; increases in content control increase company liability)

As corporate officials make certain choices about controlling what and how to communicate with their publics, ethics becomes bound together with public relations. At the heart of an ethical stance about PR are issues related to the equivocality of responsibilities, values, and rights of an organization’s internal and external publics that may be at odds with the organization’s own values and goals (Seeger, 1997). The objective, then, is to reduce “ethical equivocality” as much as possible so that practitioners make the right decision and do what is right and just. Accordingly, communications with internal and external publics should conform to and uphold ethical principles, where the ideal ethic is that of dialogic, or two-way, communication (Johannesen, 1990).

The dialogic nature of blogging fits in nicely with Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) model of excellent communication: two-way symmetrical public relations. This model of communication is ethical — and the ideal ethical way to practice public relations (Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995) — because it, “by definition, suggests a cooperative, give-and-take form of communication based on mutual respect and compromise” (Gower, 2003, p. 11). It is there-

fore important to consider that, as long as an organization uses two-way means of communication like blogging between itself and its stakeholders, “it is likely to increase trust that it is acting in the interests of others and thereby foster their willingness to act in the interest of the organization” (Heath & Bryant, 1992, p. 263). In this regard, trust is a function of a fundamentally moral position from which an organization operates, enacts communication, invites participation from its publics, and ensures that its ethical principles are known, understood, and upheld.

Realize that a blog created and maintained for public relations purposes largely falls into the category of corporate blogs. That reality means, at least, that its content — indeed, even its *raison d’être* — may be called into question and suspected of bias.

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Of all the pros and cons covered in this article about blogs and blogging for public relations purposes, this one may be the most important to weigh, even if a public relations blog falls into one of the other three categories of personal, topic/industry, or publication-based blogs. The degree to which public relations orchestrates the blog and engages in any blogging will mean it has an appropriate level of responsibility. In other words, the more public relations is responsible for a blog, the more it is accountable for its creation, content, management, and ethics. Remember that a blog’s credibility depends on trust, and building blocks of trust are forthrightness, openness, consistency, timeliness, truthfulness, and candor. In short, ethical behavior is expected in all respects about a blog and blogging. Such ethical behavior should mitigate any negative attitudes toward a blog.

Codes of ethics are essential, formal guides for the behavior and work of public relations professionals. Ethics codes from the Public Relations Society of America, the International Association of Business Communicators, and others have a place in the ethics of public relations blogs and blogging. The “statement of values” for PRSA’s ethics code amply covers key matters of advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty, and fairness, which are at the heart of ethical communication. The

"code provisions" also apply directly as they address free-flowing, truthful and accurate information, promoting fair competition, disclosing information openly, safeguarding confidences, avoiding conflicts of interest, and enhancing the profession (Public Relations Society of America, 2000). Similarly, the IABC's ethics code specifies "articles" about good professional conduct that address the same principles, including "understand[ing] and support[ing] the principles of free speech, freedom of assembly, and access to an open marketplace of ideas," and "obey[ing] laws and public policies governing their professional activities" (International Association of Business Communicators, n.d.). Individual case-study analyses of the ethics of public relations blogs and blogging (e.g., concerning matters like whistleblowing, new-product launches, and corporate performance) would be an appropriate next step to demonstrate more specifically the applicability of these ethics codes.

As long as blogs (and perhaps podcasts) may be a public relations tactic, they must be employed strategically and ethically. In terms of strategy, blogs would be part of a broader public relations

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plan that documents how an organization's "measured and ethical use of language and symbols [would be used] to inspire cooperation between an organization and its publics" (Smudde, 2001, p. 36). Public relations professionals, then, enact that plan in all respects, and blogs would be one way to achieve certain public relations objectives. That enactment may involve counseling those in an organization who are blogging (e.g., corporate executives or employees) and/or running appropriate blogs about the organization and organizational matters that balance stakeholders' interests and organizational purposes. Lean on corporate policies about what to say and not to say as a starting point for blogging counsel. The involvement of organizations and stakeholders together in a blog fosters dialog about the good, the bad and anything in between, which should help stakeholders to identify with an organization and its messages, build community rapport, and maintain image, reputation, and credibility.

On an ethical plane, these outcomes rely on the principle that all blogs created and blogging done

for public relations purposes are conceived, designed, and operated ethically. Furthermore, those responsible for public relations blogs must "walk the talk" about being virtuous professionals who do what's right and just for an organization, its stakeholders, society, and themselves as citizens. To borrow an idea about orators from Quintilian, an Ancient Roman philosopher, the culminating ethical principle of effective blogging for public relations purposes is "the good person blogging well."

Concluding Thoughts

Organizations face "complex interrelationships between values, ethics, and organizational decision making, the matrix of concepts that comprise the 'ethical nexus'" (Conrad, 1993, p. 2) for communication. Organizations, as interconnected participants in an environment, cannot plan for, take action or manage their own boundaries without considering their stakeholders and other organizations. The benefits may well outweigh the risks when deciding whether to use a blog for public relations purposes.

Successful and effective public relations is ethical and dialogic, creating candid, open, simple, and clear messages to manage perceptions of an organization and seek feedback from the environment. Ethics and public relations, then, are bound together as organizations make choices about what and how to communicate with their environments. Blogging, like any public relations tactic, must be part of a broader plan for effective communications and, most important, pursue and uphold ethical standards. Keeping the principle of "the good person blogging well" in mind would encompass the ethical approach to blogging covered here and ensure ethical attitudes, actions, and outcomes. PRQ

References by request

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