Loyalty versus conflict in Norwegian practitioners

Knut Gabrielsen

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on loyalty and conflict in the PR field; loyalty and conflict between the practitioners and the employer on the one hand, and the practitioners and target groups on the other hand. The research among 251 practitioners in Norway confirms the "client syndrome": The practitioners are closely attached to their employer, and the ties of loyalty are stronger in private sector than in public sector. There are also differences due to the place of work when it comes to the level of conflict, and it is not unusual that the practitioners try to avoid conflict by choosing "neutrality". The research shows that the stronger the ties of loyalty are, the more likely is it that conflict will occur. Choosing sides in a conflict (with management or target groups) does not affect the practitioners' attitude to to-way symmetrical communication, and the research supports the view that the feminine worldview is a symmetrical worldview.

1.   Introduction

In a 1973 CBS report on Phillips Petroleum, Inc., one of its chief executives was asked to describe what sort of qualities his company looks for in prospective employees. He responded without hesitation that above all, what Phillips wants and needs is *loyalty* on the part of its employees (Baron, 1991, p. 225). This answer should not surprise anyone because loyalty is a prerequisite of any civilized society, big or small - it is a matter of duty and trust. However, or because of that, one of the most common ethical dilemmas has to do with *conflicting loyalties*, and many of us will experience such dilemmas during our professional life. Most likely this will happen in professions where *client* is a central concept as it is within law, politics, medicine – and public relations. Moreover, emphasis on social responsibility of organizations has resulted in communications programs designed to adjust to the demand of the marketplace often placing the public relations practitioner at the interface between the organization and its responsibility as a good corporate citizen. This has conspired to generate conflicts between the loyalties now faced by practitioners (Parsons, 1993, p. 49).

Most practitioners consider themselves to be advocates for their organizations, so this kind of statement is not unusual: "I know it was my responsibility as a public relations manager to attempt to bring public opinion in agreement with what my company wanted (Repper, 1992, p. 111). However, to side with management in a conflict because it is paying ones wages, is

not necessarily ethically right. At least, *servility* should be avoided, but where is the borderline between loyalty and servility? In Norway, there is a widespread opinion that PR is something like a derogatory term used to describe ethics programs that are largely cosmetic and designed to make the organization look better without substantially affecting the way it acts. Unfortunately, during the last 10 years there have been of examples of prominent PR practitioners who have been loyal to their employer when they obviously should not - and they had to pay for it.

2.   Historical review

The Norwegian Public Relations Club (NPRC) was founded in 1950 as an association for PR practitioners in the private sector. The first PR professionals in public administration appeared in the mid-1960s, and this group grew rapidly during the next 10 years in an expanding public sector, and in 1975 *Forum for Public Information* (FPI) was founded. In 2000, the two associations merged into the *The Norwegian Communication Association* (NCA), presently with over 2000 members. Despite its relatively recent emergence, the Norwegian PR corps has evolved into a confident professional group with a growing impact on the public opinion. Most large corporations and organizations – private as well as public – have their own information/communication department, and during the 1990s there also appeared several independent PR agencies. Originally, PR personnel were recruited among journalists, but the ongoing professionalization have gradually required theoretical knowledge, and colleges and universities now offer PR education that is growing more and more usual among the practitioners.

3.   Literature review

Separately, loyalty and conflict have been subjects to some researchers in the PR-field, but rather few have focused on conflicting loyalties, and that is a little surprising because loyalty is an important source of conflict in professional life in general, and it is about conflicting values. Sullivan (1965) outlines three types of public relations values: *technical*, which he viewed as morally neutral; *partisan*, comprising commitment, loyalty, and trust in the organization; and *mutual*; comprising obligations to the public based on principles of mutuality and rationality. Sullivan places the locus of ethical issues at the intersection of partisan and mutual values, highlighting the tension that often exist in practice between organizational and broader societal interest, and stressed the need for the practitioners to facilitate communication between the two (Pearson, 1989). According to Parsons (1993, p. 56)

who has written a theoretical article on the subject, there are four "major loyalties": *oneself*, *organization*, *profession*, and *society*, and she argues that society encompasses the other three loyalties, so that our duty to society outweighs other duties.

In a survey of public relations students, educators, and practitioners I 1993, Newsom, Ramsey, and Carroll (1993) found that the responsibilities of the practitioners were ranked in the following order: *the client*, *the client's relevant publics*, *the self*, *the society*, and *the media*. This study was designed to replicate a 1972 study, and they both found the client to be rated as the first responsibility, but there was a drop of the society from second to fourth place in the more resent study. This is in accordance with ethicist Bayles' (1981, p. 92) opinion: "Many of the most interesting, important, and difficult problems of professional ethics concern conflict between a professional's obligations to a client and to others. For a number of reasons, discussions of these problems often appear to sacrifice society's interest to those of individual clients."Because of the lack of relevant studies in the PR field, we have to look to researches that focus on loyalty *in general*, especially researches that focus on loyalty as an aspect of professional roles, for analogizing. One such research is done by Jacobsen (1996, p. 45-63), who found four prototypes as far as public bureaucrats are concerned: The classic administrators are close to the Weberian ideal; they combine political loyalty with autonomy from direct citizen influence, they are the "client's advocates". *The linking pins* respond to cues from citizens, they are actively involved with management and target group alike ("citizen's advocate"). *The political bureaucrats* strive for autonomy from their employer, the politicians, but not from citizens. Political autonomy may be necessary for them in order to (fully) satisfy the citizens' needs. At last *the autonomous bureaucrats*; they who feel that they know best. Do we find any of these prototypes among PR practitioners? Does the profession sacrifice society's interest to that of the clients, does loyalty to society come first? My research is mainly explorative, but I have two hypotheses:

- The level of conflict is inversely proportional to the ties of loyalty.
- The stronger the ties of loyalty are, the more negative is the practitioners' attitude to a two-way symmetrical communication model.

4. Methods

In 1999 I sent a questionnaire containing 45 questions was sent to 401 addresses chosen from the member list for the two organizations (NPRC and FPI), and 251 filled in and

returned the questionnaire, which is approximately 12% of the universe. The names were picked out by systematic sampling, the sampling interval is 5, i. e. every fifth name on the member lists was chosen. Both lists were alphabetized, so that the problem of systematic sampling ("periodicity") is avoided; every "element" in the population has an equal chance of selection.[21] The reason *not* to fill in and return the questionnaire may be linked to the respondents' knowledge of the item (see below), and that, of course, may have biased the outcome. Due to inadequate statistical information about the members of the two organizations, the only variables available for comparison between the sample and the universe are *gender* and *place of work*. For both variables there is less than one percentage point deviation.

My empirical concepts are based on ordinal measurement. In most of the variables the respondents are asked to show their attitudes by marking for their preferred statement on a five-alternative scale.[1] Although most attitudinal measurement is ordinal, there are inevitable methodological challenges by using quantitative methods with this kind of data. In addition most of the practitioners are not schooled in moral philosophy – from either a theoretical or applied perspective". And, of course, there is always a danger that in efforts to condense and simplify a difficult subject, one may be sacrificing too much of what is essential to genuine appreciation of the subject matter. The meaning and application of some of the concepts are inevitable subject to some varieties of interpretation, and the percentage of "don't know" answers is relative high on some variables. The generalization does not go beyond estimates.

5. Research findings

5.1. *Sex, age, education etc.*

Two out of three of the respondents are between 30 and 50 years old, the median age is 43, and 2/3 has been in the profession for less than 10 years. More than one out of three of the practitioners are previous journalists, 25% are educated in PR or media, 56% have passed examinations in other subjects at universities and/or colleges. 10% have no post-high school education. Nine out of ten say that ethics is an important part of the PR profession, while 40% agree with the statement "As a PR practitioner I am in a way "the ethical conscience" of my

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[1] The most common answer alternatives are Disagree completely, Disagree, Don't know, Agree, Agree completely. In this article, however, the percentages shown for respondents who agree with a statement include both those who mark for "Agree completely" and for "Agree" – and so is also the case for those who disagree.

organization" (26% disagree). Eighty-eight percent disagree[2] with the statement: "PR practitioners represent a profession that seldom faces ethical problems," and 41% do *not* believe that they will be better professionals if they were better educated in ethics, 58% believe they will.[3] Five percent discuss ethical questions with their colleagues daily, 20% do it weekly, while 37% discuss such questions monthly.

5.2.   Level of conflict

Table 1.

<u>"How frequently are you in situations involving what you perceive to be 'ethical conflicts'?"</u>
<u>(%)</u>

	Total (*N*=249)	PR practitioners employed in:	
		Public sector (*N*=146)	Private sector (*N*=103)
Very often	7	9	4
Sometimes	46	48	42
Never	47	43	54

Regarding whom the practitioners (N=119) are involved in ethical conflicts, the answers that most frequently appear are *management* (63%), *colleagues* (53%), *media* (50%), and *target group* (24%).

5.3   Ties of loyalty

I ask the respondents the following question: "If management plans to do something that is clearly unethical (but not illegal) in spite of your protests, what is the likelihood that you will "leak" information to the media?".[4] Six percent say it is likely,[5] 82% answer "unlikely".[6] For the practitioners in public sector the answer are 6% and 74%, respectively, while the percents for their colleagues in private sector are 6 and 92.

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[2] Forty-six percent "disagree completely", 42% "disagree", 4% "agree", 9% "don't know".
[3] Johannesen reports of a survey of 671 managers of which almost 25 % said high ethical standards could "hinder a successful career" (Johannesen 1990, p. 151).
[4] Martinson discusses the question if PR practitioners can and should represent clients who engage in activities with which the practitioner personally disagrees (Martinson, 1999, pp. 22-25).
[5] Likely = Very likely and Likely.
[6] Unlikely = Very unlikely and Unlikely.

Table 2.

"As a principle, what should be the rule for a PR practitioner who is caught in a conflict of loyalty between his/her employer and the target group?" (%).

	Total (*N*=237)	PR practitioners employed in:	
		Public sector (*N*=139)	Private sector (*N*=98)
Side with the employer	42	30	67
Side with the target group	14	19	4
Stay neutral	36	42	23
Don't know	8	9	6

6.   Discussion

6.1. Level of conflict

When 53% of the respondents have experienced ethical conflicts (Table 1) it is important to notice that as much as 2/3 of the sample has been in the profession less than 10 years (and a considerable amount of them less than 2 years), and they represent 83 % of them who have never been in conflict. On the other hand, 97 % of the respondents who have been in the profession for more than 10 have faced ethical conflicts very often or sometimes. This gives support to the theories of public relations as "conflict management" (Ehling, 1985).

6.2. Ties of loyalty

Three times as many choose loyalty to the employer over the target group in a conflict (42 % and 14 %, respectively (Table 2)). These strong ties to management are not surprise, and it is supported by studies in Taiwan a few years ago (Wu, Taylor, & Chen, 2001, p. 332). It is in accordance with the "advocate theory", and it may be interpreted as a confirmation of Bayles' suggestion that the interest of the society is sacrificed when loyalties (a premise here is that target groups are more "society" than management is…).

More than one out of three subscribe to *neutrality* as the solution when loyalties conflict, and they represent a classical view about the (public) administrator as a functionary who carries out – without bias – policy decisions made in the political sphere or by those in higher echelons of the organizational hierarchy (Max Weber, see Section 3). One can argue that both an ethics of neutrality and an ethics of structure are highly problematic as an ethics for (PR) professionals because they deny the legitimacy of administrative discretion.

But what does neutrality mean in this context? Does not neutrality in practice imply indirect support to the stronger party in a social conflict?[45] In a conflict about what, when and how in relation to initiating communication and providing information, there can be little doubt that the stronger party is the "owner" of the information, i.e. the organization. In that case "neutrality" means taking side with the employer.

When it comes to the question of leaking information to mass media, the tendency to stay by management is even clearer. Now the percentage of those who "don't know" is relatively low, possibly due to the fact that the notion of "leaking" adds a new dimension, at least in terms of connotation; one of *fraudulence*. That makes it easier to take a stand on the issue, and as much as 92% of the professionals in the private sector and 74% in the public sector say that it is unlikely that they will leak to media about their employer planning to act unethical. This is not an unproblematic stand because the organization's unethical behaviour may be negative to innocent people. In fairness to management, blowing the whistle openly should be preferred to the secret denunciation or the leaked rumour. But, of course, the anonymous message is safer for the practitioners in situations where retaliation is likely.

6.2.1. Conclusion

In spite of the fact that management most often is the opposing party to practitioners in ethical conflicts, it is to management that the practitioners' ties of loyalty are strongest. My hypothesis that the level of conflict is inversely proportional to the ties of loyalty is *not* verified. But even psychological ties, oaths and promises can be overridden by for instance leakage when the public interests at issue are strong enough. However, only 6 % of the respondents are potentially *secret* whistleblowers.

6.3.   Place of work, private and public

In Norway, more than 50% of the GNP is channelled through a dominating public sector. It is, therefore, interesting to see whether there are any differences between the PR practitioners that are due to their place of work – public or private sector – when it comes to conflict and loyalty. This question was actualized in a debate that lasted a couple of years before the fusion into The Norwegian Communication Association in 2000 (see Section 2), and there was a certain opposition against the merger among members of both the two former associations. Opponents on both sides argued that the differences between them were so great that it was not "natural" for the practitioners to be member of the same organization.

6.4. Private sector

There *are* relevant differences between the two sectors: The professionals in private sector experience ethical conflicts *less frequently* compared with their public colleagues. And they do so *i relation to management as well as to the target groups*. The conflict with the employer is worth some comments: Emerging conflicts with management in private sector tend to be solved by internal discussions, and the PR practitioners are apt to be persuaded by the dominant coalition to a greater extend than is the case in public sector (Grunig & Grunig, 1992, p. 302). Repper, who had been a PR practitioner for more than 30 years, admitted the important role "that top management plays in determining the way an organization practices its public relations" (Grunig & Grunig, 1992, p. 303).

Concerning the target group, it is important to differentiate between two main kinds: Those in the *market-oriented* field (described in terms of "customers"), and those in *governmental services*. In Norway the state interferes in a wide range of "civil" functions, and for the practitioners in private sector is a very important to communicate with governmental officials. Although I have no relevant data, it is no doubt that the private sector more often are in conflict with governmental services than with their customers, because an organization will never profit on conflicts with these target groups - "The customer is always right!"

6.5. Public sector

PR practitioners in public sector have both a higher level of conflict with (25% versus 20%) and stronger ties of loyalty to the target groups (Table 2), compared with their colleagues in private sector. The relatively high level of conflict may be due to the mixed motives that permeate public sector; the combination of two-way symmetrical (democracy!) and two-way asymmetrical (governing!) communication. And when an organization has greater power than its target groups, it can get most payoffs from asymmetrical public relations (Pavlik, 1989). Obviously, this may easily result in communication problems for the practitioners vis-a-vis their target groups. However, the public sector is not dependent on their target groups in the same way like their private counterpart. On the contrary, there are usually no alternatives to the benefit offered by public sector, and if a public office looses "customers", it may be good for its budget! Therefore, in many cases there is no reason why the practitioner should shrink to avoid conflict. But there is some ambivalence in this sector, because in the democratic setting practitioners may identify themselves with the target groups (they may even be a part of them!), and this is reflected by the ties of loyalty; one out of five takes side with the target group (Table 2).

There are resemblances between the different roles the PR practitioners play and three of the bureaucratic prototypes discussed above. In *private* sector, we can recognize the classic administrator in the practitioners working in relation to public services, while those working with consumer publics resemble the linking pins. Among the practitioners in *public* sector we recognize the political bureaucrats.

Fig. 1. Summary of the main findings of the place of work variable.

Practitioners in:	Highest level of conflict with:		Strongest ties of loyalty to:	
	Management	Target groups	Management	Target groups
Private sector			*	
Public sector	*	*		*

(The asterisk (*) show which group (PR practitioners in private or public sector) that has the *highest* level of conflict with and the *strongest* ties of loyalty to management and the target group.)

6.6.   *Attitudes to symmetrical communication*

Do the ties of loyalty (to management or to the target group) affect practitioners' attitude to a two-way symmetrical communication model? It seems reasonable to believe that they do. My next hypothesis, therefore, is that the practitioners who claim to be *neutral* in a conflict of loyalty are more positive to such a communication model than they are who take sides. However, my hypothesis is not verified. Twenty-six percent of the "neutralists" agree with the statement "it is possible to perform two-way symmetrical communication", and that is only a one percentage difference from those who take side (25%). There are bigger differences when it comes to disagreement with the statement, but it is they who by the target group that differ markedly. It is difficult to explain why my hypothesis is not verified, because "neutrality" in a way connotes "symmetry", at least more than "takes side" does. However, it is possible that (even) the "advocates" may see themselves as really performing two-way symmetrical communication (it should be noticed that with samples down to 30 respondents there may be some inadequacies in these statistics) (Fig. 1).

Sixty percent of the female practitioners ($N=113$) agree with the statement, "it is possible to perform two-way symmetrical communication". For the male respondents ($N=115$) the percentage is 47. This gives a certain support to earlier empirical findings that, "...the feminine worldview seems to be a symmetrical worldview and the masculine worldview an asymmetrical one" (Grunig and White, 1992, p. 50).

7. Concluding remarks

The challenges to the PR practitioners are mainly the same all over the world, regardless of their country's cultural and political basis (Kent & Taylor, 1999).[7] What they have in common is first and foremost the practitioners' mediatory situation that places them in an ethical "minefield", because ethical decision-making involves not only clarification and application, but also explicit choosing of priorities between conflicting loyalties to specific parties. This position makes demands on the practitioners' awareness, and it is promising that as much as 40% of the respondents in my research feel that they are "The ethical consciousness" of their organization. On the other hand, only 5% of the practitioners discuss ethical questions with their colleagues daily... For that reason it is promising that the level of conflict is proportional to the ties of loyalty, because it is often through conflicts that ethical issues are put on the agenda.

It is highly legitimate to ask whether ethical questions related to PR too frequently are addressed in individualistic terms; is it "right" or "wrong" for the practitioners to engage in particular behaviour, and so on. Perhaps our approaches to the PR profession to a higher degree should be based on the communitarian view that ethics is not (primarily) located in the autonomous individual, but within the community? We should include explicit discussions of *justice* relative to the practitioner's role within a broader social and political context than to management and target group. This does not mean a revolution in traditional PR thinking; we recognize the device (quoted from the PRSA code of professional standards): The practitioners "shall conduct his professional life in accord with the public interest". What then, is "the public interest"? According to Martinson "Even if it is impossible – operationally – to reach unanimous agreement as to what the public interest is in each and every circumstances, its abstract importance alone is central to any effort to raise public relations to a level of bona fide professional status" (Martinson, 2000, p. 18).

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[7] See also articles in Public Relations Quaterly (PRQ 45 (1) (about Russia), and PRQ, 45 (4) (China and Hong Kong), and in Public Relations Review (PRR), 26 (1) (the Netherlands), and in PRR, 26 (2) (Bulgaria and The Philippines).

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