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Bell Pottinger And The Dark Art Of Public Relations: Ethics Of Individuality Versus Ethics Of Communality

ABSTRACT

The spurious and unethical actions of the renowned global public relations (PR) firm Bell Pottinger in early 2017 cast a dark cloud over the PR industry in general. Aside from the economic and socio-political ramifications that emerged in the wake of this scandal, it has tainted the moral standing of all public relations professionals, including those in South Africa. There is little doubt that tactics such as offering to manipulate a client's online reputation through the use of fake online accounts, newly created blog pages or fake online reviews are unethical, and take the industry back to a less glorious time in its history at a point when much emphasis is being placed on both ethics and values-based practice globally. Moral philosophy provides a basis for rationalising human motivation in decision making and action. However, it can be argued that there is potentially a mismatch between theories and moral frameworks created for individualistic cultures, and their application within communal cultures. Building social capital in any society begins with a commitment to support the collective interests of the community. Thus, any discussion of the value of ethical communication practice for society must begin with a concern for the nature and integrity of community. Against this background this article utilises the Bell Pottinger case study to examine the tensions that arise between individual values and communal PR practice, and to explore the moral implications of ethical PR practice in a communal context such as South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

In the early part of 2017, spurious and unethical actions from the renowned global PR firm Bell Pottinger, cast a dark shadow of disrepute over the global PR industry, which aside from the socio-political and economic ramifications for South Africa's young democracy, has also tainted the moral standing of all public relations professionals globally. The Bell Pottinger case should be viewed within the bigger context of state capture, where shadowy elites used this global public relations firm to assist in the establishment of a shadow state of patronage networks that were used to facilitate corruption and enrichment of a small power elite that would not otherwise have been achieved within the constitutional state (Public Affairs Research Institute, 2017). As part of this state capture process, the UK-based public relations consultancy Bell Pottinger was retained by a company called Oakbay Investments that is owned by the well-known Gupta family who are implicated as key role players in the process of state capture. Bell Pottinger then used "fake

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news, disinformation and other dirty propaganda, including orchestrating the "White Monopoly Capital" narrative and distorting the meaning of "Radical Economic Transformation," in order to divert people's attention away from their state capture project." (Public Affairs Research Institute, 2017:20).

Organisations like Save SA were outraged by the unethical practice of this British firm in the SA context:

> Acting in partnership with its client – [it] sowed racial mistrust, hate and race-baiting, and divided society. Through its work, this British company has further polarized South African society and left deep scars in our social fabric (TimesLive, 2017).

While it is clear that some participants may have participated unwittingly in the hegemonic project of state capture because they were insufficiently aware of how their specific actions contributed to the wider process of systemic state capture and corruption, there can be little doubt that the actions of Bell Pottinger brought the whole PR industry into disrepute, regardless of whether they knowingly or unknowingly participated in the state capture project. There is no doubt, however, that the "dark art" tactics used, such as offering to manipulate a client's online reputation through the use of fake online accounts, newly created blog pages or fake online reviews are unethical, and take the industry back to a less glorious time in its history at a point in time when much emphasis is placed on ethics, self-regulation and values-based practice. Even if many PR professionals are not "amoral sheep that blindly service their clients with reckless ethical abandon" (Lieber, 2003:43), this moral failure of a renowned global firm focused attention on the "ethical slipperyness" and "deceptiveness" of the profession (Harrison and Galloway, 2005).

The failure of Bell Pottinger to uphold the highest ethical standards in the practice of public relations, and to uphold the standing of the profession as a whole, proved so damaging to its reputation that it culminated in the termination of its membership of the UK Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA). Finally, the defection of so many of the key clients of the once esteemed PR firm forced the firm to close its doors within weeks after the crisis began.

Moreover, the Bell Pottinger scandal also tarnished the image of professional public relations and communication professional bodies, especially since initial sanction against the firm initially came from the ranks of civil society, and not from the UK PRCA. In the aftermath of this scandal, a number of leading global public relations and communication management agencies proceeded to appoint a task force in an attempt to define a new set of principles for ethical practice, and ways to ensure the ethical conduct of their members (Global Alliance, 2018). As stated by the chair of the Global Alliance (which represents more than 60 global organisations):

> As communicators and public relations professionals, we have the potential to influence economies and individuals. This carries obligations and responsibilities to society and to organisations. Ethics must be at the core of our activities … There is no public relations/ communication profession without ethics.

In a further response to the expulsion of Bell Pottinger from the UK Public Relations and Communication Association because of its breach of ethics, the International Communication and Consultancy Organisation developed the 2017 Helsinki Declaration which also identifies a global set of principles for ethical practice. The ICCO also recently launched a #PowerofEthics campaign that ran from 3 September until 5 October 2018, and that was aimed at helping practitioners to navigate the ethical landscape by educating them about ethical agency cultures and working practices (Bold, 2018).

These events also prompted the South African Public Relations Association (PRISA) to critically re-engage with a number of ethical issues on how PR should be conducted, and how ethical standards for PR practice in South Africa should be applied. In its response to the Bell Pottinger scandal, PRISA emphasised how the credibility of the industry is affected by how PR is practised as opposed to how it ought to be practiced, and concluded that self-regulation in the industry is no longer sufficient (PRISA, 2017). This has also resulted in a renewed interest and concern about the ethics of public relations practice and the moral framework that ought to guide it.

These fresh calls from the professional body PRISA for stricter formal regulation of the industry through formal sanctions for non-adherence to its' ethical code of conduct were aimed at safeguarding the local industry from similar reputational damage (PRISA, 2017). However, we argue in this article that the moral and business failure of Bell Pottinger cannot simply be understood as a failure to adhere to industry codes of conduct, or as simple greed, criminality or complicity in the state capture project. It should also be understood at a much deeper level as a failure of moral philosophy that resulted from a lack of respect for communal values and the societal context in which Bell Pottinger plied its "dark arts." Against this background this paper utilises the Bell Pottinger case study to examine the tensions that arise between individual values and communal PR practice, and explores the moral imperatives that guide ethical PR practice in a communal context such as South Africa.

1. ETHICS OF INDIVIDUALITY VS. ETHICS OF COMMUNALITY

The dominance of partisan values that is entrenched in much of the history of public relations and communication practice led to the development of a notion of PR agency that has called on practitioners to represent their clients' (self-)interests. However, as public relations paradigms have evolved the focus has shifted away from a strict pre-occupation with organisational and managerial interests towards a more reflective and inclusive approach to PR practice (Edwards, 2012) that both questions and resists normative practices and existing power structures. Harrison and Galloway (2005) argue that ethical dilemmas tend to be systemic and informed by the manner in which contemporary organisations choose to operate or function, which in turn informs the particular nature of public relations practice that is adopted.

However, scholars such as Hurn (2008) suggest that ethical principles are devised mainly from the fundamental beliefs and value systems developed within a culture, and as such ethics attempts to tell us what is and what is not morally acceptable within a particular society or culture.

Individualist cultures tend to believe that there are universal values that should be shared by all, while collectivist cultures tend to accept that different communities may differ in their values. Communal values reference collective experiences and shared meaning, whereas individualist values are premised on the freedom and worth of the individual, even at the expense of others or the group. Ethics is viewed in reference "to questions about human flourishing, about what it means for life to be well lived"; while "morality designates something narrower, the constraints that govern how we should and should not treat other people" (Appiah, 2008:37).

Holmström (2000, 2004) has emphasised the importance of understanding the poly-contextual environment in which public relations practitioners are influenced and in turn act as influencers. In these contexts moral philosophy provides a basis for rationalising human motivation in decision making and action. Individual ethics refer to the extent to which an individual judges a certain issue or action to be morally important (Han, Park, & Jeong, 2013), and it can be viewed from two perspectives, namely relativism and absolutism. Relativism refers to "the extent to which an individual denies the existence of universal and absolute ethical principles" (Han et al., 2013:557). Individuals subscribing to relativism tend to understand and apply their ethical standards based on their society, culture, and system, "while absolutists prefer to consistently apply ideal standards in making moral judgments" (Han et al., 2013:557).) Relativism may impede moral judgment, while absolutism may increase moral tension. However, Sparks and Pan (2010) suggest that ethical value judgments may be neither relativism nor absolutism – instead ranging along a continuum of ethicality where individual ethical values reflect a personal evaluation of the degree to which some behaviour or course of action is ethical or unethical.

Ethics of inter-subjectivity may assist in calibrating personal ideals of morality in relation to a concern for the wellbeing of others (Green, 1993). By establishing "otherness, difference and marginality" as valid modes of approach to experience, inter-subjectivity opens the way for acceptance of plurality and difference and gives preference to constructing morality through the "situated and particular over the universal and general" (Green, 1993:221). Becker (2013:20-21) relates the responsibility for the adoption of the perspective of the "other" to Emmanuel Levinas' (1991) ethics of inter-subjectivity, which alternates between "duty-based norms about how to meet the needs of the other, and spontaneously responding to the face and the voice of the other and the expression the other's needs in this encounter." Becker (2013:21) summarises Levinas' (1991) stance on the complexity of this relationship as follows:

> The relationship of the self to the other becomes complicated or, at least, modified by the recognition of the Third (other): that there are other Others, to whom responsibility is owed by the self, and which are Others to the Other, to whom the Other is himself or herself also responsible.

Exercising sound moral judgment in situations of self-imposed moral dilemmas requires an "integrated moral/ethical stance based on experience, expertise, a highly developed awareness of social demands and an apparently over-arching comprehension of the balance between personal, company, social and client needs" (De Araugo & Beal 2013:358). In terms of professional practice

the complexity lies in being ethically responsible not only to the "*Other*" or corporation, but also taking responsibility for the "*Others other*", or stakeholders within the broader societal context within which the corporation is embedded. Levinas (1991) refers to this as a process of *substitution*, where the self is put "in place of the other by taking responsibility for the other's responsibilities" (as cited in Becker, 2013:20). Becker (2013:20) suggests that while the voice of the other must be heard, it does not imply that it will preponderate since the ethics of responsibility will determine "whose judgement prevails." It is therefore unavoidable that decision makers in business settings experience ethical conflicts "between their given accountability and duty to various stakeholders in situations involving conflicts of interest, but also with regard to their organization's interests and their personal interests" (Han et al., 2013:553). Grunig (2000) thus regards the tensions that arise between partisan values and mutual values as the source of ethical problems.

As noted by Metz (2012:389), the "existence of degrees of moral status best explain many intuitions about forced trade-offs among the urgent interests of different beings." However, it can be argued that because of the potential of moral tension resulting from trade-offs in interests, there is potentially a mismatch between theories and moral frameworks created for individualistic cultures, and their application within communal cultures. As a philosophy, communitarianism emphasises the connection between the individual and the community, where less emphasis is placed on the importance of individual interests/motivations in decision making. Communitarianism honours individual dignity and accountability whilst also recognising the deeply social and highly interdependent nature of human existence (Etzioni, 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). A key assumption of communitarianism is the recognition that society consists of an intersecting web of communities, each with their own moral values and standards (Johnson, 2005). Respect for local values that evidences careful deliberation, coupled with local community acceptance, therefore underpins the success of any personal or professional (inter)action. Communitarian philosophers claim that people can only be understood in light of their vulnerability and ultimate dependence on others. Communitarian philosophy is therefore premised on the relationship to others, which must be understood within a frame of vulnerability and dependence, and which is concerned with issues of human flourishing on both personal and professional planes. As such, communitarianism hinges upon accepting the role of "keeper" for one another (Macintyre, 1999). Bennett-Woods (2005) argues that the system of moral rules of a particular community is best understood in the context of that community's current and historical view of well-being and related social interests, lending a certain level of cultural relativism to this perspective.

Any discussion of the value of ethical communication practice for society must therefore begin with a concern for the nature and integrity of community. Holström & Kjaerbeck (2007:262) in particular expand on the association between reflective practice and the assumptions underlying PR practice. The notion of reflection requires professionals and organisations to see themselves as existing within society and "see themselves from the outside in" with regards to decision-making and ethical communication practice. According to Tran (2008:161-162), ethics appeals to individuals with a strong sense of role morality, and entails three types of ethical considerations, namely moral awareness (recognition of moral problems), moral dilemmas (moral judgments), and moral laxity (moral failures). What is required are theories and moral frameworks that are

more consistent with communal cultures, otherwise a mismatch between theory and practice, or individual and practice is likely to result (Lutz, 2009). In this sense, applied ethics are necessarily role based and relational rather than normative.

2. ETHICALITY AS PROFESSIONAL ROLE ENACTMENT

Botan (1997:151) suggests that ethicality is closely related the nature of the professional role that is enacted by the public relations professional. He argues (1994, 1997) that traditionally public relations had been practised at the technician level, which he contends is less ethical because of the contractual basis of the role, which reduces the professional to what he refers to as a "hired gun." This approach "instrumentalises publics, and to a lesser extent practitioners," and negates both "the ethical role of the practitioner and the dialogic approach" to practice because the practitioner "cedes unquestioned authority to decide major ethical issues such as message purpose, content, and targeting to someone outside themselves (Botan 1997:195). He notes that "ethical public relations, then is simply being loyal to the client or employer's strategic interests, or being good at the craft" (Botan, 1997:196). Edgett (1983:23), however, suggests that the function itself is neither good nor bad, but rather that it is in the manner in which the function is carried out in accordance with "some philosophical framework" which goes beyond codes of practice [that] determine the rightness or wrongness of actions." Where "traditional approaches to public relations relegate publics to a secondary role, making them an instrument for meeting organisational policy or marketing needs; dialogue elevates others to the status of communication equal with the organisation and recognises a multiplicity of viewpoints and the right of informed choice" (Botan, 1997:196).

Traditionally, public relations roles have been described according to two broad classifications, namely technical or strategic/managerial roles: as monologue communicators, technicians see "communication partners as the means to an end," while a dialogical view as enacted by strategists sees "communicative partners as ends in themselves" (Botan, 1997:197). In this regard Hutton (1999:209) suggests that "the central organizing theme of public relations theory and practice" has in fact been relational. This view resonates strongly with von Foerster's (1991:7) view of ethics as reflected in the last few lines of Martin Buber's book *Das Problem des Menschen*:

> We may come closer to answering the question, "What is human?" when we come to understand him as the being in whose dialogic, in his mutually present two-getherness, the encounter of the one with the other is realized and recognized at all times (von Foerster, 1991:7).

However, unlike the assumptions of the excellence theories, Becker (2013, 20) notes that the responsibility for the *Other* is not based on "transactional symmetry or reciprocity." The nature of the relationship is dialogical, however, in that symbolic interaction only becomes possible through closeness or interaction with the other, but not through (monologue) communication of information. In respect of the ethical imperative for public relations practice, Pearson (1989:127) surmises that if one accepts conclusions of post-modern theory – that "communication processes

play a fundamental role in the generation of both scientific and moral truth" – then ethical conduct is conduct that is sanctioned and legitimised within the "parameters of a dialogic communication process." According to Heath (2000:81) this approach fits comfortably with Kruckeberg and Stark's (1998:xi) assertion that those enacting public relations roles in society should approach communication as "a complex multi-flow process having the potential to create a sense of community."

Holtzhausen (2012:102) notes that while the traditional role of public relations practitioners has been to uphold the status quo, "the modernist class struggle becomes a postmodern struggle for asserting one's values in the face of dominant social values," thereby creating possibilities for social change. She thus suggests that the activist role has become the postmodern equivalent of traditional role-based agency. From this perspective there are no neutral approaches to the practice of public relations, because it is deeply embedded in the social and cultural values of the societies in which it originates. Instead, postmodern public relations practice forces an acknowledgement of some of the deficiencies of traditional public relations and questions the assumptions and exploitative practices on which it is based. Berger (1999:245) describes these practices as follows: "... ideological distortion must be enacted, and must be sustained on a terrain of struggle, consisting of multiple sites in which competing world views intersect to establish meaning, and gain consent for particular outcomes." The ethical challenge is therefore particularly one of voice, because "understandings of civil society do not take into account the marginalisation of voices which is accomplished through the exclusionary practices of capitalism" (Dutta-Bergman 2005:287). Accordingly, she argues in favour of a public relations role in society where the practitioner "facilitates the expression of marginalised voices, and actively participates against acts of marginalization and silencing" (2005:287). In a postmodern context, building social capital in any society begins with a commitment to support the "collective interests of the community" (Heath, 2000:81).

3.   *UBUNTU AS A COMMUNITARIAN PHILOSOPHY FOR PR PRACTICE*

The applicability of Ubuntu as a moral philosophy for public relations practice in communal societies like South Africa lies in "the emphasis all explanations of Ubuntu place on its nature as a communitarian ethic, and (which) is often contrasted with 'Western individualism'" (West, 2014:48). As a communitarian philosophy that stresses the importance of inter-personal relationships and values such as harmony and care, Ubuntu clearly has relevance for the business sphere. Previous research in this area has contributed by providing an introduction to the concept, and several interpretations of how Ubuntu could apply to business and business ethics. Scholars such as Mbigi (2005) have argued that the concept of Ubuntu emphasises the need for developing African management practices and approaches because the incorporation of Western and Eastern management approaches have only enabled African organisations to attain competitive parity. The Ubuntu philosophy is characterised by virtues such as tolerance, harmony and compassion towards the other, as well as inclusivity and the embracing of social justice (West, 2014). All of these can be regarded as very pertinent to post-modern communication management and practice.

Metz (2012) proposes a modal-relationalism approach that grounds moral status in relational properties, and which is grounded in salient sub-Saharan moral views of Ubuntu. Ubuntu as a moral philosophy is premised on the maxim that is usually translated as either "a person is a person through other persons" or "I am because we are" (Metz, 2012:391). This approach to moral philosophy resonates with von Foerster's (1991) view of ethics (which is based on Buber's notion of "two-getherness" and the relation of the "one to the other") as well as with Levinas' (1991) ethics of inter-subjectivity (which is based on the relationship with the Other and the Third Other, as well as the notion of substitution). Holtzhausen (2015) argues that exposure to the Other is a necessary condition for the moral impulse to emerge. Mourkogiannis (2014) notes that morality is reflected in a deeply felt awareness of the self, the circumstances and the potential of the calling. Thus any discussion of the value of ethical communication practice for society must begin with a concern for the nature and integrity of community. Holström's theorising (1997, 2004) and that of Holmström & Kjaerbeck (2007) on reflective practices, in particular, speak to the interplay that exists between reflective practice and the assumptions of Ubuntu, because the notion of reflection requires professionals and organisations to see themselves as existing within society and "see themselves from the outside in" with regards to decision-making and ethical communication practice. However, as Christians and Traber (1997:339) note, "this does not simply mean that community is supreme at all costs and that individuals have to subordinate themselves to it. It does mean that there is a moral commitment to community, aiming at both civic order and civic transformation."

As a communitarian philosophy, Ubuntu emphasises strong connections between people, encouragement of collaboration, diminished emphasis on self-serving individualism, and the valuing of the greater good in ethical decision making (Bennett-Woods, 2005). By following an ethic of caring, relationship-building and community, public relations practitioners who situate themselves in the complex social environment of their communities and stakeholders allow the Other direct access to their institutions (Holtzhausen, 2015). As noted by Tam (1998), a communal moral framework (1998) is based on three principles: (1) any claim of truth is to be validated through co-operative enquiry, (2) communities of co-operative inquiry, should validate common values that become the basis of mutual responsibilities of all community members, and (3) all citizens should have equal access and participation in the power structures of society.

These premises "downplay the values of individuality, autonomy, and personal rights, so prevalent in other ethical theories, in favor of a focus on the virtues and actions that support the interests of society as a whole" (Bennett-Woods, 2005:32). Communal practice, according to Grunig (2000:39) is premised on the values of collectivism and collaboration instead of individuality and individual rights:

> We should construct a profession of public relations that has collaboration at its core. ... In a sense, then, public relations professionals can be the voice of collectivism and collaboration in organizations that typically are obsessed with individualism and competition.

Unfortunately, though, the partisan values of trust, loyalty, obedience and commitment that have dominated much of the history of PR practice "… can lead to unwelcome excesses if they operate alone … Public relations has particularly suffered from these abuses of partisan values; its reputation has been scarred … by too much 'commitment' and too much 'obedience'; its techniques are often feared, its practitioners often held suspect, just because of misplaced 'trust' and 'loyalty'" (Sullivan, 1965:419). Organisations that are dominated by exchange relationships are often unwilling to incur costs to build communal relationships, and incur greater costs from negative publicity, unfavourable legislation, and other reputational costs that result from non-communal relationships (Grünig, 2000).

Ultimately, a communitarian philosophy like Ubuntu can have the greatest value for the philosophy and practice of public relations if it strengthens the democratic process through values of collaboration and collectivism. However, South African public relations has yet to realise its full responsibilities to the urban and rural classes of Africa, according to Mersham, Skinner and Rensburg (2011). These scholars point to the tremendous gap that separates public relations practice from the needs and aspirations of millions of people in Africa, and which in their view can only be met through establishing communal relationships and approaches to public relations practice with the African social and political context. In order to meet these needs, the moral philosophy and ethics of post-modern public relations practice in post-apartheid South Africa, should be strongly aligned to the values espoused in the African philosophy of Ubuntu. While it can be theorised that the African philosophy of Ubuntu may provide a moral approach that is grounded in relational properties, and ethics of communality, these assumptions are also closely aligned with Levinas' (1991) ethics of inter-subjectivity, and dialogical and relational perspectives on ethical public relations practice. While for-profit organisations are compelled, and even legally obliged to pursue profits, the challenge for PR professionals is not to achieve adherence to codes of conduct based on external rewards, but rather to motivate for virtuous practice based on the relationship of care and virtue. As such, virtue ethics also casts the PR firm or professional organisation as a community within which the pursuit of collectivist values provide opportunities for developing and practicing virtue.

In the next section, the Bell Pottinger case study is discussed to demonstrate how tensions arising from differences in moral philosophy, and values espoused in practice, resulted in both the moral and business failure of such an established PR and communications firm.

4.   BELL POTTINGER AND THE DARK ART OF PR

Bell Pottinger proved to be one of Britain's most audacious public relations firms and became well known within the upper echelons of Britain's spin doctoring game during the last 30 years. The firm has been responsible for managing reputations and polishing images of some well-known clients, which include the Singaporean government, Amazon, Hitachi Capital, Naomi Campbell, Egypt and Bahrain during the Arab Spring, Aldar Properties, Abu Dhabi's largest real estate company, as well as the Saudi Stock Exchange (Cameron, 2017a). The firm was contracted in early 2016 by a client for an assignment that would ultimately lead to its demise. Bell Pottinger was briefed

by a company called Oakbay that is owned by the well-known Gupta family, who have built a multibillion-dollar corporate empire in South Africa. The Gupta family has earned great sums of money by leveraging their friendship with the then President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, and secured contracts in fields such as armaments, mining and railways by bullying officials and using underhand tactics such as bribery and networks of patronage.

The PR firm was requested to craft a public relations campaign that would drive the idea of economic emancipation within the South African context, and which is simplistically explained as "grass-roots political activism intended to help poor blacks" (New York Times, 2018). This campaign also had to promote the reputation of the Gupta family, and divert public attention away from the effective capture of the South African state by the family. With Oakbay as one of the new clients on the books, the Bell Pottinger team returned to London after the briefing and payment of a retainer of £100,000 a month. As stated by Lord Bell (co-founder of Bell Pottinger): "So we went back to London and wrote a strategy. Town hall meetings, marching in the street, that kind of thing. Draw attention to the economic imbalance, then tell people they should protest and demand change" (New York Times, 2018).

Bell Pottinger was responsible for crafting a PR campaign that would instigate racial tension in the country by attacking whites, and particular the business sector within South Africa. A highly toxic narrative was utilised that made claims that white South Africans seize available economic resources and wealth, while depriving black South Africans of access to education and jobs. This message was communicated using the incendiary phrase, "white monopoly capital", and it was blamed for South Africa's economic stagnation and the increase in unemployment to the level of 36%, which is amongst the highest in the world (Business Live, 2017; Cameron, 2017a). The campaign utilised a series of underhanded tactics, which included the use of various news channels and media including the following: the New Age newspaper and TV channel ANN7; alternative news sites Black Opinion, Uncensored and Weekly Exposé; pro-Gupta websites AtulGupta.com and TruthbyConnorMead.co.za; as well as websites and blogs such as WMCLeaks, WMCScams, Dodgy SA Ministers, and Voetsek.

At the centre of this PR campaign was a social media campaign that was focused on diverting attention away from the public outcry against the Guptas, and reframing the public scrutiny on state interference and capture. The strategy consisted of a series of fake bloggers, commentators and Twitter users that was directed at manipulating public opinion. This was done by creating 106 fake Twitter accounts. Two types of fake accounts were created for the purposes of this campaign and they were as follows (Ancir, 2017a):

1. Fake Twitter accounts were created manually and then orchestrated as a "botnet" or "bot Twitter" (Rouse, 2013). A botnet is an automated robotic network that is programmed with a software programme that sends out automated posts on Twitter. These tweets are sent out periodically or in response when "needed" to specific phrases in user messages (Rouse, 2013).

2. The second type of fake account created by Bell Pottinger was rented Twitter accounts on the international black market. This only came to light after 200,000 emails were leaked off the Gupta company server that popularly became known as the #GuptaLeaks. This type of fake Twitter accounts are for hire, and often come with provenance in the form of a long-standing presence on Twitter, giving these accounts face-value legitimacy in the eyes of a general Twitter user.

The fake account strategy worked with both general and foot-soldier accounts. General accounts were the primary fake Twitter accounts that published links to the network websites and other media outlets, while the foot-soldier accounts amplified these messages by retweeting the primary accounts (Ancir, 2017b). These fake accounts worked extremely well and users of these accounts spread 220,431 tweets between July 2016 and July 2017. They authored 4,849 tweets and these were retweeted 215,582 times by the automated arm of the campaign (Ancir, 2017b). Similarly, Facebook was utilised as a social media tool, and 3,574 posts were made, which lead to 6,713 comments. The "likes" on Facebook amounted to 28,121 and the posts were shared 8,256 times (Ancir, 2017b).

When posting on these sites users made use of a number of hashtags that coincided with a political campaign that was orchestrated as part of the PR campaign. This political campaign was devised with the main aim of changing the leadership of the Treasury as well as the South African Reserve Bank in order to pressurise the banks to re-open the Gupta's accounts, and to ensure that the former public protector, Thuli Madonsela's State of Capture report, reached a dead end. During this time, key hashtags were retweeted to create awareness around this political campaign and its goals. These included hashtags such a #PravinMustGo and which was retweeted 24,463 times. This hashtag retweet took place after the former finance minister Pravin Gordhan had approached the courts to confirm that he did not have the power to intervene in the banks' relationships with its clients. This followed after all four South African banks (Standard Bank, Nedbank, Barclays Africa's ABSA and FNB) and a number of other companies, cut ties with the Gupta-owned company, Oakbay, without publicly disclosing their reasons. Another similar example is Public Protector Thuli Madonsela's State of Capture Report. Negative sentiments about this report were shared on Twitter through 18,000 tweets that were posted (Ancir, 2017b). Other hashtags used throughout this campaign included: #AbsaMustPay, #TalkLeftWalkRight, #RupertMustFall, #BFLFVictory (Black First Land First) and #PravinMustGo, #WhiteMonopolyCapital and #RespectGuptas (Anon., 2017).

Another underhanded technique used by Bell Pottinger in the creation of fake Twitter accounts was to utilise well-known media channel brand names that have credibility but that misspell the name in the Twitter handle. An example of this is the four fake Twitter handles that were used: @DailyMaevrick, @Radioo702, @HuffPostZA and @SundayTimessZA. These four accounts were utilised to tweet and retweet at the time of Minister Pravin Gordhan's refusal to intervene in the banks' unwillingness to do business with the Gupta family business.

4.1 Sowing division and racial tension in a fickle south african democracy

This race-baiting, manipulation and the use of dark arts of social media was confirmed as the work of the Bell Pottinger firm after a cache of 200,000 emails was leaked from the Gupta company servers, also known as the #GuptaLeaks (Cameron, 2017a). The South African socio-political environment at this point in time was characterised by daily debates about white monopoly capital and this created a divided society in which racial tension was increasingly evident as a result of the Gupta-funded campaign. This was further amplified the political campaign progressed, and propoganda techniques were increasingly used to fuel racial tension and distrust. Some examples of this include the ANC Youth League leaders giving inflammatory speeches that accused rich white people of having a stranglehold on the economy. Subsequently it transpired from leaked emails that these political groupings received media training funded by Oakbay (New York Times, 2017). New and very radical groups like Black First Land First were created and they held public rallies and protests to fulminate against white people.

Racial tension and division became glaringly obvious within the South African context and Nicholas Wolpe, a white South African whose father is a pioneer of the anti-apartheid movement, summarises it aptly when he says, "There was a shift toward intolerance. Gradually, the debate about white monopoly capital was everywhere and the people talking about it were loud and belligerent. It struck a nerve" (New York Times, 2017). Moreover, this sentiment was increasingly supported by politicians and journalists, who were interviewed by various media during this time. Minister Pravin Gordhan is on record stating that:

> It [Bell Pottinger's apology] uses "white monopoly capital" as a narrative to cover a vast array of nefarious activities at the behest of, and in collaboration with, the "Gupta syndicate" … The minor admissions made vindicate what we've been saying for almost two years – that the attacks on institutions such as the National Treasury, and on individuals and their families was designed to malign them and create a distraction from the activities of the "syndicate" (Cameron, 2017a).

Cyril Ramaphosa expressed a similar sentiment in his interview with Eyewitness News:

> … everyone must be concerned that a foreign public relations company was able to effectively poison the political discourse of the country to advance what he calls their own narrow interests. It says much about our lack of political cohesion and ideological clarity that Bell Pottinger was able to manipulate some of our own political concepts to fuel confusion and division amongst us (Cameron, 2017a).

Journalists such as Max du Preez stated that it had become clear that the Guptas have had:

> … a devastating impact on our democracy, our freedom, our economy and our political culture. The Guptas' toxic presence, their subversion of our public discourse

and compromising of so many politicians and public servants have torn our national fabric and it will take a long time to undo (Cameron, 2017).

South Africa, as a young and fickle democracy has been grappling with a history of institutionalised racism, and has also adopted many initiatives to address the problem of wealth distribution within all levels of society. The campaign devised by Bell Pottinger only added fuel to the fire by stoking up tensions about inequity in the South African community. The link between the Guptas and Bell Pottinger became evident in March 2017 when a mysterious 21-page report was posted on the website of the South African Communist Party. This anonymous report did not contain any reference its sources but it provided a detailed exposition of the work Bell Pottinger did for the Guptas, and identified the firm as the orchestrator of Twitter hashtags like #HandsofftheGuptas, and an array of other fake social media accounts. As stated by the New York Times (2018):

> Although Bell Pottinger was widely blamed for the social media campaign, a forensic analysis performed by the African Network of Centers for Investigative Reporting concluded that it was created and overseen by employees and affiliates of the Guptas. In a report called "Manufacturing Divides", the network found that much of the campaign was run out of a Gupta-financed "war room" at a marketing firm in India. However, the role of Bell Pottinger was to keep a close eye on social media related to the Guptas and their enemies.

4.2 The Bell Pottinger team

Even though the Bell Pottinger firm had a specific division that dealt with political propoganda, it chose to use Victoria Geoghegan, a member of Group CEO James Henderson's income-generating finance team, to lead the Gupta campaign in South Africa. This was after the controversial arms deal business man Fana Hlongwane, advisor to former defence minister Joe Modise, reportedly introduced Victoria's father Christopher, a former head of a global defence company BAE Systems, to members of the Gupta family. It is alleged that Christopher in turn opened doors for Bell Pottinger (Cameron, 2017b). Victoria Geoghegan, in her mid-30s at the time took the lead on the campaign.

As the campaign secrets unravelled, Geoghegan become the face of evil to many in the South African community, and during 2016/17 a Facebook campaign with pictures of her and the word "wanted" started circulating. She was even called a "terrorist" on social media (Cameron, 2017b). Subsequently Geoghegan was blamed for helping to create the racially divisive "white monopoly capital" PR campaign on behalf of the Gupta family. Even though an entire team at Bell Pottinger was responsible for this social media campaign, Geoghegan, as leader of the project, was seen as the responsible person. A bitter backlash from the South African community was directed at her on Twitter (Trending Crimes on Twitter, 2018):

> Meet Victoria Geoghegan of #London based PR agency #BellPottinger – who was paid by the #Guptas to create #RacialDivide in #SouthAfrica (@CICArsa).

aka satan's wife! #pottybelle #beelzebubpottinger #countryduty (@Shamrita_Singh).

Shun this woman, throw her out of your restaurants, refuse to serve her in your shops. Give her the treatment and contempt she deserves for the vacuum that can be found in her "morality" (Sunil Shah).

In addition to the public backlash from the South African society, the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA), the trade association for the public relations sector in the United Kingdom, found that Bell Pottinger had breached their code of conduct with the work they did for their client Oakbay Investments. Bell Pottinger's membership of this professional body was terminated, and it was barred from re-applying for corporate membership for a period of five years. This expulsion was based on the fact that the PRCA found that Bell Pottinger had caused offence "on the grounds of gender, race, religion, disability or any other form of discrimination" (Cronje, 2017). Furthermore, the PR firm breached a clause stating that companies must observe the highest standards in the practice of public relations and communications, and another that stipulated that companies must take care to uphold the standing of the profession as a whole.

In support of this, an international law firm, Herbert Smith Freehills LLP, completed an independent review which was in fact commissioned by Bell Pottinger. The findings of the review highlighted and confirmed that the campaign was "potentially racially divisive" and breached ethical principles. Moreover, the report states that:

Certain material that we have seen that was created for the campaign was negative or targeted towards wealthy white South African individuals or corporates and/or was potentially racially divisive and/or potentially offensive and was created in breach of relevant ethical principles (Business Report, 2017).

Five days prior to the PRCA announcement of Bell Pottinger's expulsion, the PR firm released what they called a full, unequivocal and absolute apology to anyone impacted. The CEO James Henderson stated that the lead partner involved had been dismissed and another partner and two employees had been suspended so that their precise role in what took place could be determined. Henderson claimed to have had no knowledge of the extent of the campaign and stated,

We didn't know, really ... as soon as we were made aware that we had been misled and that work was being done which goes against the very core of our ethical policies, we acted immediately (Cronje, 2017).

Henderson resigned amid claims that he felt "deeply let down" by his colleagues who had misled him about the content of the Oakbay account (Cronje, 2017).

4.3 Bell Pottinger and its key moral failures

When the Bell Pottinger case study is considered, it is evident that there were a number of moral failures on the part of the PR firm. While the company had been in existence for a number of years, and had served several clients in different international contexts, the execution of the PR campaign in South Africa was characterised by moral laxity on the part of the firm that quickly turned into moral failure at several levels, and that ultimately also resulted in business failure. This moral failure seemingly has its roots in a disregard for the values within the context of practice, and the moral framework that determines what is valued or what has value within the community of practice. Through moral reasoning, a practitioner takes account of their own personal beliefs, and the situation or context in which they find themselves. This means that the practice of public relations must recognise the specific nature of the practitioner's role, while also taking account of ethical issues and the nature of their moral reasoning, ideology and values, and notions of public and social responsibility. Notions of professionalism will also reflect a commitment by practitioners to preserve and refine a particular body of knowledge and skills, and use them to serve the interests of others.

As a British PR firm, Bell Pottinger operated from a British context that is generally more associated with Western, individualistic and partisan values like loyalty obedience and commitment. The South African context is characterised by collectivism and communality, which reflect a philosophy of Ubuntu characterised by virtues such as tolerance, harmony and compassion towards others, inclusivity, and the embracement of social justice. In addition, as a moral philosophy, Ubuntu focuses on strong connections between people, encourages collaboration, places diminished emphasis on self-serving individualism, and values the greater good in ethical decision-making. These differences in value sets potentially present a mismatch between theories and moral frameworks created for individualistic cultures, and their application within communal cultures. In addition, such differences also inform tensions that may arise on the level of practice. Post-modern practice requires a "habit of mind" in which the public relations practitioner resists dominant power structures which may marginalise certain sectors of society, instead of blind obedience and subjugation to the interests of the most powerful (Holtzhausen, 2012).

In considering the work done by Bell Pottinger in the South African context, a mismatch on the level of practice is evident in the manner in which they chose to enact their professional roles. Bell Pottinger failed to acknowledge an existing duality between public relations and culture, and thereby failed to take cognisance of influence that individual public relations practitioners may have in communal contexts. By not acknowledging the history and ideology of the South African context of practice, Bell Pottinger acted purely in the (self)-interest of their client and firm, and its self-serving exchange relationships. As a consequence, neither the firm nor its practitioners made any attempt to address the deficiencies of traditional persuasive public relations practices, especially also as regards the ethicality and use of "dark art" covert tactics. Consequently, no one inside the firm interrogated any of the assumptions and exploitative practices on which this campaign was based. Once unmasked, the firm chose

to plead ignorance, and blame the moral failures on certain individual practitioners, such as Victoria Geoghegan, instead of adopting collective responsibility and moral accountability for their actions. As a result, the firm suffered from the excesses that result from operating alone, and advancing their own narrow interests.

Consequently, Bell Pottinger's conduct was not sanctioned and legitimised through dialogic communication and reflective engagement with the broader community whose interests should have been considered. Bell Pottinger evidently regarded ethicality as vested in a symmetrical transaction between the firm and the client, which simply required serving the interest of the client, while being good at the craft. This reflexive approach that was adopted, limited their ability to see themselves reflectively from the outside in. Because moral impulse can only emerge in the face of the Other, Bell Pottinger's moral impulse was deficient and there was little awareness or consideration of how their actions affected Others or Others' Other. Having a balanced euro-Afrocentric worldview enables South African practitioners to perform a culturally sensitive role more often because this worldview is more inclusive of multiple perspectives, and is more beneficial in diverse multi-cultural environments (such as in South Africa). From a Eurocentric worldview, Bell Pottinger adopted a modernist transactional approach rather than a post-modern interactional approach and this allowed the interests of their client to predominate overall other interests, even if it meant breaching their own professional body's ethical code of conduct. This was done without consideration for the nature and integrity of the South African community, and its communal values that emphasise the moral premise that "I am because we are". They therefore failed to adopt a culturally sensitive role.

In this regard Bell Pottinger failed adopt an integrated moral/ethical stance based on experience and expertise that was relevant to the context of practice. Legitimacy is regarded as what is seen as "real, relevant and right" (Hölmstrom, 2007). In the case of Bell Pottinger, what was seen as a consequence of the race-baiting, manipulation, and the use of dark arts of social media, was neither real, relevant nor right. Culture determines the boundaries within which individuals interpret and act on everyday events. It is therefore important to understand the role PR practitioners play as cultural agents, and how culture affects their social representation of reality through the subjective meanings they communicate, and the dynamic processes involved in creating meaning (Moscovi, 2000). If one looks at how Bell Pottinger used symbolic processes (such as their use of social media platforms) to create a particular representation of the South African reality, communication processes clearly became instruments that were used as means to an illegitimate end by "co-creating" subjective, racially divisive meanings in a sensitive racial context. Notions of professionalism also entail the discretionary use of knowledge and skill to the benefit of society. It is clear from the decision of the PRCA and the expulsion of Bell Pottinger from the professional body that they had not exercised the discretion to use their skills and knowledge for the benefit of society, but had made the discretionary choice to cause offence through race baiting in an already racially divided society.

Dutta-Bergman (2005:287) argues in favour of a public relations role in society where the practitioner "facilitates the expression of marginalised voices, and actively participates against acts of marginalization and silencing." However, in the case of Bell Pottinger, conscious attempts were made to drown out legitimate voices through a barrage of fake news and false tweets that flooded social media platforms with a narrative that was designed to divert attention away from a vast array of nefarious activities.

These discretionary choices created a self-imposed moral dilemma, and ultimately a moral failure, for the PR firm. While Bell Pottinger had functioned in many international environments before, where it had acquired a reputation for resolving moral problems and managing reputations, it chose not to take a moral/ethical stance in executing this campaign in South Africa. It may also be said that the PR firm did not have the relevant insight into the South African context and lacked sufficient knowledge of communitarian moral frameworks.

5. CONCLUSION

The current post-modern environment that PR practitioners and organisations function in requires that they uphold the highest ethical standards in the practice of the profession. The current context not only demands reflection from practitioners on their own moral frameworks and ethicality with regards to their behaviour, but also with regards to the work they do for clients and brands. One of the great debates of modern capitalism is whether morality matters to business. However, comparatively few CEOs highlight "potential ethical scandals" as a threat – despite the growing number of firms that have suffered reputational damage in the past year because of ethical lapses (PwC's 21st CEO Survey, 2018). Most recently, Facebook has had to apologise publicly for the ongoing Cambridge Analytica privacy scandal that is embroiling the network in a legal and regulatory nightmare.

In these contexts, public relations practitioners are challenged to develop the understanding to build ethical relationships in their relational contexts that are both equitable and fair. As such they offer the best hope PR professionals to do the right thing, and to actualise the possibilities of the practice by serving the interests and voices of many.

It is evident from the Bell Pottinger case study that there are a number of principles that should inform ethical decision making and PR practice in communal contexts:

(1) Within communitarian philosophy the interests of the community takes pre-cedence over the interests of the individual. Organisations that are dominated by exchange relationships are often unwilling to incur the costs to build communal relationships, but often incur greater costs from negative publicity, unfavourable legislation, and other reputational costs that result from non-communal relationships.

(2) Practitioners should take account of their own personal beliefs, and the situation or context in which they find themselves. Developing a "habit of mind" requires questioning dominant power structures which may marginalise sectors of society, while also speaking out against injustice.

(3) Social capital is facilitated by the ability of a public relations practitioner to establish engagement opportunities, make sense of their social interactions, understand others in their relational context, and build relationships that are equitable and fair. Ethical communication is therefore relational and not transactional.

4) Ultimately, a communitarian philosophy like Ubuntu can have the greatest value for the philosophy and practice of public relations if it strengthens the democratic process through values of collaboration and collectivism. However, South African public relations has yet to realise its full responsibilities to the urban and rural classes of Africa.

… We should construct a profession of public relations that has collaboration at its core. In that way, professional public relations practitioners can help to move democracy from individualism and competition to collectivism and collaboration. (Grünig, 2000).

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