

## Should PR be regulated or not?

Unlike most other professions, PR does not have regulations. In fact, most PR professional organizations such as the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS), and the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) have codes of conduct/ethics of which their members are fully aware. However, this seems not enough to ensure an ethical practice of PR as long as these codes do not have control over PR practitioners behaving unethically or unprofessionally. The maximum penalty that an organization can impose on one of its members violating these codes is being dismissed from the organization but not from the PR industry as a whole, (*Dennis L. Wilcox, Glen T. Cameron, (2006), Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics, Eighth Edition, USA: Pearson Education, Inc.*).

Regulating PR protects qualified practitioners from the unfair competition with the unethical and unqualified ones, (*Dennis L. Wilcox, Glen T. Cameron, (2006), Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics, Eighth Edition, USA: Pearson Education, Inc.*). If PR were to be treated like other professions, this would help keep out some practitioners who tend to give a bad image about PR, and would also help defeat those who claim that PR practitioners only obey what their directors ask them to say or to do, regardless of how ethical the query is.

Moreover, regulating PR is essential to avoid its transformation into a harmful tool, given that some people might exceed boundaries and use PR techniques to spread rumors and untrue stories to ruin the image of others or manipulate the public.

It is true that in most countries, people can complain and protest to court when a person/organization is exposed to an invasion of privacy, libel and slander, disrespect of copy right and contractual confidentiality, and other abuses of PR practices. However, why not to regulate PR to boost its apparently non-appealing image that Jaquie L'Etang talked about when explaining about the social legitimacy of PR being unrecognized, and the standards constituting ethical practices being unacknowledged.

Practically and realistically speaking, regulations cannot be imposed on people without paving the way first to the regulatory action. To do so, a clear definition of PR should be first set, as well as licensing the PR industry.

Rex Harlow, a pioneer public relations educator who founded what eventually became the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), once

compiled more than 500 definitions of PR from almost as many sources, (*Dennis L. Wilcox, Glen T. Cameron, (2006), Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics, Eighth Edition, USA: Pearson Education, Inc.*). This reflects the variety of concepts and perceptions that even PR professionals have about Public Relations.

What makes the definition even harder is that Public Relations covers so many specialist areas. Its variety in terms of smoothing over, engaging in persuasion, solving conflicts, polishing organizational image, and building strong ties with partners and stakeholders, is the reason behind the difficulty in identifying exactly what PR is about. The easiest way to start defining PR might be to identify what PR is not about.

Once PR is defined and a common understanding is created about it, PR should be licensed exactly as many other professions such as medicine, engineering, and others. In this case, only people with a PR certificate, either by a specified government-approved professional association or a government agency, are authorized to practice PR in the legal sense.

Licenses should not be granted automatically to all people who study PR. Thus under the licensing approach, only those individuals who pass examinations and tests of personal integrity could call themselves 'public relations' counselors. Those not licensed would have to call themselves 'publicists' or adopt some other designation, (*Dennis L. Wilcox, Glen T. Cameron, (2006), Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics, Eighth Edition, USA: Pearson Education, Inc.*).

In sum, regulating the PR industry is needed to reduce its manipulative and propagandistic outputs, (*Kevin Moloney, (2000), Rethinking Public Relations: the spin and the substance, USA & Canada: Routledge*). This would help PR become more respectable and professionally recognised, less misused and abused, and ethically more reinforced.