

**Address by Theo Coggin, Executive Chairperson of Quo Vadis
Communications, on Ethical Public Relations in a Multi-cultural context,
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In her 1935 book, *House in Paris*, Elizabeth Bowen writes: “Nobody speaks the truth when there is something they must have”. I mulled over this quotation in my mind as I was beginning to reflect on what to say in this presentation this morning. For public relations practitioners are certainly amongst those who seek to grab the attention of publics ranging from the media to government, sometimes in a somewhat aggressive manner. At its heart, this statement by Elizabeth Bowen addresses the question of ethics – of truth, honesty and transparency in a multi-cultural society. Before I proceed, perhaps I should emphasise that any criticisms, perceived or otherwise, that I level at public relations practitioners, should be understood in the context that if and when I point a finger, there are four pointing back at me.

It is well accepted that some members of the media often have something of a heavy dose of suspicion when it comes to the public relations industry. Ignoring their own shortcomings, members of the media are often quick to dismiss public relations as a sham. Unfortunately there are cases when the media has a point – not least when spin doctors agitate incessantly to get coverage of “news” which simply is not news at all. And I have certainly had many a conversation with friends in the media who question some of the ethics in the PR industry, and the manner in which some of its members seek to impose their version of the truth, or to dodge dealing with matters of fact and record that require a transparent, ethically acceptable answer.

HOW IMPORTANT ARE ETHICS IN TODAY’S SOCIETY?

The spin doctoring that originates in the public sector is one of the most obvious – clearly not the only example - when it comes to behaviour that may be ethically questionable.

Three examples serve as illustrations of the need for people to recognise that there’s more to public communication messages than just scoring petty political points, or trying evade public scrutiny, or stretching the truth.

The first is the recent crisis around the municipal accounts of the Joburg City Council, in which Mayor Amos Masondo and his spin doctors repeatedly denied there was a crisis. Their communication was laboured and unclear and ignored the real hardships suffered by people who were being lumped with huge accounts for which they were clearly not responsible.

The second is the PR disaster surrounding the open toilets in Cape Town. The excuses offered were trite and unacceptable, and so the PR lacked credibility. In both those cases, municipalities suffered as did the reputations of their spokespersons, as well as the different corporate organisations, in this case different political parties, which they represented.

But the third example in the public domain that I want to highlight is the PR disaster surrounding the hideous beating and shooting of Andries Tetana at Ficksburg last week. Why do I raise this at a PR conference in the context of ethics in a multi-cultural society? The answer should be obvious, but let me elucidate.

First, following an incident such as this the air becomes thick with PR messages, or lack of them, and the international, let alone national, exposure that it gets demands that these messages meet the norms of a society that expects transparency and high ethics from an entity such as the police service.

Second, I have a strong belief that PR practitioners must address themselves to topical issues and there is none more topical in my view than this. After all, no PR practitioner should rest on their laurels and never expect a crisis. The manner in which one entity deals with an incident that has all the ingredients of good TV and press footage can serve as a lesson for other entities, not least in the public service.

The third is my belief that PR practitioners, as protagonists who should stand for the truth, honesty and transparency, need to be willing to speak out fearlessly when the occasion warrants it. That was the case in the apartheid

era and is no less the case now. They are, after all, professionals who work in the public arena!

IS ETHICS EVEN AN ISSUE?

The words of Martin Niemoller, a prominent German theologian who opposed the Nazi regime in World War 2, are thought-provoking in this regard: “First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out, because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out, because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. And then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak out.” Niemoller spent seven years in a Nazi prison.

So we are faced with the issue of whether ethics are important in a society in which the Information Age is rampant and ever increasing numbers of people are able to conduct their own PR campaigns, and publish with freedom on the many social networking sites open to them.

In talking about the need for ethical public relations in the contemporary environment, one has to be on one’s guard not to be seduced by the many opportunities available for one’s messages to be published. While our modern communications environment provides exciting and hitherto unknown possibilities, the fact remains that ethical PR has to be conducted within the ambit of the age-old values of truth, honesty and transparency, to which I have referred already on a number of occasions. That is a greater challenge than we might think. For those three words, truth, honesty and transparency, often tumble off our lips with ease, and our eyebrows are raised heavenwards in shock to imagine that anyone should question that as PR practitioners we are not always gospel pure.

COGS IN THE ENGINEERING OF PR

That said, there are at least five cogs that turn the engine of ethical public relations. Ignore the proficient servicing of these cogs, however, and in our multi-cultural society we will begin to discover that the engine will run dry and stutter to a stop as the credibility of both our message and our own operation is questioned. In examining the need to be effective, therefore, not least in a

country where the divisions between people – the haves and the have-nots, the powerful with arms and influence and those simply wanting to live a decent life – appear to be greater than ever before, the public relations practitioner’s responsibility to act ethically and therefore fairly, has never been greater.

When one looks at the five cogs of my ethical PR machine, it is clear that the state’s PR machine at this time in our history faces a challenge greater than at any time since 1994 to come across as facing the issues in an honest and transparent manner. It is a pity therefore that when referring to the Ficksburg killing, the Minister of Police, Nathi Mthethwa, said on Thursday last week that it would be “improper to draw conclusions on the incident”. This may be so, but countless others drew their own conclusions, not least the Independent Complaints Directorate and analysts of South Africa’s stability both abroad and at home. It was a totally inappropriate comment and suggested an attempt by him to sidestep the issue, and a complete ignorance of PR savvy of the need for ethical messages to come forth fast, and for the reputation of the country to be protected.

This was an incident that was clearly going to make international headlines and evoke strong passions. Indeed, the stark pictures of what I can only describe as a hideous betrayal of the democracy for which so many fought, was so enormous that, according to Polity.org, the public broadcaster was forced to withdraw footage of it, following complaints that the images were too shocking and disturbing.

What would have been proper would have been for the minister to issue an unequivocal statement expressing his horror at the actions of the police, which was plain to see for anyone watching the video footage. Itumeleng Mahabane’s words in Business Day, “The public, vicious deaths of citizens at the hands of the people entrusted with protecting our lives seemingly leaves us cold”, are a chilling reminder of the infamous words of one-time National Party’s Jimmy Kruger that the death of Steve Biko left him cold.

And so one has to ask where were the Minister's spin doctors immediately on hearing of the event? What ethical values were engaging their minds? Were they even involved? In saying this it should be remembered that the name of this public entity is the police *service*, not the police *force*, the word *service* implying in itself a very different ethic to one in which *force* is the operative word.

In parenthesis, let me say that the speed with which the Independent Complaints Commission has acted in this case is to be commended, as must its clear messages implicit in both its actions and its pronouncements.

To be sure there are inherent pressures on any public relations practitioner operating in the state environment. In a sense they are like the embedded journalists found operating under the protection of the allied forces in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq. But their responsibility is to more than just a minister of state or his or her department: it is to all the people of South Africa for whom they are servants – albeit it public servants.

In a very real sense that is a major difference between them and PR practitioners working in the private sector for example, who ultimately must be responsible to shareholders. Not that this absolves them of their own responsibilities to tell the truth with fairness and honesty.

The PR machine – whether operating in a private or state context - needs to be bound by principles that are as laudable and sacred as those that drive the judiciary, or faith movements. I sometimes think that PR practitioners pay little attention to the dramatic effects which their messages, and not least their choice of words and actions, can have on their publics.

NORMS AND VALUES OF THE PR ENGINE

I am reminded of the words of the great British editor, Malcolm Muggeridge, when he said: “For me personally, the media (and PR) have come to give off a whiff of sulphur, and yet at the end of the day, I have to admit that they can enrich as well as debase a life. For instance, once when I was standing waiting for a train in an underground station, a little man came up to me and asked

permission to shake my hand. As we shook hands, he remarked that some words of mine in a radio programme had prevented him from committing suicide. The humbling thing was that I couldn't remember the particular programme he had in mind; doubtless some panel or other, to me buffoonery, and yet a human life had hung on it."

So let there be no illusion: PR messages are powerful. And these messages come in many forms, written, spoken, on TV footage, in social media, and, not least, *in the actions* of entities making them. It hardly needs me to say that, from an ethical PR point of view, the pictures of those policemen in Ficksburg last week spoke far more loudly than anything they were saying, or their bosses have since said. And yes, *everyone* is involved in PR messaging, in word and deed. The need to be ethically sound in what they say and do is the duty of every person in a corporate entity, from the lowliest to the chief executive.

In meeting the purpose of the need for PR, it is important that the norms and values that we employ do not become slaves to the short-sighted or egocentric desires of chief executives, ministers of state or any other executive whom we serve. No more so should public relations practitioners pander to the whims and pressures that may come from the multitude of news media in which we wish to have our messages published.

So why, you may ask, am I going on about matters like this that may well be outside our comfort zone? I suppose the answer is quite simple. It is a matter of whether we are able to live with ourselves or whether we are willing pawns in the hands of bigger fish than we whose egocentricity or desire for economic or political power drives them to ignore the needs and legitimate demands of ordinary people in our multi-cultural democracy, and indeed our multi-cultural world.

For what happens in one part of the world impacts on us all, and PR disasters there are read as avidly in places thousands of kilometres away. Cast your mind back a few months to the way in which BP handled the incredible and disastrous oil crisis off the coast of the southern states of the USA, and the manner in which the then chief executive tried by all means to defend the

indefensible through fantastic (and I use the word in its real meaning) spin doctoring. It took the president of the most powerful country in the world to make people recognise that BP's PR defence was, put quite simply, trite!

We all understand that, intricately woven into the broad activity we call public relations, is the objective of promoting, protecting and perpetuating reputation. It should be self-evident therefore that we should have nothing to do – or at least as little as possible – with negative messages, such as those by BP in the face of its massive disaster, or those last week to which I have referred.

When one reflects on what appears to be off the cuff PR messages one can only imagine that our state departments and ministries simply don't have crisis communications plans *in situ*. Or perhaps they don't realise that even a crisis can present an opportunity if handled properly. As a consequence, reputations of many of our public spokespersons in all fields are increasingly questioned by members of the public.

What is even more frightening is the possibility that we may soon be subject to the envisaged Protection of Information Act, which the media and some other institutions particularly in the NGO field have strongly criticised as comprising laws that will effectively entail censorship.

It is regrettable that the public relations industry and PR practitioners have not been more outspoken in their denunciation of the envisaged Act. And if you think that such a law will not affect the PR industry, think again. It will surely clip our wings more effectively than anything we have known since 1994 and we will find that, like the media – and I speak from my experience as an editor in the pre-1994 era – we will find ourselves running to lawyers post haste to check that simple media releases on some subjects are not breaking some law.

PICK 'N PAY AND SATURN

Against the background of what I have said, it is instructive to look at an example of some years ago when Pick 'n Pay had to deal with the national scare arising from the suspected toxicity in some products available on the

supermarket chain's shelves. Pick 'n Pay was immediately forthcoming with information providing helpline details, working with the South African Police Service and, more importantly, releasing credible information about the scare, and doing so on a regular and transparent basis. Without question, the supermarket chain's reputation was enhanced and people could continue shopping without fear. The outcome was peace of mind for the consumer, as well as peace of mind for the corporate as it sought to protect, not only its consumers, but its shareholder's interests. And, more critically, it enhanced its reputation by subscribing to and implementing the highest ethical standards.

Another example of how crisis communications was well handled goes back some years to car manufacturer, Saturn, in the USA. The company decided to recall one of its models because of a fault. Instead of resorting to defensive PR mechanisms, the company was open about its problem, and invited everyone who brought in their vehicles to a picnic while the fault was being repaired. Thus a potential disaster was turned into an occasion to celebrate! At the same time, the company earned kudos galore from its publics, and could boast of acting in the most ethical of ways.

These examples are far cries from the poor public relations we witnessed last week following the Ficksburg tragedy. If nothing else, this incident has highlighted the lack of understanding or appreciation by some public figures and entities of the complexity of PR in our multicultural society, and the need for high ethics in the manner in which people communicate both in their words and their actions. The ethical behaviour of South Africa was no doubt subliminally evaluated as poor as it was reflected on screens such as SkyNews, Al Jazeera, the BBC or CNN.

SOCIAL MEDIA

And it is not as if there are not many opportunities for such communication. We all know of the huge variety of social media and the power that can be harnessed through their use. So the old cry of "the media is not reporting accurately" rings even more hollow than ever before since it is quite possible for even the smallest organisation to access social media and get their messages across.

But the point is: unless those messages are honest and truthful and fair, reputations will suffer. The public know when spokespersons are spinning uncontrollably. People are not fools and they will not be duped by spin that is transparently unfair or dishonest or untruthful.

Apart from massive access by members of the public to sites such as Facebook and Twitter, South Africa has a vast population with access to other social media through our outstanding cell phone network. It is common knowledge that there are more cell phones available in this country than there are people. That suggests that almost everyone has a cell phone and as their technological savvy improves, their use of social media will grow exponentially.

REPUTATION ISSUES

Public exposure of the messages put out by PR practitioners is therefore wider than ever before, and will increase. Against this background it is important that there is a good understanding of our responsibility. So the question remains, how can we as PR practitioners enter into, let me call it a covenant with ourselves, in which we build bridges between the spokespersons representing big business, government and other corporate entities, and the people they serve.

And there are certainly indications in our society of measures that have been put in place to meet the needs of ordinary people like you and me. For, bear in mind, at some point we too are ordinary members of the public making our own judgments of the PR messages put out by others.

REPUTATION INSTITUTE

In this respect it is instructive to note the comments by the managing director of the Reputation Institute South Africa, Dominik Heil, in which he notes that our financial services companies including banks have better reputation ratings than their counterparts abroad. [He attributes this partly to the regulatory environment provided by the Reserve Bank. Significantly, he also notes that the recently introduced Consumer Protection Act provides some of the most progressive protection of the public in the world.]

CONSUMER PROTECTION ACT

There is no doubt that the CPA poses new challenges in the field of ethics for the PR practitioner. In our company we work quite closely with issues around the protection of consumers. Our initial impression, after a few weeks, is that some companies and public entities have a tendency to see the CPA more as a means to protect their own interests than those of their consumers. It is worth noting, without comment, that just a few days after the introduction of the Act, the National Consumer Commission reported that it has received hundreds of complaints from consumers in the first few days of the Act's life.

PR practitioners, including those involved in service industries in the public and private sectors, now have an opportunity in the coming months ahead to respond with integrity to the issues that are being raised by consumers in terms of the CPA.

It remains to be seen whether the PR messages, irrespective of what action results, that come out of the CPA's implementation are fair to the man and woman in the street, whether they take cognisance of our multicultural society using the phones and their varied understanding of the intricacies of legal contracts. And will we serve, adequately, generations to come? PR practitioners acting on behalf of companies that deal with large numbers of consumers, and those working for municipal and other governmental entities that interact with consumers will need to familiarise themselves with the detail of the new Act. This will be important for them not only in terms of being able to communicate effectively on behalf of their principals, but to do so in an ethically correct manner in so far as the man and woman in the street are concerned. Properly implemented this Act will ensure that consumers are protected and there can be no sidestepping of the issues that we have seen in the past on the part of corporate organisations in both private and public sector.

It is abundantly clear that we live in a diverse world with a multi-cultural society that presents us, as public relations practitioners, with huge challenges. From my earlier comments in this presentation, I am sure you would have

realised that it is distressing to see the insensitive nature with which the rainbow people of this country are sometimes treated. In that respect, the cogs in our PR engine are simply malfunctioning.

There has never previously been a time in the history of humankind in which we have had the privilege of so many different means to communicate with people. Yet the basis for honest and fair communication remains the manner in which, in a face-to-face situation, we treat each other, and how we describe the treatment in the words we use in our public relations interventions. Truly, the words of Ed Murrow, the great American communications commentator, are as true today as ever before: “The newest computer can merely compound, at speed, the oldest problem in the relations between human beings, and in the end the communicator will be confronted with the old problem, of what to say and how to say it.”

My concern, as you will have realised, is that while we may have all the contemporary communication strategies in the world, they will still fail when it comes to communicating about the cutting-edge issues that impact, literally, on the lives of our fellow human beings when we compromise on our ethical standards. I have to ask whether this is because we forget that we have ethical responsibilities as public relations practitioners?

The glitz of the Information Age, and its unparalleled opportunities, perhaps blinds us to the need for old-fashioned virtues inherent in ethics which I have pointed to during my presentation: honesty, truth and transparency. And finally, let us remember that the standard of our ethics, our PR ethics, is reflected by the way in which we write *and* act.