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Strategic Transparency Of Public Relations Officers In Upholding Media Ethics Amidst Misinformation

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Abstract: This study introduces and contextualizes strategic transparency within media ethics. The value of proactive information tactics is to equip public relations professionals to combat misinformation and show that the company wants to encourage moral communication. When faced with such situations, organizations employ internal and external communication tactics to promote the organization's positive image and lessen the influence of unfavorable events on its reputation. This is a laborious and time-consuming process. The case studies in this research supplement provide examples of companies that have adopted transparency strategies, illustrating communication best practices and tactics. The training outcomes of public relations officers aimed at curbing the dissemination of misinformation in society to protect the organization's image were also examined in this research. This study also analyses the ethical issues arising from the practice of transparency in Public Relations by advocating for active information participation and the fact that information sharing does not mean doing it at the expense of one's privacy. In order to promote trust, however, the practice of public relations does not only enable appreciation of the need for transparency but also understanding that certain information must be protected. A mixed-methods approach is used in this research, where an exploration of cases of strategic transparency is studied quantitatively as a case analysis, and at the same time surveys assessing PR practitioners' attitudes towards the ethical dimensions of their practice were administered, and also the analysis of interviews with PR specialists, will allow to gain in-depth understanding of various effective means of transparency to tackle misinformation. This study emphasizes the importance of incorporating strategic transparency, for example, in particular as an ethical measure, as a mainstay for all Public Relations Practitioners.

Index Terms –Media Ethics, Misinformation, Public Relations Professionals, PR Strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Introduction: For obvious reasons, the integrity of journalists is becoming an increasingly prominent topic; since misinformation of various forms is spread extremely fast these days, it is more critical now than ever before. This paper began with a quick glance at all the forms of journalism, covering a wide variety of ways in which journalism is being affected by the problems emerging from the Dark Ages, in terms of what is being made available digitally and very arbitrarily labelled as news. This paper then showed how seasoned media houses work towards safeguarding their journalistic standards, although examples from real-life stories and ethical frameworks were examined. Fact-checking, transparency, and openness, and ethical grounding were indeed specifically defined as important facilities for news credibility among media journalists. In addition, the study elaborated on how media literacy could help individuals spot real information. Probably much more

dedicated effort within media ethics is needed on the part of journalism to realistically fight fabricated information and yield for the populace.

The modern age of Public Relation starts in the late 1800s with stalwarts like P.T. Barnum, who uses press agents for the publicity of his shows. That time was focused on publicity, sensationalism without ethics or accuracy. The two most influential personalities in the formation of PR as a professional practice were Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays during early 1900. Ivy Lee popularized the principle of transparency in PR—that is, focusing on the right to know by the public.

Bernays, on the other hand, popularized the idea of PR as an instrument of influencing public opinion. Both played significant roles in shaping the practice into a more strategic discipline. Both of them played a very significant role in shaping PR into a more strategic discipline.

The ethical question of transparency as an ideal of public relations, which is, in essence, equated with the problem of conflict of interest in practice, is the main subject of this study. Ethical questions remain even if today PR organizations, which operate in almost every developed region worldwide, have a code of ethics that practically proves those codes to be lacking; the absence of a truly compelling meaning in codes of ethics, usually too general or with nebulous, adequate rules, is conversely suggested. Today, PR practitioners face the dual challenge of promoting their clients' interests while ensuring ethical standards and combating misinformation. There is increasing emphasis on transparency, responsibility, and accountability in PR. With the evolution of misinformation, the role of PR officers in ensuring ethical media relations is becoming increasingly critical, especially when it comes to global events like political elections, public health crises, and environmental concerns. The history of PR and misinformation varies from early times, seemingly sometimes dubious in ethical stature, to the present situation where transparency, ethical communication, and media literacy are becoming the staple for a good public relations strategy

Brief Historical background: Historically, the philosophy of media ethics has been greatly evolutionary, changing along with various societal and technological advancements, as also the changing role of the press. During the early development of the print media, journalists operated with informal preservation of ethics, which also varied widely from one publisher to another (Bermes, 2021). The first major global effort to provide for universal journalistic ethics in practice was launched in the U.S. during the penny-press era of the 19th century (Marsha and Hamilton, 2009). Bright, cheap, and open to all came this brand-new press, calling for a touch of uprightness and accountability by the publishers so as to establish credibility (Bermes, 2021). The 20th Century witnessed larger and more actively lead initiatives to codify ethical guidelines about journalism (Ralph Frasca, 2006). ASNE¹ first time adopted an ethics code on principles of impartiality, fairness, and dedication to truth in 1923 (Wilkins et al., 2004). That particular period in media also marked the launch of investigative journalism, with few outstanding examples highlighting the importance of ethical reporting in exposing corruption and holding power accountable (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). In a wider world scope, the establishment of various media regulating bodies, including press councils, actually further accentuated the culture of journalistic ethics. For example, the Press Council of India was established in 1966, and the IPSO² in the United Kingdom, founded in 2014, came along as an effort towards high journalistic integrity. These bodies provide a framework through which press should react to ethical breaches and promote accountability within the media industry (Ward, 2008).

Literature Reviews: Scammell (2012) asserts that there isn't a single, widely accepted definition of political public relations. Nonetheless, she asserts that political public relations advance the understanding of other academic disciplines. Therefore, it aids in the explanation of political science as a discipline and political leaders' actions. Additionally, it inspires and improves comprehension of political processes. There are essentially two different ways to define political public relations. According to the first school, political public relations is all about communication, but the second school stresses that it's also about managing communication and fostering connections (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). According to the Okudero (2008) Political Public relation provides useful strategic solution for resolving several issues.

According to McNair (2001), political public relations indeed formulate public communication strategies that assure the individual political figure or political party the best possible positive publicity and the least negative publicity. Such a definition has also been supported by Moloney (2006), who states that public relations practitioners do not just help candidates design and package their information but also counsel them on public perceptions, hopes, issues, and demands.

Political public relations, as per Iyengar (2001), build and maintain the relationship between public and political figures most effectively towards the advancement of democratic principles, rule of law, and scruples

¹ American Society of Newspaper Editors

² Independent Press Standards Organization

regarding established authority. However, these are simply the most basic functions of political public relations.

It is a complete book by Biswa Rangan Mohanty titled Constitution, Government and Political in India published in 2009, which develops an understanding of the whole framework in which the political system, constitution, and political behaviors operate in India, a vast and diverse country, populated in terms of geology and demography, inhabited by peoples of various religions, speaking many languages, and characterized by multiple sociocultural ethos.

Grunig (2013) regards public relations as an empirical science of communication management public relations being part of the planning, execution, and assessment of organizational communication through which organizations 'adapt or alter or retain their environments so as to improve their performance against their objectives' (Long & Hazelton), turning management of communication into a deliberate and strategic engagement.

"Rumor is a complex phenomenon. It might be provisionally conceived as the product of a series of witnesses, each of whom testifies to a statement that his predecessor gave him (Hart, 1916). "Rumors are impatient in character," said Gordon Allport and Allan Hunt (1947) in their seminal work, The Psychology of Rumor. Because they deal with an immediate danger, they spread like wildfire. They can spread like wildfire, accidents, or natural disasters in a remarkably short amount of time. Because it is based on deep feelings of fear and anger, rumors of this form are likely to elicit quick and forceful action, in a highly inflamed climate. Thus, fake news spreads like wildfire.

Jefferies (2016) has highlighted that public relations actions are deliberate and well organized with the courses of time for which public relations professionals act as interpretation agents for the organization, consistently articulating its philosophy, policies, and programs to stakeholders (Skinner et al., 2006, Cutlip et al., 2000; Seitel, 2007). In addition, Rensburg and Cant (2009) also claim that public relations do not operate by itself because it is part of the cognitive dimension of organizational communication. Therefore, public relations practitioners must also balance the strategic dimension of the message and its framing with an understanding of the intended audience (Gordon, 1997; Hutton, 1999; Newson et al., 2000; Cutlip et al., 2006).

Objectives:

- To identify the proper guidelines and best practices for PRO's to follow when managing misinformation and promoting ethical transparency.
- To explore the role of PROs in maintaining trust between the organisation and customer by analysing several case studies.
- To understand how PROs with their communication strategy uphold media ethics ensuring accurate truthful information to be disseminated among individual.

Methodology: This study employs a mixed-methods approach in analysing Strategic transparency of Public Relations Officers in Upholding Media Ethics Amidst Misinformation.

Qualitative Method- A detailed discourse analysis of the case studies of PR and Misinformation management.

Quantitative Method- A detailed survey to understand the importance of Public Relation officers amidst misinformation.

Case Study Analysis:

1. It was early April 2014 when the Lucknow Food & Drug Administration department searched a local shopkeeper named Umesh Chandra from Barabanki, Uttar Pradesh. They took samples of Maggi, the most popular brand of noodles owned by the FMCG behemoth Nestle, and sent it to a lab for analysis. A few weeks later, the Gorakhpur lab released a groundbreaking paper that caught everyone off guard. Monosodium glutamate, or MSG, a highly dubious substance thought to be producing lethal reactions in the body, was detected in Maggi noodles. Moreover, the investigations hinted that Maggi had higher levels of lead than were allowed. For the first time, Nestlé India, a 30% revenue generator, was involved in a significant dispute. This case study described how the minor headache that could just have been averted by paying an affordable fine for violating norms turned into a public relations nightmare for one of the world's best-known companies. This case study broadly describes how strict a company must be with the quality dimensions of the product. A little deviation from quality benchmarks can spoil the decades of product value. The most frequently searched sources include FSSAI.gov.in, Nestle.in, Fortune.com, and Indian Express online. It can be brought as a case study to work out the applications of concepts of Managing public relations, Business

Environment (Legal), Business Ethics, Strategic decision making, Quality Management, Brand Equity and Corporate Governance to understand the situation.

2. **Misinformation spreads in 2019 election-** This study examines the dynamics and spread of political misinformation in India's 2019 national election campaign, based on cases found by internationally authenticated fact-checkers. Many political parties and their affiliates or supporters used both positive (pro-party) and negative (anti-party) misinformation claims. The distribution of measures of engagement with misinformation claims on Facebook (N=4,478) indicate BJP, INC and CPIM were most often using positive or pro-party misinformation, whereas more parties were targeted with Negative or anti-party misinformation. The ruling BJP was most targeted by the majority of the negative misinformation claims coming from rival parties and by the INC more particularly, which fits well with some of the Western-based research regarding challenges going negative in targeting incumbents as the latter concentrate more on the record of accomplishments. More than twice the use of positive or pro-party misinformation, it was used negative or antiparty misinformation and went farther than did the positive or pro-party claims.

Role of PROs:

Covid 19 pandemic related misinformation: The COVID-19 outbreak in India became a platform for a ripple effect of misinformation, particularly on social media, through rumors and fake news regarding the virus, transmission, and possible cures. Additionally, the dissemination of false information on vaccines, such as conspiracy theories and unverified medical advice, went viral and sowed confusion and fear among the public.

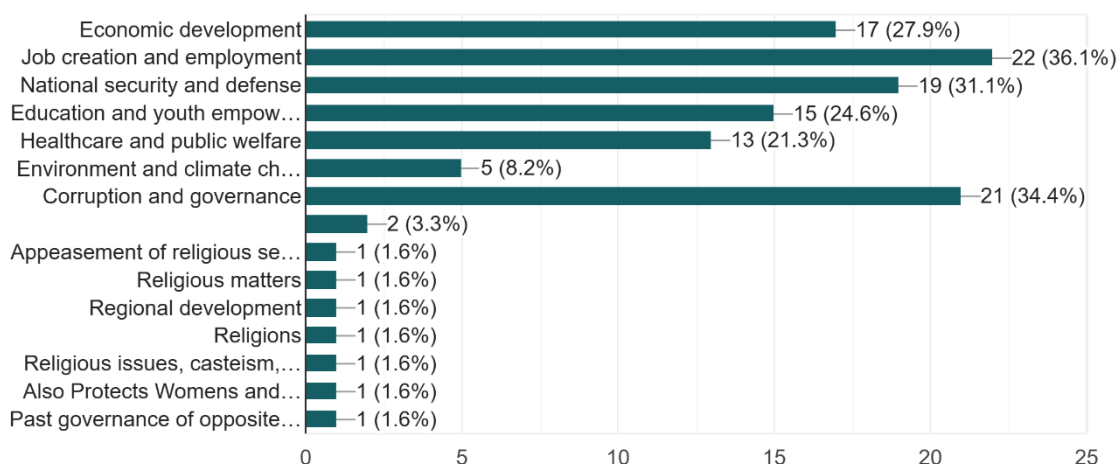
Role of PROs: Countering Vaccine Misinformation: PR professionals working with organizations like the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and health-focused NGOs played a critical role against COVID-19 vaccine misinformation. Some of the common types of misinformation stated that vaccines could cause infertility or were part of a conspiracy orchestrated on a global scale: PR teams had to ensure that adequate information reached the public through other fact-checking platforms, social media, and news briefings.

- PROs worked with agencies to put out verified facts through media stories, post infographics, and scientist expert opinions from doctors and medical authorities. Their goal was to reassure the general public during the vaccine roll-out.
- **Collaborating with Social Media Platforms:** During the second wave of COVID-19, which saw a proliferation of misinformation around oxygen shortage and vaccine availability, PR teams partnered with social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook to report false claims. They helped create content that clarified such how-to guidelines as quarantine, availability of medical resources, and preventive measures.
- **Engagement with Influencers and Celebrities:** In India, where there is a high impact of celebrities and influencers, PR teams worked with film actors, cricketers, and social media influencers to spread correct information, appealing to people to follow the government mandate. These influencers acted as amplifiers for public service messages and created awareness on vaccines.
- **Results:** Misinformation continued to pose problems from time to time, while PR efforts had gradually begun to improve vaccine acceptance and trust in public health advisories. However, misinformation persisted, capable of regaining momentum in many areas of rural health information.

Case Study 2: The 2019 General Elections: Misinformation in the Political Campaign_Misinformation flourished during the 2019 Indian General Elections, with allegations by political parties accusing each other of spreading fake news in order to damage their opponents or manipulate public opinion. Social media pages were flooded with allegations on fake voting machines, altered elections, and misleading political advertisements.

Which of the following issues did you notice political parties focusing on most during the 2024 General Election?

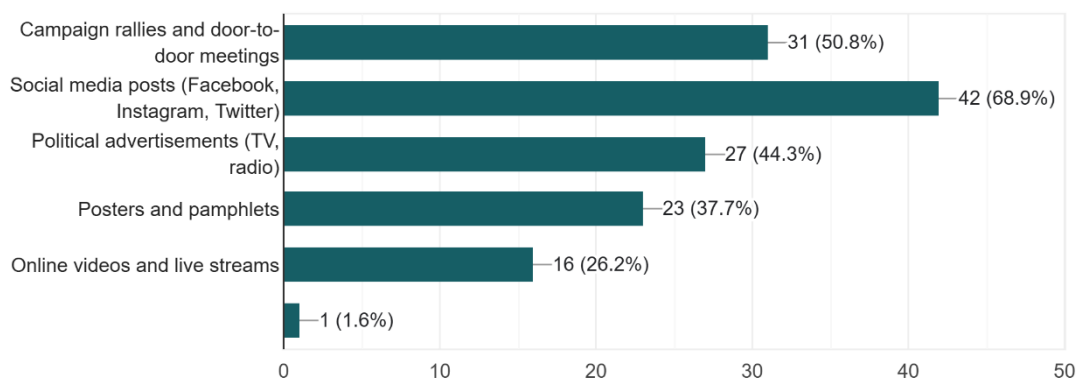
61 responses



- **Role of Public Relations Officers (PROs): Fact-Checking and Public Clarification:** PR professionals working with political parties were engaged in countering misinformation about their candidates and their campaigns. For instance, in response to opposition parties accusing the ruling party of utilizing biased voting machines, PROs swiftly issued official statements and engaged the media in explaining the legitimacy of the election process. They also pointed out transparency and provided various forms of proof from independent electoral bodies to corroborate their own claims.

Which of the following methods of political communication did you notice the most during the campaign?

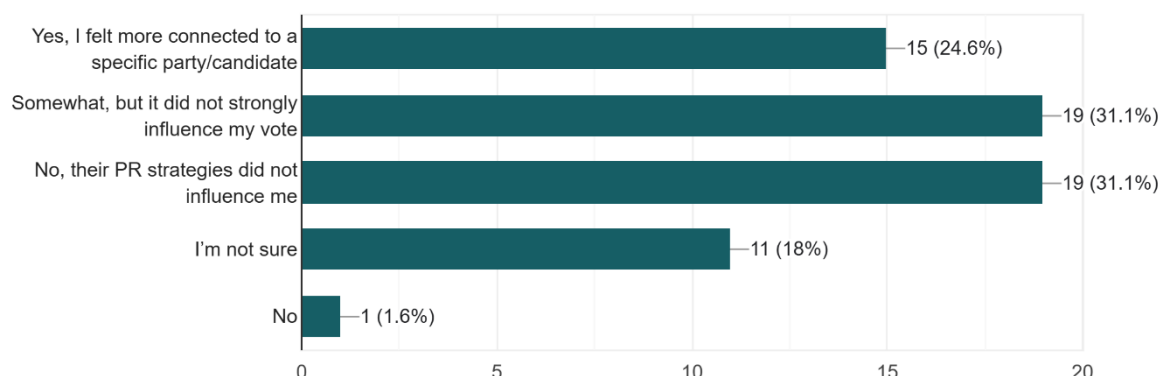
61 responses



- **Narrative Control of Fake News:** WhatsApp and Facebook became carry-on environments during elections, sucking in pamphlets along with false videos and manipulated photographs. PROs worked closely together with fact-checking organizations, including Alt News and BOOM Live, to fact-check and debunk fake news on an ongoing basis. This process also included directly reaching out to key media outlets to deny false narratives and push out the correct information.

Did you feel more connected to any particular political party or candidate due to their PR strategies?

61 responses



- **Engagement with Digital Media:** PR teams made wider use of digital media strategies to rectify factual inaccuracies during digital-high engagement at elections. A focused social media campaign, videos, and responses from influencers were started in order to tackle and decimate misinformation. There will also be joint efforts to ensure that the election coverage was objective, with proper clarification done in case of misinformation.
- **Outcome:** While PR kept in check some of the misinformation that gained wide acceptance, some aspects of the general public could still be influenced by misinformation which arose due to fragmentation within the media in India.

Case Study 3: The Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid Dispute, Managing Misinformation around Sensitive Religious Contestation

- **Background:** The Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid controversy has been a bitter point of tension and misinformation for ages. For decades now, the fire of debate and misreporting has blazed on both sides for that reason, especially involving religious sentiments.
- **Role of PROs: Healing Differences, Fostering Dialogue:** PROs from organizations on both sides worked to manage the narrative around sensitive issues of religion and communal harmony over many months. They made great efforts to clarify their stand on varying facets in some instances by extending a hand to work together in peaceful dialogue in de-escalating tensions.
- **Dispel False Narratives and Rumors:** In the period leading up to the final judgment from the Supreme Court of India in 2019, several rumors and wrong stories had been circulating about what the court might rule, especially through WhatsApp and other channels. PR teams worked hard in conjunction with the media, ensuring that reports were even-handed and anchored on factual background, at the same time issuing statements to clarify misleading dispositions of certain issues about the implications of the verdict.
- **Transparent Processes Within the Framework of Law:** After the Supreme Court cleared the way for the construction of the Ram Mandir, the aspects of transparency offered by PR efforts were focused on creating public awareness of the legal official procedures and the reasoning of any possible decision. These media outreach and public engagement campaigns were designed to ensure that the decision had been contextualized in light of the formal law and not a polarizing issue.
- **Result:** The PR planning had helped maintain peace during the legal battle, especially given the kind of potential the dispute had for violent escalation. Misinformation spread during and after the verdict, however, calling for PR professionals to continue working on mediation of sensitive issues and the handling of narratives in real time.

Case Study 4: The 2017 Kerala Floods - Misinformation and Crisis Management: In 2017, the Indian state of Kerala was subject to one of the worst floods to hit the subcontinent in a century. During the crisis, misinformation about damage, aid, and various NGOs flooded social media, causing much confusion and panic.

- **Role of Public Relations Agencies: Correcting Misinformation about Relief Efforts:** Amid the floods, many rumors surfaced about the mishandling of aid and delays in the distribution of relief material. Here, the PROs from governments, NGOs, and disaster management teams set up dedicated helplines, social media pages, and crisis communication systems to issue real-time updates and rebut false claims.
- **Engaging with the Media:** The Kerala State Government and giant NGOs involved in rescue work coordinated with local and national media for correct reporting. They provided print journalists with verified facts concerning the floods and coordinated efforts for addressing them. The PRO teams also turned their efforts toward favourably profiling local heroes and positive stories in the thick of the crisis that countered misinformation regarding inaction or corruption.
- **Public Communication on Relief and Donations:** As misinformation spread about false relief donation drives and fake fundraisers, the PROs endeavoured to establish official channels through which people could donate in safety. They also provided regular reports on the relief operations, assuring the public that aid was reaching the needy.
- **Results:** PR played a pivotal role in garnering faith in relief efforts and positively manipulating crisis communications pertaining to the Kerala floods. While misinformation continued to thrive during the waning days of panic, effective communication through the PROs managed to temper the situation instead of quickening panic.

Conclusion: This study identifies the articulation of strategic transparency as central to maintaining media ethics, given the challenges posed by misinformation. By emphasizing proactive communication tactics, PR professionals can enhance their organization's reputation and create an environment of ethical communication. Several cases presented herein show that organizations have effectively used strategic transparency to protect themselves from the damaging effects of misinformation. The research also elaborates on further ethical considerations surrounding transparency and calls for approved and neutral approaches to providing information that remain at risk, not violating people's right to seek after trust. The collection of methods, using analysis of cases, surveys, and interviews, is viewed as an instrument that allows GEOPAM to develop a better understanding of the practical and ethical views on transparency in public relations. Overall, this work establishes strategic transparency not only as an ethical responsibility but also as a powerful opportunity for PR professionals in dealing with the complex media world of today. The organizations may build effective relationships with their stakeholders in this way while enabling an informed public conversation.

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