Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to consider whether ethical persuasion can be part of public relations practice.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper contends that the critical issue for practitioners is not whether they engage in persuasion, but whether they do so ethically. Accordingly, a definition of ethical persuasion is derived by examining unethical propaganda. The paper then considers what standard might be used to assess the ethics of persuasion. The notion of “the public interest” – ubiquitously linked to ethical practice in public relations – is considered but found to be too elusive to guide the practice individual practitioners. Other more assessable standards are identified, as is a guiding approach to ethics. The approach to ethics adopted in this paper is rule utilitarianism. The methodology of this paper is deductive and derivative analysis, argument and synthesis, drawn from a broad body of literature.

Findings – Persuasion can be ethical, and a definition of ethical persuasion is proffered. The public interest is not a standard that individual practitioners can determine, decide, know, or apply to assess the ethics of their practice. Ethical persuasion can, however, be assessed using other standards, discussed in the paper. Consequently, a set of criteria and standards to practicing ethical persuasion is developed.

Research limitations/implications – The paper does not extend into a discussion of practical persuasive techniques. Therefore, an extension of this examination could consider a thorough assessment of the ethics of practical persuasive communication techniques.

Practical implications – Directly relevant to the daily work of public relations practitioners, communicators, advertisers and marketers, who are interested in acting ethically. The paper provide a basis for a guide to assessing the ethics of persuasive practice.

Originality/value – This paper confronts both the question of whether practitioners can use the notion of the public interest to assess the ethics of practice, and also what constitutes ethical (and unethical) persuasion, and considers how persuasion can be used ethically.

Keywords Public relations, Ethics

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In the last half century at least, public relations literature has largely shunned the word persuasion. Yet, public relations remain predominantly about communication with...
intent. That is, to inform, raise awareness or educate, or to influence attitudes, or to influence behavior (Hendrix, 1998, pp. 23-9, see discussion on public relations objectives as informational, attitudinal or behavioural).

Persuasion is integral to all categories and vital to the last two. One cannot inform without the message receiver at least implicitly being persuaded that the topic is worthy of attention. To influence attitudes or behaviour, the part played by persuasion only strengthens. Influencing attitudes about gender equality requires doubters to be persuaded. Moreover, persuasion is indivisible from communication if the objective is to change the behaviour of smokers, or people who engage in unsafe sex, or users of unsterile syringes to inject illicit drugs.

Hence, the term, the role and the process of persuasion must be openly discussed in public relations. The questions should revolve around the limits of persuasion. Those limits should be prescribed by ethics.

The scope of this paper will be limited to the free will of audiences to be informed, or to change attitudes or behaviour. Coercion is excluded because in day-to-day public relations work it could never be considered ethical. Also excluded is attitude or behavior change elicited by systematic reward and punishment because the focus here is on change motivated internally and not linked to external or transient inducements (Kelman, 1981, see discussion of compliance, identification and internalisation.). Lastly, this paper excludes one-on-one influence. This is to maintain a manageable scope, but also because the focus here is not on individual psychological idiosyncrasies but on aggregate effects across large groups. This one-to-many framework reflects the bulk of daily public relations communications and will be the scope of this paper.

This inquiry is motivated by a gap in public relations literature, which avoids confronting the practice of persuasion and neglects to explain the role of the public interest. The intent of this inquiry then is to answer:

How can ethical persuasion be integrated into public relations practice, what is the role of the public interest, and what might be the essential standards for ethical persuasion?

The outcome of paper will be a core value and rule, and standards and tests, for what may constitute ethical persuasion in public relations.

What the literature tells us

One should approach the literature on persuasion with caution. The words “public relations” and “persuasion” often co-habit with “propaganda” and its pejorative implications. Sometimes writers distinguish the two, and sometimes not (Deaver, 1990; Jowett, 1999; Marlin, 2003; Miller, 1989). The first task, then, is to distinguish propaganda from ethical persuasion.

Persuasion – a PR blind spot

Reviewing the “anatomy” of public relations, Mallinson (1996) is keenly interested in the silence he encounters around the question of persuasion. For example, in the late 1990s Professor Rex Harlow, a pioneer of the US Public Relations Society, examined almost 500 public relations definitions. They alluded to the greater good, the public interest and the role of public relations as an honest broker between organisations and publics. The Society itself plumbed for a statement rather than a definition that ran to 400 words – none of them was “persuasion”. Mallinson laments that among the
prodigious cluster of definitions, “It is tempting to think the word (persuasion) has been studiously avoided” (Mallinson, 1996, p. 16).

Consistent with Mallinson’s view, prolific and influential writers on public relations, such as the US academic, James Grunig, have evaded its role as a persuasive discipline, except to derogate persuasion. In their 1984 seminal work, Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 42) associated persuasion with propaganda and concluded that research had rejected persuasion in place of understanding as the goal of all communications. Latterly, he still rejects the inclusion of “persuasion” as a function, even in conflict resolution, though he admits to being tempted (Grunig, 1989; Grunig and Grunig, 1992).

Recent writers who have discussed future roles for public relations have continued to eschew persuasion (German, 1995; Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988). In Britain, L’Etang found that the feeling against persuasion in the field of public relations was facilitated by a desire for practitioners to distance themselves from the propaganda tactics of the war years (L’Etang, 2004). Yet writers in public relations, who are also practitioners, have been willing to concede the role of persuasion. Cutlip et al. (1994, p. 229) said: “Communication is a reciprocal process of exchanging signals to inform, instruct, or persuade”. Also, in a US study in 1989, two thirds of surveyed practitioners said their role was to develop “mutual understanding” between management and publics. But less than one third thought their managers agreed, saying PR was about “persuasion, information dissemination, or propaganda” (Guth and March, 2003, p. 8). Another writer/practitioner, Seitel (2004, p. 111), said: “Persuading is the goal of the vast majority of public relations programs”. One theorist, at least, is prepared to argue that persuasion is intrinsic to communication (Miller, 1989; Miller and Steinberg, 1975).

Miller (1989, p. 46) argues persuasion is simply how we control our environment to achieve preferred outcomes. He refers to control in an amoral sense, “just as breathing and eating is amoral; it is an inevitable aspect of being alive”.

The point revealed here by the literature is not whether persuasion is *per se* good or bad. Rather, that it is a dominant practice in public relations despite the gap in public relations literature, and that persuasion and public relations are as “two Ps in a pod” (Miller, 1989; Cutlip et al., 1994, p. 229; Guth and March, 2003, p. 8; Seitel, 2004, p. 111).

The gap, however, is not evident in literature outside of public relations. The varied literature to be examined in the service of this research goes well beyond public relations literature to embrace ethics, the public interest, political philosophy and communications (Allen, 1991; Andersen, 1978; Benditt, 1973; Bentham, 1948; Bivins, 1987b, 1993; Bok, 1989; Bryce, 1981; Cassinelli, 1958; Cochran, 1974; Dillard and Pfau, 2002; Edgett, 2002; Flathman, 1966; Grace and Cohen, 1996; Hoyland et al., 1949; Katz, 1981; L’Etang, 2004; Mallinson, 1996; Martinson, 1994; O’Keefe, 1997; Perloff, 1993; Petty and Wegner, 1999; Pfau and Burgoon, 1988; Rachels, 1999; Reardon, 1991; Reynolds and Reynolds, 2002; Sherif et al., 1965; Sorauf, 1957; Stiff and Mongeau, 2003; Toulmin et al., 1978; Wangerin, 1993; Witte and Allen, 2000; Worchel et al., 1975).

**Defining propaganda**

The first part of the inquiry of this paper is to examine how ethical persuasion can be integrated into public relations. The word “persuasion” and its role in public relations has been shunned in the literature partly due to its historical connection with propaganda (Jowett, 1999; Marlin, 2003; Miller, 1989). Consequently, with rare exceptions (Parsons, 2004, Chapter 12), the literature has not broached the question of
what might constitute ethical persuasion. The first task of this paper then is to
distinguish between propaganda and ethical persuasion. The paper will then examine
the role and prominence given to serving the “public interest” which is widely asserted
to be central to ethical practice.

It is important to scrutinise the concept of propaganda because, in asking what
ethical persuasion is, it is imperative to understand first what is not. Propaganda is
commonly defined as control, deception and disregard for truth which is deployed (or
not) only as a means to achieve ends. And the ends serve the propagandist’s interests
(Jowett, 1999, pp. 2-8; Marlin, 2003, pp. 16-23; Parsons, 2004, p. 107). This entails an
“indifference to truth” unless it serves the propagandist. Jowett (1999, p. 4) highlights
the means and ends: “Propaganda is the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape
perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that
furthers the desired intent of the propagandist”.

The definitions contain latent tensions. Clearly, no ethical position can be cavalier
about truth. But Marlin and Jowett also say propaganda is distinguished by its
purpose – to benefit the propagandist. The inference is that an ethical communicator
who avoids propaganda must avoid communication whose sole or main intent is to
benefit the communicator’s cause. Parson’s, in her review of ethics in public relations,
supports this definition (Parsons, 2004, p. 107). However, this would exclude many
communications of perceived value, particularly charitable appeals, sponsorship
requests and calls for volunteer assistance. Advertising would be virtually dismissed
in total as propaganda. However, it is arguable that the general common sense view
would not hold these acts to all be necessarily propaganda, especially if there were a
discernable social benefit. Hypothetically, it would not necessarily be propagandistic
for a celebrity to visit a hospital to persuade audiences to sponsor a children’s ward,
while transparently reaping some publicity benefit. On the other hand, if the benefit
included a concealed remuneration, then arguably the propagandistic nature of the act
may be questioned. Prima facie at least, this suggests that the component of
self-seeking purpose alone may not define propaganda.

Marlin’s (2003, p. 22) own definition of propaganda circumvents the problem by
focussing not on benefits to the communicator but on the needs of the audience. He
proposes that propaganda is:

The organised attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes
in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual’s adequately informed,
rational, reflective judgement.

It is the last half of Marlin’s definition that is critical. That is “to circumvent or
suppress” informed judgement. Here, Marlin alludes to propaganda not telling the
relevant truth and using misleading and deceptive selective information (true or not) to
channel an audience to a pre-conceived conclusion. The emphasis is on the audience
not being equipped to autonomously judge issues.

Defining ethical persuasion
Marlin’s approach is helpful in proposing an obverse and indicative definition of what
we might call ethical persuasion. Derived from Marlin, this paper proposes the
following working definition of ethical persuasion:
An attempt through communication to influence knowledge, attitude or behaviour of an audience through presentation of a view that addresses and allows the audience to make voluntary, informed, rational and reflective judgements.

This core requirement, that audiences have adequate information to make voluntary, informed, rational and reflective decisions, is held in this paper to be essential to the ethics of persuasion.

The focus on the needs of autonomous, reasoning audience is consistent with the moral philosophy expounded by the Eighteenth Century German Philosopher Immanuel Kant. In his search for moral laws binding all people, Kant held that humans had a unique intrinsic worth that derived from their rationality. Guided by reason, only humans could set goals and make their own choices. Without rational beings to reason what ought to be, and to do it, Kant maintained that moral goodness itself could not exist (Rachels, 1999, p. 129).

Accordingly, Kant framed his “categorical imperative” or ultimate law of morality that governed the duties and obligations of being human. He said to “act only according to that maxim by which you can at all times will that it should become a universal law” or equally to “Act so that you treat humanity . . . always as an end and never as a means only” (Grace and Cohen, 1996, p. 25; Rachels, 1999, p. 128). The idea that what is good for one ought to be good for all, and that humans ought never be used as means, or tools, to other ends, led Kant to conclude humans had intrinsic rights to fulsome information. For example, it would be categorically wrong to lie. Lying could not be willed to become a universal law: if lying were condoned for one and all, societal trust would be undermined. Also, treating people as means to achieving some other end by lying would preclude people from exercising their intrinsic reasoning to make choices (Rachels, 1999, p. 130).

The definition of ethical persuasion adopted here has, then, as an underpinning value the need to defer to autonomous reasoning. We shall call this the value of respect for reason.

The word “voluntary” in the definition is central to the ethical need to allow autonomous reasoning. Kelman (1981, pp. 57-8) helps us to understand why. He distilled and examined three processes of social influence: compliance, identification and internalisation. Only the last could be said to be voluntary. The first process of influence, compliance (similar to coercion) can elicit an outward response to reward or punishment but not change private, inward beliefs. Similarly, identification, say with those who have power, may affect one’s attitudes. But this remains dependent on the relationship and can dissolve with it, such as in the case of identification with personalities who lead cults. Only internalisation involves voluntary, inward change. Although there may be external prompts, Kelman said internalised change was intrinsically rewarding because the individual freely decided it. Ethical persuasion, envisaged in this paper, facilitates this kind of change.

The definitional focus on audiences’ needs also avoids the elements of propaganda that Parsons’ in her discussion of the ethics of public relations, says should be avoided. She advocates avoidance of information that is false, fabricated, distorted, irrelevant, spurious, illogical, conceals one’s purpose, crafted to divert public attention, linked to unrelated emotion-laden devices, or oversimplifies complex messages (Parsons, 2004, pp. 107-8). All these would tend to undermine one’s ability to make voluntary, informed, rational and reflective judgements.
The initial part of this research asks how to integrate the concept of ethical persuasion into public relations. It has been shown that, to do this, it is necessary to understand the integral role of persuasion in public relations. Using deductive methodology, we have derived a definition of ethical persuasion focussed on the value of respect for reason, particularly the needs of audiences to make voluntary, informed, rational and reflective judgement. It will be seen that ethical persuasion must respect this information need in order to respect individuals as ends in themselves who use reason to make autonomous decisions.

### PR and the public interest

Having defined ethical persuasion, this paper now considers what general ethical standard is desirable and ought to be met by public relations practitioners acting in accordance with the definition. The ethical standard ubiquitously cited in the literature is the standard of “the public interest”. Indeed, the literature puts a great onus on practitioners to demonstrate their ethics by acting in “the public interest”. But it will become clear that, although the public interest is liberally invoked in the context of ethical practice, public relations writers have by and large failed to discuss how it is determined. This is a major failing. Indeed, this paper will argue that “the public interest” of any practitioners’ acts is something individual practitioners cannot themselves determine, let alone make a measure of ethical practice.

Before demonstrating this conclusion, the paper will consider how “the public interest” has been invoked and connected to ethics in the modern history of public relations. In 1927, Arthur Page – the first corporate Vice President of public relations for the US communications giant AT&T – said that success for a large enterprise depended on “conducting itself in the public interest” (Newsom et al., 2004, p. 148). In the 1930s, Harwood L. Childs – the Princeton University Politics Professor and Commentator on public opinion – said the basic function of public relations was: “to reconcile or adjust in the public interest those aspects of our personal and corporate behaviour, which have a social significance” (Cutlip et al., 1994, p. 2). Harold Burson, cofounder of the global public relations giant Burson-Marsteller, said one objective for corporate public relations was “to make sure that business institutions perform as servants of the people” (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 43). The so-called father of modern public relations, Edward Bernays, who upheld the importance the public interest and public good, once even described a campaign to boost sales of women’s hairnets as a coincidence of “the public and private interests” (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 40; Wynn, 1984). Another writer, Kendall, declared practice would be ethical if it were oriented to the public interest (Kendall, 1996, pp. 23-4), which was the “cardinal rule on which the definition of public relations is built”.

These influential formative comments have ensured that “acting in the public interest” has become almost axiomatic in the industry. Indeed, the Public Relations Society of America’s code requires members to act “in accord with the public interest” (Bivins, 1993). The US industry annal, *Public Relations News*, included in its definition of public relations that it: “identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization with the public interest . . .” (Cutlip et al., 1994, p. 5; Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 8). In Australia, the Public Relations Institute of Australia recently adopted this same phrase in its new definition of public relations for the twenty-first century (Tymson et al., 2002, p. 20).
In Britain, the Institute of Public Relations’ code stated in 1963 that members shall conduct “professional activities with respect for the public interest” (L’Etang, 2004, p. 171). One former President, Tim Traverse-Healy, later suggested that “Fate has elected that in this modern society we public relations people must carry much of that responsibility” for protecting the public interest (L’Etang, 2004, p. 172). In 1976, when Rex Harlow sifted 472 definitions of public relations to distil his own definition of public relations, he said in part that it “defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest . . .” (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 7). In 1978, 34 national public relations organisations adopted the World Assembly of Public Relations Associations’ definition, which included the statement that public relations “will serve both the organisation and the public interest” (Tymson et al., 2002, p. 20).

So, in examining the role of “the public interest” in public relations practice, it is clear that an influential array of writers and institutions assert that it is central to practice. But while the colours of ethical practice have been nailed to the mast of “the public interest” very little guidance is offered to show how practitioners might determine “the public interest” (Bivins, 1993, pp. 118-19 particularly on the PRSA code). This leaves open the critical question of how practitioners can discover the public interest in order to know they have acted in its name.

Is there a public interest?
It has been argued that public relations writers have held the role of the public interest to be central to ethical practice and, by inference, to ethical persuasion. If serving the public interest is to be a defining standard of ethical practice then practitioners must know how to determine it, or they simply could not know how to act ethically. Yet, it will be shown that it is not possible for a practitioner to determine the public interest.

To this end, this paper must first review major critiques of the public interest.

Seib and Fitzpatrick (1995, pp. 18-20) favour the view of Bivins (1993) that practitioners can determine the public interest. Bivins requires that practitioners act in the best interest of individual clients, ensure public relations service is accessible to all individuals who need it, serve public interest causes, and improve the quality of debate. While this approach emphasises the interests of individuals or individual organizations, neither Seib and Fitzpatrick nor Bivins take the opportunity to show how these laudable elements, in part or together, could categorically constitute “the public interest”.

Flathman (1966) and others who have scrutinised the idea of the public interest (Benditt, 1973; Cassinelli, 1958; Cochran, 1974; Sorauf, 1957) agree that, whatever it may be, it must be more than individual interests. Flathman (1966, p. 32) argues:

It is true that self-interest has a legitimate place in the public interest, but deciding whose self-interest and to what extent requires the utilization of values and principles which transcend such interests.

Accordingly, Bivins’ emphasis on serving individuals (clients or people) is likely only to achieve service of private interests, not any public interest. In so far as “public interest causes” are concerned, without a viable definition for the public interest, serving the right cause would seem impossible for Bivins: is it the nuclear energy cause or the fossil fuel cause; anti-immigration or immigration; pro-life or pro-choice; peace or war?
The paper now turns to examining the difficulties encountered in defining the public interest. In the 1950s, Sorauf (1957, p. 618) revisited the idea of the public interest and found an imprecise concept that could not be shown to be superior to other interests. Embedded in the idea of “The Public Interest” Sorauf distilled four theories: the public interest as a commonly held value, as wise or superior interest, as moral imperative and as a balance of interests. He found all approaches fatally flawed. First, no commonly held value could be held to be truly universal. If not, then how “common” must be an interest before it is the public interest? Even if that could be agreed “by counting noses” Sorauf asked why would “counting noses” be a way of determining a public interest. Would an interest held very strongly by a few be less a “public interest” than one held very weakly by many? This “intensity” issue only clouded the value of common-ness as a measure of public interest (Sorauf, 1957, pp. 625-6). The principal flaw in considering the public interest as wise or superior interest was that “One man’s wisdom is another man’s folly” (Sorauf, 1957, pp. 626-8), Sorauf (1957, pp. 628-30) observed ironically that this wise or superior public interest was not public. Rather, it was anti-public and anti-democratic, since absolutist wisdom could also be dominance (or dictatorship?) Similarly, any moral imperative rested on absolutist presumptions of moral standards. Again, this “public interest” may be neither public nor an interest. “By reason of its sanction in higher morality, it would still be in the public interest if nobody embraced it as an interest”. The public interest as balance of interests rendered the public interest unknowable until the battle of interests was won – this made the public interest simply a label after the fact.

Cassinelli (1958, p. 48) also tried, but failed, to pinpoint “the public interest” which he thought should represent the “ultimate ethical goal of political relationships”. But his inquiry uncovered no direct method to determine it, like polling (Cassinelli, 1958, p. 50). Glasser and Salmon’s review of public opinion supports this, saying polling did not call for reasons, challenge selfishness, test content, or consider how altruism or what ought to be might influence opinion (Glasser and Salmon, 1995). Cassinelli also found not indirect method to discover “the public interest”.

For example, nationalism may imply an interest in national welfare, or deference to one’s government. But under examination, these ideas were “strikingly vague if not indeed meaningless” for indicating the public interest (Cassinelli, 1958, p. 53). Sorauf concurred. Citing Walter Lippmann, Sorauf (1957, p. 631) said general symbols like “justice, morality and welfare of society” achieved “harmony through meaninglessness”. Beneath the surface of symbols, antagonisms reigned. The point is easily illustrated: while all may see the “rightness” of peace and prosperity, not all will see the “rightness” of declaring war to secure it. The unifying symbols of “rightness” (peace, prosperity) do not unite us in attitude or action.

From these positions, Cassinelli and Sorauf concluded the public interest, as an interest possessed or held in common by the public, was inadequate, perhaps even undiscoverable.

**How is the public interest decided**

However, Flathman (1966) was not so pessimistic. From a utilitarian political philosophy perspective, he offered a way to rescue the endangered public interest without relying on superior wisdom, moral imperative, polling or simply “counting noses”. He agreed that individual interests remained central. As Bentham said “no man
can be so good a judge as the man himself, what it is gives him pleasure or displeasure” (Bentham, 1948, p. 282). However, the public interest also required an “other regarding” view of the consequences of one’s proposed actions. So Flathman argued for a set of criteria and principles to guide a determination of the public interest. He said the public interest must have “universalisability”. That is, if an interest is considered desirable and right (or wrong) for one person, it must be desirable and right (or wrong) when applied to others in similar circumstances (Flathman, 1966, p. 40). This principle was similar to Kant’s categorical imperative (to be discussed in detail later). But unlike Kant, Flathman (1966, p. 42) did not require a universal principle – such as “never lie” – to be applied without exception. Instead he argued that the principle of universalisability must be tempered by the principle of other regarding consequences.

With consequences evaluated, a claim to the public interest had also to be justified and validated. The criterion by which this was achieved was to rest conclusions on other-regarding reasons. Finally, these reasons must be supported by evidence, which validated the reasons and justified the utility of consequences (Flathman, 1966, p. 43).

Flathman’s thinking is capable of resolving issues raised by Sorauf and Cassinelli. His approach suggests that the public interest is not a matter of “counting noses” or of whether an interest intensely held, or whether it is perceived as superior wisdom or moral imperative. In all cases, the public interest depends on the universalisability of the interest (is it desirable if applied to all similar people), the evaluation of the other-regarding consequences (how would it affect others) and the validity of reasons and evidence that justify the utility of the assessment of consequences. Hence, Flathman (1966, p. 73) said: “To say a policy is in the public interest is to say that it meets standards and satisfies principles”.

But even if it were possible to determine a public interest by applying Flathman’s principles and criteria, there are still intractable problems for a public relations practitioner. The issue is whether it is possible for practitioners to be the judges of the public interest of their actions. Flathman (1966, p. 73) acknowledges that, even after applying his principles and criteria: “There is no reason to think that there is one and only one policy which will meet those standards in each of the myriad policy-making situations”. But how can conflict be reconciled? At the outset, Flathman (1966, p. 5) alludes to an arbiter: “In political life, one agent, government, acts in the name and on behalf of all the members of the system, and its actions apply to all”. This reveals a critical point: it appears the public interest depends on a reciprocal interplay between individuals and their representative body. Flathman never explicitly closes the circle between government arbitration and the review of government decisions at the ballot box. But in the play between individuals, competing interests and government, the government is still only the penultimate arbiter of public interest. In a pluralist democracy, the final voice rests with the voter. Perhaps not case by case. But in a holistic way the ballot box delivers a judgement on whether the government has acted in the interests of voters’ conceptions of the public interest. This is the democratic political process at work, imprecise as it may be, and without any government perfectly knowing all individuals’ interests. Hence, the need for checks and balances “and the insistence that the citizenry decide who should occupy the positions of authority” (Flathman, 1966, p. 50). The alternative would be benevolent dictatorship, or worse. Ultimately Flathman (1966, p. 66) concludes:
We argue that a politics of public interest is impossible without the positive exercise of governmental authority and without disinterested service of the public interest by those in authority and by members of the citizenry.

For the public relations practitioner this conclusion poses an insurmountable difficulty. Even if Flathman’s challenge to the pessimism of Sorauf, Cassinelli and Benditt is right and the public interest can be discovered, what is clear is that the determination of the public interest evolves from the interplay between the citizen and a representative central authority. The ultimate mechanism for determining the public interest is the democratic political process. No third party, no public relations practitioner overrides this. So, logically, if showing that one has acted in the public interest were an mandatory part of ethical practice, then no public relations practitioner could act ethically because no practitioner could preemptively decipher the public interest. Where, for example, does the public interest lie on the question of legal abortion? Which practitioner is acting in the public interest: the one who advocates for the pro-life organisation, or the one who advocates for the pro-choice organisation? Or both? Or neither? The ethics – in terms of the public interest – of a particular act, a particular piece of advocacy, a position taken, can only be determined later by the political process. And the process itself is constantly under review by the electorate. So, stipulating that practitioners, acting ethically, must show that they act “in the public interest” simply misconstrues how the public interest is decided.

It may be argued that the practitioner can identify the public interest in retrospect by observing the political process. Perhaps, but this fails to reconcile the core conundrum. That is, how can a practitioner act now in the public interest? If the public interest is only determined ex post facto, it follows that this concept cannot guide the practitioner’s actions today.

This paper is now in a position to deduce the answer to the second part of the research inquiry regarding the role of the public interest in ethical persuasion. Despite ubiquitous assertions to the opposite, in the end, the concept of a mandatory need for ethical practitioners to show they have acted in the public interest is unachievable and must be abandoned. Hence, there is no definable role for “the public interest” as a standard to measure ethical persuasion.

A utilitarian approach
The last part of this inquiry asks what might constitute the standards of ethical persuasion. If not “the public interest” because it is intractably difficult for practitioners to determine it, then what might be alternative standards? As already argued, any standards of ethical persuasion must deliver to audiences the ability to make voluntary, informed, rational and reflective judgements. The standards we will consider include truthfulness, authenticity (sincerity), respect, equity and social responsibility, known as the TARES test (Baker and Martinson, 2001). Further, it will be seen that a particular utilitarian approach to ethics – the rule utilitarian approach – provides the tool to assess the ethical quality of these standards.

In following a utilitarian course, this paper does not take an absolutist approach to ethics. No immutable ethical statement will hold, for example, that it is always unethical to lie. In this sense, the strict Kantian principle of the “categorical imperative” is eschewed.
Kant’s approach tends towards defending absolutist minority positions. For example, his philosophy holds that it would wrong to lie in any case, despite the consequences. However, imagine the hypothetical case of the ethical German citizen who, in the midst of WWII, is asked by a Nazi SS officer about the location of a hidden Jewish family. So long as the citizen appears plausibly helpful, there is no real threat from the officer. The citizen knows the location of the fugitive family, and knows their fate if SS Officer finds them. Being ethical and believing that to lie is categorically unethical, the ethical act should be to respect the family rationality and reveal the family’s location, knowing that the family, as rational beings, ought to accept the reason: that lying is wrong. Yet not many who uphold the rightness of being always truthful would do so in such horrible circumstances.

So the ideal of Kant’s absolutist approach poses horrible dilemmas. Ethical action can become so excruciating that most would willfully embrace an unethical act. This paper seeks to avoid the Kantian conundrums. Public relations practitioners – like lawyers, like professionals, like business people, like most people in daily life – are actors not debaters. They need a guide to ethical action consistent with the community of daily life, rather than an idealistic community of absolutes. Hence, this paper seeks an approach to ethics that does not entail near impossible acts but nevertheless is governed by standards that can be broadly agreed to be justifiable as ethical.

So what ethical approach might guide the ethics of persuasive communication? “Consequentialism” which places the evaluation of the consequences of action at the centre of judgments about ethics, offers a solution. This approach leads to utilitarianism, which itself has weaknesses. However, it shall be seen that a hybrid of utilitarianism, rule utilitarianism, overcomes weaknesses and can serve as a practitioners’ guide to ethical action.

The seminal exponent of utilitarianism, philosopher Jeremy Bentham, proposed in his *Principles of Morals and Philosophy* that action should be judged “according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish happiness of the party whose interest is in question” (Rachels, 1999, p. 97). Together with his contemporary, philosopher John Stuart Mill, they expounded the view that the ethical act was that which produced the greatest net good for all concerned citizens (Grace and Cohen, 1996, pp. 22, 200). So, utilitarianism proposes a kind of sum “happiness quotient” for society – the greatest good for the greatest number.

A key problem, however, is the difficulty of calculating ethical action. For example, how would one calculate the ethics of the US bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima – a calculus of all the pains of continued war versus an end to the war at the cost of hundreds of thousands of dead Japanese people?

Compounding this algebraic problem, the strict Benthamite calculus of optimal pleasure tends to weaken some strongly held principles such as “tell the truth” “don’t steal” and “don’t kill”. The inference is that, if enough good results, then it may be ethical to contravene these principles. For example, euthanasia is strongly supported by the Benthamite position (Rachels, 1999, pp. 99-102). Voluntary euthanasia increases one person’s happiness by ending suffering without hurting others; so, euthanasia is right. And yet many in our society hold trenchant reservations about this calculation.

These scenarios cast doubt on whether the “happiness quotient” can be measured and on the adequacy of the Benthamite principles that hold that “happiness” and “consequences” are all that matter in assessing ethics (Rachels, 1999, p. 107).
Rachels indicates a path between the problems of Kantian absolutism and the 
happiness quotient proposed by Bentham and Mill. In explaining a hybrid position, he 
says Kant did not allow for exceptions to lying because the categorical rule he would 
have to condone would be: “It is permissible to lie”. As has been seen, it could not 
be applied as a universal law because trust, truth and honesty would be eroded. If these 
good reasons dictate it is wrong to lie, then rational consistency requires that it be 
avways wrong to lie. 

But Rachels suggested that consistency and the categorical imperative could be 
served if exceptions to rules were allowed. For example, the rule followed in the case of 
the Nazi seeking the Jewish family could be modified from “It is permissible to lie” to 
“It is permissible to lie to save innocent lives”. We could will this rule to apply 
universally. 

Rachels says Kant’s contribution was to adhere to the need for universal 
consistency with extra step of allowing no exception. “ . . . but the extra step was not 
necessary. Rules, even within a Kantian framework, need not be regarded as absolute. 
All that Kant’s basic idea requires is that if we violate a rule, we do so for a reason that 
we would be willing for anyone to accept, were they in our position” (Rachels, 1999, 
p. 131).

This idea of setting ethical rules but considering justifiable exceptions that could 
comfortably apply universally has been called rule utilitarianism (Rachels, 1999, 
pp. 115-21). In this, one must first and in most cases apply the categorical imperative 
about the act. If it does not seem fit, the questions can be posed about valid exceptions. 
The “fitness” is essentially tested by utilitarian ideas of harm caused or averted by 
one’s actions. When rule utilitarianism is applied to the example of the Nazi in pursuit 
of the Jewish family, the question progresses from the wrongness of the act of lying to 
what general rule could be willed to apply universally that would promote the greatest 
happiness for society? 

As with utilitarianism, calculating consequences remains an issue. Framing an 
exception to a strict rule depends on being able to calculate consequences with 
accuracy. In the absence of this possibility, one would be left with the guidance of the 
categorical imperative: “don’t lie”. But it is unlikely that the strict rule “never 
lie” would stand regardless of ascertainable consequences, such as a threat to 
innocent lives. Consider the consequences for the workers on Schindler’s List if 
Oskar Schindler had been a Kantian. We can ask if the happier society is one in 
which no ethical person ever lies, or one that allows exceptions. Indeed, by 
accommodating exceptions to rules that we would willingly universalise, rule 
utilitarianism can accommodate exceptions at the extremes of categorical principles 
such as “tell the truth” “don’t steal” and “don’t kill”. 

It has been shown that absolutism can produce ethics that few, if any, would pursue 
to the bitter end. In place of an impractical standard that will at times not be adhered to, 
utilitarianism has been considered. This approach of maximising the benefits also 
meets with problems. However, rule utilitarianism, which still requires adherence to 
rules such as “don’t lie” allows ascertainably justifiable exceptions at extremes where 
harm overrides strict application of the rule. Rachels says acts can be judged against 
the rules, rather than evaluated individually. The ethical test of the utilitarian rule is 
whether it may be desirabley generalised. In a sense, this is an application of Kantian 
universality. But it is Kant plus consequentialism aimed at achieving the greatest good.
The paper will adopt rule utilitarianism as the essential guiding ethical principle to assess the standards of ethical persuasion.

It will be seen that this approach can guide individual practitioners' assessments of ethical persuasion according to the TARES standards. But for reasons already examined, rule utilitarianism cannot confer ability on individuals to judge the public interest. As Sorauf, Cassinelli and Flathman found, the public interest is an extremely difficult, elusive concept to define. One cannot apply a rule utilitarian rule stipulating “always act in the public interest”. Even a rule with exceptions would leave unresolved the questions: what is in the public interest; who decides; and, how can I determine the public interest? This is because the public interest is a peculiar blend of individual selfish interests, judgements about universalisability tempered by each individual’s assessments of the impacts on others of particular acts or policies. As has been seen, this can only be reconciled through an on-going interaction of individuals, a representative body and then each individual’s assessment of the policy settings of the representative body. No one individual can apply a rule, even a utilitarian rule that somehow distils the evaluations of all individuals, and the interaction with government, to finally determine the public interest. Not even a representative body can do this in isolation.

But most standards of the TARES test – truthfulness, authenticity, respect and equity – are definable and assessable. For example, the desirability of factual accuracy, or of not misleading by omission, is more assessable than judging whether lying or misleading in a given case is in the public interest. One’s own authenticity (sincerity, expertise, and knowledge) is more assessable than evaluating whether an insincere though truthful statement is in the public interest. Practising respect for what others need to know to make a voluntary, informed, rational and reflective judgement is more assessable than deciding whether an act or policy that is being advocated is in the public interest. Achieving equity of access to information, or opportunity to respond, is more easily measured than judging whether it is always in the public interest for competing parties to treat each other equitably. However, the TARES test will be trimmed here by one element to become the TARE test. This is because Baker and Martinson define the final element, social responsibility, in terms of the public interest. As such, it is subject to the analysis and limitations already discussed.

The next section shall examine the TARE standards of ethical persuasion and how rule utilitarianism can be used to assess ethical persuasion.

What is ethical persuasion

It remains for this inquiry to propose some essential standards of ethical persuasion. It will be deduced that when persuasive practice meets these standards it is ethical and, so, acceptable public relations practice. This will be achieved by relying on the guiding framework of truthfulness, authenticity, respect and equity as modified from Baker and Martinson (2001). The modified test is consistent with Seib and Fitzpatrick’s discussion of essential values underpinning ethics. Some have identified as many as ten values (Edgett, 2002; Josephson, 1994), but Professor Melvin Sharpe undertook an intense literature search to distill two essential ethical values: honesty and fairness (Seib and Fitzpatrick, 1995, p. 22; Sharpe, 1993). Further, Parsons (2004) identifies what she calls the PR Pillars: truthfulness, do no harm, do good, fairness and respect confidences/privacy. It will be seen the TARE test encompasses the concepts of Sharp...
and Parsons, in particular through the elevation of the notion of respect to a value that underpins ethical persuasion.

Baker arrived at the essence of ethical persuasion by arguing that ethical communicators must pursue a “Final (or relative Last) End” or final purpose beyond just conveying data. Drawing on Kant, Baker proposed that the last end of ethical persuasion should be respect for people as autonomous, rational, worthy and capable of informed choice. Respect is an end in itself. It defers to the human capacity to reason, which drove Kant to declare: “Act so that you treat humanity always as an end and never as a means” (Rachels, 1999). While respect for reason is the underpinning value of this paper, but under the rule utilitarian approach the notion of respect will be modified to account for ascertainable justifiable utilitarian exceptions. Accordingly, the examination of the TARE standards of ethical persuasion will begin with respect, a standard that will overarch the others.

Respect
As we have seen, notion of respect derives from Kant. It has already been shown that respect for reason must inherently include respecting an audience’s right to make voluntary, informed, rational, reflective choices. We have seen, however, that the categorical approach can lead to intractable dilemmas. From a rule utilitarian perspective, an imperative must account for a balance of the harm and good caused by the consequences of an act. This will be expressed here as a rule that can accommodates ascertainable justifiable cases.

A salient advantage of a rule utilitarian approach is that it offers a framework for dealing with the real-world good and bad consequences of single decisions. In public relations and in persuasive practice in particular, it is not often that decisions have only good or only bad consequences, so these must be balanced. Truth may be indispensable, but it may produce some harmful consequences. While Parsons’ (2004) pillars of ethical public relations include “do no harm” and “do good” and also the need to respect confidences and privacy, and the primacy of truthfulness, she offers no framework similar to rule utilitarianism for reconciling good and bad results of single decisions. Parsons (2004, p. 143) and Seib and Fitzpatrick (1995, p. 35) do invoke the Potter Box to assist in assessing the ethics of decisions. Ethical decision making by the Potter Box requires one to define problems, identify relevant values, select relevant principles and choose one’s loyalties. But while the Potter Box isolates where values or principles may conflict, it does not offer guidance on how to balance and reconcile conflicting consequences. The rule utilitarian approach allows practitioners this ability.

Take for example, the case of journalists who often rely on confidential sources to disclose momentous matters. Consider the “Deep Throat” source and consequent Watergate investigations (Bernstein and Woodward, 1976). Until 2005, the source was secret. But respecting the audience of the Washington Post as an end in themselves would have required respect of the right to make an autonomous reasoned judgement. This implies a requirement to supply full knowledge. But the audience’s “right” to full knowledge was compromised. Indeed, the source’s identity may have influenced voluntary, (more fully) informed, rational and reflective judgements about the Nixon administration, and even the possible motivations behind the source. And yet, without protecting the source, the Watergate revelations may never have emerged and rational people would never have known to judge. In a rule utilitarian sense it is arguable that,
on balance, the accrued good from withholding data allowed a greater body of information to emerge that outweighed the harm of undermining respect for the audience in that case.

With this type of scenario in mind, we can modify Kant’s imperative to develop a rule utilitarian rule of respect. As Rachels argued, the ethical justification of a rule is that we could will the rule (and exceptions) to be applied and accepted universally. This rule we will adopt is:

Act so that you treat humanity always as an end and never as a means, unless justifiably outweighed by ascertainable good that would accrue or harm averted.

Given this Rule, which allows exceptions, we must now turn to the matter of what tests can be arrayed to assess justifiable exceptions to the rule utilitarian rule of respect?

Reversibility is one powerful concept highlighted by Edgett (2002). Simply put, Edgett asked that the persuader put him or herself in the shoes of the audience. In a sense, this is a reflexive approach to assessing the Sharpe’s two concepts of ethical action: honesty and fairness. In turning the tables on oneself, one should ask would I in this situation feel fairly and honestly treated, and would I feel respected? Would I feel I had the relevant information to make a voluntary, informed, rational, reflective judgment? Another test is to assess possible justifications of the outcome of applying a utilitarian rule by referring to Flathman’s Principles and Criteria. Could the rule of respect meet Flathman’s principles of universalisability and consequences? Flathman would say this depends on an evaluation of the utility of other-regarding consequences, supported by the criteria of reasons and evidence. One might ask: would I, on balance, accept the validity of the reasons and evidence for some information being withheld? Even further rigor may be applied to assessing a rule by using a test proposed by Sisela Bok. In analysing the ethics of lying, she argued that lying was a last resort that could not be justified only by the liar’s “accommodating and malleable” conscience. It must survive the withering Test of Publicity (Bok, 1989, pp. 94-103). Parsons’ (2004, p. 150) calls this the “never-fail litmus test” – in short, what would others think; would I be comfortable if my decision were spread across the front page of newspapers?

So the application of an underpinning value for ethical persuasion, the rule of respect, can be tested. As other TARE standards of ethical persuasion are now examined, it shall be seen that the value of respect for reason and the rule of respect permeates these, and the three tests above can be effectively deployed in testing actions.

Truthfulness

A pivotal element of ethical persuasion is truthfulness. It is one of Parsons’ PR Pillars. Baker and Martinson, and Edgett see it as more than a coincidence of statement with fact. They say truthfulness requires intention and action that does not mislead, misinform or deceive. It includes what is said, or omitted. Consistent with this paper’s definition of ethical persuasion, truthfulness must allow for voluntary, informed, rational and reflective decision making. Simultaneously, truthfulness is incorporated in rule of respect in that it is respectful of an audience’s faculty of reason.

But in examining truth, there are also boundaries. Parsons’ PR Pillars, concede this, calling for respect of confidentiality and privacy. Martinson says truth “has respect for secrecy, confidence and concealment” (Martinson, 2000). Edgett helps clarify the
boundary of Truthfulness by drawing on Martinson’s concept of “substantial completeness” (Martinson, 1996). Organisations routinely carry voluminous data. Selective release is inevitable, but how ethical is a press release that can contain only limited information? Martinson’s substantial completeness requires the release of “what needs to be communicated to achieve substantial understanding”. “Substantial understanding” or “substantial completeness” in the context of ethical persuasion, must by definition allow for voluntary, informed, rational and reflective decision-making. Consequently, it would satisfy the value of respect for reason and the rule of respect. The approach taken here to Truthfulness overcomes the concerns of Deaver (1990, p. 172), who sees persuasion and propaganda as nearly the same. Deaver critiqued the use of true but selective information because it is “certainly not the whole story”. But if such an approach fell short of “substantial completeness” it would violate the definition of ethical persuasion used in this paper. Consequently, it would not be ethical. This failure would be born out by applying the tests reversibility, principles and criteria, and the test of publicity.

However, under the rule utilitarian approach, these tests must contemplate boundaries and allow for exceptions to truthfulness. For example, Edgett highlights confidentiality, or keeping confidences, as an important area of ethics that is linked to truthfulness. As demonstrated in the example of the source of Watergate disclosures, keeping confidences can be problematic and can include omitting pertinent information.

Confidentiality
Bok (1989, Chapter 11) examines confidentiality, harm and privacy in the medical and legal context. Bok held serious concerns about medical colleagues keeping a doctor’s malpractice confidential, or a lawyer keeping a client’s perjury confidential. The concern related to the potential harm caused. In the medical case, “There can be no excuse for lying to protect anyone who places patients at such risk” (Bok, 1989, p. 155). But cases of mediocrity are not so clear. Bok said that aware colleagues, or an aware medical system, must remove a mediocre doctor to endeavours out of harms way. Yet this ought to be done without “needlessly destroying careers” (Bok, 1989, p. 157). Unspoken behind Bok’s position is the same concern for harm that dams a malpractising doctor. If no harm has been realised, and any potential harm can be averted, then so it ought to be. Conceivably, this can justifiably include not telling unharmed patients.

How can this be reconciled with the rule of respect? Indeed, the rule utilitarian rule would not be violated because the safety of patients is preserved. Breaking confidentiality would make no patient safer and would destroy a career without any good gained or harm averted. The tests of reversibility, principles and criteria and the test of publicity we could uphold this action on utilitarian grounds. But, equally, if patients remained at residual risk of harm, any implied confidence should not prevent averting the risk even if that required breaking confidentiality. Patients ought to be informed to allow them to judge whether potential harm has been mitigated.

In a communications context, upholding legitimate confidences may be justifiable in circumstances of, for example, commercially sensitive information or draft deliberations that are not official organisational positions. In some sense, this compromises the rule of respect. Arguably, if information is withheld on the grounds of
privacy or confidentiality then a reasoning person is receiving less than all relevant information. But, equally, compromising commercial sensitivity or privacy at all cost and breaking confidence would impact broadly on the willingness to give full and frank advice and to engage in legitimate, legal commercial ventures. However, should information be withheld because a commercial venture was less than legal, or because draft deliberations were exploring ways to deceive, then the rule utilitarian rule of respect would be violated for want of justifiable other-regarding good consequences. Clearly, some confidentiality is legitimate but each case is idiosyncratic. To withstand ethical scrutiny, the harm from keeping a confidence must be less than the harm from not keeping it (Grace and Cohen, 1996, p. 58).

Lying
Bok laid down a principle of veracity that demands a presumption against lying. She said lying eroded and compromised trust by distorting, deceiving, misleading and ultimately altering choice. So, prima facie lying violates this paper's definition of ethical persuasion, which requires informed choice. Indeed, while Bok countenanced the withholding of information on grounds of privacy and confidentiality, she said, “the right to withhold information is not the right to lie about it” (Bok, 1989, p. 176). For example, she demonstrated serious flaws in lawyer-client confidentiality when a lawyer could legally build a court case upon a client’s known perjured testimony. Would a lawyer who was a victim of crime happily accept that another lawyer might use a client’s known lie to the detriment of the lawyer-victim (reversibility); would it be sufficient to know that universal administration of the legal system required this (universality, reasons and evidence); would the lawyer want the jury to know he would knowingly propagate a client’s lie (publicity, what would others think)? Unlikely, said Bok (1989, p. 155). Indeed, this legal practice may not meet the rule of respect and it may not survive the tests of reversibility or publicity. Whether it survives a test principles and criteria is also moot. What is the implication for communications? If such a practice were debatable in a legal context of codes, judges and rules of evidence, it seems indefensibly unethical except in the most extreme circumstances to lie to protect a client in a loosely governed public relations context.

Bok still leaves the door a crack open. She says that in the “absence of special considerations . . . in any situation where a lie is a possible choice, one must first seek truthful alternatives . . . (and) only where a lie is a last resort can one even begin to consider whether or not it is morally justified” (Bok, 1989, p. 31). It is conceivable that, consistent with the rule of respect, Bok would agree that – as a last resort – the German citizen should lie to persuade the Nazi SS officer that he does not know the location of a fleeing Jewish family. And yet it must be recognised that in the vast majority of cases the rule is “don’t lie” and this would certainly apply in public relations.

Authenticity
Another key element for Baker and Martinson is that the source of information should have integrity sincerity and a sense of principled independence as important. Seib and Fitzpatrick say integrity contains Sharpe’s concepts of honesty and fairness. Together, Baker and Martinson call these elements authenticity. Similarly, Edgett uses the notion of visibility. This means that the message source ought to have a disposition to do
what is right, be trustworthy, have expertise in the topic, or not illegitimately claim expertise. In short, to have integrity.

There is little requirement to elaborate further since the rules that would constrain unethical practices – or provide for exceptions – are contained in the rule of respect and attendant tests. By inference, no propagandistic source can be authentic and no ethical source can be other than authentic.

Equity
Baker and Martinson stress that the content and execution of persuasive appeals must be fair, but also appropriate to the audience. This equity element adds an extra dimension to fairness. It takes explicitly into account the resources available to the audience, the audience’s ability, and the audience’s opportunity to speak and be heard. In this sense, equity in persuasive communication is part of providing information that allows a voluntary, informed, rational and reflective judgement. For example, information of a technical complexity, given to an audience that lacks the wherewithal to interpret it, or have it interpreted, is tantamount to no information at all. Delivering a 4000-page Tax Act and regulations to a wage-earning migrant worker is not an ethical means of persuading him or her to meet tax obligations. It would not withstand the tests of reversibility, principles and criteria, and publicity.

Edgett referred to another consideration related to equity: priority. Edgett acknowledged that public relations practitioners also owed some priority to a client. She conceded that a practitioner’s personal and professional goals might conflict. Parsons was firm that practitioners should not represent views they do not personally believe in. She argued that lawyers who supported questionable clients were not necessarily supporting the clients but showing faith in the workings of an elaborate legal system. Public relations did not have such a system (Parsons, 2004, pp. 106-10). Seib and Fitzpatrick (1995, p. 16) were less certain. They said practitioners had a duty to consider their own values. But they stopped short of declaring it unethical for a young public relations practitioner, arriving in a new city where there was no other work, to accept work from a tobacco company when she did not personally agree with the promotion of tobacco (Seib and Fitzpatrick, 1995, p. 48). Despite Parsons’ view, Seib and Fitzpatrick said that supporting questionable organisations, based on the lawyer model, was a complex issue that seemed to “preclude resolution by either consensus or reliance on a code of ethics. Thus, the choice of client, cause, or issue falls to the individual practitioner” (Seib and Fitzpatrick, 1995, p. 47).

It is contended here that ethics of the issue ought to turn on what the practitioner does, not who the practitioner does it for. Further, personal ethics may constrain one long before professional ethics are violated. For example, on the question of whether practitioners should represent a tobacco company – or a company like Enron, for that matter – the ethical issue ought to revolve around whether one’s actions meet the rule of respect. It should be remembered at least that it is possible to do good work in bad place, and even work to change organisations from within (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002). Are you providing information that allows audiences to exercise autonomous reason and make informed, voluntary, rational and reflective judgements? Is there any exception that can be ethically justified and validated as per the three tests? If not, the answer to whether you are doing ethical work for that employer is clear.
Where a practitioner meets the rule of respect but cannot reconcile their actions with their personal, as opposed to professional, ethic, then the matter is purely one of personal not professional choice. Parsons asserts that anyone has the “right” to believe that if you work for an organisation you also support its views. But she makes no rational case for why this should follow. Certainly, the conflict does not necessarily undermine the standards required for ethical persuasion or advocacy, unless a practitioner says “I believe...” rather than “My organization’s view is...” Consider for example, senior public servants who may frequently find personal and professional goals in conflict, especially as policies change with governments. They are employed to implement and explain organisational goals, not personal goals, and have a professional obligation to serve the government of the day. Personally this may be hypocritical. Indeed, each person may choose to continue, or not. If they continue, then so long as they provide audiences adequate information and ask audiences to make judgements about the organization not the person, it is consistent with the rule of respect. This is consistent with Baker and Martinson’s requirement of authenticity. It is consistent with truthfulness, honesty and fairness, with respect for privacy and confidentiality. Bok supported individuals’ rights to privacy, confidentiality and concealing facts where it creates no palpable harm.

On the other hand, if a CEO were leading an organisation in a direction because it was his or her personal view, then the personal view would be directly relevant to the consequences of the organisation’s direction. In this case, the personal view would form part of the information needed for audiences to make informed, rational, reflective judgements. In short, the obligation to show priority to a client, a government or an employer means that one must professionally practice the requirements of ethical persuasion and meet the standards and tests already outlined.

**Social responsibility**

Baker and Martinson’s last category, social responsibility, is problematic, as is Seib and Fitzpatrick’s reliance on serving the public interest. Baker and Martinson defined social responsibility as concern for the wider public interest and common good. Edgett had a similar category called evaluation. This required the ethical practitioner to work for the “best interest of society” by judging the “worthiness” of a client before offering professional services. These concepts are not well defined by the authors, but they appear to share much in common with the notion of the public interest.

Baker and Martinson’s example was that an ethical practitioner could not promote a known harmful product. This is correct. But Baker and Martinson’s do not need the extra category of social responsibility to rule such practices as unethical. Without revealing all faults and dangers, it could not be argued that one had weighed harms and met standards of ethical persuasion. That is, respect and truthfulness and sufficient information to allow a voluntary, informed, rational, reflective judgment. If ethical persuasion is the goal, then it is necessary and sufficient to meet the rule of respect and the standards of truthfulness, authenticity, respect and equity assessed by tests already outlined.

However, there is another reason for excluding the notion of social responsibility as a mandatory measure of ethical persuasion. Since, social responsibility is defined as akin to the public interest, if suffers the same fate. As has been argued, no individual practitioner aiming to act ethically is able to discern the public interest of his or her
actions in any authoritative or definitive way. As has been argued, this requirement derives from a misunderstanding of how the public interest is defined.

Checkpoints for ethical persuasion
A framework for ethical persuasion has been built based on a guiding value of respect for reason, a definition, a rule utilitarian approach, standards to be met, and tests to be applied. Consequently, we can now lay out the decision-making checkpoints for assessing the ethics of persuasive practice.

Does the planned persuasive communication:

- Agree with the value of respect for reason – i.e. offer adequate information to allow audiences to make voluntary, informed, rational and reflective judgements?
- Meet the standards for truthfulness, respect, authenticity and equity?
- Withstand the tests of reversibility, principles and criteria and publicity?

If any standard is not met:

- Is there an ascertainable balance of good accrued or harm averted.
- Is it justifiable by reasoned argument?
- Is the reasoning validated by evidence?
- Do the justifying reasons and validating evidence withstand the tests of reversibility, principles and criteria and publicity?
- Can you will the exception to be applied universally, based on the justifying reasons and validating evidence?

A final word on duty
Duty of care is a phrase deployed often in the professions. In respect of public relations, Seib and Fitzpatrick have unpacked the concept of duties of care and specified five duties they believe must bind practitioners. It will be seen that four of the five Duties can be accommodated within the ethical framework of this paper.

First, is the duty to self, or to one’s values. Seib and Fitzpatrick raise the dilemma of whether personal values ought to ever be sacrificed for one’s profession. As has been discussed, Parsons is unequivocal that they must not. However, Seib and Fitzpatrick (1995, pp. 45-9) consider questions relating to representing “controversial” clients, and conflicts of interest, but they refrain from unequivocal conclusions. Representing controversial clients is, they say, an issue that has evaded consensus. Where personal and professional interests conflict they opt for a full disclosure policy rather than a ban.

The approach of this paper is that ethical professional practice is governed by rule utilitarian rules, ethical standards and tests. Where personal ethics fall short of the requirements of rules and standards, an ethical practitioner could not be professionally guided by those personal ethics. Conversely, where the rigor of personal ethics exceeds professional ethics, and the two come into conflict, the consequence for each practitioner’s professional status remains a personal matter for the practitioner. The practitioner may defer to personal ethics and leave the conflicting circumstance, or she/he may adhere to professional ethics in professional life and personal ethics in personal life.
The second, third and fourth duties are duty to client, duty to employer and duty to profession. These duties imply that practitioners’ first loyalties should be to those who pay them, or to their industry. All kinds of matters of privacy, confidentiality, propriety and trust are contained in these duties. They may even involve a conflict of personal and professional ethics. For example, a practitioner’s personal ethic may hold as paramount their loyalty to an employer, rather than their profession. Yet, if loyalty meant that communication failed to meet audiences’ needs for information to make autonomous judgements, and there was no reasoned other-regarding justification validated by evidence, then the practitioner could not be described as ethical.

Seib and Fitzpatrick’s fifth duty, the duty to society, is defined in terms of the public interest. Suffice here to reiterate that writers in this field have not found consensus on how individual practitioners could determine “the public interest” of their proposed acts. Without a viable definition and criteria, not practitioner can know in advance that an action will be in the public interest. Consequently, it is argued that this duty cannot be authoritatively discharged by practitioners because they cannot know the public interest.

Concluding remarks
This inquiry has shown that persuasion is not propaganda. Nor is it necessarily ethical or unethical. The question under examination was: how then could an ethical practitioner engage in persuasive practices that would be ethical. The paper considered the widely cited standard of meeting the “the public interest” as a possible determinant of ethical persuasion. But the concept of the public interest was found to be elusive at best and incapable of guiding day to day practice. The inquiry instead built on a core value of respect for reason as the underpinning value of ethical persuasion. The value was manifested in the need for audiences to be sufficiently informed to allow voluntary, informed, rational, reflective judgements. This requirement was inherent in the definition developed in this paper for ethical persuasion. To assess the ethics of particular acts of persuasion, a rule utilitarian approach was adopted. This allowed for the ethics of persuasion to be governed by a rule requiring all people to be treated as ends in themselves and never as means. Implicit in this rule was the requirement that persuasive communication must include sufficient information for audiences to make voluntary, informed, rational and reflective judgements. To meet these information requirements, certain standards of ethical practice were examined and accepted. These were truthfulness, authenticity, respect and equity. The rule utilitarian approach, however, allowed for exceptions, if justifiable by other-regarding reasoning and validated by evidence. Several tests helped guide the application of the rule utilitarian rule approach, and the justifications for any deviations from the standards. These tests were the tests of reversibility (how would I feel as the subject of the act in question), the test of publicity (what would others think) and the test of the principles and criteria (could the act be generalised, and would consequences be justified by other-regarding reasons and evidence).

Finally, a next research step in this inquiry is to align the ethics of persuasion with practical techniques of persuasion. Practical techniques and examples of persuasive communication could be examined against the rule utilitarian approach proposed here, and the standards and tests. Using this method, a next iteration of this research could uncover unethical techniques and develop a profile of ethical techniques.
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