Discuss the effectiveness of codes of conduct for the Public Relations industry with reference to any two codes.

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There are numerous codes of conduct for Public Relations (PR) practitioners and some practitioners have committed to even more than one of such codes (Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012). Codes of conduct should offer practical guidance when a practitioner faces an ethical dilemma outreaching the law (L’Etang, 1992; Seib and Fitzpatrick, 1995; Powell, 2011). The proliferation of best practice guides is the result of the aspiration to raise ethical and hence professional standards (CIPR, 2013; Magee, 2013; IPRA, 2013; Parsons, 2008) in an industry that has had notoriously bad reputation (Tench and Yeomans, 2006; CIPR, 2013; Magee, 2013). This essay will discuss how effective codes of conduct are in raising ethical standards in the PR industry by having a closer look at the codes of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR). Both codes are revised versions and were put into place in 2011. The IPRA Code of Conduct was adopted to incorporate the 1961 Code of Venice, the 1965 Code of Athens and the 2007 Code of Brussels into one code (IPRA, 2013). The CIPR’s Codes of Conduct was revisited and amended with Social Media Guidelines to meet the challenges of a rapidly evolving professional environment (CIPR, 2013; Philips and Young, 2009). In this essay, firstly, it will be discussed how the fact that there is no universally accepted definition of PR can affect the effectiveness of the codes of conduct in the industry. Secondly, the essay will discuss the implications of non-obligatory trade body memberships. Thirdly, it will be looked at how much trade associations can enforce the code if it is breached.

First of all, there is no consensus about the definition of PR which makes it difficult to set up an effective code of conduct (Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012). Almost 40 years ago Rex Harlow found 472 definitions (Fawkes, 2012) and it has become an even more debated topic (Tench and Yeomans, 2006). The lack of universal definition of PR results in codes of conduct based on vague ideas of what PR practitioners do (Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012), of
what ethical dilemmas may arise from those activities and of how practitioners should deal with those ethical considerations. One of the main themes of the debate is whether PR entails symmetric or asymmetric communication (Powell, 2011; Grunig et al., 2012). The different models involve duties to different stakeholders and in different priority order (L’Etang, 2008; Tench and Yeomans, 2009). Seib and Fitzpatrick (1995) identified as many as five different categories of duties: the duty to self, client organization, employer, profession and society. It can be ethically problematic that neither IPRA’s¹ nor CIPR’s² definition makes it unequivocally clear whether they consider PR symmetrical or asymmetrical communication and that whether the practitioner has a duty primarily to the organisation or its public (asymmetric) or both (symmetric) when there is a conflict of interest (Grunig et al., 2012). Both definitions carry the notion of “mutual understanding between an organisation and its public” (CIPR, 2013b; IPRA, 2013b) which suggests symmetric communication and thus mutual benefit (Bowen, 2010): duty to both the client and the public. On the other hand, the IPRA definition also mentions “for the benefit of the practice of public relations” suggesting duty to PR, and the CIPR’s definition is also “about reputation” suggesting duty to the organisation, both of which can compete with the duty to the public. Accordingly, the unclear view of duty priorities can lead to contradictory points in the code of conduct, which can make them ineffective when the practitioner consults them for advice (Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012). For example, the IPRA code recommends that the practitioners should foster the free flow of information to contribute to the interests of all stakeholders (IPRA, 2013). According to this, the practitioner has a duty to provide information to all stakeholders,

¹“Public Relations is defined as the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its public, such development being for the benefit of the practice of public relations in commerce, industry, central and local government, nationalised undertakings, professional, trade and voluntary organisations and all practitioners and others concerned in or with public relations” (IPRA, 2013b).

²“Public Relations is about reputation - the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public relations is the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics” (CIPR, 2013b).
including the organisation and its publics. This guideline is impossible to follow if a conflict of interest arises between them (L’Etang, 1996). Instead of offering priority orders, the IPRA code (2013) recommends “to disclose such conflicts to affected parties when they occur”. Disclosing the conflict of interest to all affected parties, however, could in itself harm the interest of at least one of them. For instance, letting the public know that they cannot know something about the organisation, with regards to reputation, is almost equal to telling them what they cannot know, so this piece of advice is not always helpful. The same contradiction can be found in the CIPR code (2013) concerning the question of duties. It requires the practitioner to “deal honestly and fairly in business with employers...and the public”. Moreover, serving public interest is reinforced by the chartered status of the trade body (Privy Council Office, 2013), while practitioners would have a big chance of losing their job if they did not put the interest of their employer on the top (Seaman, n.d.; Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012). So this guideline is impossible to follow when the same kind of conflict of interest arises. In that case, they advise to declare conflicts of interest “in writing to clients, potential clients and employers”, but notably not to the public, even if they might be stakeholders. The CIPR code does not offer advice on what to do if the conflict of interest is between the organisation and its public. So it is fair to conclude that there are cases when both the IPRA and the CIPR codes fail to offer effective advice, which can be traced back to the problematic nature of definitions of PR.

However, if codes of conduct are seen as a set of values that PR practitioners strive to achieve the best they can, as opposed to as a rigid ethical framework each paragraphs of which must be strictly followed, then they can be useful (Parsons, 2008). Parsons argues that code of conduct should be seen as “a profession’s contract with the society it serves rather than...a cookbook to thumb through when looking for the answer to a dilemma” (2008, p64). In this perspective, by joining to a trade body and thus making a promise to society about
trying to follow the code serve public interest in itself (Powell, 2011; McNair, 1996; L’Etang, 1996). For this, and for the fact that in return for the practitioners’ promise, society considers PR more professional (Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012; L’Etang, 2008), codes can be seen as effectively serving their intended purpose – making PR more professional. The acceptance of this view is, however, problematic as it is questionable how codes can raise ethical standards and so professionalism, if they are only useful when there is status quo, and not when a practitioner has a real ethical dilemma. In fact, the latter case is when the PR profession’s reputation and so professionalism is at stake (Byrne, 2010) because a bad decision in an ethical dilemma can easily lead to a PR scandal widely reported in the media. To be effective, that is when the codes of conduct should give useful advice.

Secondly, the ethical standards set out by the code of conduct are difficult to enforce in PR as practitioners are not legally bound to join a trade association (Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012; Powell, 2011), which strongly questions the effectiveness of the code. One of the implications of this is it is dubious who should follow the codes. Both CIPR and IPRA invite member and non-member PR practitioners to follow them for the sake of the profession, but it is not clear who counts as a PR practitioner (Moloney, 2000; Owens, 2013). As seen above, there is no commonly accepted definition of PR and boundaries between different communications disciplines are blurred (L’Etang, 2008; Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012). Therefore, the codes call on people who consider themselves PR practitioners. It is also because practitioners do not necessarily have any formal PR qualification so membership cannot be tested against that (Magee, 2013; Theaker, 2012). IPRA says that literally anyone can be a member (IPRA, 2013c) which is not helpful in finding out who should follow the guidelines. CIPR’s membership assessment “is based on multi-disciplinary experience and qualifications” (CIPR, 2013c) that is still extremely vague, although at least it suggests some kind of condition (Privy Council Office, 2013).
Besides, even if someone regards themselves as a PR practitioner, they are not required by law to follow the code (Monk, 2006; Moloney, 2000). Practitioner can become bound by the CIPR and IPRA codes if they sign up to be members. It is the practitioner’s choice whether they wish to do so. Moreover, they can leave the associations anytime and therefore stop holding liability to the code (R26, Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012). However, it is important to note that CIPR sets out the disciplinary rules in a way that ex-members can also be held to account for an act they performed when they were members. So CIPR members cannot dodge responsibility for an unethical act by simply leaving the trade body. Not all associations declare this, such as IPRA, which makes their code of conduct less effective. On the other hand, the codes of conduct effectively encourage practitioners to become members and so be bound to the codes because that suggests professionalism and higher ethical standards in the competitive industry of PR (Theaker, 2012; Tench and Yeomans, 2009; Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012). Namely, practitioners become more desirable workforce in the industry by signing up. This is a powerful pulling force for practitioners who know well how important reputation is (Magee, 2013). Besides, PR practitioners are passionately fighting for PR to become an acknowledged profession (Tench and Yeomans, 2006) and as having a code of conduct is one of the cornerstones of professionalism (Tench and Yeomans, 2009; Moloney, 2000; Theaker, 2012), lot of them actively encourage involvement with the code. Therefore it can be concluded that the idea of voluntary commitment significantly detracts from the effectiveness of the code, but the implications of membership of a trade body makes it desirable to sign up, which improves the reach of the codes.

Thirdly, trade bodies have no legal power to enforce the codes of conduct if they are broken that is arguably the most significant blow to the effectiveness of ethical guidelines (Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012, Seib and Fitzpatrick, 1995, R6, R26). If someone breaches
the code all CIPR and IPRA can do is to set up a disciplinary committee and open an investigation with no legal consequences (CIPR, 2013). However, in case of both trade associations one of the main punishments can be the suspension of membership that some of the practitioners would find significantly damaging to their credibility, as discussed above. Also, in case of both IPRA and CIPR if it is found that the practitioner did breach the code, this finding will be made public (CIPR, 2013; R30) that can ruin the career of a practitioner (Magee, 2013; Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012). It follows that although the lack of legal power on the hands of the trade bodies makes it impossible to fully enforce the codes of conduct, there are sanctions that can truly be deterrent measures against breaching them.

In conclusion, codes of conduct in the PR industry are playing an important role but are not fully effective. The lack of straightforward definition of PR results in that IPRA’s and CIPR’s codes of conduct are sometimes contradictory and so useless when a practitioner faces an ethical dilemma, although at least they provide a common value standard for the profession. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the code is spoiled by the fact that it is not legally required to join the trade associations and that they do not have powers to legally enforce the codes. Yet, being member of a trade body and abiding by its code of conduct suggest professionalism and credibility that is an effective pulling force for practitioners. Therefore, it can be concluded that at some instances codes of conduct can effectively work as an ethical framework in the industry, but they are not effective enough to make PR an undoubtedly ethical profession.
Bibliography


