

GLOBAL PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE CRISIS OF UNETHICAL JOURNALISM IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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ABSTRACT

In view of calls for a more established body of knowledge in the practice of public relations in the international context, this paper uses the analytical framework of global public relations to analyze the impact of environmental variables, *political economy, culture, media system and level of activism*, on the crisis of the *News of the World* in 2011. Although the crisis began with a single case of phone hacking, the crisis was exacerbated by news organizations' investigation into other instances of unethical journalism for which the *News of the World* was also responsible. This descriptive study examines the utility of the framework of global public relations in analyzing the confluence between external influences and internal processes which led to the closure of the tabloid. Implications for the practice of global public relations are also discussed.

Keywords: crisis communication, global public relations, media crisis, *News of the World*.

INTRODUCTION

According to Corbett (2012), a public vote amongst public relations practitioners resulted in a new definition of public relations adopted by the Public Relations Society of America: "Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (para. 2). It is best practiced as a *management* function; that is, practitioners should perform their role as a *boundary spanner*, disseminating information from organizations to their publics and bringing information from publics into organizations (Grunig *et al.* 2002). It contributes to organizational effectiveness by facilitating the communication process that meets goals shared by both an organization and its publics.

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The extent to which public relations could contribute to organizations depends on how it is practiced within the organizations; at the same time, situational factors external to organizations (i.e., external contingencies) are also influential to organizations and their publics (i.e., the contingency theory, Cancel et al 1999). For this reason, Sriramesh (2002) called for the incorporation of multiculturalism into public relations education. The rise of globalization has created opportunities for public relations, but ethnocentricity in public relations practice and research has posed challenges to the practice of global public relations (Sriramesh 2010).

In response to calls for more research on global public relations (e.g., Sriramesh and Vercic 2009), this paper uses the framework of global public relations to analyze the extent to which the environmental variables proposed (i.e., political economy, culture, media system and level of activism) made an impact on the crisis of unethical journalism which led to the closure of the *News of the World* (e.g., Sriramesh and Vercic 2001). As Sriramesh and Vercic (2007) suggested, “Public relations practice has globalized: it is time that we globalize our conceptualizations and reflect on the evidence and use our knowledge to ensure that public relations practice contributes even more toward the development of the world”. (358) By understanding the environmental factors in which global public relations are situated, this paper would shed light on how public relations should be practiced to best contribute to organizations and society.

THE FALL OF THE NEWS OF THE WORLD

Over the years, the *News of the World* had received numerous accusations about its unethical practices in journalism. Since as early as 2005, the *News of the World* had been accused of intercepting the voicemail messages of members of the royal family (“Phone hacking: Timeline of the scandal” 2012). In 2006, two of its employees were arrested for allegations of hacking into the mobile phones of members of the royal family. They were put in jail in 2007, but at that time, the lawyers representing the *News of the World* claimed that they found no evidence that the executives were aware of the scandal. In 2008, James Murdoch paid footballer, Gordon Taylor, 700,000 pounds to settle a phone hacking allegation. In 2009, employees of the *News of the World* were found to have illegally hacked into the mobile phones of celebrities and politicians with the knowledge of senior executives, who then agreed to pay the victims a compensation for the charges. But again, investigations claimed to have found no evidence that employees other than the two involved were aware of the unethical practice. In 2010, the former editor of the company, who was also the Head of Media Operations of David Cameron’s

government, Andy Coulson, was interviewed by the police for phone hacking allegations. No further charges were put forward because the witnesses refused to cooperate with the police. In 2011, the *News of the World* was found to have hacked into the emails of a former British army officer. After several accusations, they apologized in the paper, but they had denied responsibility. In the same year, the company paid actress Siena Miller 100,000 pounds to settle a phone hacking allegation. As more cases of phone interceptions were revealed, more staff members of the *News of the World* were arrested. More cases of unethical journalism were also revealed. The company offered Rebecca Loos a sum of six figures for revealing her affair with David Beckham (Allen 2011). It corrupted the police for illegally obtaining information about famous people (Davies and Dodd 2011). The ways in which the *News of the World* had acquired information from the sources for its news stories were considered to be highly unethical.

In spite of the repeated accusations of practices of unethical journalism, it was not until 2011 when the *News of the World's* practice of unethical journalism was put to a halt with the closure of the tabloid. On July 4, 2011, *the Guardian* revealed that the voicemail of a missing schoolgirl, Miller Dowler, was found to have been hacked by a *News of the World* investigator. Her voicemail messages were even deleted to make room for new messages, which subsequently misled the police and her family into believing that she was still alive. On July 6, CEO of the News Corporation, Rupert Murdoch, appointed an executive to oversee investigations into the scandal. But because of the scandal, advertisers began to withdraw advertisements from the tabloid. On July 7, Rupert Murdoch announced to close the 168-year-old tabloid. Prime Minister David Cameron called for investigations into the scandal. The last edition of the *News of the World* was published on July 10.

On July 19, 2011, in the special hearing held by the British House of Commons' Culture, Media and Sport Committee for the phone hacking scandal, Rupert Murdoch claimed that as the CEO of the News Corporation which hired 52,000 people around the world, he was disappointed by the people he trusted who had betrayed the company and believed that they should be held responsible for the scandal ("Uncorrected Transcript of Oral Evidence" 2011). He felt responsible for following up on the allegations, but had passed the responsibility onto his employees. His son, James Murdoch, who was the Deputy Chief Operating Officer of the News Corporation, apologized to the victims and their families. He claimed that the actions did not live up to the standards of the company and that the company would ensure that it would not happen again. The Murdoches made an apology and promised corrective actions, but shifted the blame to their employees and asserted a lack of control over the situation.

CRITICISMS RECEIVED

After the hearing, the *News of the World* had received numerous criticisms about how the crisis was handled. The *News of the World* made an apology, but at the same time, they expressed anger towards their trusted employees. Based on Benoit's (1995) image restoration theory, they employed the strategy of *shifting the blame* to blame their trusted subordinates rather than accepting responsibility for their mismanagement of the organization. They employed the strategy of *defeasibility* by claiming a lack of information and control. They employed the strategy of *mortification* by reducing the offensiveness of the allegations by admitting guilt, expressing regret and asking for forgiveness. At the same time, they used the strategy of *compensation* by offering money to those who were affected through a victim's compensation fund. Even though it was not the first time that the *News of the World* was accused of phone hacking, it was a management misconduct which "violates prevailing laws, professional standards and social norms" (Lerbinger 2011, 281). The company failed to take into consideration the previous practices of mismanagement which had affected the company immensely. What made the situation worse was that such problems of management misconduct were more likely to turn into a crisis because they were more likely to be exposed to the public, such as via the news media (Lerbinger 2011). For the news media, management misconduct is newsworthy because it is a self-inflicted crisis caused by a violation of social norms. The *News of the World* had been repeatedly accused of practicing checkbook journalism, that is, they made financial payments for information from people who have close ties with famous people (Peters 2011). Practices of unethical journalism, however, are not uncommon in the United Kingdom. In 2012, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was also accused of covering up the child abuse allegations against its late star presenter, Jimmy Savile, for which the bureaucratic structure of the company was blamed (Clifton 2012). Lerbinger (2011) also suggested that organizational culture, organizational structure, the ethical standards of an organization's partners, such as their auditors, and the regulations put in place by regulatory bodies, could also contribute to the crisis of management misconduct.

This crisis of unethical journalism, which could be attributed to the crisis of management misconduct, received numerous criticisms. News organizations were criticized for claiming innocence or lack of knowledge about the scandal and dismissing the criticism as being caused by the actions of individual employees. Yet, they agreed to settle the charges put forward by victims of the scandal through financial compensation. Their internal investigations always found *no evidence* that their executives were aware. It was not until its rival news organizations, such as *the Guardian*, exposed the scandals that the public became aware of these unethical practices. In response to the phone hacking scandal, the *Washington Post* described it as the biggest PR disaster of Murdoch's News Corporation that it had damaged

the reputation of the media conglomerate, leading to skepticism about whether the media empire was overly powerful (Booth and Farhi 2011). Online activists and the general public brought the tabloid to an end by producing an Arab Spring-like damage on its reputation on social and traditional media (Yann 2011). Trivitt (2011) asserted that public relations should not be blamed for the crisis because it was inherently caused by the repeated practice of unethical journalism. The crisis communication efforts made by the News Corporation did not work because the cancer had already spread too wide (Cartmell 2011). The crisis was also described as a self-inflicted nightmare as a result of the News Corporation's unwillingness to be honest about what happened, what was done to fix it and how it could be prevented from happening again (White 2011).

Whereas some criticisms had focused on how badly public relations were used to handle the crisis, some criticized the News Corporation for its mismanagement in the first place. It was criticized for blurring the line between corporate interests and journalistic integrity (Greenwald 2011). Journalism should be practiced ethically. The crisis communication strategies used by the *News of the World* were criticized for manipulating the facts; it was claimed that Murdoch had hired Edelman, a public relations agency, for instructions on the selection of words like "shocked," "surprised," and "humble," to strengthen the message that they did nothing wrong and had no responsibility. The apology was welcomed, but other public relations efforts were not (Wynne 2011).

According to the Excellence Study, public relations are the most effective in contributing to an organization when it is practiced as a *management* rather than a *messaging* function (Grunig *et al.* 2002). It should focus on the co-adaptation of behaviors, not the manipulation of public perceptions through the use of words. But the *News of the World* had failed to harness the strengths of public relations as a management function by incorporating publics' expectations into their decisions and behaviors. Its repeated denial of responsibility for accusations of unethical practices had caused it to continue employing crisis communication for the purpose of changing public perceptions, but not its own behaviors to prevent future crises from arising. Public relations is supposed to help the dominant coalition make better decisions by incorporating publics' concerns into their decisions. But in this instance, the *News of the World* was accused of hiring a public relations agency for the manipulation of public perceptions.

Even though the internal processes of the *News of the World* were a major factor contributing to the evolvement of the crisis, the infrastructural environment in which an organization operates is also impactful. Transnational corporations, which involve in the exchange of goods and services multiple foreign countries, are confronted with more challenges due to the rapidly evolving global business environment (e.g., Coombs 2010). For this reason, corporations are advised to consider a country's political system, level of economic development, the legal system, culture, the media system, and level of activism when practicing public relations in foreign markets (Sriramesh and Vercic 2001).

FRAMEWORK OF GLOBAL PUBLIC RELATIONS

The *News of the World* is a transnational corporation with its headquarters in the United States, and its subsidiary, News International, in the United Kingdom. News International is responsible for overseeing the News Corporation's media operations in the United Kingdom, including *the Sun*, *the Times* and the *News of the World*. Using Sriramesh's (2003) conceptual model which links environmental variables to the practice of public relations, this paper examines the influence of these environmental variables in the United Kingdom on the development of the crisis. According to Sriramesh and Duhe (2009), public relations practitioners should be "well-educated and sensitized to communicating in a global environment due to the diverse and global nature of their relevant publics" (368). Even though both the United States, in which the News Corporation has its headquarters, and the United Kingdom, where its U.K. subsidiary is located, are both Anglo-Saxon countries, they are different in certain aspects. It was argued that what the *News of the World* did in the U.K. could not possibly be done in the U.S. because of its stringent laws for the protection of privacy ("The News Corp. Hacking Saga" 2012). Thus, this paper would examine the following environmental variables: *political economy*, *culture*, *media system* and *level of activism*. These variables are not independent of one another but are interrelated and conceptually linked to the practice of public relations.

POLITICAL ECONOMY

Political economy can be broadly defined as "the extent to which the government should be involved in the economic lives of its citizens" (Sriramesh and Duhe 2009, 369). In Hallin and Mancini's (2004) model of media and politics, the U.K. falls under the classification of being a *libertarian* political system with a predominantly majoritarian government whose political history was characterized by early democratization and moderate pluralism. As a constitutional monarchy, Queen Elizabeth II is currently the representative of the will and aspirations of its citizens (White *et al.* 2009). Its national parliament is made up of the House of Commons which is elected and the House of Lords which is made up of appointed members. The U.K. has remained close to other countries which used to be part of the British Empire, including the United States.

As a highly developed country in terms of its economic development, the private and public sectors have been in close relationships as a result of the activities held by individual government departments and corporate lobbying efforts (White *et al.* 2009). The think-tanks and policy institutes are very strong in influencing the ideas of the government. Businesses are expected to contribute to social progress by "permeating all sectors of the economy including the public

sector” (White *et al.* 2009, 396). At the same time, the public sector sought to adopt the practices of the private sector to improve their performance. On the global stage, the U.K. has been influential in political and economic affairs as an influential member of the European Union and a close ally of the United States.

The study of political economy should examine the primary purpose of economic activity, the role of the state in the economy and the structure of the corporate sector and private business practices (Sriramesh and Duhe 2009). In this respect, the U.K. adopts the neoclassical political economic system whereby the government’s role is minimal in the free market, but remains active in serving certain functions that the market may fail to serve, such as national defense and the national welfare system. But in terms of media ownership, the government has imposed certain regulations, such as using anti-monopoly legislations to ensure that no single company could monopolize the market to cause an unfair market system (Stokes 1999).

But under this system of political economy, the scandal of the *News of the World* triggered a number of allegations against Rupert Murdoch as the kingmaker of British Politics (“The News Corp. hacking saga” 2012). Doubts were cast about how the phenomenon of Murdoch-phobia had led the issue of phone hacking to be under-covered in the news media until July 2011 even though the earliest report of phone hacking was revealed by *the Guardian* in 2006. In addition to the *News of the World*, Rupert Murdoch also owned several other media outlets in the U.K., including newspapers *the Sun* and *the Times* and satellite TV *BSkyB*. Because of this, media organizations had been fearful of making negative reports about Murdoch’s media empire. Prime Minister David Cameron was also described to have benefited from the political support from Rupert Murdoch. Thus, Murdoch was an influential figure in British politics (Booth and Farhi 2011).

The political economy of the U.K. is one of the environmental factors contributing to the development of the crisis for several reasons. First, even though media monopolies were prohibited in the U.K., there was a problem of media concentration or media oligopoly, that is, a person’s control of several media outlets threatens the ideal of free press (Sparks 1999). Second, because of the predominantly majoritarian government structure, politicians needed positive media coverage to be re-elected and to receive public support for their policies. As a result, the relationships between the politicians and the media could be influential in shaping public opinion. For this reason, editorial independence of the press could be threatened. The crisis raised questions about the extent to which the News Corporation had been overly powerful to the extent that it was able to use its monetary and non-monetary power to cover up the scandal. Thus, this crisis of unethical journalism was attributed to have been caused by both the U.K. government and the News Corporation.

CULTURE

Culture is a phenomenon innate to human beings (Sriramesh 2012). Public relations practitioners are expected to deal with both internal and external publics and should be alert to both societal and corporate cultures in the countries in which they operate (Sriramesh 2009). To explain the extent to which culture had affected the development of the crisis, Hofstede's analysis of the culture in the U.K. and the Edelman Trust Barometer were used for the analysis ("Edelman Trust Barometer" 2012; Hofstede 1984; Hofstede 1991).

POWER DISTANCE

Power distance refers to the extent to which the less powerful members of a country expect and accept that power is equally distributed. According to Hofstede (2012), the U.K. received a score of 35 out of 100, falling under the category of being low in power distance. It is a society which generally believes that inequalities should be kept to a minimum so that people could have a sense of fair play. Yet, this is incongruent with the long-established class system in the country, which has caused racial and ethical tensions in the country. But Hofstede's research indicated that compared to those in working class, those in higher classes were more likely to believe that the power distance in the U.K. is low.

INDIVIDUALISM

The U.K. is ranked third in individualism, only after Australia and the United States. Individualism refers to the degree of interdependence a society maintains amongst its members. The U.K. received a score of 89 out of 100, meaning that citizens are expected to look after themselves and their families only. They are highly individualistic and private. Children are encouraged to learn to think for themselves starting from a young age. The *me* culture cultivates acts of personal fulfilment for the pursuit of happiness. The country's affluence and consumer culture are believed to have contributed to the high level of individualism.

MASCULINITY/FEMININITY

The U.K. scored high in masculinity and femininity that it is highly success-oriented and success-driven. It received a score of 66 out of 100, making it a masculine culture driven by competition, achievement and success. Success is defined by being the winner or the best in the field or the institutions, such as in schools. The culture does not encourage one to care for others, but encourages one

to be wanting to be the best rather than enjoying what one does. Thus, British people are believed to be living to work with an ambition for good performance.

UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

The U.K. scored low for uncertainty avoidance, receiving a score of 35 out of 100. As a nation, British people are happy with not knowing what will happen and change plans as new information comes along. Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which a culture feels threatened by unknown situations and tries to avoid ambiguous situations. Even though their end goals are clear, the means to achieve the goals are flexible. This explains why the culture is high in consumerism for innovative products and strong in creative industries like advertising.

LONG-TERM ORIENTATION

The U.K. scored low in long-term orientation, receiving a score of 25 out of 100. It is a rather short-term-oriented society which focuses on quick results. Long-term orientation refers to the extent to which individuals show a future-oriented perspective. It means that British people are generally unlikely to be willing to give up something today for a bigger reward in the future.

INTERPERSONAL TRUST

In addition to Hofstede's cultural dimensions of individualism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation, Sriramesh (2009) added interpersonal trust as an additional dimension to culture. He posits that personal influence could affect interpersonal relationships because trust attaches credibility to a source in the communication process. Research is yet to be done on trust as a dimension in the U.K. culture. Yet, in the crisis, the fact that Prime Minister David Cameron still hired and defended Andy Coulson, the former editor of the *News of the World*, as head of his media operations, after the *News of the World* had been accused of wrongful acts portrayed the significance of interpersonal relationships in the U.K. culture.

EDELMAN TRUST BAROMETER

In spite of the lack of research on the significance of interpersonal trust in the U.K., the Edelman Trust Barometer, which surveyed 30,000 people aged 25–64 in 25 countries, found that the level of trust in the government and CEOs in the U.K. had fallen to its all-time low in 2012. Only 38% of the British respondents trusted the government and businesses, reporting a significant decrease of 5% from 2011.

Even though 32% of the respondents trusted the traditional media, tabloid newspapers, like the *News of the World*, were only trusted by 14% of the respondents. On the other hand, 58% of the respondents trusted TV and radio news outlets. And 47% of the respondents trusted broadsheets like *the Times* and *the Guardian*. These results pointed to the need to examine whether the high competitiveness of the news industry had led the tabloid to adopt a short-term perspective by using unethical means to collect news sources for immediate gains.

MEDIA SYSTEM

The media system of the U.K. was a combination of the libertarian theory and the social responsibility theory (Oates 2007). The libertarian theory emphasizes the importance of media freedom, independent of government control for different views to be contested in the marketplace of ideas (Sriramesh and Vercic 2009). On the other hand, the social responsibility theory is an extension of the libertarian theory, but the media needs to adhere to certain professional norms and codes of conduct when exercising media freedom. In analyzing the media system, three variables should be examined: the extent of *media control*, i.e. media ownership, *media diffusion*, i.e. the extent to which the media have permeated in society, and *media access*, i.e. the extent to which individuals could use the mass media to disseminate important information. With the advent of social media, the public has been able to exchange information more freely; during the crisis, angry members of the public used social media to coerce advertisers to withdraw advertisements from the *News of the World* (Yann 2011).

In the U.K., both the public and private sectors play a role in the media industry. The BBC is a public broadcasting company, which was funded by the government's collection of license fees from TV owners in the country (Stokes 1999). The print media in the U.K. would fall under the model of the libertarian theory because they were not publicly funded and were driven by competition. The U.K. broadcast media fell under the social responsibility model because the government acted as a partner of the media. Broadcast media had certain obligations to society, such as providing access to all groups. Therefore, BBC also airs programs in multiple languages for different ethnic minorities and marginalized groups.

The crisis had re-ignited the discussion about the problem of media oligopoly caused by the libertarian model. The death of Princess Diana had led to animosity against paparazzi and unethical journalism in general (Petley 1999). The media conglomerate owned by Rupert Murdoch had led to the rise of Murdoch-phobia in the United Kingdom. Sparks (1999) reported that the two newspapers owned by Murdoch's News Corporation had a daily circulation of 3.8 million (*the Sun*) and 750,000 (*the Times*) respectively, making up a market share of 33%. On the other hand, *the Guardian* only had a circulation of 410,000, contributing to only 3% of

the market share. Such a concentration in media ownership made cross-media promotion possible – the newspapers could be used to promote each other rather than reporting what the public is interested in.

LEVEL OF ACTIVISM

As of November 25, 2012, over a year after the scandal was revealed in July 2011, the Facebook group “Boycott the News of the World” had 7,807 likes. Activists had used the social media as a platform to express their anger (Yann 2011). Activism is a “social phenomenon that can be related to problem-solving actions by individuals or groups who coalesce around problematic situations created by organizational activities” (Sriramesh and Kim 2009, 80). In the study of activism, there are two important dimensions: 1) the degree of intensity characterized by individuals’ actions on an issue; and 2) the number of issues in a given society.

The level of activism in the crisis was shown through the expressions of reactions from the public. First, the government and politicians had called for investigations to be made into the matter and for tighter regulations for journalistic standards. Second, advocacy was brought against the power of Murdoch’s media conglomerate. Advertisers withdrew their advertisements as a way to express discontent against what happened. Third, major rival newspapers advocated a re-examination of the News Corporation’s over-powerfulness in the media industry globally by publishing many commentaries about the scandal. Fourth, British people voiced out their concerns in different ways, such as via the social media. Apart from them, victims of the scandal, their families, the British Parliament and the police were also engaged in various ways of advocacy in public hearings, police investigations and expressing discontent through traditional and social media.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As a result of the crisis, the News Corporation had received numerous criticisms – even though most of the criticisms were against the use of public relations, management misconduct was the root cause of the problem. According to the behavioral, strategic management paradigm of public relations, which supports the belief that actions speak louder than words, public relations should be practiced as a management function by incorporating publics’ concerns into the organizational decision-making process to prevent publics from arising (Grunig and Kim 2011). Instead of treating the symptoms, the causes of the symptoms should have been treated. By applying the framework of global public relations to

the crisis of the *News of the World*, this paper seeks to understand the confluence between environmental factors in the country in which public relations are practiced and the involvement of a crisis. As communication specialists, public relations practitioners are advised to stay alert to the environment in which they operate by conducting environmental scanning. Their understanding of the environment would help them understand an organization's publics, build relationships with them and advise the organization to consider their concerns when making decisions which make an impact on them. During the crisis of the *News of the World*, public relations were used as a reactive function of crisis communication. It must be acknowledged that public relations performs multiple functions of relationship building; crisis communication is only one of the functions. Public relations is best practiced as a proactive function of strategic management to minimize the impact of organizational consequences on publics. While this paper was a preliminary attempt to use the framework of global public relations to analyze the crisis, it must be acknowledged that the findings of the present study could be applicable to the selected crisis only. Thus, more future studies should be conducted on global public relations with reference to the framework.

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