



» The reputation of the reputation makers

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What impression would it make us eat fish in poor condition in a fishmonger's house? Well, something similar seems to be happening in the PR industry; at least there are suspicions that some fishmongers are serving fish in poor condition to their customers, whether or not with their consent.

Such is the [case of Cambridge Analytica](#), the British firm with operations also in the United States that promised its customers to "change the behavior of the audience" to which they were addressing. The company was forced to close down when news broke that it had acquired and misused data from 50 million Facebook users and the judicial authorities initiated a process against it. As a result of the noise generated around this case, the value of the shares of the social network collapsed 7 percent in just a few hours, which reduced its capitalization by 37 billion dollars.

The scandal forced the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, to make a statement two days after the stock market debacle in which he acknowledged that the company made mistakes, took responsibility and explained the steps to strengthen security and ensure the privacy of users. A good example of crisis communication, although some analysts commented that the reaction was a bit late, and, at the same time, an evidence that intangibles can have a great impact on tangibles.

The data that Cambridge Analytica handled was obtained by a professor at the University of Cambridge, Aleksandr Kogan, who had developed a personality test in 2013 for its application through Facebook. Some 265,000 users completed the test that required permission to access personal data and the network of friends without the consent of the latter. This is how Kogan accessed status updates, "likes" and even private messages from more than 15 percent of the US population, which he later sold to Cambridge Analytica. According to The New York Times and The Observer, these private data were then used to psychologically manipulate voters in the US elections. In 2016, in which Donald Trump was elected president.

In an interview with the BBC, an employee of Cambridge Analytica revealed that during the campaign for the presidential elections not only was the irregularly obtained data used to marry messages and related psychological profiles, but also false news was created and distributed through social networks, blogs and media.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal, a company that also intervened in the Brexit campaign, had its most notorious antecedent in the bankruptcy of another London-based firm, Bell Pottinger, in September of last year. This agency designed and executed a 'dirty campaign' that played on racial animosity in South Africa, including the creation of fake news, to benefit its client Inversiones Oakbay, a society that



is controlled by the controversial and influential Gupta family, with strong ties to the government of then President Zuma.

As a result of the outrage, Richard Edelman, founder and president of the network of public relations agencies that bears his last name, made a [call to the communication industry](#) to adopt a single code of ethics. The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, the federation that integrates associations of communicators and academic entities from around the world, responded arranging a [summit of the main international associations](#) of professionals and communication companies, in order to explore the components of a new global code of ethics for communicators. After six months of work, a new global set of principles has emerged- 16 principles that we deem essential, universal and fundamental to practice public relations. We believe that if every professional adopted these principles in their work, we would improve the profession.

Although the main egregious examples have come from political communication, the industry as a whole suffers the onslaught of the winds of doubt about the correctness of their behavior. For years we have faced the bad reputation of propaganda; now it is the lie that knocks at our door. The Bell Pottinger and Cambridge Analytica cases have awakened our consciousness, but how many similar ones will have occurred and are now occurring that, for now, go unnoticed?

José Antonio Llorente, founder and president of the reputation and public affairs consultancy LLORENTE & CUENCA, recently wrote on [LinkedIn](#): "To date we have looked at the fake news and post-truth, both manifestations of the lie, as if they were something alien to our professional practice, one more difficulty that we communicators face, almost as a condition of the environment. We did not want to think that behind those false or falsified news could be 'one of ours'."

In the era of hypertransparency, the PR industry is also subject to public scrutiny. Civil society asks, for example, why we work for clients whose reputation is shady. Communication is under the spotlight, it has become a profession with a public dimension, very different from the erstwhile image associated with dark, discreet, elusive figure of the spokesperson spinning a story or whispering innuendoes.

The new generations (millennials and Z) are much more sensitive than their predecessors to responsible behaviors and, consequently, punish deviations

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harshly. They are more selective when it comes to giving their trust to a company or brand. They judge companies not only for what they produce or sell, but for how they produce and sell it. They investigate the purpose of organizations and check whether or not it aligns with their way of understanding the world. In short, they are more ethical activists and they vote with their wallet.

In this context of greater demand and scrutiny, the communication industry can not afford to have its professional practices questioned from the ethical point of view.

Concepts such as credibility, transparency, trust and social responsibility, linked to the professional practice of communication, have a clear moral dimension. In fact, they are the cornerstone of ethical decisions: credibility is a quality associated with the repeated practice of truth; transparency is an attitude of openness opposed to obfuscation and closely linked to democratic principles; Trust builds and grows, from truth and transparency; and social responsibility expresses the desire of people and organizations to transcend their interests and work for the collective good.

A solid reputation comes from the commitment to build trust. [The 16 ethical principles](#) that the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management recently announced with the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) and with the support of the International Consultancy Organization (ICCO), Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) United Kingdom and Middle East and African Public Relations Association (APRA), do not specifically mention trust, but clearly that is a basic objective of ethical practice in communication activities.

It is the "raison d'être" of the 16 principles. Because without trust and confidence, the building we are trying to build will crumble. The first principle we list is, in fact, the most powerful litmus for business. "Working in the public interest" is not just a declaration of intent, it is a fundamental change in the way we should approach our activities in society. What that means in practice is that if a company faces a dilemma between self-interest and the best interests of society, the latter should prevail. Why? Because self-interest is almost always of short duration and conflict with the common good will sooner or later lead to a loss of confidence.

Communication has to work on its own reputation. We cannot be shoemakers and go barefoot. The first step to improve our own reputation is to have and

respect solid ethical principles that are clear, firm and adopted by a large majority. The 16 principles meets this requirement and serves as a guide to all of us.. It is up to the different professional associations to establish mechanisms to ensure compliance with their ethical and deontological codes, offer training and resources to help their members. As a service to the 160,000 members of the Global Alliance, the task force that established the 16 principles also assembled resources, case studies, guidance and podcasts from around the world.

The second lever of reputation connects again with the principle of "working for the public interest". Our profession is committed to the human values that guarantee social coexistence. We are managers of a dialogue that transcends the borders of our organizations. Recalling the etymological origin of the term, "communication" implies a sense of community.

And the third lever is part of the medicine that we prescribe to ourselves: good storytelling. We have to demonstrate the relevance of the function for the sustainable management of all types of organizations. If communication does not create value from values, it is useless. We have to be close to the tangible and intangible results, committed to the common objectives and to show with proper metrics, our contribution to values.

Returning to the metaphor of the beginning of this article, the "fish" that the communicators harvest and sell can not be under suspicion, must be very fresh, be exposed in a well-lit showcase and produce positive effects on the health of our consumers.

THE EXAMPLE OF NASA'S CASSINI SPACECRAFT

The US Space Agency (NASA) reported on September 15 that the Cassini spacecraft, having exhausted almost all of its fuel, had entered at 7:57 (local time in Washington) in the atmosphere of Saturn, where it ended up disintegrating, as planned.

This put an end to the Cassini-Huygens Mission, which over the last twenty years had collected data as important as the possible habitability of two of Saturn's moons, Enceladus and Titan. It is precisely this finding that led NASA to make the decision to give way to the 'Grand Finale' phase, with the purpose of destroying the ship before its control was lost from Earth and thus avoiding a possible collision with a of the moons that could compromise future investigations. Although the Cassini was sterilized before being sent to space, the researchers did not rule out the possibility that terrestrial microorganisms had survived decontamination. That is, it was not an operational decision that precipitated the end of the ship, which could have continued to wander through the galaxy, but ethics and an overarching concern for the greater public interest.

This is a clear example that the most difficult decisions that organizations have to take, be they companies or institutions, to make ethics a prime directive. And communicators must be there to advise on the consequences that many business decisions have, especially when they can have an impact on society of which they are part. We must act like a Pepito Grillo that brings to the organization the concerns of interest groups, one of which is society itself.



José Manuel Velasco, he is part of the Advisory Board at LLORENTE & CUENCA and represents the Executive Communications Coaching leader at the firm. He is Chair of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, a coalition that brings together professional communication associations and academic entities from around the world.

He has worked as General Manager of Communications and Corporate Responsibility at the construction company FCC and as Director of Communications at the energy company Unión Fenosa and the railway company Renfe. In addition, he has presided over the Spanish Association of Directors of Communications (Dircom) and the Ethical Management Forum (Forética).

He holds a degree in journalism from Madrid's Complutense University and completed the Advanced Management Program offered by the Institute for Management Development (IMD) in Lausanne, Switzerland. He is a certified executive and team coach by the International Coach Federation (ICF).

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Jean Valin, Principal of Valin Strategic Communications and founding member and past chair of the Global Alliance. He holds a degree in Communications from the University of Ottawa and began his career as a broadcaster in the Ottawa region. After his journalistic experience, he worked for 30 years as a PR executive for the Government of Canada. He currently manages his own firm, Valin Strategic Communications. APR Certified Communicator, author and mentor, is a Fellow of the Canadian Public Relations Association (CPRS) and an honorary Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR-United Kingdom).

During his time as a public servant, he worked on gun control, anti-terrorism and organized crime legislation, same sex marriage legislation, the launch of Service Canada (Canada's one-stop for all government services) as well as transportation policy for air, road, and marine safety and for security issues.

Very active throughout his career as a leader in professional organizations, he is one of the founders of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, which he chaired for two years (2004-2005).

He is co-editor of the book of two volumes of public relations cases studies from around the world. (Peter Lang, 2014 and 2017). Throughout his career he has received numerous awards, including the CIPR President's Medal in the United Kingdom, the CPRS Achievement Award, the David Ferguson PRSA Award and the Philip Novikoff Award of the CPRS for all his career accomplishments.

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Alex Malouf, Corporate Communications Manager for Indian Subcontinent, Middle East and Africa at Procter & Gamble and board member of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management.

Former journalist Alex Malouf has carved out a niche as a lively voice in the Middle East's burgeoning media scene, combining razor-sharp observations with a keen understanding of the forces that underpin the region's digital transformation. Much of which, no doubt, is informed by Malouf's day job at P&G, where he manages reputational affairs for the Middle East's largest FMCG.

Malouf's experience and roots in the region are not the only things that set him apart — he is also a highly visible advocate for modern public relations, serving in board roles on numerous industry organisations, including the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, as board member, and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC).

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