A 'moral compass' of the organisation during a crisis: Exploring the ethics roles of strategic communication practice

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Abstract

Ethical behaviour has long been a subject of the strategic communication discipline, but in South Africa, there are few empirical studies on ethical practice to date. Using a qualitative methodology, this study examines what constitutes ethical communication and how strategic communication practitioners from diverse organisations perceive their role as a "moral compass" during a crisis. The study indicates that ethical principles of communication are employed, but practitioners still find themselves in conflict with truth-telling. Overall, the results show that respondents identify more with ethical counsel types than advocacy role types. In terms of counsel types of ethics, being authentic, empathetic, truthful, honest, owning up to mistakes, being open and transparent, and being sensitive to stakeholders' urgent needs were paramount. On the basis of this study, although marked with issues of legal challenges, as well as leaders and clients who often want practitioners to compromise on their ethical conscience roles, practitioners were insisting on performing the role of ethics counsel in their organisations. This study contributes to the strategic communication discipline by offering insights into ethical communication and provides a foundation from which future research can leverage.

1. Introduction

Concern about ethical communication in the communication discipline has existed for decades. As communication practitioners evaluate the prevalence, effectiveness, and outcomes of existing ethical principles in the field of strategic communication, the role of ethical communication as the moral compass of

future communication remains an important concern. Strategic communication refers to a number of disciplines within communication, including public relations, marketing communication, corporate communication, and other areas of practice. Clearly, ethical communication during crisis communication is a complex entity that encompasses public relations and a broad field of strategic communication. In particular, public relations, referred to as part of business ethics in a global society, is situated within the management literature realm (Bowen & Bhalla, 2021). However, the field is still nascent concerning ethical training (Bowen & Bhalla, 2021).

Today, strategic communication practitioners are continuously learning about ethics and responding to new practices such as social media, social listening, augmented reality and data analytics, and artificial intelligence, to name a few (Schauster et al., 2020). Research on ethics and crisis communication (Eriksson, 2018) tends to a higher degree to be linked to Western countries, primarily the US (Jin Pang & Smith, 2018; Bowen & Lovari, 2020). While it is argued that embracing ethical responsibilities results in positive outcomes for businesses, many organisations are continuously plagued by various ethics scandals.

A crisis is defined as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organisation's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2015:3). Crises, varying from an organisation's wrongdoings to natural catastrophes, often result in destruction and even death, which interrupt the organisation's business routine, threaten public safety or cause reputational and financial loss. During a crisis, when the feasibility and sustainability of an organisation are enormously threatened, ethical decision-making is crucial, as stakeholders' trust is frequently at its lowest. From this perspective, communication practitioners should be considered as the "ethics counsel" for the organisation (Bowen, 2008:271). When the impact of a crisis is high, and its consequences are deemed severe, the public expects organisations to handle the crisis with high moral principles (DeMars, 2017). Despite the importance of ethics in organisational decision-making, strategic communication practitioners often face dilemmas in making ethical decisions that might conflict with professional values.

In the strategic communication discipline, particularly the field of public relations (PR), practitioners should consider themselves as moral agents: "A look at conflict literature reveals a moral bearing to ethical communication, that is: How does one manage conflict in a manner that leads to a morally acceptable resolution?" (Jin et al., 2018:44). The PR profession, in particular, is haunted by adverse connotations resulting from the use of propaganda, spin-doctoring, and practitioners' numerous unethical activities, and recovering from such is essential for professionals. The PR's involvement with historical or contemporary propaganda is now viewed as a thing of the past because it presents the field of practice as moving towards harmony (Fawkes, 2018). As Moloney and McGrath (2020) observe, PR is weak propaganda if it takes the form of persuasive communication that is meant for competitive advantage. The history is marked by deceitful promotional stunts that have often been adopted to manipulate people's

approaches to an organisation, its services, goods, and ideas (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). Hence, strategic communication practitioners (SCPs) have adopted mediation and negotiation principles as fundamental concepts, moving beyond rhetoric and persuasion (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001).

Jin, Pang and Smith (2018) contend that individual and organisational influences have roles to play in communicating ethically during moral conflicts. However, professional communication codes of ethics interfere with individual ethical decision-making and move ethical responsibility away from the individual to that of the group (Holtzhausen, 2015). Surprisingly, empirical studies accounting for moral reasoning in strategic communication are increasing (Schauster et al., 2020), while their role as ethics moral agents are nebulous (Place, 2019), as qualitative research studies achieve detailed accounts of professional experience. Much data has been amassed on the best practice to adopt when responding during a crisis (Bowen & Lovari, 2020). However, little research has framed the ethical role of crisis communication (Bowen & Combs, 2020), and that which involves ethical communication during a crisis is mentioned as a relatively unexplored concern. Therefore this study answers calls for knowledge regarding insight into an ethical, moral compass. Whereas in previous profiles (Jin et al., 2018) on advertising and public relations practitioners' views of their roles and responsibilities for ethical communication abound (Schauster & Neill, 2017), this study profiles strategic communication practitioners' ethical role as moral compass of their organisation.

Having ethical counsel improves the organisation's reputation as reliable and credible, and builds "public trust". Therefore, the organisation will be viewed as a good corporate citizen. St. John and Pearson (2017:11) argue that "unethical behaviour by a malevolent actor may precipitate a crisis or interfere with its resolution, but this is often not the case". Not from malevolence but from things like moral myopia, arrogance, or naïveté, a great deal of immoral conduct stems. An individual can be highly intelligent in one or more fields but fail miserably as a moral agent.

Previous studies on the topic focused on how an organisation should engage ethically with its stakeholders during a crisis (Jin et al., 2018) and examined South African PR professionals' views of a moral structure for PR practice in the context of agencies (Carter, 2018). This study investigates the role of strategic communication practitioners as a moral compass of the organisation. For this study, 'moral compass' is defined as an ethical framework, which helps manage organisational values and analyse ethical decisions by integrating the knowledge of the public gathered through boundary-spanning activities. To our knowledge, this research is the initial step in exploring ethical roles from the point of view of strategic communication practitioners in South Africa, whose perspectives will not only shed light on years of experience in the field of crisis communication but also on:

1. What constitutes ethical communication during a crisis?
2. The role of strategic communication practitioners in guiding/directing the organisation to consider ethics when communicating with the public during a crisis.

2. The obligation to interact as morally responsible agents

Strategic communication practitioners recognise and acknowledge their accountability and resulting vulnerability in the workspace. Most strategic communication professionals offering public relations services provide guidance on the consequences of the decisions and activities of an organisation (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). For competitive advantage, management and staff consider ethics to be necessary, as the double- or triple-bottom-line is directly related to healthy earnings (DeMars, 2017:21). Brunner (2017) states that public relations will 'find a moral compass' to explain its intent and pursue the public interest only by identifying its values. The literature has acknowledged the importance of fostering multifaceted professional expertise, values, and an ethical mindset amongst communication practitioners (Bowen, 2016). Brunner (2017) argues that the subject of ethics focuses on ethics regarding the way people do their work, with the emphasis placed beyond professional codes of ethics to include general morality and citizenship. Organisation communicators must protect reputations and stakeholder relationships (Farmer, 2018). The organisation's leadership must set the tone in the organisation to apply the moral compass. Given the complexity of working within an organisation, communication practitioners often face various stakeholders who may consider compromising the organisation's values during a crisis, which should be considered when making ethical decisions. However, the responsible exercise of moral action requires careful consideration of the circumstances, especially from the point of view of all relevant stakeholders; it is the duty of moral agents to foresee the possible consequences during their deliberations.

3. Stakeholders' interest in crises

Stakeholders often pressure an organisation during a crisis by demanding answers, asking for information, and looking for a resolution (Bowen, 2016). It is a rare communication practice that does not experience a 'problem of principle' and heightened clients' expectations creating an environment rampant with ethical hurdles.

To embrace this 'ethical approach,' organisations must attend to all affected stakeholders (Farmer, 2018); prioritise stakeholders on the basis of the circumstances and alter these priorities as cases develop (Xu & Wu, 2020); and shape decisions that equally represent and consider the interests of all stakeholders (Sandin, 2009). In September 2017, in the wake of the campaign to provoke racial tension in South Africa, Bell Pottinger, one of the biggest and most prominent public relations agencies in the UK, was placed under administration amid an exodus of customers and mounting losses. If not careful, the case of Bell Pottinger, which met its demise due to the unethical campaign it conducted on behalf of a private corporation suspected of engaging in state corruption in South Africa, is unavoidable (Azionya, Oksiutycz & Benecke, 2019). "Arguably, the greatest such weakness is that dominant research perspectives are broached from management standpoints with market-based organisational concerns as the focus (e.g., protecting reputation, profits)" (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018:19).

4. Ethical decision approaches

The decision-making process that an organisation engages in is often aimed at balancing competing stakeholder interests. Ethics refers to a set of moral principles and rules intended to protect all stakeholders' interests while communicating in times of crisis (Tao & Kim, 2017). Literature shows that most communication techniques and methods designed to influence the habits and attitudes of target audiences in modern public relations efforts, include both selfish persuasion tactics and genuinely benevolent initiatives (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). More practitioners remain involved in mixed-motive communication campaigns and programmes designed to help organisations and their stakeholders (Grunig, 2014). Tao and Kim (2017:698) argue that "without an ethical compass to guide its decisions", an organisation could adopt strategies that oppose stakeholder expectations, strain its relationships with stakeholders and risk its legitimacy.

Grunig (2014:9) restates two proposed principles: firstly, teleology – practitioners in ethical public relations question how their organisation's ethical communication decision might affect the public regarding ethical behaviour that provides the greatest good to many people. Secondly, deontology – practitioners in ethical public relations have a moral duty to expose these implications to the affected public and to participate in conversations with audiences regarding possible decisions that could impact them. Practitioners seeking to apply these principles are affected by the lack of clear guidelines in addressing ethical dilemmas created by various obligations to a number of competing pursuits. The justice and the care ethics are the two ethical approaches that delineate how organisations can respond to stakeholders' pressure. The ethics of justice developed from the philosophy of social justice theory, advocates for standard rules for people to be held to (Farmer, 2018). The ethics of justice entails that organisations treat involved stakeholders fairly through impartial decision-making, which recognises all stakeholders' interests during the crisis (Sandin, 2009). The organisation reacts critically and adopts empirical methods, human rights, and reasoning (Tao & Kim, 2017), drawing on diverse views centred on objectivity and logic. An ethics of care emphasises nurturing relations and transmitting values, such as empathy and compassion (Sandin, 2009).

5. Theoretical framework

Using Fitzpatrick and Gauthier's (2001) responsible advocacy theory as one of the applied conceptual foundations, this study examines what constitutes ethical communication in a crisis and the strategic communication practitioner's role in guiding/directing the organisation to consider ethics when communicating with the publics in a crisis. The theory of responsible advocacy emerged out of the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig, 2014). Practitioners counsel the institution on communication tactics and strategies, which can be customised to attract and retain the support of important electorates, called publics, or stakeholders. Practices typically adopted to assist organisations in establishing good relationships with the media, staff, shareholders, societies, government officials,

and other audiences include strategic, often persuasive communication (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). Critics of responsible advocacy theory suggest a postmodern lens and reflexive approach to ethics, rejecting the 'metanarratives' of ethical guardians and advocate archetypes (Holtzhausen, 2012). Grunig (2014:7) explains that "asymmetrical practitioners who see their social role as conservative or radical typically choose organisations whose partisan values are similar to their own. Such practitioners then can passionately defend or promote the interests and values of their client organisations ... however, practitioners who defend partisan values often make unethical decisions because of too much commitment and obedience". Most professionals adhere to some basic level of ethical theory. Communication practitioners make decisions on the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of such acts based on their own moral principles, whether they are embedded in early childhood teachings, faith or religious convictions, or simply shaped life experiences (Jackson & Moloney, 2019).

6. Methodology

To gather and analyse data, the research design draws on participants' interviews. The underpinning methodology takes a qualitative approach in recognising that the inquiry attempts to get close to the participants involved in strategic communication practice, their social processes, and the context in which they and their practice is situated (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Purposeful and snowball sampling techniques were utilised because the characteristics of target participants were not easily accessible (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). The use of qualitative research methods allowed researchers to inquire into the ethical standards of the practitioners and their position as the organisation's moral agents. The interview was deemed the most appropriate technique for a field of inquiry, which was previously unknown, as it offers a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013). Interviews have previously been used to study public relations' role as ethical conscience (Bowen, 2008; Neill & Drumwright, 2012) and the use of influence tactics by senior public relations executives to provide counsel (Neill & Barnes, 2018). Ten strategic communication practitioners (seven participants were female and three male) from South Africa were recruited and interviewed between July 2020 and October 2020.

Given that interviews were focused on professional experiences of ethical issues, participants were required to have at least five years' experience in the industry – the experience of practitioners ranged from six to twenty-four years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven of the ten interviewees via WhatsApp voice calling or Zoom video call, and three over email. Interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes, enough time to create trust and rapport, and in most cases, to penetrate under the professional persona and capture some more unguarded opinions and practices, which were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Participants were anonymised, given the potentially sensitive nature of the results. After collecting data and transcribing the interviews, researchers systematically coded data through a thematic analysis approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994), including data reduction, data display, and conclusion

drawing/verification, using Atlas Ti. software. First, all data were read to gain a holistic understanding of the themes while making initial notes. Second, the information was repeatedly re-read to form preliminary codes, which were grouped and put into more significant categories or themes, merging to prevent repetition. Finally, data were read to ensure that all data supported the assigned theme. Our analysis of such data represents ontological and epistemological assumptions, which are consistent with a constructivist study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During the analysis and coding process, the researchers remained reflexively aware of their personal biases and their effect on the interpretation of the data. To deal with this, the researchers engaged in member checks with selected participants and often wrote memos during the analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The trustworthiness of reliable qualitative research is assessed to be credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure trustworthiness, researchers used two key techniques: (1) member checking (testing themes, interpretations, and conclusions through follow-up interaction with respondents, as well as comments from respondents after interviews); and (2) thorough clarification of context and explanation (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Researchers work through the findings in the following section, grouped by the two broad themes of the RQs, describing sub-themes where they occurred.

7. Results

Strategic communication practitioner's role as a moral agent

When asked to talk about what constitutes ethical communication and their role as a moral agent during a crisis, most participants largely expressed a professional position in line with the ethical counsel, using the organisation's code of ethics and moral principles. Results reveal both ethical counsel and advocacy role types.

7.1 Ethical counsel role types

Symmetrical professionals see themselves as counsellors who assist client businesses in applying shared principles when making decisions (Grunig, 2014:7).

7.1.1 Being authentic during a crisis

One group of strategic communication managers at a public sector organisation opined that the "view that every single piece of communication that you share on behalf of a client should be authentic and ethical", adding that the "tone [should] be authentic, approachable, honest and as open as possible". A head of communications in the public sector referred to the impact on the authenticity of strategic communication practitioners as "Misrepresentation of facts to make the company look good at the expense of stakeholders … Failure to protect those who may be affected by the situation in the long-term … Failure to apologise". This is consistent with the view that ethical communication is predicted on specific values, such as being truthful, concise, and responsible with one's

words and the resulting actions" (Surdu et al., 2021). Sisson and Bowen (2017) elucidated that the most essential basis of authenticity is a good intention, known as good will or pure moral will, that could not be corrupted.

7.1.2 Being empathetic and truthful on how the organisation is handling the crisis

Compensation, apology, and sympathy were seen as signs of taking responsibility and showing empathy for impacted consumers, and, in particular, expressing sympathy could be seen as an accommodative response (Xu & Wu, 2020:355). A corporate communication manager at a non-governmental organisation (NGO) argued that, "It's truthful, communicated in a manner that is easy to understand, shows empathy/sensitivity to the issue at hand, and demonstrates how the organisation is handling the issue."

Implied in such an account is an empathetic and truthful SCP that cannot stop communicating; however, this was a far more complicated picture for one marketing and communications executive agency: "during a crisis, you cannot stop communicating". Participants highlighted their moral responsibilities to others, as well as to themselves or to organisations. For instance, "Empathy is so important because you are putting yourself in the shoes of the people that you are producing or creating products and services for". Therefore, an ethics of care stresses nurturing relationships and expressing ideals, such as empathy and compassion (Farmer, 2018), which were important for the communications manager. Kang and Berger (2010) concur that strategic communications officers are uniquely suited to serve as corporate consciences.

7.1.3 Being honest and owning up to mistakes and being ready to give an apology when things go wrong

For one head of communications, it meant having "to be honest, to own up to mistakes and apologise". For one PR consultant, being honest meant "there must be synergies so that you don't get caught lying". For this type of participant, SCPs "must be honest as a communications practitioner in that particular situation". Apologies are emblematic comebacks of an organisation during a crisis. Thus, Koehn (2013) argued that simply apologising is not enough to eliminate negative effects. Naming the wrongdoing for which the apologiser takes responsibility, taking responsibility for the wrongdoing, promptly apologising, conveying a settled, just, and prudent CEO character, creating a supportive, consistent context, delivering the apology in person, exhibiting empathy, and following through on the apology are pertinent factors to consider (Cheung & Leung, 2016). In some cases, the desire for SCPs to satisfy their bosses and get a promotion might affect their judgement and encourage them to be complicit in the lie. A managing director rejected the persuasive advocate archetype, becoming selfish, which prolongs crisis:

> I think the other thing that prolongs a crisis is because we are all trying to watch our back, and as such, we become selfish. We no longer communicate honestly, and if you can't communicate honestly, you are definitely not communicating ethically because ethics go with honesty.

Some participants placed emphasis on honesty and accuracy of information:

> So, it's all about the value of being sincere, the value of being honest, the value of being accurate and forthcoming with information so that people can then have trust in you and the organisation so that they don't feel that they are being misled in any way. … taking into consideration the people who're affected by crises.

For one marketing and communications executive, it meant having a decision or conduct or action that does not cause harm either to self or stakeholders:

> It implies being honest. But it is easier said than done cause sometimes, by being honest and transparent, you may cause harm to others. So, it's very, very difficult.

Many participants – again resonating the discussion of the moral counsel that companies make mistakes and SCPs have a responsibility to be fair at all times – talked about: "being honest is not always about being right all the time".

This managing director at a communications agency explained:

> The main thing is honesty; simplicity, you know you need to make sure that what you are communicating is simple enough for people to understand. When a crisis happens, what companies will do is to drop and bring in lawyers, and there's a legal person who speaks, and people don't understand.

While many participants spoke about their counselling role of honesty with people, the last part of the quote appears to describe the constraints many meet in the boardroom.

One participant expressed that being honest demonstrates integrity and fairness:

> Communication that is backed, that is fact-based and has the whole amount of honesty, integrity, and being fair at all times.

One head of a strategic communication department in a public sector organisation with 24 years' experience also talked of apologising if the organisation is wrong and the importance of aligning with the company values to guide during crisis communication:

> It is important because even if when you are in the wrong as an organisation, I believe it is very important to apologise and to ensure your stakeholders in the public that you are taking action to right your wrongs, and there's also a flip side of it.
>
> Stakeholders always have a way of finding the truth. So eliminate any type of communication that will expose you to further interrogation, either by the public or by your stakeholders.

Here, being honest is helpful to avoid exposure to further interrogation as truth will always come out. This mirrors Place's (2019) findings that PR professionals applied values such as justice, honesty, fairness, transparency, and loyalty to their decision-making. Also, Neill and Barnes' (2018) agreed with the findings that PR had internalised a code of ethics as they found it consistent with their own values. A view that practitioners are fundamental to their thoughtful decision-making and responsible thinking (Surdu et al., 2021).

7.1.4 Being open and transparent about what happened during a crisis

Maintaining information transparency is important to create the capacity for risk communication to support all stages of emergency management. One public sector corporate communications manager described the role of "ensuring that factually correct information is communicated as it becomes available". Transparency is very critical for crisis communication in the digital era (Cheung & Leung, 2016) and takes on even greater significance during a crisis (Sisson & Bowen, 2017): "Being transparent and open while following the necessary protocols."

For another participant, keeping communication channels completely open was important:

> Being ethical during a crisis means to keep communication channels completely open. Be available 24/7. No comment is never an option. Look at all communication like your emails and WhatsApp messages etc.

One strategic communications manager overwhelmingly saw technological changes (particularly the growth of "supercomputer" as a key medium for public verification of SCPs messages) as a compelling reason for organisations to be more accessible and transparent with their audiences and to share information wherever possible:

> Almost everyone has a supercomputer in the palm of their hand and can verify any single statement within minutes.

A compelling reason for organisations to be more open is that not saying anything is tantamount to guilt:

> I do believe that the most successful companies do hold strategic communication in high regard and utilise it effectively. Again, in today's digital age – not saying anything is tantamount to guilt. We live in a world where not communicating and engaging is just not an option.

In line with humanitarian care, one head of communications recalled her experience and a need to use openness as activism for miners' rights during the Covid-19 crisis:

> I have noted that a crisis such as the Coronavirus has made us step up our human rights activism as we advocate for miners' rights.

The participants further clarified how their employers, especially in a crisis, were still reluctant to reveal potentially harmful information. Leadership is not easily persuaded, and similarly, Jackson and Moloney (2019:87) allude to "practitioners [that] flow between ethical identities, painting a fluid, complex and occasionally contradictory picture of ethical practice that does not fall neatly into ethical metanarratives":

> It took time to decide as an organisation that the way forward will be to write to all our stakeholders, informing them of what our CEO had done. It took a number of meetings and rewriting of statements before considering the final action to take.

Another respondent emphasised openness and transparency and rejected the persuasive advocate archetype:

> It is about transparency and being truthful, being honest about whatever crisis … because as a communicator, you might have heard of the term that is used out there to refer to us as spin doctors, which has a negative connotation because if someone calls you a spin doctor, it means somewhere along the value chain you are forced to spin the facts, which is not ethical communication.

Lack of transparency can have devastating effects that sometimes leave a permanent stain on an organisation (Roberts, 2018). Hence this observation is further strengthened.

Participants note the contemporary media environment in which investigative journalists pressure transparency issues, making the SCP industry warier of doing spin:

> You get journalists calling, and an anonymous source will speak the truth, and they will ask me later to comment. What the anonymous source said is the right thing, and on this side, I am trying to defend things that are not necessarily 'defendable.' So, that is why communication should be transparent.

The participants explained how timing and language suitable for the intended audience are important:

> An ethical message … transparency. The timing of that message and who the intended people of that message are; and the language used in crafting that message so that the message does not get lost. So, your conduct again, you must be transparent.

For one managing director at an agency, being sincere and openness to acknowledging wrongdoing was crucial for the practitioners:

> It is communication that is sincere, that is based not to spin or mislead people but to empower them to fully understand the crisis. If it requires the organisation to acknowledge wrongdoing – perfect, they have to acknowledge wrongdoing. If it requires the organisation to apologise for whatever crisis they caused, they have to.

The practitioners indicated their working with teams during a crisis centred on the dialogue principle (Grunig, 2014). Again, a participant described the need to be visible and accessible:

> You need to be a visible and accessible company because you need to understand where the other parties are coming from in terms of seeking closure, seeking information that will better inform them.

As the previous quote suggests, it was a common sentiment to associate ethics with legal problems, shared by around one-third of our participants, such as this managing director at a communication agency:

> Emotions are part of those. You will be dealing with people – some got high emotions, some have got anxieties – to be part of your crisis communication. You do need legal

> because you need to be sure that you are still legally protected. But, on the other side, that is where the challenge comes from because the lawyers will tell you to just shut up and don't say anything because you are going to incriminate yourself.

Here the study is not the first to reveal this. In the UK, Jackson and Moloney (2019) and the US, Bowen (2008), for example, found similar sentiments amongst public relations practitioners (PRPs), with a variety of complex reasons as to why such practices are pursued. The tension between legal practice and communication practice can obstruct openness and transparency. This agrees with literature, which suggests that legal professionals favour protective tactics, urging clients to remain quiet (Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995; Gibson & Padilla, 1999). Crisis communication scholars emphasise a more accommodative method, including transparent and truthful communication, along with remedial action, which could be viewed as a concession technique (Seeger, 2006). Thus, a group corporate affairs spokesperson was of the view that:

> Being transparent about the incident, what happened or at least what we think has happened, the causes/s, the impact on human life, communities, the bottom line. Communicating information as soon as possible and not causing unnecessary delays in terms of communication.

Furthermore, Surdu et al. (2021) sum this up well by suggesting that practitioners' ethical communication should consider the medium or even the language chosen for delivering a message. This implies that the message should be accessible to all stakeholders. Bowen (2018) argued that business research ethicists implicitly, if not explicitly, endorse a stakeholder approach to construing the moral responsibilities of business.

7.1.5 Being sensitive to stakeholders' urgent needs in a crisis even at the expense of profits

Holtzhausen (2015) indicates that it is the practitioner's role to make his or her own institution aware of the immoral act and speak up on behalf of the other. Based on humanitarian care (for victims of crisis), being sensitive to stakeholders' urgent needs in a crisis, even at the expense of profits, was mentioned by participants as noted below:

> To be sensitive to what people are going through. For example, Coca-Cola diverted money meant for advertising to humanitarian purposes.

Participants referred to their personal virtues: "It's all about what and how you would like to be treated if you are at the receiving end." Addressing inequality in education and health issues, one communications manager expressed that ethics should supersede profit-making: "Ethics really needs to be at the heart of that and not just about profits."

The participant further showed that these moral thickets were once again central to clients:

> And it's not just about me and how much money I can make, but how is it serving the people that are buying from me or how is it serving my country and things like that. So putting people at the heart of all your decisions is, for me, quite important.

This is consistent with Place (2019), who found that participants adapted to honing moral sensitivity and intuition.

7.1.6 Being truthful and not misleading the public

Strategic communication practitioners were aware that in advancing the interests of clients and employers, they adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth. Still, truth is always elusive in practice, as it is affected by perspective, viewpoint, completeness of facts, understanding, and perception (Jackson & Moloney, 2019). Holtzhausen (2015) acknowledges that ethical practice is based on allowing them to speak for themselves and is based on dissensus, questioning power, and speaking truthfully in one's voice. An argument by Edwards (2021) suggests that disinformation has a well-established pedigree across the PR industry, manifesting as intentional dissemination of incorrect information, hiding or maintaining silence about issues, and reframing issues in order to deflect debate and serve organisational interests. One junior corporate communications manager with more than six years' experience says:

> Wilfully misleading stakeholders or the public will have a negative impact on the company in the long run in terms of the reputation and image of the company. It erodes trust and confidence in the company, which may take a while to restore, if ever.

Although strategic communication practitioners want to be truthful and not mislead the public, there is a dilemma related to almost every participant's wider concern, the customer relationship, which is full of tensions. After the truth is exposed, sponsors will leave the organisation. One senior head of communications with 16 years' experience across a variety of sectors sees strategic communication practitioners trapped between their telling the truth and losing short-term trust with their organisational funders. The expression of one respondent indicates that reputation has a decisive effect on the internal and external variables, which ensure the survival and even growth of a business. The participant recalled having to face the dilemma of a CEO who stole funds, but they chose to tell the truth:

> For example, I also worked for a respectable NGO where the CEO embezzled funds. We were faced with the dilemma of just dealing with it in-house and remaining silent about it or come out in the open and tell the truth, risking losing trust with our funders. We opted for the latter, and it cost the organisation a lot as funders pulled out, and up to today, it is still struggling, but at the same time, it is rebuilding its reputation.

Bowen (2018) suggests that ethics involves systematising, recommending, and explaining or defending right behaviour.

For this type of participant, companies must be responsible; however, it is difficult to conceal information because of social media:

> Companies have to be responsible when they issue out statements on communication crises to protect their reputation because these days, it is hard for companies to conceal information, even if they want to, because of social media.

For her, truthfulness is important when considering the bigger picture:

> Companies have to look at the bigger picture. For example, Tiger Brands had to tell the truth, even if they stood to lose, but they knew telling the truth had far more positive implications in the future than the losses they stood to lose in the short term.

As one PR consultant agency put it: "Tell the truth. About what is happening."

The value of PR cannot be monetarised. The sympathy reaction is deemed more intimate and warmer. The organisation reacts to the public in some way to display their sympathy, which decreases the intensity of aversive emotions, such as fury (Xu & Wu, 2020). One participant noted:

> Companies have a problem because the value of PR cannot be monetised sometimes, which is why research has become an integral part of PR in recent years to determine the benefits.

Another participant stated:

> Being truthful to all stakeholders. Yes, because stakeholders (customers, employees, and local communities) will remember how you have responded during a crisis, which directly impacts the profitability and sustainability of the business.

The statement of being truthful to all stakeholders is disputed by Farmer (2018:6), who indicates that "in theory, it is easy to say that an ethical decision should not only favour the client's interests but must, on the contrary, balance the client's interests against those of all stakeholders. In practice, however, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve this idea". Surdu et al. (2021) explain that truthfulness and honesty imply practitioners should present information most reliably and as factually as possible with professional integrity.

7.2 Ethical advocacy role types

Asymmetrical practitioners consider themselves advocates of their clients' partisan values (Grunig, 2014:36; Farmer, 2018). According to Grunig (2014:7), advocates see their position as interpreting "truth" or "facts" in a manner that places their client in the most favourable light or is likely to provide support for the position of their client.

7.2.1 Being available to update or communicate useful information

When it comes to the role of being available to update or communicate useful information, there seems to be some acknowledgement. As one head of communications admitted, it is important "to constantly update the audience with relevant, useful information. This is also time for a constant update to your audience with relevant information".

A group corporate affairs spokesperson at a public organisation was also nuanced:

> To be available to the media and other key stakeholders who need to be kept appraised on what has happened and the impact thereof to correct inaccuracies that may be prevalent.

Another participant added:

> Timing – be available 24 hours a day – that includes a company representative that is media-ready. Frequency – depending on the severity of the crisis, updates can be provided to the media on an hourly or three times per day basis, depending on the crisis. There is no excuse on earth why communication cannot be effective in 2020. Assure the public that your brand remains safe and dependable.

Pointing to how practitioners need to be available to update the public, it is important to establish consistency as it contributes to building trust, commitment, satisfaction, control mutuality, and community with stakeholders (Bowen, Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2016).

7.2.2 Being proactive as the eyes and ears of the organisation through boundary spanning

Grunig (2014) was correct in suggesting that PR professionals can personify an organisation's 'ethical conscience' as long as they manage its reputation (Bowen, 2008). Similar to journalists, strategic communication practitioners, in particular, are involved in interfering with the moral impulse of others because of their role of representing others and creating a false reality and a moral distance between the self and the other (Holtzhausen, 2015). A PR consultant believed that SCPs were being proactive as the eyes and ears of the organisation through boundary spanning.

> We must be proactive. We must anticipate the crisis. As communication practitioners, one of our roles is to be the eyes and ears of the organisation that you work for. So, you must be able to scan the environment within the organisation and the external environments.

This is confirmed by Bowen (2018) who alluded that communicators listen through environmental scanning, surveys, and focus groups. They also measure analytics, segment stakeholders and publics, analyse reams of data, gather internal research, define issues or problems accordingly, and interpret patterns that emerge from their analysis as findings to keep strategic plans moving forward (Bowen, 2018). They create a dialogue with stakeholders, initiate conflict resolution, and implement problem-solving, amongst others as critical activities to strategy creation (an argument parallel to texts on stakeholders, see, e.g., Bowen, 2018; Cheung & Leung, 2016; Farmer, 2018).

7.2.3 Being sensitive to secrets on copyright information

In line with the ethical concerns of the ability to withhold or delay the publication of information, a group strategic communication manager admitted their role of being sensitive to secrets on copyright information. This implies that they avoid divulging confidential information to a competitor:

> This, of course, does not include any information that strategically shouldn't be published in the open – I'm talking about KFC or Coca-Cola's secret recipe – things that are fundamental to the ongoing success of a brand or individual.

This sensitivity to secrets on copyright information can perhaps be explained by the fact that practitioners should protect confidential information that gives their organisation a competitive edge. On the other hand, transparency is important with its overriding virtues, such as openness and clarity. This does not suggest giving away business confidentiality however, an organisation should avoid keeping its stakeholders in the dark (Cheung & Lueng, 2016). The lawyers also come to understand that, while "no comments" translates as "we are guilty or trying to hide something" from the public, there are a lot of ways to say very little without compromising legal matters while still appearing responsive to those who seek more information (Tyler, 1997).

7.2.4 Communicating verified information

Communication fact-based messages are a basic human need (Surdu et al., 2021). Relevant senior leadership should approve the information before SCPs communicate it to the public. A corporate communication manager states this:

> Ensure that whatever information is communicated is verified with the relevant technical/information owners within the organisation and that it is approved by the most relevant senior person (CEO/Board, etc.).

In crisis management, practitioners recalled how certain situations forced them to communicate unverified information with the added scrutiny of media coverage, while the internal processes took time. When engaging with bosses or clients, practitioners often seem to turn a blind eye to ethics. One communication agency's managing director described how:

> Most people suffer from the desire to answer a journalist quickly than the internal processes, so that is where the other challenge comes because you are in crisis communication. So, do not rush to make any decision. Sometimes it is better to wait until everything clears up and you have a clear view of what is going on then, you can better manage your colleagues.

As confirmed by Carter (2018), conflicting loyalties are at the core of ethical decisions. Strategic communication practitioners typically aim to disseminate information from CEOs, other organisational executives, etc., as objective and rational (Holtzhausen, 2015). The conflict between legal crisis communication and the balancing of stakeholder interest is constant as communication practitioners resort to delayed communication until the information is verified, as noted below:

> We work closely with our management, CEOs, etc., so if you are going to say yes, we know there's a crisis, but you haven't spoken to the CEO or your management about the crisis, then you are going to get fired. …that it is going to be the most accurate and have the entire info for your internal stakeholders first, sometimes you have no choice but just to wait on the board.

Balancing everyone's interest, for example, legal considerations, leadership, internal stakeholders – particularly in the form of waiting to communicate verified information – impedes the practitioners' ability to act and counsel amid confusion when management

refuses to listen. What can be created is a level of social impersonality that whithers passion and the moral responsibility of individuals. The media accomplish the alienation by creating a mass audience and public opinion that is devoid of individual thoughts and compassion. One of the outcomes of media practice is the normalisation and massification of ideas and thoughts, which further alienates the practitioner as an individual from his or her own ethical responsibility (Holtzhausen, 2015).

8. Discussion

This study brought up two research questions about what constitutes ethical communication during a crisis and the roles of strategic communication practitioners in guiding or directing an organisation to consider ethics while communicating with the publics during a crisis. Ethical counsel and advocacy role types were identified in the study, with ten roles that emerged. In agreement with the previous findings, SCPs implement ethical counselling as part of their professional role (Bowen, 2008; Grunig, 2014). Practitioners integrated both teleological (the ethics of consequences) and deontological (the ethics of rules) concepts, which were introduced in the literature (Grunig, 2014).

Firstly, it was found that strategic communication practitioners viewed ethics to supersede profits. As Surdu et al. (2021) alluded, practitioners should be guided by the five principles: autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity. During a crisis, humanitarian care is prioritised, although practitioners face obstacles to make this a reality in practice. However, some participants expressed that, in most instances, their loyalty was focused on the relations with clients, legal representatives, journalists, sponsors, employers, or organisations, and not with victims. Disinformation was a traditional tactic in commerce to convey an optimistic corporations' view, securing credibility by obscuring the profit motive in favour of social beneficence claims (Jackson & Moloney, 2019).

Secondly, the principle of communicating facts on what happens during a crisis was an important advocacy role for the common good. Risking everything for the sake of the truth is present in the ethical counsel role type. Matilda (2020:44) postulated that "the principle of truthfulness of information includes the following duties: respecting the truth, avoiding lying, not misleading the public, avoiding exaggeration, explaining, and interpreting information, offering accurate information, and, finally, the duty of rectification". This was expressed by practitioners who believed that the reputation and image of the organisation could be repaired by applying the principle of truthfulness of the information. In most cases, trust and confidence in the company are often debated by leadership and legal professionals. For example, participants highlighted truth-telling with their potential value in crisis communication because they can only reflect the reality of what happened in a crisis that could save the organisation. Although professional codes typically require honesty as a first and foremost standard, many professionals, regardless of their motivation, still find themselves in a conflict with truth-telling (Bowen, 2018).

Farmer (2018:4) argues that "in ethical decision-making, complexity manifests itself in at least three areas: including the ranking of consequences by impact and uncertainty, the balance of interests, and management of the truth and reputation risk".

This takes us to the third major emerging finding: the analyses have shown that media advancement makes ethics important in addressing dubious practices and normalising organisational lying during a crisis. Telling the truth is a concern for practitioners who fear investigative journalists, who further interrogate the organisation's statements about the crisis. Investigative media and new technology provide more scope to increase openness and their effect on unethical practice and information, which is distorted or purposely concealed.

Despite the smaller sample, the findings of this study can be compared to some of the recent studies of ethics codes in public relations. Jackson and Moloney (2019) extracted three leading themes from UK PRP's perspectives and interpretations of ethics: societal responsibilities, truth and lies, and PR ethics and professional bodies. They have also recognised that, while the PRP is frequently positioned in literature as the company's ethical conscience, in reality, 'uneasy lies the head that wears a crown'. We discover that in the face of commercial and organisational bosses, many PRPs aspire to an ethical advocacy position but lack agency. The challenge of unethical practice is not challenged as PRPs choose coping strategies. Results confirm Grunig's (2014) statement that practitioners "serve as ethical counsellors to organisations, a role in which they help organisations behave in ethical, responsible, and sustainable ways". Practitioners should be a conscience for their organisations. The findings reflect that participants were profoundly involved in determining the social role of an organisation. Before taking action, organisations must attempt to quantify the social impacts of major decisions.

9. Conclusion

The exploratory approach that was adopted and the qualitative techniques that were employed led to findings that suggest ethical roles previously not clearly identified through empirical studies. This research explored South African strategic communication practitioners' experiences and perceptions of ethics, paying particular attention to their views on what constitutes ethical communication and their role as the moral compass of an organisation.

Technology advancement and access to social media increasingly provide opportunities for the public to verify unethical information or behaviour. As a result, there is a growing compulsory acceptance amongst practitioners that ethical communication should be prioritised during a crisis. The findings contribute to the dialogue and offer guidance to strategic communication practitioners on what elements, particularly as a moral agent, promote ethical communication during a crisis. Communication of ethics should be a collective intent of the organisation in that leaders need to carefully define the principles of the organisation in consultation with their governing boards and need to model those values. The actions of leaders, therefore, directly and indirectly, affect the entire

organisation's ethical climate. Listening to practitioners talk about their ethical roles and their view on ethical communication during a crisis is an initial and necessary step in considering these ideas. The findings are significant, but so is the fact that they are written from the viewpoint of strategic communication experts who help complex and diverse organisations. Future studies may consider and refine these ethical roles and suggest others, whether they focus on strategic communication practice and interdisciplinarity in greater depth, make comparisons between communication and other disciplines, or concentrate on a related discipline or set of disciplines.

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