What is Responsible Advocacy in Public Relations?

Kate Cox
CMN 334
22 February 2006
katykat224@aol.com

Responsible advocacy has been seen as a theory of ethics that could be applied to the practice of public relations. The theory was developed by communication scholars Kathy Fitzpatrick and Candace Gauthier. While I agree with the Fitzpatrick/Gauthier theory for the most part, I have my own take on responsible advocacy. In order to most completely define my view of responsible advocacy in public relations, it is necessary to examine the Fitzpatrick/Gauthier theory, the advantages and disadvantages of it, and my personal thoughts on it.

The theory of responsible advocacy was developed by Fitzpatrick and Gauthier to be a significant step towards "providing a universally acceptable philosophy on which standards of ethical public relations practice might be based." (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 201) Responsible advocacy seeks to marry the ethical identity of public relations professional as advocate and social conscience, two roles that have consistently been at odds with each other. As an advocate, a public relations professional is accountable to his or her client or organization. As a social conscience, however, a public relations professional is accountable to the public at large. Thus, the innate conflict between the two identities. Public relations scholar Don Wright writes, "They [public relations professionals] need guidance in reconciling the…roles of the professional advocate and the social conscience." (qtd. Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 201) The theory of responsible advocacy attempts to be that guidance. Specifically, there are three principles that must be adhered to. First, a public relations professional must carefully consider the harms and benefits of possible action. Second, respect for all persons should be insured. Third, a public relations professional must see that all rewards and difficulties be equally

allocated. These principles are the basis for the responsible advocacy theory. Admittedly, the principles can conflict and therefore responsible advocacy must employ the personal ethics of a practitioner. Overall, the Fitzpatrick & Gauthier theory demonstrates the ideal of public relations practitioners being able to serve the interests of clients while simultaneously and equally serving the interests of society at large.

The advantages and disadvantages of the theory are essential to an in depth analysis of responsible advocacy. The greatest advantage of the model is its dedication to *both* advocacy and social responsibility. By giving equal weight to both roles, ethics becomes a realistic component in the practice of public relations. In other words, it is unrealistic to think that ethics can exist within the public relations industry if a practitioner only adheres to the appeals of either a client or the public, but not both. Furthermore, in today's world people, both in and out of the public relations industry, are realizing the need for social responsibility within corporate America. Paul Samuelson writes "a larger corporation these days not only may engage in social responsibility, it had damn well better try to do so." (qtd. in Stone, 31) Simply put, a theory of ethics that does not seriously consider the role of social conscience will not cut it. Another advantage of the Fitzpatrick & Gauthier model is the principles on which it is founded. The three principles provide easily understandable moral guideposts for the public relations practitioner. The greatest disadvantage to the Fitzpatrick/Gauthier theory is the likelihood for the principles to conflict. It is difficult to rely on a theory, that when applied to a real life situation, fails to survive. Consequently, another disadvantage is the use of *personal* ethics to take the place of the principles when they conflict. Each person

is unique and so, too, are his or her personal ethics. Thus, an accurate balance of both advocate and social conscience cannot be insured.

After noting the elements, advantages and disadvantages of Fitzpatrick/Gauthier responsible advocacy, I am left to contemplate if this is true responsible advocacy. To be honest, I feel this is as close to true responsible advocacy as any public relations practitioner can get. Due to the ethical nature that responsible advocacy implies, there can never be one correct definition of responsible advocacy. That being true, I believe the Fitzpatrick/Gauthier theory provides the most universally applicable concept of responsible advocacy. That is, the balance and equality of advocacy and social responsibility in the actions of a public relations practitioner. Nyirjesy writes it is important that "someone recognizes that we [public relations professionals] all have to juggle our loyalties to our employer, our clients, our profession, those around us and ourselves." (1) The only way to be truly loyal to each is to offer advocacy *and* social responsibility.

I feel that responsible advocacy also calls for public relations professionals to do more than function as a social conscience for an organization. It calls for an equal amount of passionate advocacy. This passionate advocacy, for me, is the root of public relations. Responsible advocacy is a means to facilitate and foster fervent active support for a cause while at the same time providing a method for checking and balancing such support.

The biggest challenge for me in practicing responsible advocacy in the public relations field is the inconsistency among people's definition of responsible advocacy. For me, especially starting out, how can I practice what I believe to be responsible advocacy when my employer feels differently? Even worse, what if I am asked by a

superior to practice responsible advocacy that I feel is unethical? I know I am not alone in this challenge. In fact, it is a challenge that has been plaguing the entire public relations industry for a long time. Harrison and Galloway write "even if many public relations practitioners are not 'amoral sheep that blindly service their clients with reckless abandon' (Lieber, 2003, p.43), the public relations industry has become synonymous with ethical slipperiness to the extent that a leading academic at a recent conference equated public relations directly with 'deceptive communication'." (1) This notion of public relations being the practice of deceptive communication stems directly from the contradiction, in and out of the industry, as to what is ethical action and consequently responsible advocacy.

Thus, while the best definition for responsible advocacy I can come up with is the equal balancing of ardent advocacy and careful social responsibility, it is clear the public relations industry has yet to universally define and implement it. The Fitzpatrick/Gauthier theory of responsible advocacy is perhaps the greatest step towards such definition and implementation. For now, however, it seems as though each public relations practitioner is going to have to avoid the amoral sheep on his or her own, hopefully in time making a collective dent in the belief that public relations is merely deceptive communication.

Works Cited

Fitzpatrick, Kathy and Gauthier, Candace. "Toward a Professional Responsibility Theory

of Public Relations Ethics." <u>Journal of Mass Media Ethics</u> 16 (2001): 193-212

Harrison, Karey and Galloway, Chris. "Public Relations Ethics: A Simpler (but not

simplistic) Approach to the Complexities." <u>Prism</u> 3 (2005): 1-17

Nyirjesy, Christine. "Taking an Ethical Stand with Your Public Relations Strategy."

<u>Communication World</u> 1 May 2005: 1-2

Stone, John D. "Public Relations and Public Responsibility." <u>Public Relations Quarterly</u>

Spring (2005): 31-34