The world phone hacking scandal media essay

The phone hacking scandal and the subsequent public inquiries exposed how journalists from News of the World (NoW) had been employing illegal reporting techniques to gather information for news with no regards to journalism ethics. The implications of the scandal and the inquiries on public relations and media relations is more on the ethical part. Similar to the media industry, ethical behavior is also important in the public relations profession that includes media relations. Public relations can be explained as the ethical and strategic management of communications and relationships to build and develop coalitions and policy, identify and manage issues and to create and direct messages to achieve sound outcomes within a responsible framework with media relations being more specific. Media relations is a part of public relations that deals mostly with the relationships of an organization with the media. Media relations also determine how the organization gets it's messages across to the target audience. Media relations what message the organization wants to send, who to send it to, where to send it and when to send it and if possible without paying directly for it through advertising.

In most countries, public relations practiotioners are members of professional public relations institutes and/or associations such as the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) of the United Kingdom, the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA). These institues and/or associations all have established a set of code of ethics which not only provide an ethical framework for the activities of the profession but is also central in maintaining the professional standards in the public relations profession. Membership of these institutes are given after

the applicants pass the assestment tests and members of these public relations institutes are required to follow the set of code of ethics. Members who have breached the code of ethics can be reported to the institues and they will be investigated and pinalized.

In the wake of the NoW phone hacking scandal, there are concerns in the United Kingdom (UK) about ethics and privacy arising especially from the flow of information between the government and the press. According to the report from Elizabeth Filkin's inquiry, the main concern being improper disclosure of information to the media. The government and the media interacts with each other on many levels. These unregulated interactions causes information to flow outside of the government causing problems. Improper disclosure can be broken down into a few kinds. They are improper disclosure for personal advantage, improper disclosure for trading and improper disclosure cause of bribery or financial rewards.

Improper disclosure for personal advantage is where civil servants deliberately leak information for various kinds of improper personal benefits such as a sense of power and control, professional advantage during employment with the government or to gain future employment elsewere by providing exclusive information. According to a statement by Kit Malthouse who is a British assembly member, there is an odd kind of fascination with knowing it's them that put the information on the newspapers, this knowledge gives them a sense of power.

Trading is another kind of improper disclosure of information where inappropriate information is given to the media in order to dilute or prevent

the publication of other information which might be damaging to some civil servants or those with senior positions in the government. Although there are proper and ethical negotiations with the media to prevent the publishing of information which might obstruct an ongoing investigation, cause harm to members of the public or civil servants or to ensure accuracy in reporting but these negotiations often have to include unethical placing of materials or offering of exclusive information to the media in return to bury the harmful information. Quoting Nick Davies, a freelance journalist, “ you get the Press Officer who says, well, if I give Reporter ‘ A’ a particular story exclusively, then next week Reporter ‘ A’ will do me a favour.” These kinds of behaviours conflict between what the public needs and what the Press Officer wants causing information that are not supposed to be known to the media to be leaked out.

Bribery and financial rewards is the most common and prevalent cause of information leak. From her questioning, Filkin found out that NoW journalists have been paying civil servants especially the Metropolitan Police Service for information. The demand for exclusive government information is high especially information on police work. Police information is a commodity that is very valuable to journalists and much of it is of interest and enjoyment of the public. This demand coupled with no proper guidelines in place in regards to what is acceptable in dealing with the media leads to the unstoppable and untracable leakage of information to the media.

Disaffected staffs is also another cause for improper information disclosure. Staffs that are disaffected or in dispute with the organization can become a source of improper and damaging disclosures to the media. Quoting from

Filkin's report, " a Thomas Lund-Lack has leaked a highly confidential Counter Terrorism report to the Sunday Times. Lund-Lack has served with the British police force ethically for 34 years before being given a role in the Special Branch as a member of police staff. When integorated Lund-Lack cited that the reasons leaking the information as being ' annoyed' by his workplace, and becoming ' more and more angry' about the ineffectiveness of the Counter Terrorism Command. He felt that what he has done was legally wrong but was morally justified in bringing his concerns into the publics' attention."

Another main concern of the flow of information between the government and the press lies in the relationships the government have with the press. It is known that the government has not given equal access to all parts of the media for a number of years and that relationships between press members have been developed selectively. Journalists develop close relationships with senior government members because if you are nice to them chances are you are going to get more stories than you're not. This often leads to private news briefings during drinking sessions in clubs. This has lead to a culture where media contacts are close aquaintaces and their hospitality is a norm. It is also not uncommon for civil servants to have friends or family members working with the media. There friends and family members that when they acquired some exculsive information, they pass the information on to the media.

With regards to the concerns expressed in the UK about the flow of information between the government and the press in the light of the ongoing News Limited controversy, practice and ethics of media relations are

being questioned due to the similar nature of the public relations industry with the media industry. As a part of public relations, media relations is also bound to the code of ethics of the public relations profession.

There is a set of common ethical practice that is generally adopted and followed by media relations practitioners in dealing with information. Before using any information, media relations practitioners must first make sure that whether the information acquired is confidential. If the information is not confidential then the practitioner can proceed with the information. If confidential information is given on the record then the practitioner is also allowed to used the information. However if the confidential information is obtained off the records, the practitioner is discouraged from using the information based on the ethical obligations of the public relations profession.

Media relations practitioners are required to exercise caution when talking and/or writing about a person or an organization. This is not only to maintain the accuracy of the subject but also to avoid inadvertently defaming someone or an organization. Practitioners are also required to not dissiminate false and misleading information and/or claims. Media relations pratitioners must obtain permission for any materials that they use to acknowledge the owners of the materials and to avoid copyright infringement. Practitioners are also required to get permission to use personal information and/or images in public. Practitioners must also immediately correct any errors that occur in the course of carrying out their duty such as media using the material you provided wrongly.

Ethics is a standard of conduct that indicate how one should behave based on moral duties and virtues. Who determines these ethical obigations? Ethical obligations are determined not only by a person's own values but it is also influenced by the organization a person is working with and the client the person is dealing with. Each organization has it's own set of ethics that it enforces and every client has a different ethics expectation. When faced with ethical problems, the practitioner is encouraged to discuss with the employer and/or the client to reach an agreeable ethics standpoint. Ethical obligations are also determined by the industry a person is working in such as the code of ethics of the public relations industry. The code of ethics is to safeguard the credibility and legitimacy of the profession. Another factor that influences ethical obligations is the society. An ethical media relations practitioner should alwaysput the public interests before his/her own's or the client's.

Besides code of conducts, public relations and media relations practitioners also acknowledge the existence of a set of universal values and embracing them in carrying out their duties to uphold the standards of practice and professional conduct on the part of public relations practitioners. The set universal values are: honesty, integrity, fidelity, fairness, transparency, accountability, confidentiality, and accuracy and most if not all of them can be found in the code of ethics of the many public relations institutions.

The ethics pyramid is a structural approach to checking ethics by Tilley. It is used to examine the ethicality of behaviours and actions. It is divided into four stages: ethical baseline, ethical intent, ethical means and ethical end. Media relations practitioners are encouraged to usethis pyramid to examinie

ethics. The the first stage at the bottom part of the pyramid is the ethical baseline. This stage is where the media relations practitioner carries out research on the ethics and expectations of the stakeholders. The second stage is the ethical intent stage where the practitioner plans and choose ethical principles for virtues, rules and outcomes. This is also the stage where the practitioner create measurable objectives and discuss and agree the shared ethical objectives with the client. The third stage, ethical means is assessing the tactical objectives and choosing ethical tactics to employ and deciding the means to use to communicate with others. The final stage, the ethical ends is where the practitioner assess strategic ethics objectives for evaluation and check and report ethics outcomes.