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Challenges for public relations: working in an international framework

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Abstract: Western models of public relations tend to dominate the discipline, but the efficiency of such models in light of global public relations and the richness of alternative – particularly South East Asian – approaches will be interrogated in this paper. There are few scholars who take a critical approach to public relations practice, or consider the significance and practice of public relations in non-Western and developing nation contexts. Those who do tend to approach international public relations as an opportunity that offers the multinational company competitive advantage and sound image management in international markets, rather than as the potential for developing ethical and reciprocally meaningful communication practices.

This paper aims to address issues of globalisation and the demands of ethical approaches and social responsibility by developing a context-sensitive orientation to the discipline. The complexities resulting from the internationalising of the field, specifically in terms of education and professional practice, will be explored and illuminated through reference to case studies in SE Asia and Australia.

Key words: International public relations theory

The Relevance of Western Models of Public Relations to Non-Western Contexts

Despite an explosion in writing and research on public relations in Asia in the last decade, public relations scholarship in the region tends to be dominated by Western models and approaches. The use of these models suggests a profoundly Western bias in our understanding of public relations, even when theorists identify limitations of the models in non-Western contexts. In addition, few scholars writing about public relations in Asia take a critical approach to the field, or interrogate the effect or the ethical implications of the use of such models.

Nevertheless, the Western bias in approaches to Asian public relations is generally well-recognised by public relations scholars. For instance, Sriramesh refers to Asia as 'The Silent Continent' in public relations pedagogy (2004, p.2), and he argues that the public relations 'body of knowledge' is 'largely ethnocentric with the focus on theory building confined almost exclusively to the United States with input from a few Western European countries' (2004, p.1). Similarly, Huang is keen to avoid the ethnocentrism of imposing Western values when writing about public relations in Taiwan (2000, p.230).

In a different vein, Moloney argues that public relations is 'communicative behaviour ... by groups/organisations in the pluralistic competition for marginal advantage in liberal, capitalist, market political economies' (1997, p.14). If public relations is, as Moloney suggests, a business tool for modern, Western societies, then what is the effect of imposing this understanding on a non-Western society which does not fit these criteria?

Although much research has been conducted on public relations practices in individual Asian countries, this research tends specifically to compare local and North American practices through the application of Western models—in particular the four communicative models devised by Grunig and Hunt. For instance, Singh argues that ‘the application of professional, predominantly American PR models is a relatively new concept to Indian PR’, and describes the progress in recent decades towards the ‘professional’ model (2000, p.300). This idea of professionalism draws heavily on Grunig’s (1992) writing on ‘excellent’ public relations, a combination of the two-way asymmetrical and symmetrical models, developed from the IABC study based on studies in the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada. Similarly, Ekachai uses Broom’s role scales as well as Grunig and Hunt’s four models to compare Thai and American understandings of public relations (1995). Even when Sriramesh, Kim and Taskasaki explicitly compare public relations practices in three Asian countries (1999), they draw on Grunig and Hunt’s four models, models derived from normative studies of North American practice, to do so.

But we also need to consider the effects of working with such models, and the values embedded in those theoretical approaches influenced by them. Grunig believes that the four models ‘describe the historical development of public relations in the United States’ (2001, p.11), where there is a linear progression towards ‘excellent communication’ based on symmetrical approaches and mutual understanding. These categories suggest at once a linear and ahistorical professional development where the most ‘excellent’ model of public relations practice is deemed to be the two-way symmetrical model.

Moloney suggests that a major problem with Grunig's typology is that it constructs symmetrical public relations as a moral, virtuous and highly ethical practice (even though this two-way model rarely occurs) (1997, pp.13-14). Other public relations scholars have also criticised Grunig and Hunt’s emphasis on symmetry (for example, critical scholars such as Motion and Weaver, 2005; Holtzhausen, 2000; Murphy, 2000; Roper, 2005; and cultural studies theorists such as Mickey, 2003). This fourth model is arguably an ideal and difficult to achieve in practice, even in the West. Given the variables of culture (including issues of class, gender, ethnicity and religion), politics, economy, and modes of communication, what sense does it make to talk of *symmetry* at all? Does symmetry really obtain in Western let alone in non-Western contexts? Aren’t relations always, and necessarily, *asymmetrical*? Communicators—whether individual, institutional or corporate—are not interchangeable, or equivalent; generally, far from it.¹ For example, where is the possibility for symmetrical communication between a multinational corporation and a local community dependent on it for employment? And where is the potential for symmetrical communication between a federal government that spends millions of dollars on advertising its policies and its citizens who, bombarded by their government’s

¹ Roper includes a brief discussion of the pervasiveness of asymmetrical communication in her highly persuasive paper, which argues that symmetrical communication is regularly harnessed (as a hegemonic practice) by powerful organisations merely to avoid public criticism and to maintain unequal power relations with stakeholders (Roper, 2005).

television, print and media messages, struggle to distinguish between public information and propaganda? Additional barriers such as low levels of education, illiteracy and poverty make it difficult for organisations to develop a collaborative dialogue with stakeholders with any sense of symmetry (see, for example, Singh, 2000, p.299; Sriramesh, 2004, p.21).

Yet even putting aside for the moment the question of the possibility of symmetrical relations anywhere in the world, the very act of trying to 'fit' symmetrical and other models to an Asian context makes certain assumptions about the models' universality, and denies the specific social and political conditions out of which they were developed. Our concern is that these normative models are derived from North American practices, and are arguably focused on predominantly organisational and/or corporate understandings of public relations.

Furthermore, if these categories are 'developmental', with the best being the ideal, then the Asian countries are both constructed as less than ideal and condemned to being constantly compared with North American models and practices. This is reflected in much of the writing about public relations in Asia. For instance, Singh predicts that 'Indian public relations will grow and mature to best practice' (Singh, 2000, p.304)²; and Sriramesh, Kim and Takasaki in their comparative study: 'In all the three Asian cultures studied here, the press agency/publicity model turned out to be the most frequently practiced model' (Sriramesh, Kim, and Takasaki, 1999, p.7).

The notion of public relations presented in these models is closely linked to Western liberal democracies and free market economies. Certainly this is recognised by scholars of Asian public relations who clearly see links between increasing democratisation, deregulation, liberalization and greater transparency and the development of public relations as a strategic management profession (see for example, Sriramesh et al., 1999, Sriramesh 2004, Singh 2000; Wu, Taylor and Chen. 2001; Ekachai 1995). This poses a difficulty for public relations scholars in that it is difficult to see how Asian public relations—at least in those societies which are not liberal-democratic in structure—can ever be granted legitimacy if they are always to be measured against standards derived from Western, liberal-democratic, market economies. This suggests the need for an alternative, a broader conceptual understanding of public relations, one which addresses specifically the particular political and social conditions of each country and, in addition, recognises the values implicit in current models of public relations.

Significance of context-sensitive and critical theory approaches

Notably, theorists such as Sriramesh (2004), Huang (2000), Park (2001) and Wu et al. (2001) have attempted to adapt Grunig and Hunt's models and ideas about symmetry to local contexts or situations, partly in recognition of the shortcomings of these models in the Asian context. More particularly, Asian scholars have

² In fact, Singh believes that public relations has existed in India for over 2000 years, and certainly is not contingent on Grunig and Hunt's models (2000, p.300). She maintains that these models are only a 'point of departure' and that India should not simply adopt Western or American paradigms, but rather develop their own (Singh, 2000, p.309)

devised a fifth model, drawn from studies of Asian practices: the personal influence model (Sriramesh, Kim and Takasaki, 1999; Wu, Taylor and Chen 2001). The personal influence model is variously described as ‘a quid pro quo relationship between the public relations practitioner and strategically placed individuals such as government regulators, media persons and tax officials’ (Sriramesh et al., 1999, p.285) and ‘practitioners cultivating good relationships with external publics to restrict government regulation, secure government approval and ensure positive press coverage’ (Wu et al., 2000, p.321)³. Other scholars demand that the impact of local culture be taken into account through its recognition as an important environmental variable. For instance, Sriramesh et al. (1999) argue strongly for the inclusion of an additional environmental variable, culture. This has also led to the development of an additional model of public relations, drawn from the significance of culture from the Asian region, the cultural interpreter model (Sriramesh et al., 1999, p.278).

Sriramesh argues that although the relationship between culture and public relations has been investigated in several studies, it is important to also consider the impact of local social, environmental and political variables (2004, p.3). Sriramesh suggests that this is an attempt to ‘operationalize’ Grunig and Hunt’s models (2004, p.4).⁴ A significant omission in this account, however, are the *ethical* implications for the relationships that obtain in particular social contexts in which it public relations strategies and techniques might be developed and implemented. The strategies and techniques harnessed in a given public relations campaign, for example, will not only be influenced by determinants such as the political system, the level of economic development, activism, the legal system, corporate culture, the mass media, and so on (see Sriramesh 2004, pp.5-22), but the relations of power structuring each of these both independently and interdependently, *as well as* the ethical issues and complexities brought about by such a network of relations. We will take up this question in the next section.

With Sriramesh, then, we argue that is important to consider the specific political (and social) context in relation to public relations in each country, and that it is highly problematic to ignore the liberal democratic assumptions of Western concepts of public relations.⁵ And yet Sriramesh also claims that only pluralistic societies offer an environment that is conducive to practicing strategic public relations...in societies where public opinion is not valued, the nature of public relations tends to be one-way and

³ Ironically, we suspect this particular model probably has greater relevance in Western contexts than is generally acknowledged; the role of ‘personal influence’ or private relationships in public relations may in fact warrant further research in Europe, US and the Antipodes.

⁴ Sriramesh draws on later writing—in particular the ‘Excellence Project’ by Grunig (1992) and Vercic, Grunig and Grunig (1996), along with a study by Culbertson and Jeffers (1992)—to develop generic principles for global public relations practice, and five socio-cultural variables, which allow a better understanding of public relations practices in different countries (2004, pp. 3-4).

⁵ As one example, the influence of a political system on public relations is significant. Rodan, for instance, identifies a contradiction between the resistance to openness, media freedom and greater transparency in authoritarian states such as Singapore and Malaysia, and the ‘unprecedented emphasis on transparency’ in government and corporate rhetoric (2002, pp. 23-5, p.42).

propagandistic in nature. Democracy, then is the primary underpinning on which strategic public relations thrives. (Sriramesh, 2004, p.5)

Although Sriramesh recognises the effect of specific political and governmental variables on public relations, that is, that a democratic, pluralistic society is the only one in which strategic or professional public relations can be practised, he does not extend this idea and interrogate the political implications or social effects of public relations. For this reason, we believe a critical approach can usefully provide the framework within which specific public relations approaches and practices in given contexts can be scrutinised, debated, analysed, and judged.

The value of critical perspectives is that they investigate how political, sociocultural, and economic conditions shape public relations practice (Holtzhausen, 2000) and determine the "sources of power and influence" (Mickey 1998, p.336) that public relations practitioners represent. Equally important are issues concerning how public relations practice itself might promote certain values that fit within particular political, economic and cultural frameworks and modes of living, but not with others. This in turn leads to a questioning of the role of public relations within, and its responsibility to, democratic society. (Motion and Weaver, 2005, p.51)

Critical scholars such as L'Etang and Pieczka (1996), Holtzhausen (2000) and Motion and Weaver (2005)⁶ argue that normative and functional approaches to public relations—such as those indicated by Grunig and Hunt's typology—tend to privilege organisational interests, and neglect to address inequalities in power. In addition, the focus on symmetrical models has excluded, until recently, the social and political contexts of public relations. Through the use of a combination of political economy and discourse analysis frameworks, Motion and Weaver (2005) demonstrate the value of studying social and political contexts as well as discursive aspects of public relations. Importantly, such a critical approach can address issues of power which are neglected in most models and theories of public relations:

From this perspective, public relations is theorized as a legitimate tactic in the struggle for and the negotiation of *power*. The task for the critical public relations scholar is to investigate how public relations practice uses particular discursive strategies to advance the hegemonic power of particular groups and to examine how these groups attempt to gain public consent to pursue their organizational mission. (Motion and Weaver, 2005, p.50)

⁶ Although there is arguably some irony that we draw on 'Western' theorists, we believe that theorists such as Motion and Weaver (2005), Holtzhausen (2000) Mickey (2003) and L'Etang and Pieczka (1996), in their rejection of normative and 'universal' approaches to public relations and call for both a specific focus on social and political contexts, and for a reconsideration of ethical dimensions, suggest an approach which is arguably culturally and context-sensitive; we believe this potentially offers a reconceptualisation of public relations in both Asian and non-Asian contexts. In addition, this paper can be seen as an attempt to negotiate our own position as scholars and educators of public relations in the gap between Australian and Asian approaches, and drawing on Western and non-Western writers and theories seems highly appropriate.

This is precisely the approach we endorse and embrace. In addition, Motion and Weaver signal the interest in ethics implicit in the critical approach, through reference to its capacity to question ‘the role of public relations within, and its responsibility to, democratic society’. We wish to make explicit that interest in ethics, contending that its integration is crucial in enabling an even more engaged and productive examination of public relations as it is conceptualised and practised in diverse social contexts, whether democratic or otherwise.

The Integration of Ethics into Context-sensitive and Critical Approaches

The very act of assuming the propriety of Western-oriented approaches for all public relations activities is itself morally dubious, though that is not what concerns us here. Rather we wish, building on the discussion in the previous section, to explore the integral role of ethics in the revised approach to public relations we propose, building on the work of other scholars. After a brief overview of the ways in which ethics has been treated in the literature, and an account of those approaches we regard as limited and limiting, we define our position on the place of ethics in public relations, and particularly its integration into the processes and practices of communication in, what are typically, asymmetrical relationships. We also draw attention to the particular significance of social responsibility as framing or guiding ethical practice, most importantly because such an approach serves to highlight the interdependence of politics, economics, culture and modes of communication—in other words and broadly speaking, *the social*—and public relations. In this way we hope to gesture towards a more inclusive, context-sensitive ethical orientation for public relations in the contemporary global world.

A number of scholars have variously attended to broad questions of ethics and ethical approaches to and practices of public relations (for example, Grunig 1992; Roth, Hunt, Stavropoulos and Babik 1996; Botan 1997; Heath 2000; L’Etang 2003; Starck and Kruckeberg 2003). As well, given the profession’s affection for the defining of strategies and objectives, for measurement and evaluation, it is unsurprising that more specific, step-by-step accounts of *how to do* ethics, or *how to be* an ethical public relations professional have frequently been couched in a quasi-scientific or objectivist discourse. We would argue that while these latter approaches may provide a broad framework within which understandings of ethics: its reach, functions, practices and value may be outlined and appraised, they are inevitably limited, since the processes and contingencies of particular relationships and networks of relationships, and the social situations and interpersonal exchanges in which they obtain and have different meanings and different impacts are, within such a framework, often overlooked.

With the feminist philosopher and ethicist, Margaret Urban Walker, we believe that any overly theoretical, systematised, rational appraisal of ethical orientations and practices has restricted value, especially in an international arena of practice. Walker calls this ‘template’ approach the ‘theoretical-juridical’ model, as it

prescribes the representation of morality as a compact, propositionally codifiable set of law-like propositions that 'explain' the moral behaviour of a well-formed moral agent (not, however, in the sense of predicting what will happen or revealing the causal mechanisms underlying what does happen, but rather by 'explaining' what should happen)' (Walker, 1998, pp.7-8).

Take, for example, Elspeth Tilley's comprehensive pulling together and detailed synthesis of a range of ethical 'tools' into an 'ethics pyramid', which she describes as

a new organizing strategy that enables practitioners to choose the ethics approaches that work for them from the many on offer, and integrate those chosen approaches into the actual daily business of designing, implementing and evaluating a PR campaign (Tilley, 2005, p.313).

With the focus on measurable 'ethical objectives' and 'ethical achievements', ethics in this view is conceived as variously understood but separable sets of goals or standards against which public relations activities at marked stages in a campaign can be measured. As well, in this view, no *direct* account is taken of the social—the political, economic, cultural—contexts in which public relations activities, and particularly the web and mesh of relationships involved and implicated in those, are necessarily caught up.⁷ From our perspective, the approaches gathered together in the ethics pyramid cannot deal with ethics as a series of questions, to be posed, interrogated and negotiated by *all* stakeholders collaboratively, an exchange which would be bound to acknowledge the social determinants, as well as the role of individual and organisational agency, which structure and organise engagement.

In another recent study, Harrison and Galloway (2005) reject code- or rule-based ethics in favour of 'agent-based' ethics, which focuses on 'the individual agent's character and motivations, and asks whether they are virtuous' (2005, p.5). This orientation is similar to Aristotle's notion of virtue ethics.⁸ However, taking such an approach requires being careful not to treat virtues as absolutes, as abstractions. Harrison and Galloway do not appear to grapple with the ways in which, for example, the practice of the virtue of honesty may be compromised or constrained by economic, political and cultural rather than by individual weaknesses or shortcomings. Virtue's negotiable role and value in specific social relationships between individuals or between individuals and organisations may also be overlooked in this account. And indeed—and this is particularly relevant in terms of public relations in the globalised or international arena of practice—such an approach may obscure the distinct possibility that an action may be virtuous in one situation and not in another, or that a virtuous act can have positive effects in its original context, but (unintended) negative effects elsewhere. Social theorist, Zygmunt Bauman, makes the point succinctly in his depiction of the postmodern scene in which ethical acts are played out:

⁷ Reference is made to the allowance for multicultural views, but only within the public relations team (Tilley, 2005, p.310).

⁸ Tilley incorporates virtue-based ethics into the ethics pyramid she develops. See especially Tilley 2005, pp.308-10.

In the complex network of mutual dependencies, the consequences of any act are bound to be ambivalent – no act, no matter how noble and unselfish and beneficial for some, can be truly insured against hurting those who may find themselves, inadvertently, on its receiving end (Bauman 1993, p.181).

Thus, as we saw in the discussion of symmetrical communication and the notion of 'excellent' practice of public relations above, approaches that don't take into account these constraints on ethical practice—determined by relations of power, and the diverse pressures brought to bear by politics, the economy and culture—will surely fall short. For example, if the 'ideas, facts and viewpoints' articulated in public debate are elements of the 'marketplace', as Skinner, Mersham, and Valin (2003, p.18) maintain (in their discussion about the creation of a global protocol for ethics), then the economy clearly wields significant influence over the processes and practices of communicating in public relations and the opportunities for or restrictions on interaction between interested parties. This undoubtedly raises ethical as well as pragmatic questions.

From the discussion above it should not be inferred that we are advocating ethical relativism, but rather a preference for a particularist orientation to ethics, and confronting ethical situations and questions. As philosopher Margaret Little argues, a particularist orientation does not, for example, 'reject[] principles that tell us to "respect autonomy" or to "be kind"'. But the particularist denies that we can unpack those very abstract principles into generalizations that are both accurate and contentful enough to be action-guiding' (Little 2000, p.278). Instead, when we take a particularist approach to ethical issues or situations we attend to their detail, their complexities, exercising sensitivity in order to discern and discriminate—that is, in order to make an ethical judgment about a particular issue or about how we should act in response to a given situation (Little 2000, p. 292). This approach, we believe, manages to avoid the pitfalls of both universalism and relativism. We subscribe neither to the position assumed by the cultural relativists, and described by political theorist and feminist philosopher, Seyla Benhabib, as one of 'bemused detachment' (1995, p.241),⁹ nor, however, to Benhabib's own universalist faith in the possibility of 'symmetrical reciprocity' (1992) in 'a dialogical global community' (1995, p.253).¹⁰

Instead, in our view and in terms of the profession of public relations, ethics is a postmodern, situated practice (see Bauman, 1993; Walker, 1998; Holtzhausen, 2000), one which involves (often ongoing) negotiation about what constitutes morally responsible action, within the constraints of particular social

⁹ Benhabib argues that cultural relativists mistakenly believe that, when observing the other from a distance, we can't make strong evaluations or judgments about whether a moral, political, religious or aesthetic question is right, wrong, good or bad. We can only do this in our 'real' (that is, immediate, direct), our own experience of such questions (Benhabib, 1995, pp.247-9)

¹⁰ Benhabib claims that 'the recognition of cultural difference is predicated upon the recognition of a common humanity' (1995, p.252). From this view, in which she embraces the reality of global interdependence, Benhabib argues for a 'universalist ethics', which 'seeks to establish ... that in the face of the needs and suffering of others, we have to engage in moral conversation and action; that we cannot abdicate the responsibility of responsiveness to the other with facile arguments about cultural relativism' (Benhabib, 1995, p. 252). See also Benhabib, 1992.

situations. This orientation highlights the significance of the processes and practices of communication (within organisations, and between organisations and diverse stakeholders) to ethical deliberations (see Benhabib, 1992; Young, 1997), and therefore *depends* on communicative exchange between parties, however that may be mediated, for its realisation (see Walker 1998, pp.59-70). At the same time, it is alert to the asymmetrical nature of all such exchanges. As Walker points out, while morality is collaborative: 'we construct and sustain it together', this is 'by [no] means on equitable or voluntarily chosen terms' (1998, p.10). And Young draws attention to two key ways 'that the perspectives of subjects are asymmetrical'. In the first place this is because

each has its own temporality ... each brings to a communication situation the particular experiences, assumptions, meanings, symbolic associations, and so on, that emerge from a particular history, most of which lies as background to the communicating situation (Young, 1997, p.51).

And in the second because each occupies a specific position ... structured by the configuration of relationships among positions. Persons may flow and shift among structured social positions, and the positions themselves may flow and shift, but the positions cannot be plucked from their contextualised relations and substituted for one another (Young, 1997, pp.51-2)

This context-sensitive approach to ethics, then, demands that interaction between organisations and stakeholders be pivotal to developing, engaging in and sustaining ethical practices, practices that embrace the gamut of communicative activity, and that include negotiation, judgment and reflection. We see this approach as particularly pertinent to an international orientation to public relations because it allows for the diversity and particularity of cultural, political and economic contexts in which practice is carried out, and for the influence of those on the specific dynamic of relationships between asymmetrically positioned subjects (whether subjects are conceived of as corporate entities, diverse publics or as individuals). Importantly, this approach also helps highlight the need for socially responsible practice, as it throws the spotlight on the often inequitable relations between (particularly) large corporations and their stakeholders. Maintaining that business is central to the process of shaping, influencing and 'doing culture', Birch and Glazebrook argue that 'corporate practices and policies can no longer ignore the social, ethical, moral and above all, cultural consequences of their partnership with society' (2000, p.51).¹¹ This view, we feel, properly focuses on the interdependence and mutual influence of organisations and the (in some cases, several) cultures in which they are active. As organisations (business, governmental, private and public) *do* culture, so does public relations *do* culture too. Attendant on such doing, such practice, and on an orientation to practice, are specific (and often competing) ethical demands.

¹¹ These ideas are explored and extended in Surma, 2005, pp.107-30.

These demands can only be addressed and acted upon in light of active and meaningful engagement between *all* those stakeholders concerned.

Conclusion: Future Directions

We have suggested that the dominance of Western approaches to understanding public relations constrains our conceptual understanding of public relations in an international framework, and that the assumption that Western models can be adapted to suit all contexts denies those models' own historicity and the ideological values embedded in them. In addition to ignoring specific social, political and cultural conditions, the use of such approaches also means that scholars and practitioners may fail to consider the ethical implications of public relations praxis. We suggest an active, meaningful and ongoing engagement with all stakeholders, an engagement that is always alert to the asymmetry and inequality implicit in all communicative relationships, and therefore one more attuned to the possibility of more socially responsible, reflective public relations practice.

The discussion above leads us to believe that in order to flesh out the modified paradigm for the discipline we have sketched, further research is required. With Christine Daymon, we believe that there is a valuable role for qualitative research in this area of the discipline of public relations, as it can help us to 'understand the world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live and work in it' (Daymon, 2002, p. 12). For example, what does public relations as contextualized practice and process mean and what does it involve—both for its practitioners and for its various stakeholders—in a large private organisation in Kuala Lumpur? And for a multinational corporation with a local office in Singapore? Or an aid agency with a base in East Timor? In what ways do social and cultural contexts shape the processes and practices of public relations, and how are those processes and practices validated and evaluated in their own terms, or through alternative discourses, rather than as measured against Western models? How are ethical relationships and responsibilities understood and articulated in specific cultural contexts? And what are the pressing ethical issues, questions and dilemmas that practitioners and stakeholders in these locations must grapple with daily? How are asymmetrical relations negotiated, and how do various communicative practices facilitate or inhibit ethical exchange? These are just a few of the questions that we need to pose to those practitioners and stakeholders who can answer them best, and to those who can enable us to understand and learn from their experiences. In this way we may be able to enrich our capacity for undertaking critical approaches to and interpretations of public relations as ethical practice in an international framework.

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