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Deciphering Professional Codes of Ethics

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Operating essentially as a social contract that outlines group values, norms, and responsibilities, a professional code reinforces an occupation's claims to unique social utility. Yet, many codes, which should be beacons of guidance, are in fact "encoded." This paper focuses chiefly on the Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations, deciphering the two most important aspects of this or any professional code: implicit and explicit attitudes toward the public and toward the truth. Confronted by ethical dilemmas in these areas, professionals should be able to, but usually cannot, find clear direction in the official code. Thus, to function truly as a legitimizing document, the code must be expository, analytical, and evaluational, constructed according to the six recommendations offered in this paper's conclusion.

WHY PROFESSIONS HAVE CODES

Historically, the professions have included the military, medicine, law, divinity, and education. In this century, various occupations in business and industry have been elevated to professional status: engineering, accountancy, marketing, banking, advertising, and public relations, to name a few. Generally speaking, the primary characteristics of such professions, outlined by John Kultgen, can be grouped into three categories: the substantive, the structural, and the ideational. Substantively, "a profession involves complex and specialized activities that require a great amount of skill and arcane theoretical knowledge." Structurally, "according to sociologists such as Talcott Parsons and Bernard Barber, a 'true' profession has an autonomous, collegial, and meritocratic social structure." Ideationally, "the animating purpose of a profession," is largely altruistic, that is, "to contribute maximally and efficiently to human welfare."¹

¹ "The Ideological Use of Professional Codes," *Business and Professional Ethics Journal*, 1:3 (Spring 1982), 61.

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While Kultgen is careful to explain that these ideal characteristics are in fact mythical — all too often contravened by experience — he concludes nonetheless that such myths lend an aura of superiority to professional occupations. Ultimately, professions are exclusionary and lucrative as well, for their “standards of competence, control entry into the occupation, limit the supply of practitioners, and produce important material benefits.”² Entry is usually controlled through licensure, certification, or degree requirements.

What does society get in return for conferring this occupational autonomy? Society is promised explicitly that members of the profession will behave responsibly and ethically to all humankind. Such promises are codified in the principles and articles to which every professional must subscribe.

Licensure and certification aside, professions psychologically and culturally legitimize themselves by their codes. Operating essentially as a social contract that outlines group values, norms, and responsibilities, the professional code reinforces an occupation’s claims to unique social utility. By and large, in these promissory documents the profession articulates its foremost duties: to serve the public and to protect the commonweal. In large part, then, through the code, altruism officially becomes the prime motivator of the profession. It is arguable, of course, whether members of professions actually do perform unique services altruistically. One need only reflect on the immense wealth accumulated by certain doctors and lawyers. But whether professionals do in fact operate altruistically is beside the point; what matters is that professions project the altruistic attitude central to their mystique. Official embracement of altruism — the public vow to serve all mankind — undergirds the social sanction so necessary for the profession to attain its status.³

This promise to be socially responsible becomes the code’s pledge of allegiance to the American public, a pledge that sets the tone and direction of the entire document. For example, the American Association of University Professors’ *Statement on Professional Ethics* declares in its very first sentence “that membership in the academic profession carries with it special responsibilities.” What then follows “is a reminder of the variety of obligations assumed by all members of the profession.”⁴ The *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Realtors* informs realtors of their “grave social responsibility” and “patriotic duty.”⁵ Architects, in their *Ethical Principles*, are reminded of their “responsibilities to the public, which the profession is expected to serve and enrich.”⁶ The *Code of Ethics for Engineers* dedicates engineers “to the protection of

² Kultgen, p. 64.

³ For a closer examination of the professional mythos, see John Kultgen, “The Ideological Uses of Professional Codes” and Magali Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977).

⁴ Rena Gorlin, ed., *Codes of Professional Responsibility* (Washington, DC: Bureau of National Affairs, 1986), p. 183.

⁵ Gorlin, p. 271.

⁶ Gorlin, p. 245.

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the public health, safety and welfare.”⁷ And public relations practitioners are enjoined by their *Code of Professional Standards* to adhere to “truth, accuracy, fairness, and responsibility to the public.”⁸ In return for these promises to labor unstintingly for the good of all, professionals are rewarded with high social status, political and economic power, educational superiority, and all the special privileges that accrue to an elite, entry-controlled class.

THE SPECIFIC PURPOSES OF PROFESSIONAL CODES

If codes bind the profession to public service, how do they spell out individual duties and obligations? Some codes are rigorously specific. The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants’ *Code of Professional Ethics* spells out its concepts and rules in over 100 pages of careful detail. On the other hand, the Society for Technical Communication’s *Code for Communicators* and the International Association of Business Communicators’ *IABC Code of Ethics* offer a few ethical bromides in a page or less. These methods, the overly general and the minutely specific, represent the two extremes in the approach to ethics found in professional codes.

Generalized statements in the codes are usually abstract, high-minded, and largely universalizable. These generalizations are designed either to establish the philosophical base of the profession (usually in a preamble or preface) or to present a principle that covers a multitude of situations. Such ethical indeterminacy is absolutely essential, as Brady reminds us, for “if ethical principles were not designed to subsume a wide range of actions under a simple rule, universalizing would be so ‘situation-specific’ and so tied to the idiosyncratic features of each case that any principle relating to a particular case would suffer immediate obsolescence.”⁹ The danger in universalizing, however, is that ethical grandstanding becomes so easy. Ethically suspicious professionals find easy sanctuary in codes that brim with encomiums to virtue and the American way.

Even the apparently hard-edged categorical imperatives, the proscriptive “thou shalt not’s” reminiscent of the Mosaic Law, can be impaired by ambiguous phrasing. For example, the National Education Association’s *Code of Ethics of the Education Profession* consists entirely of sixteen proscriptions, nearly all of which are as ambiguous as these: [The teacher]

1. Shall not unreasonably restrain the student from independent action in the pursuit of learning.
2. Shall not unreasonably deny the student access to varying points of view¹⁰

At what point do restraint and denial become “unreasonable”? How independent can a student’s action be? What exactly is the “pursuit of learning”? These questions need some rather

⁷ Gorlin, p. 257.

⁸ Public Relations Society of America, *Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations* (New York: PRSA, 1983). Throughout the remainder of this paper, all quotations are taken from the code’s latest revision.

⁹ F. Neil Brady, “A Janus-Headed Model of Ethical Theory: Looking Two Ways at Business/society Issues,” *Academy of Management Review*, 10:3 (1985), 570.

¹⁰ Gorlin, p. 191.

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lengthy interpretations, without which no clear ethical guidance can be forthcoming. The chief function of these statements, however, is not to guide; it is rather to set the desired tone of the profession. The code is simply enforcing a “professional” view: that student intellectual inquiry must, to some unspecified degree, be independent and wide-ranging. How such inquiry is achieved or denied is quite another matter. The code is happy to leave that knotty consideration to the discretion of individual teachers. As professionals, after all, teachers are assumed capable of rendering sophisticated judgments in these matters.

The danger in such indeterminate phrasings, however, is that individuals must actually decipher them. The ethics code itself, which ideally should be a beacon of guidance, is in fact “encoded.” Meaning is snared in semantic entanglements every bit as opaque as those in top secret, encrypted, military communiques — encoded to frustrate the enemy. But the enemy here is the code itself. None of this would be important if professional codes were insignificant. But as Kultgen reminds us, “Codes of ethics are official expressions of normative components in the self-images of professions, as well as the ideas to which the professional is alleged to be committed.”¹¹ A confused, ambiguous, or shoddy code of professional standards reflects an occupational group having the same characteristics, and thereby casts suspicion upon the group’s right to be a profession. Thus, for any occupation aspiring to professional status, its code of conduct, a crucial legitimizing agent, must clearly and accurately render the group’s values, norms, and ethical responsibilities.

CODES OF THE COMMUNICATION ASSOCIATIONS

Within the last forty years or so, communication occupations have striven for social recognition as professions on a par with medicine, law, and education. The Society for Technical Communication (STC), the International Association of Business Communicators, (IABC) and the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) have attempted to establish ethical guidelines for business communicators. In the struggle to become recognized as professions, the groups have codified their standards as best they could to reflect the rights and responsibilities of their occupation. The remainder of this paper focuses primarily on the *Code of Professional Standards for the Practice of Public Relations*, examining two of the most important aspects of any professional code: implicit and explicit attitudes toward the public and toward the truth.

The Public

PRSA Code of Professional Standards

“To conduct ourselves professionally, with truth, accuracy, fairness, and responsibility to the public.”

“These articles have been adopted by the Public Relations Society of America to promote and maintain high standards of public service and ethical conduct among its members.

A member shall deal fairly with clients or employers, past, present, or potential, with fellow practitioners, and with the general public.

A member shall conduct his or her professional life in accord with the public interest.”

¹¹ Kultgen, p. 61.

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Let us focus for a moment on the word “public” and the phrases “public service,” “general public,” and “public interest.” Concern for the public is articulated only four times in the entire PRSA Code, a curiously low number for a profession whose very title indicates the public as a central focus. Perhaps this infrequency is explained by the code’s official interpretation of the phrase “public interest”:

The public interest is here defined primarily as comprising respect for and enforcement of the rights guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States of America.

On the face of it, this statement seems perfectly acceptable; it is patriotic, humane, juridical, idealistic, and libertarian — in short, everything American.

But what are the practical effects of a code that wraps its key term in the United States Constitution? Whenever vagueness masquerades as definition, the result is inutility. Is it reasonable to assume that PR practitioners will actually know specifically the rights guaranteed by the Constitution? Even if they have a rough working knowledge of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, are they likely to be aware of the Supreme Court’s interpretation of these rights?

Consider for a moment a Constitutional principle at the very heart of public relations: the First Amendment guarantee of free speech. Free speech is, of course, not always free. Its bounds are most egregiously crossed, for example, when one person defames another. Yet, how many practitioners understand the rights of the individual regarding defamation? The issue can get very complicated. In assessing, for instance, whether one person has defamed another, thereby committing libel or slander, privilege may need to be determined. For public figures, the difference between absolute and qualified privilege must be clarified. Whether the statement was malicious or negligent, whether a libel can be repeated in a news story, what is and what is not a fair comment on such allegedly libelous statements,

and what might constitute criminal libel — all these considerations revolve around this one small but crucial legal question of defamation and the larger Constitutional issue of free speech.¹²

While it might be unreasonable to expect the PRSA Code to spell out all these details, it certainly is not unreasonable to expect some kind of official recognition of their existence. What is least needed is the palliative given in the official interpretation (except perhaps as a tone-setting prelude to more specifically useful guidance). In defining the “public” so generally, without warning practitioners in more detail of their Constitutional rights and responsibilities to that public, the Code fails as a professional guide. Subscribers are implicitly held responsible for a knowledge they most likely do not have —except for the Constitutional lawyers among them. The burden of 200 years of Constitutional law is hoisted onto the shoulders of practitioners whose familiarity with such documents may well be limited to high school civics or to a college government course.¹³

¹² A brief yet effective overview of defamation is contained in *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual*, ed Christopher French, Eileen Powell, and Howard Angione (New York: The Associated Press, 1984), pp. 256-276.

¹³ While the better public relations textbooks present a general overview of the legal aspects of the First Amendment rights, students may or may not undertake to read such material. They usually must be forced to study the legal information, and then be examined on it.

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But let me be more charitable. Assume for a moment that American practitioners, through education and experience, actually do have a good working knowledge of Constitutional law and of the functioning of local, state, and federal governments. To define “the public” in Constitutionally global terms certainly imbues the code with the proper democratic spirit, that is, to respect the rights of the citizenry. But still left is the nagging question: who is that citizenry? How can the individual practitioner be expected to defend and enforce public rights when those rights invariably spill out among publics at odds with one another? The term “public interest” becomes meaningless, because the proponents and opponents on any one issue are themselves struggling to convince others how to define the general public interest. In other words, if a practitioner is to behave responsibly to the public, if professional life is to be conducted “in accord with the public interest,” which public — of a multitude of them — is the ascendant public?

The problem can best be illustrated with a case. Suppose a busy urban international airport can no longer operate safely under the crush of its air traffic. The facility has been given such low safety ratings that many passengers are reluctant to fly. The solution seems to be either to expand the airport or to reassign traffic. Airport neighbors, last taken advantage of a decade ago when their neighborhoods were obliterated by expansion, have had it; they simply will not tolerate more noise and congestion. They have formed vocal and powerful special interest groups to protect themselves from further incursions.

The city, no longer able to handle automobile traffic to and from the airport, will have to spend hundreds of millions on new tunnels, roadway expansion, and parking facilities. Some city residents, whose tax bills would skyrocket and whose neighborhoods would be reconfigured, are furiously opposed to the roadway expansion. Other city residents, involved in the lodging, restaurant, and retail businesses, strongly favor expansion. Given the ultimate environmental burdens, however, the mayor and city counsel, along with the immediate neighbors, favor diverting a significant percentage of the flights.

But relocation will not come without a price to the public. This move means that a smaller airfield in a beautiful and historic suburb will be expanded to accommodate jet traffic. Not only will the skies grow unfriendly over suburbia, the roadways, already congested, will have to be widened. Inevitably the quaint historical character of the town will be ruined. Desecration of national historical treasures has attracted the attention of people across America and around the world. Yet, even at that, many town residents favor the increased restaurant, hotel, service, and retail business that will follow in the wake of expansion.

Assume now that a practitioner must use the PRSA Code to determine “responsibility to the public.” The “public” comprises airline passengers, airport neighbors (pro and con) , city residents (pro and con) , the suburban anti-relocation faction and their national/international alliances, and the suburban pro-relocation faction — a minimum of eight clearly defined publics. The concerns here (and the growingly heated passions) revolve around safety, economic, political, historical, and environmental issues. Enter the bemused PR practitioner who hopes, under the guidance of the Code of Professional Standards, to make some sense of this crazy quilt

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of competing interests.¹⁴ The code's advice? Respect and enforce Constitutionally guaranteed rights.

Do practitioners at this juncture need to be reminded of the rights and responsibilities of good citizenship? Possibly so, but more to the point, they need help in deciding which public most closely represents the code's ideal "public." What usually results is some ungainly amalgamation. Given this unholy alliance of publics, the practitioner must figure out how to resolve various dilemmas through conciliation, mediation, arbitration, negotiation, and appeasement — whenever and wherever appropriate.

Before any steps can be taken toward resolution, however, competing interests must be weighed, taking into account the value systems of the particular groups, and balancing these against what can best be determined as the general value system of the society on the whole (no small task). For example, that retail economic interests have less value than passenger safety is a clear and easy determination. But less clear is the relative value of economic interests over and against environmental and historical-preservation concerns. The health of local economies generally and their specific subsets must be examined; environmental impact must be studied, and the relative merits of historical districts need to be determined. Therefore, insofar as is humanly possible, the practitioner must attempt to decide objectively, based on whatever evidence is at hand, which other values ride higher or lower on the scale, always careful to balance short-term against long-term gains and losses. Thus, today's economic boom may well be tomorrow's bust. If over-development, through hasty or partial decisions about what best serves "the public interest," damages the quality of life, then industrial, residential, business, and tourism growth may be irretrievably stunted. Confusing as it all may be, puzzling through this thicket of tangled issues is one of the primary responsibilities of the PR practitioner.

Perhaps it is this very complexity and continuous flux that has driven the PRSA code to silence, abandoning the practitioner on one lone sentence. That sentence gives no useful guidance on exactly what these Constitutional rights are nor on how to safeguard them. Perhaps worse, the code provokes troublesome ethical and practical questions by failing to recognize openly that the so-called ideal "public" is usually nothing more than an uncomfortable coalition of "publics," which, chameleon-like, change from issue to issue. The PRSA code fails even meagerly to suggest how to identify publics, how to evaluate the relative worth of their competing needs, and, most importantly, how to conciliate the publics, or, when necessary, how to choose the most meritorious view (balancing short- and long-term social effects). Because of these critical failings in the code, public relations practitioners, to carry out their task, are placed in the role of public defenders, beating back the unethical hordes with a balsa club.

Equally frustrating for many is the PRSA code's handling of "truth." In what follows, the codes of the PRSA, IABC, and STC are examined to discover what inevitably prevents honorable men and women from keeping their promises to tell the truth.

TRUTH

PRSA Code of Professional Standards

¹⁴ In this case the practitioner is not assigned a client, because such allegiances must be overridden anyway if the client's aims would conflict with the public interest (Article 2, *Code of Professional Standards*).

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We pledge:

To conduct ourselves professionally, with truth, accuracy, fairness, and responsibility to the public;

3. A member shall adhere to truth and accuracy and to generally accepted standards of good taste.

7. A member shall not intentionally communicate false or misleading information, and is obligated to use care to avoid communication of false or misleading information.

IABC Code of Ethics

1. Communication professionals will uphold the credibility and dignity of their profession by encouraging the practice of honest, candid and timely communication.

STC Code for Communicators

I therefore recognize my responsibility to communicate technical information truthfully, clearly, and economically.

To many outside the communication profession, these promises to tell the truth ring hollow and false. And why not? The technical communicators who abide by the promise to write “truthfully, clearly, and economically” do not write the manuals most of us read. These failures of clarity, however, may be the result of incompetence, inability, or deadlines (not to mention naivete for even making such a promise). After all, I may pledge with the most honorable intent to express myself clearly and yet, because of the complexity of my ideas or the task at hand, simply be unable to fulfill the promise. Worse by far, however, is the mendacity of the public relations professional who (fingers crossed) publicly vows to tell the truth.

The public has been lied to for so long now that PR has become synonymous with conniving, whitewashing, and covering up. The consummate flacks of the late sixties and early seventies — the Nixons, the Haldemans, the Erlichmans — PR’ed their way into power and, once there, stonewalled to maintain it. Today the likes of Michael Deaver, Edwin Meese, Lyn Nofziger, and the Great Communicator himself (ex-pitchman for General Electric) come to mind, each in turn committing perjury or peddling influence or violating ethics rules or just plain “forgetting.” It is a mistake, of course, to assume that the moral lapses of these men necessarily pervade public relations. Such people, either through innate depravity, weakness, or moral expedience, have simply taken the advice of their mentor, Machiavelli, who counseled:

anyone who determines to act in all circumstances the part of a good man must come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence, if a prince wishes to maintain himself, he must learn how to be not good, and to use that ability or not as is required.¹⁵

Yet, we must ask, does the spirit of Machiavelli haunt this profession? Is he, at bottom, the true founding father of modern public relations? The PRSA code’s declaration to tell the truth — is it just another attempt to manipulate an image? Is everybody in this business venal? For the

15 Niccolo Machiavelli, *Machiavelli. The Prince and Other Works*, trans. Allan H. Gilbert, copyright by Hendricks House Farrar Straus, in Maynard Mack, et al. eds., *World Masterpieces*, vol. 1 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), 1234.

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honorable and conscientious practitioner, these questions are disturbing. The answers seem to depend on how “truth” is defined.

Many people find the notion of telling “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth” — except under oath in a court of law — laughable. In our time, moral relativism, situational ethics, as well as psychological and communication research and theory, have made us healthily skeptical, indeed afraid, of anyone claiming to know “the absolute truth” about anything. Yet the communication codes seem to suggest a moral grandeur that has little to do with the workaday world.

Underlying the codes’ injunctions always to tell the truth, it would appear, are these assumptions: Truth (with a capital “T”) is objective; that is, somehow Truth lies outside the individual. I can strive for and “capture” Truth in the same way that I strive for and earn money or power. (How else could technical communicators promise to deliver such ineffable substances as “truth” and “clarity”?) Second, such “objective” Truth is seen as essentially separable from the individual perspective or collective human experience. Truth transcends individuals and can exist independent of the human mind. Third, Truth is verifiable. Because it does exist outside the individual, others can know it as well as I in essentially the same way. If others and I can verify it, we can localize, identify, and name “it.” Thus, fourth, Truth is discrete. All I need is patience and time to acquaint you with the Truth. And though sometimes hard to get at, the Truth is essentially simple; that is, I do not need to be a genius to know the Truth. Education and experience are less relevant in apprehending Truth than are a pure heart and a sound mind. Finally, because Truth is objective, verifiable, discrete, and simple, it is therefore absolute. Truth is ultimately something like a manifestation of the Platonic Ideal interposed between us and infinity. If we make the effort to scrape away at the temporal corrosion, we will reach a glowing core of absolute and infinite Truth. This world’s vicissitudes simply corrupt our attempts to attain that Ideal.

With the exception of a few poets and divines, most people fail to have such epiphanies; in fact, they really do not bother their heads about them. Experience suggests that truth-telling is difficult stuff — at best a dim shadowing of maybes and oughts. For most people, figuring out the truth becomes a guessing game, because they can rarely trust the sources that claim to be giving them all the facts. Misstatements, ignorance, misunderstandings, vested interests, mixed motives, expediency, malicious intent, venality, malfeasance, incompetence, scheming, cowardice — the list is endless — all work to obscure our vision. After a lifetime sunk in this morass, is it any wonder that so many people forswear ever knowing the Truth? Truth, then, like “Public interest,” in the course of a lifetime gets diced into little bits and pieces, smidgens of Truth churned about in a stew of illusion and circumstance. Practically speaking, Truth becomes subjective, complex, and relative. One’s daily catechism finally shrinks into, “It all depends.”¹⁶

Given such a world view, any code of professional standards that enjoins us in all circumstances to “adhere to the truth” and “not intentionally communicate false or misleading

¹⁶ For the phrase used in this context, I am indebted to Milton F. Lunch’s “Commentary” on Joseph S. Ellin’s “Special Professional Morality and the Duty of Veracity,” *Business and Professional Ethics Journal*, 1:2 (Winter 1982), 94: “For those concerned over the differences between lying and deception . . . I would suggest a simple answer—it all depends.”

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information” falls upon jaded ears. Crucial, however, is the general, though rarely articulated, belief that Truth and truth-telling are not quite the same thing. Apprehending Truth is an epistemological or even a religious venture while “truth-telling” is an ethical concern. This means that “truthfulness can be required even where full ‘truth’ is out of reach.”¹⁷ But in truth-telling, shades and gradations often make the smallest truths kaleidoscopically transitory.

It is this ever-shifting evanescence that makes truth-telling so difficult. Common sense tells us that the so-called truths of a situation can be hidden any number of ways without actually violating an ethical code. For example, dealing in abstractions and generalities can obscure crucial facts without denying their truth. Apparently clear yet essentially ambiguous statements do the same. Thus, I can tell the “public” that my company has the best interests of the community at heart. This statement is generally true, to be sure, but I may evade my duty to truth-telling by not specifying those “interests” and by not indicating which publics benefit and which do not. Or I can write a product release bulging with the mindless jargon of the day: “state of the art,” “cutting edge of technology,” “user friendly,” “precision engineered,”

“award winning,” “industry standard.” I thereby conjure up visions of excellence through association, visions that actually becloud the facts; yet, I have not communicated “false or misleading information” — there simply is no proof to destroy my ambiguous or generalized claims.

Euphemism, first cousin to the glittering generality and ambiguity, likewise hides political, corporate, and bureaucratic dirty laundry without denying so-called truth. How else can we have a department of defense that seems equally interested in offense? Tax “simplification” that engenders an indecipherable tax code? A national “budget” that budgets the country into deficit oblivion? Corporate communications departments that, in churning out advertising-oriented printed matter, don’t really “communicate” with the public at all?

Dumps become “landfills,” razors become “shaving systems,” secretaries become administrative assistants,” store clerks become “management associates,” loan personnel become “loan vice presidents,” libraries become “media resource centers,” and making-a-few-quick-phone-calls becomes “market research.” The humble are dignified; fact conspires with fiction.

But if abstractions, ambiguity, and euphemism can be ethically suspect, what about the unstated? In communicating no information whatsoever, have I logically or ethically violated the injunction to “avoid communication of false or misleading information”? Does my silence ever damn me? At best, the PRSA, IABC, and STC codes are themselves ambiguous here; but the intent of their proscriptions seems this: as long as I do not actually communicate a falsehood through my words, actions, or deeds, I do not violate the code. Well and good, except for the countless situations where silence itself bears untruth.¹⁸ Take, for example, this hypothetical

17 Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 13. Bok’s close examination of the motives, variations, and results of lying is recommended reading for communication professionals.

¹⁸ Bok reminds us that the “mental reservation” trick has saved many a professional in uncomfortable spots: “A well-known Catholic textbook advises doctors and nurses to deceive patients by this method when they see fit to do so. If a feverish patient, for example, asks what his temperature is, the doctor is advised to answer: ‘Your temperature is normal today,’ while making the mental reservation that it is normal for someone in the patient’s precise physical condition,” (p. 37).

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situation: Sharon G. tells one of her prospective clients that, as advisor under contract to the Public Affairs Office at the Harvard Business School, she could not begin working with his company until late summer. She has communicated no “untruth,” for indeed her work with Harvard goes through July.

But Sharon’s intent here has been deviously self-serving, for she wants the prospect to hear “Harvard B-school” in all its attendant glory; she wants to be seen through the excellence of her Harvard connection. Nothing wrong with that, on the face of it. Everyone does it. What Sharon has not told this prospect, however, is that her work with Harvard is very low-level, does not relate significantly to the proposal she is making to his company, and has come to her not through her honest professional efforts but rather through the machinations of her fiancée. She is hoping the prospective client thinks Harvard has sought her out because of her highly regarded reputation. Sharon has embellished her professional image by remaining silent on these serious points. She has not lied certainly. She has been accurate. She has adhered to the truth. She has been honest and candid. She has complied with the codes of the PRSA, the IABC, and the STC. Nevertheless, no matter how subtly, Sharon G. has deviously manipulated silence with her intent to deceive for gain.¹⁹ Such deceptions —professional life is filled with them — need never be uttered.

Recognizing this, the Advertising Code of American Business, after enjoining subscribers to “tell the truth,” informs them of the difference between truth-telling and Sharon G.’s type of deception by omission.

1. Truth. Advertising shall tell the truth, and shall reveal significant facts, the concealment of which would mislead the public.

Basic Principles

3. An advertisement as a whole may be misleading although every sentence separately considered is literally true. Misrepresentation may result not only from direct statements but by omitting or obscuring a material fact.²⁰

The Advertising Code makes a very important point here: words can have a transcendent effect, that is, though literally true, they can suggest beyond their native meanings and thereby “mislead” and “misrepresent.” The clause “obscuring a material fact,” however, introduces a complication. How is “a material fact” defined? In the Harvard illustration, through Sharon’s manipulative silence, has she omitted any material facts? I may think not. You may think so. We may never come to agreement. And certainly the Advertising Code offers no help. But at least it has taken the right step in offering the reader a clearer idea of truth-telling’s larger scope.

19 Deception “consists either in true statements which are nonetheless misleading, or in actions which convey a false impression, or in the deliberate withholding of information where the person not informed is misled into drawing a false conclusion. Deception can be inadvertent, but where it is deliberate, the agent must want someone to draw a false conclusion,” from Joseph H. Ellin, “Special Professional Morality and the Duty of Veracity,” *Business and Professional Ethics Journal*, 1:2 (Winter 1982), 78. Ellin, in explaining how deception differs from lying, demonstrates why lying is “a greater wrong” (80-82, 86).

20 From Doug Newsom and Alan Scott, *This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1981), pp. 472-473.

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The AAUP Statement on Professional Ethics illustrates further how a professional code can offer helpful perspectives on this business of truth-telling. In enjoining its members to search for truth, the AAUP Statement reveals that the professor's

primary responsibility to his subject is to seek and to state the truth as he sees it. He accepts the obligation to exercise critical self-discipline and judgment in using, extending, and transmitting knowledge. He practices intellectual honesty.²¹

The key phrasings here are “the truth as he sees it,” “judgment,” and “intellectual honesty.” The AAUP Statement acknowledges that truth is evanescent — subject to myriad viewpoints and perspectives. The professional, relying upon personal judgment, therefore, cannot report the Truth, but can report his or her perspective on the truths, that is, on “the truths as he sees them.” This matter of “intellectual honesty,” is less clear (a very difficult thing to define); the Statement chooses to let educators decide upon this for themselves.

Some hints of what such honesty means, however, are given later as the code clarifies the way in which an intellectually honest person conducts relationships with students: “He makes every reasonable effort to foster honest academic conduct and to assure that his evaluation of students reflects their true merit.” In addition, the scholar-teacher, as a colleague, “acknowledges his academic debts and strives to be objective in his professional judgment of colleagues.”²² Important here is that the educator makes “every reasonable effort” and “strives to be objective.” Again, the Statement's humanistic, rather than absolutist, approach to honesty and judgment lends credibility because the phrasing does not appear frivolously abstract or beyond human reach. True, there is a note of the puritanical here in that one must “strive,” but striving, after all — being driven by internal motivation rather than by external threats of retribution — may well be one of the chief hallmarks of the “professional” attitude toward life and work.

PROFESSIONAL CODES AS GUIDES

Codes of professional behavior or statements of ethical principles function as the enlivening spirit of a profession. The code in many ways is even more important than the law, for in addressing the ineffable questions of propriety often ignored by the law, the code offers a larger ethical vista. But there can be danger in codes. Just as poorly phrased laws cause great injury to a society, so do ambiguously phrased codes cause great harm to a profession. Impenetrable codes, or codes with unrealistic or unclear aims, are the last refuge of the scoundrel. As sanctuary for cloudy thinkers — or indeed for the unthinking — loosely phrased code articles, like poison, seep through the entire fabric of the document, rendering the whole code, if not useless, at best suspect, and at worst laughable.

Though professional codes do function as outward and visible signs of occupations having “arrived,” such documents must, to earn the respect of both the profession and its society, become relevant in the day-to-day life of the profession. Confronted by an ethical dilemma, the professional should be able to find specific guidance in the official code. That guidance, insofar as is humanly must be straightforward and directive. And given the need to universalize articles and

²¹ Gorlin, p. 183.

²² Gorlin, p. 184.

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operating principles, code writers must be especially careful not to equivocate or introduce unnecessary ambiguity.

To be useful, therefore, codes must be expository, analytical, and evaluational. They must

1. clearly define terms whenever necessary.
2. offer succinct examples, illustrations, or analogies as well as suggest other written sources helpful in explaining difficult material.
3. carefully classify and divide troublesome groupings of concepts, terms, practices, or principles.
4. clearly analyze and evaluate knotty problems, offering, whenever possible in their interpretations, historical and philosophical perspectives.
5. indicate the law's standing on an issue.
6. openly admit when an article or principle may be subject to personal interpretation.

Written in accordance with these six recommendations, codes would be imbued with the proper spirit of enlightened guidance. If code writers would thus frame their preambles, articles, principles, and interpretations with due care, beleaguered professionals would not have to puzzle over intended purposes and missed meanings. Rather than having to decipher their codes, professionals could use them as guides to improve their lives — and the lives of all those whom they serve as professionals.

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