

Public Abstract

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Title:THE ROLE OF DUTY-BASED ETHICS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS:
AN ETHICAL JUSTIFICATION MODEL FOR THE ACTIONS OF CRISIS COMMUNICATORS

This thesis explores how duty-based ethics can aid in explaining how public relations professional employed by corporations communicate with external publics, especially when organizations are faced with crises. A content analysis examined whether ethical duties were mentioned in various types of messages by four organizationsTM, two non-profit and two profit corporations, in times of "non-crisis" and crisis. The analysis examined publicly available documents, which contained official communication related to the organizational culture and news stories published in four newspapers during times of crisis.

Analysis found that autonomy and respect from the dominant coalition enabled public relations practitioners to act as ethical advocates. In addition, public communication follows a crisis life cycle. Content analysis also found that RossTM six ethical duties could be plausible evaluative criteria for determining the ethical tone of communication. Identifying the dominant ethical duties for each case established the ethical tone for the messages. When there was no crisis, all six of RossTM ethical duties were expressed in the messages through mission statements and descriptions of corporate culture. In times of crisis, often the message is changed to reflect the law or only some ethical duties. The change of message suggests that ethical communication can be accomplished in several ways, which supports a fundamental claim of contingency theory.