Article

Spinning at the Border: Employee Activism in 'Big PR'

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Abstract
This article extends Coombs and Holladay's (2018) social issues management model to provide new perspectives on activism and public relations. It also fills a gap in the literature on internal activism by analyzing the case of The Ogilvy Group and their employees, many of whom pushed for the agency to resign its work for U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Through a textual analysis of a leaked transcript documenting a meeting between Ogilvy management and internal activist employees, the communicative tasks of definition, legitimation, and awareness (Coombs & Holladay, 2018) are explored in a way that complicates identity and power. As public relations practitioners are increasingly called upon to either advocate for or against social issues, this study provides an interesting contrast, showing one interpretation of what happens when there is dissension in the ranks.

1. Introduction

In July 2019, The Ogilvy Group (Ogilvy) and Edelman, two titans of the persuasion industries, faced protest from their own employees regarding client-work related to the migration crisis at the Mexico/U.S. border. Employees of both agencies, as internal stakeholders, asked to be excluded from the respective accounts. As of this writing, Ogilvy leadership has refused to resign its work for U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), while Edelman executives chose to end a new relationship with GEO Group, a prison operator running detention facilities at the border (Hsu, 2019). In both instances, employees turned activists were counting on negative publicity, or the threat of it, to create change within their respective organizations. Edelman received condemnation from the abandoned client, GEO Group, with executives there complaining of a "chilling" effect from "politically motivated attacks" (Moore, 2019). Other than this momentary derision (confined to trade press), Edelman emerged seemingly unscathed by capitulating to internal activists; whereas, Ogilvy experienced more furor.

In a leaked transcript of a meeting about CBP between Ogilvy CEO John Seifert and employees, *Buzzfeed*'s Vo and Vu (2019, p. 12) quoted one employee as saying, "What I'm mostly hearing is that we're willing to work with companies that are allowing children to die and that are running concentration camps." In response, Seifert said that car companies "allow people to die every single year" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 12). External stakeholders such as the immigrant rights group Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES), amplified and supported the employee protests at Ogilvy by publishing an open letter to the agency's president on Twitter. In one of many follow up tweets, RAICES (2019) encouraged endurance on the part of the agency employees, writing, "Companies won't change plans after a few negative media cycles. Workers need to consistently organize for months, maybe years, for change to happen. #CanceltheContract."

Both Ogilvy and Edelman provide promotional services in what could be called 'Big PR,' or the combined $68,7 billion (Miller, 2020, 2021) global landscape of

influence. The difference in decisions regarding border work might be attributed to the fact that Ogilvy is owned by mega conglomerate WPP while Edelman remains independent. Regardless, this study is more concerned with the crisis communication and the agentic possibilities engaged after the Ogilvy decision to retain CBP was made. The strategies at play for internal activist stakeholders and Ogilvy management, examined through a textual analysis of the leaked transcript, offer an opportunity to increase understanding of social issues management in the understudied area of internal activism by extending the social issues management model (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). The study will also consider briefly the role of the external activist group, RAICES, since they ignited the crisis for Ogilvy when they publicly misattributed a border video to the agency.

In public relations, a crisis is a conflict that forces practitioners to manage disputes in the best interest of their organization, and if possible, in the interests of other stakeholders (Wilcox et al., 2013). Issues management, a related process, has grown from its corporate advocacy roots in public policy (Heath, 1988) to include social issues (Coombs et al., 2019). With social issues management, a company must communicate and attempt to shape a public stance on a social problem (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Ogilvy's promotional work for CBP—designed to encourage new recruits in patriotic service—arguably helped shape an image for CBP in conflict with reportage concerning contentious social issues at the border. This work, although not a direct statement of corporate advocacy, was also challenged by the internal activists. Once the transcript was leaked, the potential conflict between image and social reality was exposed. Such unmasking threatened the neoliberal order inherent in corporate promotional production. This order prioritizes "profit over people" (Chomsky, 1999) and wields power behind a veil of seeming common sense and individual responsibility. In such an environment, promotional agencies as organizations, not individuals, are often not held to account because it is business as usual, even when, as some employee activists argued, human rights are at stake.

2. Literature Review

In a critique of public relations scholarship that arguably marginalized activist publics, Coombs and Holladay (2012) advanced the role of activism as central to the question of power in public relations research. Rather than confining power to the C-suite and activists as always in opposition to the corporate interest, activist publics also offer opportunities to study the "potential to create power and salience through advocacy" (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 885). Since their critique, the literature has widened to include consideration of activism in/as public relations from further critical cultural perspectives (see, for example, Demetrious, 2013; Holtzhausen, 2012; Vardeman et al.,

2020), and to nuanced corporate contexts (Pompper, 2015). Summarily, these studies all treat activism as a rich site of public relations understood "to be fundamentally about producing, sustaining, and regulating... meaning" (Edwards & Hodges, 2011, p. 3).

The study also intersects with employee relations, specifically tensions between upper-management and account staff. Histories of employee relations within the profession (Curtin, 2020; Miller, 1999) traced ways in which public relation's role as the voice of business was predicated on its ability to control its own intermediaries. With Ogilvy, we see some of these attempts at control in action in the contemporary moment. While many of the dynamics were antagonistic, the text reveals that some of these activists and possibly some senior leaders were morally conflicted about the border work. A similar tension concerning values was found by Hill (2020), who examined strategic communication in the context of corporate political advocacy, a growing trend that she argued "creates expectations and pressures on commercial organizations without addressing persistent mismatches between market and civic concerns" (p. 325).

The majority of the literature treats activists as a force against these expert persuaders. According to Heath and Waymer (2009), activists "employ the strategy of 'incremental erosion'... challeng[ing] the legitimacy of its target by chipping away at premises that are needed by the business to sustain its current means for generating revenue" (p. 197). While this is certainly true for external stakeholders, the situation is different for internal stakeholders, such as employees. Reducing revenue, for example, would not be in the employees' best interests.

There have been few studies of internal activism. Curtin (2016) published one such study, examining the case of two Girl Scouts who launched a campaign to persuade their organization and related companies to stop using palm oil in their products. When internal stakeholders wished to remain with an organization and to create change, the complexities revealed the limitations of a frame that posits activism as diametrically opposed to corporate interests (Curtin, 2016). In another case study examining internal stakeholders, Henderson et al. (2015) found that insiders may define values and relationships vis a vis a social issue differently from the external, organizational voice.

2.1. Social Issues Management

Social issues management, the primary model used to analyze the case, is deeply interrelated with crisis communication and risk communication (Coombs et al., 2019). Risk communication concerns the management of real or perceived harms and hinges upon "interactivity," "awareness," "tolerance," and comprehending "perceptions of risk" (Coombs et al., 2019, p. 32). Issues management, among many factors, "requires balancing the interests of organizations and stakeholders to facilitate

mutually beneficial relationships" (Coombs et al., 2019, p. 33). Mutuality relates to the dynamic of power in issues management.

Many scholars within critical public relations have asserted that power heavily favors the interests of organizations over other stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Motion & Weaver, 2005; Roper, 2005). Still others have claimed that putting the client interest above all others might damage long-term relationships (Heath & Palenchar, 2009) and such an outcome might encourage balance. Also relevant is the position of activists as publics. Instead of the typical assumption of activists as always/only organizations, Dougall (2005) disrupted this notion by theorizing activists as publics that are not necessarily organized into groups. This perspective shares the idea that identity itself is fluid and deeply contextual (e.g., Curtin, 2016; Demetrious, 2013; Motion & Weaver, 2005). The positioning of activists as dynamic, contextual publics opens space to consider better the work of communication in social issues management.

Coombs and Holladay (2018) developed their social issues management theory by modifying the catalytic model, which tracks a crisis through its life cycle, examining key communication strategies in a non-linear process. Their model arguably better addresses the dynamism that social conflict and social media introduce to the management process (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Though inspired by the catalytic model, the social issues management model moves away from the idea of stages to focus on the communicative tasks facing firms. The social issues management model seeks to explain how various communicative tasks are used to influence the debate and possible resolution of social issues.

Coombs and Holladay (2018) divide the communicative tasks in their social issues management model into three areas: definition, legitimacy, and awareness. All three tasks at various non-linear stages in the management process invite contestation given the inherent polarization of social issues (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Definition is a battle for setting the terms of the issue with the firm's issue manager confronted by activist stakeholders who wish to challenge the framing of the debate in either nuanced or oppositional ways.

Legitimacy is interrelated with the task of definition; however, it is broader in scope. For example, a manager not only must define the contours of the debate, they must also contest the standing to speak on the issue in the first place. Coombs and Holladay (2018) assert that legitimacy represents a key difference between companies and activists in that the former "can face intense scrutiny for supporting a social issue that is unrelated to their core business" (p. 83). Whereas activist stakeholders, especially those representing formal organizations, strive to embody a mission predicated on the very social issue at hand (Coombs & Holladay, 2018).

Related, in a study featuring interviews with 21 activist organizations, Woods (2019) extended Coombs' (1992) typologies of legitimation strategies and made two key findings: 1) Activists who tie values to the issue manager increase legitimacy; and 2) activists have an opportunity to increase legitimacy by harnessing media coverage of the issue in a way that emphasizes misdeeds by corporate actors.

Finally, awareness represents both task and stage in the model because Coombs and Holladay (2018) recognized that the "loci for decision making" for social issues management and traditional issues management was markedly different. Company leaders make the decision on how or if they should address a social issue, rendering moot agenda setting from the catalytic model (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Therefore, Coombs and Holladay (2018) "collapse the current and critical stages into one stage that we label awareness" (p. 84).

Importantly, the case to be analyzed addresses the reputational harms that are sometimes generated through the process of awareness. In short, the social issues management model explains what seems like a simple statement of beliefs on the part of a company and activists, revealing the complex power dynamics at play (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). The following case study will be used to analyze such complexity using the model. First, however, it is useful to provide political economic context on both the issue of migration and the business of 'Big PR.'

3. Political Economic Context

The current crisis is but one of many at the Mexico/U.S. border over the course of more than a century. However, we start with President Obama because it is his policies which President Trump has by turns abolished or re-interpreted. In what was a controversial strategy, Obama sought to aggressively crack down on illegal immigration to the U.S. (Young, 2011) with deportations reaching record levels during many years of the Obama administration, "including a three-year period between fiscal 2012 and 2014 when there were more than 400,000 per year" (Gramlich, 2020). In 2012, finding Congress unwilling to legislate, Obama passed an executive order to help the children of undocumented parents become citizens in a relatively short time; this policy was called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

One of Trump's early actions was to reverse DACA, claiming he had no choice and that he was simply enforcing the policies Obama had established. Trump could have influenced Congress, then controlled by the GOP in both houses, to pass legislation similar to DACA, but this was not his strategy. Instead, Trump, along with Attorney General Sessions, would proceed to reinterpret Obama-era legislation in even more anti-immigrant fashion, including new executive orders (e.g., the 'Muslim Ban').

The Trump administration re-framed claiming asylum to the U.S. as a largely illegal activity. For example, Sessions declared that women fleeing abuse did not meet the legal bar for a valid asylum claim. The next

significant re-interpretation of Obama-era law came in the form of the Trump administration's "zero tolerance policy." Suddenly the debate over the wall between the two countries seemed like a sideshow as thousands of children were forcibly removed from their parents and placed in separate custody. As of 2020, more than 100 children have yet to be reunited with their families (American Civil Liberties Union, 2020). That summer, before the midterm elections in fall of 2018, the American press was awash with stories of protests about the separations, the squalid conditions at the detention centers, and deaths at these facilities. These protests subsided somewhat after a judge declared a halt to the zero tolerance policy.

In January of 2019, the administration moved to a new tact, known as "Remain in Mexico." Under this policy, "more than 50,000 people have been told to wait there for weeks or months for U.S. court dates" (Merchant & Spagat, 2020). Mexico complied, likely due to the importance of the trade pact between the U.S., Mexico, and Canada. The policy, among the first rescinded by the Biden administration in 2021, did not lead to less work for CBP. According to a Pew Research report based on CBP data, "the number of migrant apprehensions at the U.S.–Mexico border rose in fiscal 2019 to its highest annual level in 12 years" (Gramlich, 2020, p. 1).

The image of CBP has suffered amidst these controversies (see, for example, Fernandez et. al, 2019). In a survey of residents along the border, Wong (2019) found "a lack of trust that Border Patrol officials" will serve and protect people and that those officers "who abuse their authority will be held accountable for their abuses" (p. 2). Harnessing public sentiment, various protest groups have persuaded companies to stop doing business related to the border (from banks to furniture makers) and disrupted several Immigration and Customs Enforcement deportation raids.

3.1. 'Big PR' by the Numbers

The Ogilvy Group, headquartered in New York City, is a subsidiary of the conglomerate WPP, headquartered in London. U.S. revenues account for the largest share of income for the holding company (Miller, 2021). Although The Ogilvy Group is primarily categorized as an advertising agency, they do list public relations among their services on their website; this despite having a separate firm called Ogilvy Public Relations. The Ogilvy Group is examined in the context of public relations in this study because crisis communication is a subset of public relations.

Major clients for The Ogilvy Group include Cadbury, Pizza Hut, and Samsung with Publicis and BBDO identified as competitors (Dun & Bradstreet Hoovers, 2021b). Publicis, one of the 'big four' agency holding companies along with WPP, IPG, and Omnicom, has faced rapidly declining growth as the entire sector copes with a radically transformed environment where Google and Facebook dominate the advertising business (Barker & Agnew, 2019). WPP is in third place by market share at 5.6% (Miller, 2021).

Operating in 85 countries, The Ogilvy Group garnered approximately $308 million in revenue during the most recent fiscal year (Dun & Bradstreet Hoovers, 2021b). This figure, while significant, is dwarfed by the $16 billion in revenue generated by the parent company, WPP, as a whole (Dun & Bradstreet Hoovers, 2021b). By contrast, Edelman, the largest independent public relations firm in the country (O'Dwyers, 2021) will generate a projected $420 million in annual sales (Dun & Bradstreet Hoovers, 2021a). Clearly, conglomeration pays, but at what ethical cost? Edelman was arguably freer than Ogilvy to, as the activists might frame it, do the right thing and walk away from a controversial client. As will be discussed, the Ogilvy contract with CBP represented a small piece of the larger, lucrative government sector. Furthermore, the economic pressures of the 'big four' agency race were immense. Through this political economic lens and the analysis of the case through the social issues management model, we see communication tasks deployed in the liminal space between 'good' and 'bad' practitioners or organizations.

4. Method

The researcher was made aware of the Ogilvy case through routine reading of trade publications. The leaked transcript of the Ogilvy meeting provided a lengthy (35 pages) document for close reading. Furthermore, the Ogilvy example offered an opportunity to expand the social issues management model. Since the textual analysis method must consider context (Allen, 2017), the researcher also conducted a political economic analysis of the migration issue and of the agency using a variety of press, think tank research, social media, and databases. Drilling down on the database work, the researcher used Hoovers to find revenue information and relevant corporate relationships. IBISWorld was then employed to situate Ogilvy within the advertising and public relations industries broadly. The information on federal contracts was obtained using the software GovTribe. Social media, specifically Twitter, was searched using the hashtags established by RAICES, the external stakeholder most relevant to the case.

Data analysis of the primary text, the leaked transcript, involved numerous close readings to identify patterns or themes. Since textual analysis is an interpretative method, the researcher began from a poststructuralist standpoint, viewing all texts as polysemic and situated within crucial contexts that aid understanding of phenomena. Furthermore, the researcher interpreted the transcript with insider knowledge of the general culture of global agencies, based on her decade-plus experience as a public relations practitioner with a top multi-national firm. This subject position advanced the ideological interpretations of the promotional logics of the case, as well.

After the initial readings of the text, the researcher selected the social issues management model (Coombs & Holladay, 2018) as a suitable lens for analysis. She chose this particular theory due to its relevance to the case and to the recognition of a gap in the model to be filled, pointed out in a question posed by the theorists themselves (Coombs et al., 2019, p. 43). The analysis then continued deductively, searching for evidence that did or did not complement the existing typologies. This pattern recognition occurred at many levels, including: (1) individual words and phrases (repetition, contextual meanings, elision, etc.); (2) general subjectivity of the speakers (employee or CEO); (3) any non-verbal responses (e.g., clapping, interruption when indicated); (4) themes (e.g., values talk); and (5) the order of presentation. The researcher's interpretation also contributed to theoretical implications of the analysis.

The analysis was guided by the model and the following research questions:

RQ1: How was the social issue addressed or not addressed by the stakeholders engaged?

RQ2: How might social issues management with employees (internal stakeholders) differ from similar communication processes with external stakeholders?

5. Case Study: Ogilvy Border Woes

In a transcript leaked to *BuzzFeed News* (Vo & Vu, 2019) of a meeting between Ogilvy CEO John Seifert and a group of employees, the tensions between management and employee activists were palpable. Seifert opened, saying they were there to talk about:

What we know is happening broadly in our reality of the immigration issues going on in the country and the border specifically, the southern border specifically, and how that may or may not be connected to the work we're doing [for CBP]. (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 2)

Although a couple of employee comments would later come to define "the issues," Seifert never named them, relying instead on terms such as: "issues," "things that are happening," "today's environment," "situations like this." The closest he came to specificity was in this moment early in his opening remarks:

My first wife was Mexican American. Both of my sons are fifty percent Mexican as far as I'm concerned. I find what is going on in the immigration debate broadly and what is going on in particular in terms of the horrific human situation going on at the southern border abhorrent. So I suspect I feel almost as passionate as many of you to see a country that is as wealthy as the United States, as I would hope as progressive as the United States, confront these challenges so badly. (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 3)

Seifert continued: "Whatever my personal views are of what's happening around the world, what I am paid to do is represent the company to the best of my ability" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 3).

He stated that he had worked for the agency for 40 of its 70 years and that he was mentored by founder David Ogilvy. After invoking the founding father, Seifert's opening remarks in the transcript proceeded another four pages without directly mentioning CBP or the crisis at the border.

Instead, Seifert shifted to the existential importance of maintaining confidentiality with clients. For example, he said, "It has always been true... that we only have the right to exist if clients could trust us" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 4). He bemoaned the outsized liability of agencies these days concluding: "We either agree, or they don't assign the business to us" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 5).

Seifert finally addressed the reason for the meeting:

Now, I know that in some cases, there is a view of, you have to have something that, the point of view is, is sometimes bigger than the money, and I get that. But the fact is, $25 million here, means probably 150 jobs, or more. (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 8)

Seifert then turned to CBP specifically and hit upon another theme of his legitimation: the work done for this client is limited to recruitment advertising only. He returned to the subject of risk: "But it's a very important assignment because it is a prestigious piece of business in Washington....We have government service contracts that represent about 80% of our Washington, DC, operation" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 8).

The first question during the Q&A with Seifert was essentially: At what point as the leader do you decide the negative publicity makes a client not worth having? Seifert responded with a defense invoking previous problematic Ogilvy client industries such as 'Big Oil' (BP, the corporation held primarily responsible for the largest maritime oil spill in U.S. history, was an Ogilvy client at the time), 'Big Tobacco,' and sugary beverages (Coca-Cola). Seifert summarized, "But in the main we have tried to find and see the good side in most clients and work with them to mitigate things that over time might be deemed negative" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 11).

Seifert then returned to individual employee liberty (to protest, to vote), but implied that the workplace was not such a democratic space. Then, Seifert stated, "The work we were doing for CBP is advancing the good of what that organization can and should be doing by getting the most diverse people with the right set of skills serving the needs of that organization" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 13).

Following this, an employee said, "I love the fact that you talked about learning from David Ogilvy because in his books" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 18), and continued to offer a different interpretation of the wisdom of the founder than did Seifert, asserting that Ogilvy had a "moral ground" that put people first. The difference

between BP and Coca Cola, the employee argued, is that those companies make products that consumers may choose not to buy, whereas the actions of CBP constitute "a human rights problem" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 18). The employee concluded their comment by saying, "This is about people not just about money" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 19). According to the transcript, this was immediately followed by applause from the other employees.

In another signal of dissent, an employee asked, who will work with Ogilvy now that every media piece about the agency will say "last known for its work with the CBP" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 21). The CEO responded: "This is where you need to stand up for the brand" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 21). The employee interrupted Seifert: "I've worked here for nine years and I've never not been proud until Monday to come to work" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 21). Seifert, unphased, invoked the values of the company to which the employee responded, "I'm not sure what those values are" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 21).

Seifert again reframed the crisis, this time as Utilitarian moral dilemma: "I don't believe it's responsible to ask or expect the company to make a choice at an individual level when we're trying to weigh a whole set of factors for the collective good of the company at large" (Vo & Vu, 2019, pp. 22–23). After several more rounds with the activist, Seifert said: "If your line is we should not work for clients at that risk level, then you shouldn't be here" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 24).

The meeting turned again on a comment from another employee who asserted that they'd rather have Ogilvy helping to recruit good people—people with a conscience—to CBP than not. This inspired another employee to agree, but then raise the practical question as yet unanswered, how much business will we lose before we drop CBP as a client? This prompted an employee to opine about the larger consumer climate:

> Purpose is also very very big in today's world. I'm not sure on a good day....Ogilvy knows or fully knows its purpose—to clients yes but to social in the social realm of things—we don't stand for sustainability [for example]. (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 28)

Siefert disagreed by immediately pointing to pro bono work and asserted: "We are a purpose driven company. We serve communities, we serve brands" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 29)

The exchange with this employee climaxed with the employee saying, "And my point about [Ogilvy's purpose], before you interrupted me" was that the Ogilvy brand is not synonymous with social good (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 30). Perhaps sensing an impasse, Seifert soon suggested to all employees: "If any of you personally feel that your livelihood...[has] been damaged... come see me. I'll be your personal public relations advisor because there's nothing that we have done... that I wouldn't defend go defend to anybody" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 33). He closed the meeting with remarks that included: "[If]

someone thinks that I'm not upholding the brand they should shoot me. I mean that with all seriousness" (Vo & Vu, 2019, p. 34).

The repercussions of the leaked transcript were not confined to the press. RAICES, an immigrants' rights organization that sparked the crisis for Ogilvy, wrote an open letter to Ogilvy President, Lauren Crampsie, demanding that they terminate the contract. The account NotColumbia (2019) directly challenged Crampsie to respond to the RAICES letter. He tagged a number of accounts in this message including media such as *Adweek* and the *Wall Street Journal*. RAICES continued to tweet and added the hashtag: #cancelthecontract. Union organizer Thompson (2019) investigated and tweeted this take: "They [Ogilvy] made 20M+ to make CBP appear palatable to the public."

6. Discussion

First, it should be acknowledged that Ogilvy did not willingly enter into the public discourse about the border crisis; in this sense, the case does not qualify with traditional social issues management in which firms take a more proactive, advocacy role. However, the model still works well to explain the management process from the perspective of multiple stakeholders and the case suggests that it is useful for understanding internal activism, as well. The discussion section is presented by order of the communication tasks specified in the non-linear model: definition, legitimation, and awareness.

6.1. Definition

Siefert avoids specificity when defining the issue(s) related to doing work on behalf of clients engaged with the crisis at the Mexico/U.S. border. In other words, he does not directly define the issue. The resulting ambiguity is lessened when the internal employee activists begin to define the issue as one of human rights. This definition is contested by Seifert in indirect ways through diversity and values talk, all of which foreground the primacy of the profit motive based on his remarks.

The work of 'Big PR' delivers value in the form of profit, however, as Aronczyk (2013) asserted in the context of nation branding, "this position does not map well onto ideas of the collective good in terms of our moral and ethical responsibilities and relationships" (p. 79). Seifert tried to smooth out that map. It was a struggle with many discursive weapons at his disposal, including ironically, diversity. Seifert deployed diversity as a means of (re)defining the social issue in at least two instances: 1) To establish common ground with the marginalized ("my family is Mexican American"); and 2) to lessen the moral turpitude of CBP, positioning Ogilvy as savior—we will recruit diverse people. The employee response was mixed.

Seifert, a white, wealthy man attempted to identify with the victims—mostly Mexicans in the public imagination—of the new anti-immigration policies.

In reality, the majority of the migrants seeking entry to the U.S. at the Southern border at this time were from other Central American countries (Passel & Cohn, 2019). "Unauthorized immigration" by Mexicans to the U.S. was at historic lows (Passel & Cohn, 2019). However, Seifert likely understood that many Americans do not make such distinctions. 'Mexican' in the current discourse in the U.S. is a substitute for all Latinx migrants.

After establishing his Mexican American credentials, Seifert described a passive tragedy—no one was actively doing the "abhorrent" deeds at the border. When he did ascribe blame, it was the "country" at fault, not the Trump administration, not the American people, and definitely not Ogilvy's client in charge of separating children from families at the border. His words were likely meant to establish common ground with his employees, suggesting he was one of them, united in passion and progressive values.

Seifert likely wished to construct a divide between the two spheres of public/private. Public, in this case, meaning all activity outside of the agency, and private meaning personal views. He would return to this regulation of speech—who gets to say what when—throughout the meeting. He claimed that not even the CEO is allowed to let personal beliefs interfere with the profit of the company. This is in line with Banet-Weiser (2012):

> Advanced capitalism not only is a political economic condition but also functions as a political rationality, one that works as a system of governmentality and management that not only builds culture but also reimagines definitions of the state and the individual. (p. 130)

Here the corporation is the state and the individual may only exercise power in restricted ways when the corporation is seemingly separate from the state, e.g., government elections.

In his opening remarks, Seifert introduced values talk—or rhetoric that refers to an organization's core beliefs—through an invocation of the founding father, David Ogilvy. He does not define said values at any point, nor does he refer to any corporate statements on the matter. Instead, he attempts to let the mythology of the founder as a great man be self-evident. However, an activist employee offers a contrasting definition of David Ogilvy as putting people before profit—the implication being that Seifert and the agency were not, in fact, living up to the values previously suggested.

Seifert doubled down on the ambiguity by once again referring to values without naming them and asserting that Ogilvy is a purpose driven company. This leads to an employee expressing shame for the firm's involvement with CBP. Not to be outdone, Seifert summons his theatricality, saying if we're not living up to our (ambiguous) values, then someone should shoot him.

It is interesting, although not surprising given their profession, that many of the activist employees appear to be more concerned about the appearance of wrongdoing, rather than any actual human rights abuses with which the company may be associated. To paraphrase one employee, the Ogilvy *brand* is not synonymous with social good (Vo & Vu, 2019). Seifert himself uses the concept of service to apply equally to communities and to brands.

As to the problematic brands of the past that Ogilvy has served such as BP and Coca-Cola, one activist employee attempts to deposition this work as not akin to the current crisis because the latter companies sell products that involve consumer choice, whereas the issue at hand is related to human rights. Of course, this definitional work is reductive as BP and Coca Cola have both been accused of human rights abuses in various scandals. The larger point of the activist however was that values should demand that people come before profit. Seifert, as one might expect from a managerial perspective, redefines the issue, asserting that Ogilvy serves even flawed clients by finding the good in them and mitigating the risk of negative appearances (again, not actual harms).

Finally, once the transcript is leaked, RAICES enters the space of definition with an automatic standing based on their mission. They define the crisis, as expected, in a wholly oppositional manner, writing an open letter demanding that Ogilvy resign from the account. Other activist accounts on Twitter echoed this definition—that the work was immoral—and added to the legitimation process by external stakeholders.

6.2. Legitimation

The first point of legitimation to be considered is that of trust and how it is bound to risk. Seifert specifically calls out the importance of trust in the client-agency relationship and the liability of agencies that break this trust. The question of should the agency trust the client is not entertained. To do so would challenge an assumption of public relations work that the client relationship is paramount among agency stakeholders (Wilcox et al., 2013). The employee activists who speak in opposition to Seifert, and therefore the managerial status quo, are potentially risking their jobs. Seifert foregrounds this risk when he suggests that if employees are so opposed to the CBP work, then maybe they should not work at Ogilvy.

The most significant point of legitimation for management, based on frequency and substance of the references, is this: Ogilvy must continue this controversial work for the financial health of the company. According to a software that tracks federal contracts, the CBP account had an "obligated" value of $40,7 million and a potential value of $52,5 million (Nash & Hariani, 2021). For 'Big PR' this is not a significant amount. However, the sector of the CBP work, public affairs, is important to consider. Seifert underscores this fact himself when he shares the value in both money and jobs of their contracts in D.C., not to mention the lost revenue

from potential government clients should Ogilvy face any backlash if they decided to resign. This scenario is far from abstract, as Edelman faced public backlash from GEO Group in the trade press when that agency made the decision to resign from the controversial work at the border. As of March 2021, The Ogilvy Group and Ogilvy Public Relations have 27 active federal contracts (Nash & Hariani, 2021). The combined obligated funds from federal awards total $425,5 million since 2001 with 75% of that figure coming from the "Executive Office of the President" (Nash & Hariani, 2021), or the branch wherein the Department of Homeland Security (and thus CBP) sits. In short, meeting the demands of some internal stakeholders to resign the CBP account would indeed threaten a significant revenue source for the holding company, WPP.

With the financial stakes somewhat expressed to employees, Seifert moves to a different kind of legitimation in an effort to persuade more employees to the side of management. Seifert attempts to separate the problematic enforcement work of CBP from the seemingly benign work of Ogilvy for the client. In other words, he suggests, improving recruitment to CBP—the purpose of the contract—has nothing to do with, as RAICES and some employee activists insist, kidnapping and caging children at the border.

Woods' (2019) finding about the utility of the strategy to associate values with issue manager legitimacy is applicable to this case. Although the stakeholders examined here employed values talk to persuade in relation to their respective sides, the employee activists might have gained more legitimacy by repeating the disconnect between Ogilvy's values (never defined) and what they argued were human rights abuses. As it happened, the employee activists in the meeting largely kept to the same vagaries of the purpose driven brand rhetoric used by management. This is perhaps not surprising as their position as internal stakeholders signals some level of identification with the corporate ethos. In other words, clearly defining corporate values might have seemed too obvious to a group of insiders; however, Woods' (2019) approach, offered in a different context, would seem beneficial to the employee activists in this case given the opportunity to highlight the disconnect. The strategic ambiguity afforded by not specifying values would seem here only to favor the decision of management in this case.

Woods' (2019) other contribution to the literature is also applicable, again more so to the employee activist contingent. Activists striving to sustain interest in a given issue might attempt to connect better to the larger social narratives in circulation as an organic way of "demonstrating the relevancy of the issue, fostering support, and encouraging action" (Woods, 2019, p. 344). The employee activists did the latter to a limited extent in the meeting, but then largely let the leaking to the press do the talking. This suggested connecting approach would entail increased risk however, and might there-fore be impractical. It should be noted that RAICES is arguably adept at this approach and as an external stakeholder in the issue does not face the same level of risk as do employees.

6.3. Awareness

The building of legitimacy also speaks to the communication task of awareness in social issues management. Activist groups, when faced with a credibility challenge, attempt to increase awareness, deliver accurate information, harness news coverage, and celebrate wins (Woods, 2019). In this case, given the mission-level connection with immigration issues, RAICES is arguably the most credible issue manager of the three stakeholders, i.e., the most authorized to speak. Perhaps this is why the credibility of the organization did not appear to be damaged, at least in the press, when they shared the inaccurate information that sparked the crisis for Ogilvy. However, the misattribution of the detention center video did damage Ogilvy's credibility among employees and in the press.

RAICES could have addressed the open letter sent via Twitter to Seifert, especially since he was the face of management in the leaked transcript. However, the choice of Crampsie, Ogilvy's president, seemed strategic as she is a woman who sits on the board of social justice organizations such as Makers and TimesUp. Posters on Twitter made much of what they viewed as hypocrisy becoming especially agitated in replies when Crampsie tweeted in support of gun control legislation.

It is presumed that an employee activist leaked the transcript in part to gain negative publicity that might shame Ogilvy into resigning the account, the desired result of those opposed to management. When the employee in the meeting mentions the negative press that will follow the work for CBP, she is likely attempting to persuade management to make an ethical decision, a textbook maneuver (Wilcox et al., 2013). Her prediction came true. At Ogilvy, Seifert later shared news over email of a 3.7% reduction of the agency's U.S. workforce due to "volatility in our diverse client portfolio" (Smiley, 2020). That email was leaked to the press. *Adweek* included information about the CBP controversy at the end of the story (Smiley, 2020).

This multi-faceted case illustrates the complexities of social issues management, as well as risk communication for managers in particular. Seifert's meeting with employee stakeholders demonstrates the key components of risk communication (Coombs et al., 2019). He, more or less, engages in dialogue with the risk bearers he manages, and attempts to raise their awareness to the threat posed by resigning the account. Although the process itself is non-linear, Seifert fulfills the last element of risk communication by basing his remarks on understanding the position of the employees agitating for change (whether or not he is perceived as authentic is another matter). The efficacy of the communicative

tasks in the case cannot be evaluated by the method and is thus a limitation of this study.

7. Conclusion

The internal activists in this case attempted to define the border issue as one of human rights, but then did not define the company values that might be in conflict with this definition. Aside from the leak of the transcript, they took no known public action to raise awareness of the issue, likely due to the precarity of their employment. Seifert decided maintaining the CBP account was worth the risk of continued publicity and found ways to make the moral quandary more palatable personally. He reasoned that: 1) his personal beliefs were subordinated to the good of shareholders; 2) CBP did good deeds elsewhere; 3) the firm could help CBP hire more compassionate people; 4) his client was blameless as the American system of immigration was at fault. However, social issues management moves responsibility away from the government and to firm managers. This is not to say that Ogilvy is somehow to blame for the migration crisis as a whole, but rather to suggest that the communicative tasks demonstrated by management may, in this case, prove counterproductive in managing the reputational crisis borne of a social issue.

As Edwards (2018) wrote, "Paying attention to the promotional culture in which public relations thrives prompts ethical questions about the kind of world that we want to live in and public relations' role in constructing (or obstructing) it" (pp. 211–212). While most people will agree that the kidnapping and caging of children is wrong, larger debates concerning migration and immigration are much more nuanced. In this case, even indefensible conduct of the CBP is rationalized in the context of promotional work. Far from being merely philosophical, such promotional logics constrict the agentic possibilities of even internal activists. Public relations practitioners and scholars alike should be vigilant about the relativism that often excuses the profit motive at the expense of social justice.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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