# Professional Ethics in Commercializing Blogs as a Potential Public Relations Tool

MOHD HELMI ABD RAHIM
*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*

PRIYA DARSANEE MAHADAVESINGH HUZOOREE
*Mataora Limited, Mauritius*

## ABSTRACT

The research aims to find out whether the responses of bloggers and public relations practitioners have any implication for the practice of public relations, and, whether blogging is an ethical tool to the public relations industry. This research studies the extent of the blogola (paid-post) practice and help understand why organizations still insist on practicing blogola despite the risk of negative public relations. The research also explores the ethical challenge encountered by the public relations industry in the digital age. The researchers evaluate whether new ethical guidelines are needed to resolve the issue of blogola. The researchers adopted the qualitative methodology, namely, the in-depth interview method. The informants are gathered using the convenience sampling, and, fifteen informants were extensively interviewed; being public relations practitioners, bloggers and consumers in Mauritius. The findings suggested that blogs are effective public relations tools to attract customers and boost sales. Deepening into the relationships between bloggers and public relations practitioners concluded that a friendly relationship is good for easy communication and for diversity of blog content. Concerning the ethical dilemma surrounding blogs and public relations, almost all informants agreed that paying bloggers for writing good reviews for the brand is not a violation, provided, the blogger is sincere and transparent about it. As long as the blogger reveals that he or she was compensated in any sort, it is tolerable. The question of new ethical guidelines is a must since social media has completely changed the way public relations work.

**Keywords:** *Public relations, bloggers, professional ethics, blogola, public relations practices.*

## INTRODUCTION

A code of ethics is *"a profession's contract with the society it serves"* (Parsons, 2008). However, can these policies be seen as the least ethics or as ideals? Or is it, in the case of public relations, somewhat a way of altering an unprofessional occupation (Parsons, 2008). However, the public relations industry needs to solicit itself another set of ethical questions as developing data and communication innovations (ICT) enter the enclosure of corporate communication. Different platforms, regularly alluded to "social media" – offer new ways of connecting with various audiences. Commercial Blogging is one of the newest in the field; it represents for many an exciting new forms of internet journalism, but very often not a totally free one.

As a starting point, the degree to which individuals are blogging is expanding exponentially. A 2008 report evaluated that more than 180 million individuals have begun an online journal, more than 26 million of them in the United States. Furthermore, people are paying more attention to, more than 346 million people read blogs in 2008 and of that number more than 94 million blog readers live in the US (Winn, 2009). Other recent data suggest that about 100,000 new blogs are being created daily (Hayes et al., 2007) and that almost 10 percent of Americans get their news from blogs (Smith, 2008).

Blogs have several major advantages including their efficacy as research tools (environment scanning, issue management), and their usefulness as message framing and persuasion tools (Kent, 2007). However, it is also very important to understand the risks involved in blogging, such as; communicative risks, exaggerated significance attached to blogging, and, blogger credibility and status.

In the US, Stealth marketing on blogs has been called 'blogola' (Jensen, 2011). Blogola is a reference to and play on the term 'payola'- practice originally found in the music industry as far back as in the 1950s, where DJs and radio stations were paid to play and provide favorable comment on specific music (Cammaerts, 2008). According to Cammaerts (2008), the practice of blogola is becoming commonplace in the blogosphere and if rules are not set to guide the bloggers, the integrity of the industry might suffer the consequences of such practices.

Furthermore, matters of blogging ethics are just inferred or tended superficially in articles that talk about broadly about truth, legal issues, and impact of blogs on the consumers (Smudde, 2005). These articles say blogs unvarnished and immaculate scope of topics; working relationships with organizations and the utilization, validity, and biases blogs (Flew, 2005).

Additionally, the possible effect of blogs on public relations and corporate communication is exceptional. Steve Crescenzo, wrote in The Regan Report (2005) stating that blogs' enormous, verging on the boundless potential to share knowledge, promote dialogue, market products and open up two-way communication. The 2005 PR Week/Burson-Marsteller CEO Survey states that "59 percent of CEPs rate blogs as a good, very good, or excellent corporate communications tool for internal audiences".

Despite the fact that some public relations agencies support blogging, numerous others do not as they fear clients and their public may misuse the blog to address negative data and comments about the firm or even exchange personal and confidential data. Many employers or public relations consultant is worried about the authenticity of the information published online and thus worry about the ethical guidelines of the industry.

The matter of public relations blogging ethics has not been specifically discussed in any articles, except in terms of blog content implications or while referencing to the problem of honesty and transparency of information (Lazar, 2005). This research will therefore help the public relations industry understand the ethical concerns surrounding this new phenomena and set ethical barriers and guidelines on how to ensure that bloggers and PR practitioner are acting ethically.

When blogs (then called web logs) were presented in the late 1990s, a large number of us were amped up for this new type of web reporting. The guarantee of blogs was that this new medium would permit anybody to post his/her authentic opinions in a virtual journal that could be perused by anybody with web access. But, when you with friends and colleagues about blogging today, a great part of the introductory flourish that went with the acquaintance of blogging, it appears to have blurred away. Rather, many of us now have a difficult time perceiving if the content of blogs is much else besides sponsored advertising, in this manner disabling the validity of the content.

In a nutshell, the principle issue is that numerous individuals who blog are never being straightforward and transparent in their writing and are not disclosing the degree to which their writing may have been unduly impacted by the payments and gifts of sponsors. A related concern is the extent to which bloggers may be obliged to write only positive reviews with a specific end goal to get money or other remuneration. At the end of the day,

when we read a "mommy blogger" portraying how her kids cherished their latest vacation to Disneyland, it is almost impossible to figure out whether the written work is a precise record of what the writer experienced or if the author is rather only rehashing key marketing messages from Disney as a major aspect of a bribe to win a free trip to the resort. Along similar lines, how can we be sure that bloggers didn't simply fake descriptions of the product and services they wrote about in order to get a pay check?

One of the core debates about blogging ethics being discussed by scholars fixates on the issue of whether codes of ethics need to be developed and the extent to which they are being used as a part of practice. In response to the concerns about pervasive incidents of flogs and Blogola, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has been developing guidelines to regulate paid bloggers.

However, Medina (2005) suggests that the development of a code of ethics is inevitable because the vast majority of bloggers want to be taken seriously. Similarly Kuhn (2007) argues that developing a code of ethics would, if followed, ensure that more blogs are crafted with transparency and honesty, thus reflecting more people's authentic first hand personal experiences.

In response to the problem statement and to guide the research, the following research questions were established:

(1) Is blog an effective public relations tool?
(2) Why paying bloggers make sense to the business and how does this practice benefit Public Relations?
(3) How can the public relations industry ensure bloggers are acting ethically?

The goal of this research is therefore, to help find out whether the responses of bloggers and PR practitioners have any implication for the theory and practice of public relations and whether blogging is an ethical tool to the public relations industry.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Blogging*

Blogging is generally a new thing which has successfully grown. In what is known as traditional blogging, anybody can write whatever they wish to at any time. It has turned into a sanctuary for the verbose, highly and often uniformed. Clearly, this is not what public relation blogging ought to represent. The key contrast is that public relations practitioners do not speak for themselves. They speak for their clients and/or organisations they represent.

Blogging can be a less formal method for keeping consumers and the public in general informed than numerous other media alternatives. It is a low cost publish tool that has the capacity to get organization news out rapidly. Dissimilar to email, blogging is "broadcast" at the same time to any individual who want to peruse it. It is likewise egalitarian in a way that a lot of public relation communication is definitely not. Blogs allow rapid and quick reactions, different conversation strings, and a kind of available history of issues that can be referenced, added to, and adjusted any time (Bivins, 2008)

However, there are weaknesses too. A great number of bloggers or commentators do not have much to say that is intriguing, and/or cannot record their thoughts in a convincing and clear way. It is true those who have unlimited time to write have slightest to

say, and those who have a lot to say don't have enough time to write. Therefore, the real expertise within the company lays hidden, as you get drowned in trivia. The Web makes businesses look disorganized, with different opinions and assessments. As opposed to what some may think, the average client leans towards whether the company or brand they are about to purchase their product and services from is somewhat coherent.

Blogging is the perfect illustration, then, of both the advantages and potential issues regularly innate in public relations. Notwithstanding the practical inconveniences of blogging, there are a few ethical issues that can emerge from this new tool of communication. For instance, one of the significant detriments of blogs not mentioned above is the need to respond promptly to questions and remarks posted by other individuals. This regularly induces to not very well-thought-out responses, which, for public relations experts, is not a decent approach to communicating with publics. Ethical decision-making requires a specific level of reflection—time in which to consider the moral results of your actions. Prompt reactions, by nature, are not intelligent and reflective. But, maybe the most troublesome part of blogging, and with a number of the new technologies now utilized as a part of public relations, is the lure of anonymity and transparency.

According to Smith (2008) the blogosphere is seen as an important and legitimate arena for public relations efforts. The blogger makes the business looks alive and made of honest individuals. Rather than being an anonymous and faceless organization, blogs help the individuals in the organization to come alive in their posts. Moreover, should a crisis happens either to the business or its clients, a corporate blog gives a prompt and customized vehicle to talk about the issues with the public? Rather than the "spin" often associated with public relations, blogs serve as an honest and legitimate pipeline directed to the general population (Jensen, 2011).

*Blog Ethics*
Likewise, we need to distinguish a portion of the enormous ethical situations confronting the blogging community. Some of the major ethical concerns according to Jensen (2011) include:

- Bloggers who plagiarize and fabricate content
- Bloggers who accept funds from corporations, but do not disclose these sponsorship
- Bloggers who misrepresent their affiliations.

According to internet marketing analyst Jay Weintraub, fake blogs make more than $500 million in sales annually, and the most popular flogs can generate to 10,000 sales a day (McAdams, 2006). In the restaurant business, it is totally normal to give food critic who blog with free meals or vouchers since word-of-mouth is so important to attract customers. Many restaurants host special events, offer free dinners, and invite bloggers to selective tasting occasions, with the trust of accumulating positive reviews. By 2006 derivation of the sponsored web log were raising new ethical questions: 'faux blogging' and 'blogvertorials.' 'Faux blogging' occurs when fake or false accounts of happy imaginary customers and consumers are created. On the other hand, 'blogvertorials' occur when paid bloggers are required to write positive reviews in exchange for cash payments or free products or services" (Jensen, 2011). Corcoran et al. (2009) claim that a number of brands have had

their fingers burned by negative PR when it come to light that they were paying bloggers to shill their products or services.

*How can bloggers ensure they act ethically?*
Drushel (2011) recommended that the development of blogging ethics reflects the way in which moral standards in public relations spread-out. At first, only few comprehended blogging and/or understood its significance. After the public relations industry recognized the economic potential of blogging, authors and public relations firms seeking instant fame, fortune and gratification flocked to the new medium and some played fast and loose with the rules (Drushel, 2011). We now know some critical things about the ethical environment of blogging versus the public relations industry. We realize that some ethical failures have happened. We additionally know that scholars, experts and public relations regulating bodies are trying to regulate the practice to guarantee that the industry acts ethically and have taken steps in that direction. That being said, we do not know on the off chance if the ethical problem facing bloggers or companies sponsoring them can be effectively remedied, if so, how it may be cured. Therefore, one of the objectives of this research will help find out, to what extent this ethical issue will make the public relations industry rethinks, or redefine the fundamental theory and ethical guidelines.

## METHODOLOGY

This research investigates the value of public relations ethics within the blogosphere. For the purpose of this study, the researchers picked qualitative approach, more particularly, the in-depth interview method. This research is exploratory, targeting to portray the relationship between bloggers and public relations practitioners, and concepts such as the value of public relations, implementation of ethical guidelines in the digital era and bloggers interpretation of public relations ethics in Mauritius. It is additionally exploratory as it adds to existing hypotheses and theories in public relations with observations from other disciplines. Second, qualitative methodology mirrors the perspective that reality is comprehensive and must be inspected comprehensively (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). This research utilized interviewing as the significant method.

Finally, this research was led in real organizational settings, where the researchers met distinctive public relations practitioners, bloggers and the consumer to conduct the interview. The researchers had no control of and couldn't manipulate the conditions in which the study was directed.

The in-depth interviews are open-ended interviews, conducted face-to-face. The in-depth interviews generally last between 45 minutes to two hours. The interviewers utilize detailed interview schedule with open questions, and already knows what questions to cover. The 15 informants interviewed include the public relations practitioners, bloggers and consumer in Mauritius.

The researchers utilized open-ended questions as a part of the interview protocol. This method fits the presumption in qualitative interviewing where interviewees can express their thoughts utilizing their own frame of reference. The researcher utilized three sets of protocol for the various groups of informants. The interview protocol for public relations practitioners contained four sections. The first section comprised of rapport-building questions and questions about respondents' background and experiences. The second section was about public relations, the strategies and ethical issues. The third

section was about the public relations industry and the social media. The final section, talks about the effect of blogging and the ethical concerns arising.

The interview protocol for bloggers contained the four sections mentioned above, except, from a blogger perspective. The interview protocol for general public (consumers) consisted of questions about how they perceive blogging, and how important are online information before any purchase, and, if they are aware of those paid posts that companies offer to bloggers.

Data was collected through taking notes and recording of the interview sessions, and analyzed by the transcription made from the verbatim remarks. To ensure confidentiality, no name of any interviewee was mentioned. All interviewees were handed a consent form prior to the interview, to acknowledge their participation, within which it was clearly stated that they had the choice to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Regardless that blogging is still a new world to most public relations companies, particularly in Mauritius, more organizations are getting into the game. They are discovering that pitching blogs is not the same thing as conventional media.

### Blogs as an effective tool of public relations

All informants answered positively and agreed that blogs are the industry new tool to attract customers and boost sales. One consumer who claims to do 50 to 60 percent of her shopping online said, "Blogs *is the new image of the company. If the blog is attractive and give enough reviews and information about a product, I am definitely buying from them"* (Informant 2C). The following reports the findings.

### Why paying bloggers make sense to the business and how does this practice benefit Public Relations?

From the research conducted, the finding presumes that the prominence of blogs and the power of word-of-mouth in blogs are indisputable as buyers appreciate reading blogs not just for their own satisfaction and interest, but also to gain information on new products and services, for instance. One of the consumers said that she "*perceives bloggers as being a trustworthy and a credible source of information*" (Informant 1C), in this manner making them incredible marketers for products and brands. In addition, a study conducted in Sweden in 2008 demonstrated that 58% of blog readers had purchased products in the wake of perusing about it in the blog. This absolutely raises the enthusiasm and interest of organizations and their desires to motivate bloggers to collaborate and promote their image Blogs have additionally shaken the conventional balance of organizations communicating to consumers, blogs now provide a platform for discussion where the public can exchange opinions on products that bloggers present and endorse. In addition, blogs and their discussion boards likewise give data to organizations as they can study the preferences and dislikes of consumers (Gummer et al., 2011), making it less demanding for organizations to target particular products and brands for particular bloggers and group of consumers. It makes sense for organizations to explore blogs and what sort of conversations they make, as of this, organizations can aim at making popular bloggers their "part-time marketers" (Gummerus et al., 2011).

This may happen even without the bloggers truly acknowledging it, because the primary motivation for bloggers to compose a blog is not to market organizations and their products, but rather to share their interests, expertise and passion (Smudde, 2005). Most of

the public relations executives interviewed for the research agreed that *'bloggers make astounding marketers for brands, because of their ability to create remarkable, unique, exciting and diverse content about brands than the organization itself"* (Informant 5B), as pointed out by one of the bloggers. When an organization writes on its own brand, consumers may see it as being dull and generic as compare to bloggers, they are more personal and are not seen as agents of the organizations.

*Relationship between bloggers and brands*
One section of the interview was intended on finding out how bloggers see relationships between themselves and public relations representatives and also do they feel that it has some value and what would that value like.

When bloggers were asked if they want to build a relationship with public relations representatives, 4 over 5 replied affirmatively. One of the bloggers replied yes and no. He felt that having a too close relationship with just one PR organisation/agency "*might close doors and lead to a lack of contacts*" (Informant 3B) Still, he did appreciate close and friendly relationships with public relations agencies and representatives. The four (4) bloggers who wanted to build and maintain a relationship with public relations professionals felt that it would be beneficial due to the following reasons: easy communication and diversity of blog content.

It is less demanding to communicate and organise things with people bloggers already know. The blogger can easily stop by the office to get information about new products or brands. Moreover, relationships with organisations create diversity for blog content. The finding from the research acknowledged the significance that human relations have on blogger-brand collaboration. The bloggers felt that having a relationship with the organization and their representatives would facilitate their life. Bloggers likewise felt that the best way to introduce a new brand is if they are able to visit the company and the representatives present the brands and products face-to-face.

Moreover, bloggers also admitted that they would write better blog posts marketing new products and/or brands if the public relations agency that introduced it to them is honest and wants to maintain a friendlier relationship with the blogger. Three of the more experienced bloggers have seen the differences between public relations agencies and they feel that some of them are not interested in building any type of relationship with the blogger and instead just want to use their blog as an advertising channel.

Bloggers are less willing to associate with this kind of companies and since they like to work mainly with organizations that they have good relations with and feel comfortable with. This demonstrates that a genuinely warm and sincere relationship with bloggers is valuable for the public relations industry as they may get their brand and products promoted in a more positive light. One of the bloggers interviewed, said that "*one reason for wanting to create and maintain a relationship with the various brands is that it likewise creates a continuum to our blogs and content"* (Informant 3B). She feels that by having a long-lasting relationship with a specific brand or agency, it will also benefit her readers. The companies' products and services will be visible more often on her blog and because of that the public will have time to acclimate and familiarize themselves with the brands. She likewise feels that collaboration is much more natural when a genuine relationship is maintained. Adding that she goes on saying that "*long-lasting relationships will also help me*

*differentiate my blog from others, because most likely the brands that I have been promoting will not be as visible in other blogs*" (Informant 3B).

When bloggers were questioned about how they wish to build and maintain relationship with the organization, their answers were especially in-accordance with each other. They all felt that a decent method for keeping relations is by going to the organization and by attending different events, for example, PR days and press conferences. Visiting the company and attending events are simple and natural ways to catch up and meet the company's representatives. In addition, bloggers agreed that there is esteem and that building a relationship is valuable for all parties; the blogger, the organization and the public.

*How can the public relations industry ensure bloggers are acting ethically?*
The expanding prevalence of social media has forced communicators to adjust public relations strategies to the new digital environment, surrendering a major portion of the relationship with their stakeholders to community of unknown person (bloggers). Those bloggers help the organizations promote their products and services, raise awareness, inform and educate the publics, gain understanding and build trust and stimulate consumer acceptance (Moreno, 2015).

However, much concern exists over whether bloggers are using their influence in an ethical manner. Despite their developing prominence, some bloggers do get monetary compensation (payola) and little progress has been made in regards to the institutionalization of tasks and their roles. "*Exploiting the lack of ethical codes and guidelines for blogging activities, some PR experts offer corporate sponsorship as remuneration to get scope by bloggers*" (Informant 1A), said one public relations manager. The fact that there are no regulation condemning bloggers recruited by public relations agencies, organizations seize the opportunity to exploit to the maximum the blogosphere.

"*Most of the bloggers recruited are paid monetary compensation or are given free sample of product in exchange of positive content. I am not saying all content are fake but some of them over exaggerate things*" (Informant 2B), debated one of the bloggers. While most of the bloggers agreed that they would eventually like some compensation for writing positive words for a company, most of them said they would have preferred to write in their own words rather than the company providing them with what to write. Like this, "*there would be more control over what we are publishing on our blogs*" (Informant 2B), responded one blogger.

Moreover, there is also "no general agreement on the reliability and credibility of their activities and, leaving aside the professional status of bloggers, there are still many concerns about identity, transparency, coverage of topics, commercial affiliation, working relationships with PR practitioners as well as the use, credibility, and biases of blogs", (Moreno, 2015). "*This is what makes us lose followers. The public think we are not trustworthy*" (Informant 4B), responded one blogger. From the research conducted, four out of five consumers trust bloggers as a credible source of information, before any purchase or consult them for advice on products. Despite this fact, most bloggers believe that if fake information continues to be published on blogs, the trust of their readers might just fade away.

So, while some PR experts portray their relationships with bloggers as being founded on mutuality and trust, this is much of an ideal picture projected than reality, especially given the use of incentives by some organizations as a means of persuasion. Few

consumers' informants commented that, in order "*to protect consumers, bloggers ought to clarify whether their posts have been influenced by any sort of compensation as this makes the public aware of the motivation behind the post*" (Informants 1C and 2C). Bloggers are required at least to mention at the end of the post if they received any reward or product sample from the public relations agencies.

Because of these doubtful practices, there is serious concern that bloggers may be unreliable and bias when it comes to their posts and articles and are therefore violating the ethical practice of public relations, which is honesty and transparency. Despite of the fact that consumers say the blogosphere serves as a reliable and trustworthy platform, the validity of this statement is not totally true. The problem is that unchecked information is a daily published by bloggers who just take releases from public relations practitioners and post them online without any background check. And this certainly goes against any ethical barriers with in the public relations arena.

For public relations practitioners, blogs are a cheap and effective platform to make their companies known to the public, compared to the high market price of advertising in traditional media. As the influence of blogs grew, the question of ethics became more and more important. A Delphi study, which is a structured communication method, developed as a systematic, interactive forecasting method relying on a panel of experts, was conducted in Spain in 2014. The study indicates that most bloggers see themselves as more independent and credible than professional critics. They believe that their articles and reviews are more valuable and appreciated, as they are linked to the freedom and independence associated with social media (Moreno, 2015). However, blogging is an open space where any individual with or without expertise can freely express themselves. Therefore, the open nature of blogging, where no expertise or industry affiliation is needed, complicates its claim to a professional status (Moreno, 2015). Bloggers cannot really claim that they are professionals since they are neither affiliated with any professional public relations institutions neither are they expertise writers. This once again, challenges and questions the ethical guidelines on blogging.

From the response of the bloggers the researchers interviewed, it can evaluate that most bloggers in general believe they are producers of online content and that their activity should not be regulated since they do not belong to any professional institution or community. They consider the blogosphere as a free and open space where they can write their thoughts and share freely their opinions. There is also a prevalent view that the blogosphere is self-regulated and expels those who act in an unethical way; so the imposition of explicit rules of behavior would not be required (Moreno, 2015).

However, despite the fact that most bloggers see themselves as professionals who adhere to freedom and independence, when asked about how they choose what content to be published, most of them agreed that the majority of bloggers, "*simply copy paste materials and press releases received from public relations agencies and managers*" (Informants 3B, 4B and 5B). Some of them also relate to personal experience and stated that "*very often we receive pre-written articles to publish and are even required to review products and interview people on orders of the public relations agencies* (Informants 1B and 2B).

From what has been gathered from the research, there seems to be a clear agreement on what bloggers have contributed to the public relations industry. Most of the bloggers agreed and are aware of the fact that most public relations agencies use them as a

cheap and quick platform for promoting their products and services. However, they say they are not really scared of their future since they believe the influence of blogs will continue to grow due to the fading of traditional media among the younger generation. Now the only concern that most consumers and public relations experts have, is, whether bloggers are changing the rules of public relations. Are they using the same practices that have been once banished by the public relations community? It seems clear that both bloggers and public relations professionals need to change the way they are doing business.

*An Ethical Approach to Public Relations Blogging*
Despite devoting their trust in bloggers, the consumers interviewed by the researchers do agree that if eventually false and unreliable information is being posted on blogs, this should call for legal scrutiny. One consumer said, "*We trust the bloggers because we believe they would not lie to us, but if you are saying that they are being paid to lie then this is illegal*" (Informant 3C). It is important to note here that in public relations unethical behaviours do involve law and penalties. As said by Parkinson et al (2001), legal advice about blogging should be required for particular applications of the technology as a public relations tactic, because it is a legal matter.

As public relations practitioners settle on specific ways to control what and how to speak with their public, ethics gets to be bound together with the PR industry. "At the heart of an ethical stance about PR are issues related to the equivocality of responsibilities, values, and rights of an organization's internal and external publics that may be at odds with the organization's own values and goals" (Seeger, 1997). The goal is therefore, to diminish ethical equivocality much as could be expected so that public relations practitioners settle on the right choice and take the right decision. Moreover, communication with the publics or any blogger should uphold ethical principles where the ideal is honest and transparent two-way communication. Two -way communication by Grunig and Hunt's (1984) is ethical and the ideal ethical way to practice public relations (Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995), because it recommends a cooperative 'give and take' type of communication based on honesty and mutual respect.

It is therefore important, as one of the public relations managers said, "*as long as a company is using honest and mutual two-way communication with bloggers, it will encourage the bloggers to willingly act in the interest of the company. This is likely to increase trust of the public also*" (Informant 3A). As we can see, trust is a vital element and function within which an organization should operate, communicate, invite participation of its bloggers and publics, and guarantee that its moral and ethical standards are known, comprehended, and maintained. It is important to note that a blog created for public relations purposes falls into the corporate blog category. This makes the blog as well as the blogger and the public relation company being questioned for bias and falsifying statements. It is therefore cautious for both the public relations practitioner and the blogger to carefully scrutinize what information goes online.

The engagement of organizations and its publics together in a blog encourage communication and exchange about what is right, wrong, good and bad. Of the considerable number of advantages and disadvantages discussed in this research paper about blogs as a tool for public relations purposes, this one might be the most vital to weigh, regardless of the possibility that a public relations blog can be categorized as any other categories of blogs, such as personal, industrial or as an online journal. The extent to which public relations coordinate the blog and takes part in any blogging will mean it has a

proper level of obligation. At the end of the day, the more public relations practitioners are in charge of a blog, the more they are responsible for its creation, administration, publication and ethics. It is here very important to note that blog credibility relies upon trust, and trust is based on openness, honesty, transparency, consistency, and truthfulness. In other words, ethical behaviour is always expected when it comes to public relations blogs and any other categories of blogs. *"Ethics reduces negative public attitudes towards a blog and the company and help build trust" (Informant 2A),* said one public relations executive.

## CONCLUSION

Public Relations, more than any other media industry, is entering with zest into the sphere of new media, particularly the opportunities provided by blogs and other social media platforms. However, public relations practitioners must keep on following the direction already established standards be it, regulations by professional institutions like the Public Relations Society or the Federal Trade Commission with the idea of social obligation, or to their very own personal ethics.

Currently, many professionals are suggesting that blogs have tremendous potential as tools for online communication and for reaching diverse publics (Edelman, 2005). Interestingly, however, scholars have been saying the same thing about the Internet for almost 10 years and most organizations have not figured out how to use their Web sites well except to sell things (Kent et al., 2006). Ultimately, scholars and professionals are still out on blogging. Significantly, more insightful research should be conducted before most organizations start blogging. Public relations professionals ought not to get trampled by the blogging until researchers, scholars, and particularly professionals really comprehend blogs better.

A blog can only be useful to an organization when it has somebody to look after it, somebody reliable and trained in dialogical communication and somebody who has the trust of consumers and publics. Posting anonymously on blogs is not good for the business nor are attempts to manipulate content and use persuasion to convince the readers. Blogs are presently great research tools but scholars need to critically examine blogs and understand a lot more about how blogs function as persuasive/informative tools and how they fit in with organizational initiatives before jumping on the blog bandwagon (Kent et al., 2006)

As a concluding thought, it is important to realise that something that was unethical before, will be unethical now. Despite better approaches of communicating with publics, respect is still respected. The only way to ensure ethical practices is to practice ethics in everything in business we do.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

## BIODATA

*Mohd Helmi Abd Rahim* is a senior lecturer and researcher at the School Media Studies and Communication, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Email: mhelmi@ukm.edu.my

*Priya Darsanee Mahadavesingh Huzooree* is an advertising and design artisan for luxury brands at Mataora Ltd., Mauritius. Email: priyahuzz.aiesec@gmail.com

REFERENCE

Aiello, S. (2004*). The evolution of business and transformation of public relations. Public Relations Strategist*. Retrieved from http://www.prsa.org/_Publications/magazines/strat_sum2004.asp?ident=t15,2009

Archer, C. (2014). *A tale of power, passion and persuasion: Bloggers, Public Relations and Ethics.* Malaysia: Curtin University. Retrieved from:  deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/apprj.

Baker, S. (2007). *A case of covert persuasion. The Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 22, 221 - 225.

Borah, P. (2011). Conceptual issues in framing theory: A systematic examination of a decade's literature. *Journal of Communication*, 61, 246–263.

Bivins, T. (2008). *Ethical approaches to public relations.* The ethics of Strategic Communication. Retrieved from http://journalism.uoregon.edu/~tbivins/stratcomweb/notes/02PR-ethics.pdf.

Booth, N., & Matic, M. J. A. (2011). Mapping and leveraging influencers' in social media to shape corporate brand perceptions. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 16, 184–191

Cammaerts, B. (2008). Critiques on the participatory potentials of web 2.0. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 1(4), 357-377.

Castells, M. (2007). Communication, power and counter-power in the network society. *International Journal of Communication*, 1, 238–266.

Cho, E. (2008). *2007 blog review.* Eugene Cho Blog. Retrieved from https://eugenecho.com/2008/01/03/2007-blog-review/

Chong, D., & Druckman, J. N. (2007b). A theory of framing and opinion formation in competitive elite environments. *Journal of Communication*, 57, 99–118.

Chu, K. (2004). Dynamic growth in China's PR industry. *The Public Relations Strategist*, 10(1), 44-47.

Clifford, C. (2009). *Foreword: Media ethics and the technologies society. Journal of Mass Media Ethics,* 13, 67-70.

Corcoran, A., Marsden, P., Zorbach, T., & Rothlingshofer, B. (2006). Blog marketing. In J. Kirby & P. Marsden (Eds.), *Connected marketing: The viral buzz, and word-of-mouth revolution.*

Craig, D. (2007). *Wal-mart public relations in the blogosphere. Journal of Mass Media Ethics*. Retrieved from  https://www.coursehero.com/file/p7md5a/In-conclusion-the-ethical-decision-of-a-public-relations-firm-and-the-deceptive/

DeVreese, C. H. (2005). News framing: Theory and typology. *Information Design Journal + Document Design*, 13(1), 51–62.

Drushel, B. (2011). *The ethics of emerging media.* Bloomsbury Collections. Retrieved from http://www.bloomsbury.com/us/the-ethics-of-emerging-media-9781441183354/

Dutton, J. E., & Dukerich, J. M. (1991). Keeping an eye on the mirror: Image and identity in organizational adaptation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 517–554.

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.

Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1991). *Social cognition*. New York: Mcgraw-Hill Book Company.

Flew, T. (2005). *New media: An introduction.* London: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from  https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=view_citation&hl=en&user=0kdaFC0AAAAJ&citation_for_view=0kdaFC0AAAAJ:u5HHmVD_uO8C.

Gogoi, P. (2006, October 8). Wal-Mart's Jim and Laura: The real story. Retrieved from www.businessweek.com/print/bwdaily/dnflash/content/oct006

Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Grunig, J. E. (1992). *Models of public relations and communication*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hayes, A., Singer, J., & Ceppos, J. (2007). Shifting roles, eroding values: The credible journalist in digital age. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 22(4), 262-279.

Higgins, E. T. (1996). Knowledge activation: Accessibility, applicability, and salience. In E. T. Higgins & A. W. Kruglanski (Eds.), *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles* (pp. 133–68). New York: Guilford.

Jensen, R. (2011). *Blogola: Sponsored Post and the Ethic of Blogging.* Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/7587111/Jensen_Ric._2011_._Blogola_Sponsored_Posts_a nd_the_Ethics_of_Blogging._In_Kathleen_German_Editor_._The_Ethics_of_Emerging_ Media_Information_Social_Norms_and_New_Media_Technology_213- 232._New_York_Continuum_Press

Kent, M. (2007). *Critical analysis of blogging in public relations.* Retrieved from http://www.sciencedirect.com

Kuhn, M. (2007). Interactivity and prioritizing the human: A code of blogging ethics. *The Journal of Mass Media Ethics,* 22(1), 18-36.

Lazar, J. (2005). Blogger engagement ethics: Dialog civility in a digital era. *Journal of Mass Communication Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality*, 28(2), 79-90.

Levins, H. (2009). *Mom-Blog: We don't do paid-for-posts.* Retrieved from http://adage.com/digital/article?article_id=137313

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (1999). *Designing qualitative research* (2nd Ed.).Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Medina, J. (2005). *Blogs' popularity spurs ethical questions. Ventura Country Star*.

McAdams, S. (2006). *The rules of blogging*. The Ragan Report, February 20, page 6.

McMillan, S. (2000). *The microscope and the moving target: The challenge of applying content analysis to the world wide web. Journalism Mass Communication Quarterly*, 77.

Moreno, A. (2015). *The ethics of blogging.* Communication Director. Retrived from http://www.communication-director.com/issues/ethics-blogging#.V1CLS5F97IV

Miller, C. (2009). *Ad shift throws blogs a business lifeline.* New York Times. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2009/09/14/technology/internet/14blog.html?_r=1&dbk

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Park, A. (2004, June 28). Blogging with the boss's blessing. *Business Week*, 96-98

Parsons, P. (2008). *Ethics in public relation: A guide to best practice.* London, UK: Kogan Page Publishers.

Perlmutter, D., & McDaniel, M. (2005). The ascent of blogging. *Nieman reports*. Retrieved from www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100641.

Phillips, B. (2013). *The use of social-networking in medical education.* UK: Taylor & Francis. Retrieved from http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.3109/0142159X.2013.804909

Ramachandran, S. (2002). *The Framingham heart study*. *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 287, 1003-1010.

Rebel, H. (1997). Towards a metaphorical theory of public relations. In D. Moss, T. MacManus, & D. Vercic (Eds.), *Public relations research: An international perspective* (pp. 333-354). London: International Thomson Business Press.

Robert J. (2005, November). *How the PR profession can fluorish in this new digital age: Why you must challenge old PR models*. *Public Relations Tactics*, 18-19.

Sabate, J. M. F., & Puente, E. Q. (2003). Empirical analysis of the relationship between corporate reputation and financial performance: A survey of the literature. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 6(2), 161-177.

Sha, B. L. (1997). *Cultural public relations: Identity, activism, globalization, and gender in the democratic progressive party on Taiwan* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park).

Skowronek, D. (2009). *The convenience of nonprobability.* College & Research Libraries. Retrieved from http://crln.acrl.org/content/70/7/412.full

Smith, A. (2008). *New numbers for blogging and blog readership.* Retrieved from www.pewinternet.org/Commentary/2008/July/New-numbers-for-blogging-and-blog-redership.aspx

Smudde, P. (2005). Blogging, ethics and public relations: A proactive and dialogic approach. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 50(3), 34.

Waddington, S. (2013). *Gruning and digital communications* (CIPR Chartered Practitioner paper). Retrieved from http://wadds.co.uk/2013/06/18/cipr-chartered-practitioner-paper-grunig-and-digital-communications/

Winn, P. (2009). *State of the Blogosphere.* Retrieved from http://Technorati.com/blogging/article/state-of-the-blogosphere-introduction/

Wright, D., & Hinson, M. (2008, October 26). *Studying the impact of the new technologies on the practice of public relations*. *Public Relations Society of America International*, Detroit, Michigan. Retrieved from http://www.instituteforpr.org/wpcontent/uploads/Wright_Hinson_PR_Miami.pdf

Yao, D. (2009). *FTC: Bloggers must disclose freebies on reviews. NBC News Tech and Gadgets*. Retrieved from http://www.nbcnews.com/id/33177160/ns/technology_and_science-tech_and_gadgets/t/ftc-bloggers-must-disclose-freebies-reviews/#.V1CTaJF97IU