Critical Reflection of PR

Public relations is described as “a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication.. between an organisation and its publics” as said by Rex Harlow (Hutton, 1999: 200) it is a way of getting relevant information to the correct people in a manner which is suited to the organisation. PR originates from Edward Bernays from the early 20th century and has a negative stigma associated with it because of propaganda “PR and public diplomacy may both be seen as euphemistic terms for propaganda” (L’etang, 2009: 608) as they both serve the same function which is to form a relationship with the public, Propaganda is described as “the manipulation of symbols as a means of influencing attitudes on controversial matters” (Lasswell, 1942: 106) but “public relations is a weak propaganda” (Moloney, 2000: 41) it doesn’t have such a detrimental effect as propaganda once did as its purpose is to create a relationship and communicate to the public so that they see the specific person or organisation in a way which they want to be seen. Everything and everyone needs to be represented in some way, organisations need to create relationships with the public to sell their goods and services, politicians need to reach out to audience to change the way the country is run; so they need to be publicised in a way which allows this to happen.

Relationships and communication are really important in PR as an organisation is communicating with the public about something specific, the relationship between an organisation and its publics is made apparent whether it’s to advertise something or deal with some breaking news it will always have a purpose, in many cases “PR activities typically cluster around centres of power and processes of change” (L’etang, 2009: 641) as this is when it is most important for the public to know what’s going on. This module has taught me that one cannot be prepared for everything and relationships are extremely important when dealing with PR “the proper term for the desired outcomes of public relations practice is public relationships. An organisation with effective public relations will attain positive public
relationships” (Center & Jackson cited in Ledingham & Bruning, 2000: 3) how an organisation communicates to the public is important so that they can have these positive relationships, but this can change so dramatically when a journalist intervenes, as we found out when doing the press conference as the way that the organisation presents themselves is of the upmost importance, because journalists will read into everything because “journalists want the truth, usually in the most sensational form possible” (Morris & Goldsworthy, 2012: 297) therefore we had to make sure everything we said was full proof so that they couldn’t keep digging with questions although journalists will always find a way to get a bad story from you.

For the assignment we were faced with a reputational disaster crisis, a crisis is “when an event increases in intensity, falls under close scrutiny of the news, media or government, interferes with normal business opportunities, devalues a positive public image, and has an adverse effect on business bottom line” (Fink cited in Penrose, 2000: 159) the outlook for the hospital was not looking good and the breaking news could definitely have an adverse effect on the company, what we needed to do as the PR of the hospital, was close down the negatives so that we could get the best out of a bad situation; we wanted the least negative story as our priority was to keep the hospital’s reputation positive, reputation is described as “the product of the social process that assigns agents their ranking in society. To this extent, PR can at its core be understood as reputation nurturing” (Eisenegger, 2005: 1) so our job as the PR for the hospital was to nurture the reputation and make sure that the journalists didn’t find a bad story to write. But looking after the reputation of a company which is badly failing is difficult and almost impossible especially when they appear to be in the wrong.

In the case of our press conference we were in a no win situation so we had be careful with what was said “phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them” (Orwell, 1946) we didn’t want to go into too much detail about specifics, especially as a child had died in our care, phrases such as ‘patient b’ and ‘still under
investigation’ were used so that the press couldn’t delve into the story too much, this was to help save the reputation of the hospital and the privacy of the patient.

Another factor that is important is preparation; you can’t be prepared for everything. This is something I learnt from the mock conference, our group wasn’t very prepared and all the other groups seemed to know exactly what they were doing so when we first got the brief we did a lot of research and came up with the reptile story as our outreak of the salmonella, we were unsure whether this would be affected by breaking news, but luckily our story still stood and we could stick to our objective of protecting the reputation of the hospital. The breaking news was an aspect that was difficult with this module, as obviously this is something that occurs in everyday life for journalists and PR companies alike and until now I hadn’t realised how much work goes on to get news out there and for a company to protect their reputation when there is a crisis, with the 3 different lots of breaking news coming through it meant a lot of research and changing of the press release had to be done to keep on top of everything.

Our main speaker was the CEO of the hospital; this was because “If the senior management is not seen as the public face, this only gives the impression that they are not treating the issue seriously enough” (Butterick, 2011: 65) and we treated the situation seriously as she handled the crisis well with the story which took the blame of the salmonella outbreak away from us and onto another cause, reptiles which gave the journalists a story as it was newsworthy because it was unique, negative, recent, and exclusive to the journalists in the press conference (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). When the finance aspect came up this is something we struggled with as none of us had prepared too much for these questions so she had to try and find a way out of this, she mentioned how Jamie Oliver was being paid a large sum of money and compared this to how she had a breast implants to benefit her marriage, this did end the press conference but not necessarily on a positive note. She was trying to say how this large investment now can benefit the hospital in the future, because in reality there was no other way to say that they were spending too much money on this Jamie Oliver scheme
for a hospital that is in debt, so she was trying to cover up the truth similarly to “A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details” (Orwell, 1946) but instead used an inappropriate metaphor which got us the headline ‘It’s all gone tits up – hospital spokesperson in amazing breast implant analogy of NHS needs’ which isn’t something that the hospital wants to be reported on, the CEO has now become the news rather than the news being the news.

A communication mistake that we made was only having one main speaker she took over the presentation by walking around at the front; the body language made her seem very in control and confident, “one sign of your control...is that you always have the freedom of movement so you can adjust your distance and...invade their personal distance if you want to” (Neill & Caswell, 1993: 26) this freedom meant there were no barriers between her and the journalists and made her seem very in control, the presentation in the background, although it only showed a name and image of the hospital, showed why the press had come to the conference, it was a preparation tool that allowed them to visually see why they were there along with the information pack that we handed them.

She was wearing smart attire to make herself look presentable and professional, while still smiling “when a neighbour dropped in to have a cup of tea, he would ordinarily wear at least a hint of an expectant warm smile as he passed through the door..” which made the journalists feel welcome, as Goffman observed that “..islanders sometimes took pleasure in watching the visitor drop whatever expression he was manifesting and replace it with a sociable one just before reaching the door” (Goffman, 1959: 7) the journalists would have seen the change in expression from professional stance when she began the conference to a smile and feel as though she was more welcoming because of the social manner of a smile. Although we did have a specialist on hand, he was sitting down at the side and was never needed as his topic never came up, there should have been more of us up there to support her and the specialist could have been up there to offer help when she needed it and that is
something we should have looked into, but me and the other 2 members of the group are not
good at public speaking, and we thought it would look even more unprofessional if we had
people up there stuttering and stumbling their words or standing around doing nothing.

Ethics is another part of PR, it is very easy to spin a story to try and manipulate the audience,
‘spin’ is seen as immoral so we therefore tried not to spin the story too much, as we didn’t
want to lie about the facts but found this very difficult as it is easy to pass the blame, which is
what we ultimately did in the end but the story we came up with was still relevant and
truthful. A relationship needs to be formed with the public, but in doing so it can exploit
other people or competitors and manipulate the public through spin doctors who have
“considerable power over the fates of people and organisations” (Morris & Goldsworthy,
2008: 5) this is usually apparent in politics, such as Alistair Campbell who was a spin doctor
for prime minister Tony Blair and was described as ‘the dark soul of Tony Blair’, spin doctors
tell stories and use language to mask the truth, they need to communicate to the public but
there are some things which can’t be shared because reputation may be at stake so
candidates create “an obfuscating trellis of presentation” (Moloney & Colmer, 2001: 965)
this means they are using PR to defend information and strategically hide information,
David (2004) says how “most of a political PR operators time is spent blocking and reacting
to negative coverage, not providing information” (Jackson, 2010:12) the only problem with
this is that “The most powerful weapon in human communication still is the truth” (Heibert,
2004: 6) and this is why PR has got such negative connotations.

Because PR involves people and companies it has a corporate social responsibility “there is
one and only one social responsibility of business – to use its resources and engage in
activities designed to increase its profits” (Friedman, 1993: 254) Friedman’s way of looking
at social responsibility would be similar to most PR firms; they just want to do what they can
to make money. I have learnt from this that PR is a very unethical industry, as it’s been
described as ‘public relations ethics’ is an oxymoron because they do what they can to hide
the truth, in the case of our press conference it was difficult to hide the truth within Grunig and Hunt’s 1984 model of public relations, the press conference for the hospital would fall under the ‘Public information’ sector as “the public information model characterises public relations as practiced by ‘journalists-in-residence’ who disseminate what generally is accurate information about the organisation but do not volunteer negative information” (Grunig & Grunig, 1995: 169).

As we were dealing with a death we were not going to volunteer this information, but we told the truth as accurately as possible because as a company we still had to protect the reputation and therefore thought of other stories and placed the blame elsewhere, this isn’t seen as manipulating the truth but “those following the public information model have the effect of manipulating publics, even though that may not be their intent” (Grunig & Grunig, 1995: 170) because when the journalists start asking questions then your automatic response is to start being defensive as although there are two sides to a story, as a company you want them to get your side of the story.

This communication module has taught me how to prepare for the unexpected, there is only so much that can be done before being confronted with journalists hungry for a story, the way a company communicates themselves to the public is so important for a relationship to be kept intact and for the reputation to be saved. Public relations is a tough, unethical industry that is compared to propaganda because of its morals, but whether or not it is morally wrong it is still important because it is the way the public create relationships with people and companies; without PR the media would be nothing as PR makes people react “as if actuated by the pressure of a button” (Bernay, 1928) although often criticised, people react to the controversy because it’s something to talk about; press conferences are needed to get information across to the journalist and the public, articles are written to create public awareness and speeches are made to communicate certain ideas. There will always be 2 sides
to a story and the idea of PR is to get the most positive and beneficial story out there to the public.
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