

Weblogs and Employee Communication: Ethical Questions for Corporate Public Relations

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Although technology has had a huge impact on public relations and all of its functions, a number of recent developments suggest the relatively new phenomenon of world wide weblogging – and in particular employee blogging – already has changed many aspects of employee communication. The rise of the web blogosphere has significantly empowered employees and has provided a dynamic new medium many are using to communicate with a variety of internal and external audiences.

The term “blogs” is an abbreviation of “weblogs” that Edelman and Intellissek (2005) say are “easily published, personal web sites that serve as sources of commentary, opinion and uncensored, unfiltered sources of information on a variety of topics.” (p. 4). According to Robert J. Key (2005), many weblogs began sporadically as vanity publishing because “anyone with an opinion about anything could create, in a matter of minutes, his or her own web site for publishing news, opinion, commentary and links to other sites” (p. 18). It is believed there were 34 million blogs in existence at the end of 2005 (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005).

Dave Winer (2005), who runs the Scripting News weblog, one of the first and currently the longest-running blog on the internet, and also is a fellow at Harvard Law School’s Berkman Center for Internet & Society, says the phenomenon of employee blogging “is nothing less than revolutionary.” Winer (2003) also points out that “Weblogs are unique in that only a weblog gives you a publication where your ideas can stand alone without interference. It gives the public writer a kind of relaxation not available in other forms.”

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In spite of a great interest in weblogs by the trade press and some of the world’s largest public relations firms, the academic literature of public relations contains little, if any, research on

this subject. Industry-related interests have led to the publication of several reports and white papers investigating the phenomenon of employee blogging, the credibility of blog messages, and how companies are reacting to this new form of consumer generated communication. However, there does not appear to have been any research examining ethical concerns associated with employee blogging.

This paper explores several ethical issues about weblogs and employee communications through a web-based, international study of public relations practitioners. The following research questions form the basis of this research:

- Are employee blogs saying positive or negative things about the organizations their authors work for?
- Is it ethical for employees to write and post on a web blog negative statements about the organizations they work for?
- Is it ethical for representatives of organizations to monitor information their employees have written on weblogs?
- Is it ethical for an organization to discipline an employee who writes negative statements about the organization on a weblog?
- Is it ethical for an organization to conduct research or measurement studies that focus on information their employees are writing on weblogs?

BLOGGING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Many aspects of technology currently are challenging how public relations is being practiced. As Robert J. Key (2005) explains, “Public relations in the digital age requires understanding how your key constituents are gathering and sharing information and then influencing them at key points. Doing so requires strategies that embrace the digital age” (p. 19).

The potential impact of blogs on public relations and corporate communications is phenomenal. Steve Crescenzo, writing in *The Ragan Report* (October 24, 2005) says employee blogs have “massive, almost unlimited potential to share knowledge, foster dialogue, market goods and services, and open up two-way channels of communication” (p. 1). A recent study commissioned by Edelman Public Relations and Intelliseek (2005) claims, “The rise of the blogosphere has the potential to empower employees in ways not unlike the rise of labor unions in the late 19th and 20th centuries” (p. 3). The 2005 *PR Week/Burson-Marsteller* CEO Survey

reports that “59 percent of CEOs rate blogs as a good, very good, or excellent corporate communications tool for internal audiences” (p. 1).

In spite of the huge potential for blogs in both business and public relations, Anderson (2005) and *Wired Magazine* claim only 20 Fortune 500 companies currently are committed to blogging.

WHY DO EMPLOYEES BLOG?

Fredrik Wackå (2005), who manages the Guide to Corporate Blogging (www.corporateblogging.info) claims there are several reasons why employees are blogging.

These include:

- Becoming an Expert: Positioning the employee as a thought leader.
- Testing Ideas: The conversational and informal nature of blogs, and the ability to encourage audience feedback, makes blogging a good way to toss out ideas and see if they generate interest.
- Personalizing Relationships: Employees can use blogs to personalize relationships with other employees and members of other strategic publics (customers, stockholders, etc.).

According to a Backbone Media (2005) survey the top five reasons why employees have created web blogs are to publish content and ideas (52%), build communities (47%), promote thought leadership (44%), get information to customers (36%) and get feedback from customers (23%). Steve Hirschfeld's (2006) research on behalf of the Employment Law Alliance claims millions of American workers blog – as much as five percent of the work force.

ARE EMPLOYEE BLOGS GOOD OR BAD?

There are conflicting viewpoints regarding whether employee blogs are good or bad. According to a 2004 *BusinessWeek* article, companies such as Microsoft, Dell and Sun have encouraged their employees to blog citing benefits such as these:

- “In a world of fragmented media, employees’ online diaries can be a seductive way to lure customers into conversations.”
- “They’re sticky – readers check back several times a day. And posts get linked to other sites amplifying their impact.”
- “They’re efficient. Employees can post questions about their work and get instant, mass feedback.”

- “They’re free. Blogs can serve as a global focus group, letting employees know exactly what customers want.”
- “Done well, they can humanize faceless behemoths. The Evil Empire of Redmond can instead become the home of ‘The Scobleizer,’ Microsoft’s most famous blogger.”

Michelle Conlin and Andrew Park (2004) point out that many corporate executives encourage employees to blog so they can create personal relationships with other employees and customers. David Weinberger (2002), the co-author of *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual* says employee blogs establish connections “through real human beings speaking like real human beings, which is something companies have forgotten how to do.”

Although some companies encourage their employees to blog, others do not. Anderson and Mayfield (2005) claim some of the companies currently encouraging blogging include Dell, Hewlett-Packard, Honeywell International, IBM, Microsoft, Sun Microsystems, Viacom and Xerox. Anderson, the editor of *Wired Magazine*, and Mayfield, the author of *Socialtext*, are collaborating on a project that will create an index of business blogging. The Ragan Report (February 20, 2006) claims some companies have large numbers of webloggers and says IBM has “more than 15,000 registered employee bloggers” (p. 6).

Even though some organizations encourage employee blogging, many organizations do not because they fear employees might misuse employee blogs and either communicate negative information about the company or exchange confidential information.

According to the *Ragan Report* (November 14, 2005) although employee blogs currently are a big phenomenon, many who work in employee communications do not like the idea of their employees blogging because the company is not able to control their messages. Communication consultant Allan Jenkins (2005) believes many public relations people fear employee blogs because they “are reluctant to let go of the communication reins.” Jenkins says “90% of this [concern is attributable to] loss of message control.” Conlin and Park (2004) claim many companies are willing to give up this message control because they now realize employee bloggers can develop meaningful relationships with customers. However, Dan Gillmor (2004) believes companies inevitably will try to co-opt blogs.

ETHICS AND EMPLOYEE BLOGS

Research on ethics began with Socrates (c. 470-399 BC) in ancient Greece. He said virtue could be identified and practiced. Plato (c. 428-384 BC), Socrates' disciple, advocated moral conduct even when it might run counter to societal norms. Aristotle (384-322 BC), a student of Plato, theorized that moral virtue often required tough choices.

The central core of the study of ethics focuses on what is *good* and what is *bad* while the main focus in the study of law is on what is *right* and what is *wrong*. Although laws can be bad, something ethically good always should be right. Societies make and change laws, but ethical principles, theoretically at least, remain constant over time.

Classical ethical theory views ethical obligation in two different ways. Teleological ethics underscores the consequences of an act or decision while deontological ethics emphasized the nature of an act or a decision. As ethical theory and research developed in the traditional areas of scholarship – philosophy, the classics, and so forth – moral rules came to represent the fuel that powered the ethical system. These rules became guideposts for resolving ethical dilemmas and posed moral duties in individuals. In fulfilling moral duties people took into account all parties, including themselves, who may be touched by ethical decisions.

For more than two decades one of this paper's authors has advocated the importance of individuals and individual actions and opinions in public relations ethics (Wright, 1982, 1985, 1989 & 1996), and few aspects of public relations ethics focus more upon the individual than those surrounding employee blogs. Authors of weblogs have unlimited control over their content and as such can choose how ethical they want to be as they communicate via the web.

Ethics deals with questions of moral behavior and is similar to a set of principles or a code of moral conduct (Fink, 1998). Ethics scholar Richard Johannesen (1983) claims ethical situations are multifaceted and it is inevitable that conflicts among competing values will emerge in this process.

The study of ethics in contemporary public relations research and practice usually reflects some interpretation or judging of value systems and is representative of much contemporary

research. As pointed out by Wilcox, Ault and Agee (1986), “a person determines what is right or wrong, fair or unfair, just or unjust. It is expressed through moral behavior in specific situations” (p. 108).

Many early studies in public relations ethics focused on the basic human need to function in honest and ethical ways. Most of these articles also combined ethics and professionalism and some also focused accreditation and licensing. Writings of Appley (1948), Bateman (1957), Bernays (1979), and Harlow (1951, 1969) justify this claim.

Contemporary ethics study in public relations is fairly young and as such reflects considerable interpretation. When it comes to the bottom line, the final arbiter in separating right from wrong or good from evil in public relations is the decision maker, all of which places a considerable amount of responsibility upon the many authors of employee weblogs.

CORPORATE BLOGGING POLICIES

Even though millions of workers currently are blogging, Hirschfield’s (2006) recent study conducted on behalf of the Employment Law Alliance found that only 15% of US companies have specific policies addressing work-related blogging. Findings claim the majority of US workers believe employees who post embarrassing information about their organizations should be dismissed. This study found:

- “59% of employees believe employers should be allowed to discipline or terminate workers who post confidential or proprietary information concerning the employer.”
- “55% think employers should be allowed to discipline or terminate employees who post damaging, embarrassing, negative information about the employer.”
- “23% support fellow workers being free to post criticism or satire about employers, co-workers, supervisors, customers, or clients without fear of discipline.”

The Ragan Report (article by Sarah McAdams, February 20, 2006) advises companies to “address blogging head-on with a written policy” and cites IBM for setting a good example with its document that “demonstrates the best way to balance open communication and legal protection” (p.6). This article quotes Ed Brill, IBM’s manager of competitive projects as saying, “IBM employees who blog do so to share information with each other. A full copy of IBM’s blogging guidelines is available on Brill’s blog (www.edbrill.com).

METHOD

A sample of public relations practitioners from various parts of the world took part in this research. Invitations to participate in the study were extended via e-mail messages to random samples collected from organizations such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), the Arthur W. Page Society, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA); and from donor, task-force and commission membership lists of the Institute for Public Relations. The study's measuring instrument contained 18 questions.

Respondents came from many different parts of the world and represented a good cross-section of a wide variety of segments of the public relations industry. More (32%) worked with corporations than any other area but small consultancies (29%) and public relations firms (19%) also were well represented. The education field accounted for eight percent of the respondents while six percent came from the not-for-profit area, four percent worked in government positions and three percent were research providers.

There was a fairly even split between male (53%) and female (47%) respondents. Given the study's large international emphasis most (63%) were IPRA members while 22% belonged to PRSA, 14% to IABC, five percent were members of the Page Society and 24% belonged to a national public relations society in a country other than the United States. Of the respondents, 44% were based in the United States and 56% were based in a foreign country.

Usable responses were received from 294 subjects. Data were analyzed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science) program.

RESULTS

Results reported in Table 1 indicate 45% of the respondents are aware of situations where employees of their organization (or a client's organization) have openly communicated on world wide weblogs.

Table 1

Responses to the question: *Are you aware of any situations where employees of your organization (or a client's organization) have openly communicated on world wide weblogs?*

Yes	45%
No	35%
Uncertain/	20%
Don't Know	

As Table 2 shows employees who blog appear to be writing both positive and negative things about their organizations. However, results of this survey suggest more positive things are being written than negative things.

Table 2

Responses to the question: *If you are aware of any such employee blog activity do you know if the employees had positive or negative things to say about the organization?*

Very Positive	1%
Somewhat Positive	16%
Both Positive and Negative but Mainly Positive	30%
Neither Negative nor Positive	18%
Both Negative and Positive but Mainly Negative	22%
Somewhat Negative	4%
Very Negative	8%

When asked whether or not it was ethical for employees to write and post on a weblog negative statements about the organizations they work for, close to one half (49%) said doing this was ethical while about one-third (34%) disagreed and 18% answered "uncertain." These results are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3

Responses to the question: *Do you agree or disagree that it is ethical for employees to write and post on a weblog negative statements about the organizations they work for?*

Strongly Agree	29%	49%
Agree	20%	
Uncertain	18%	
Disagree	33%	34%
Strongly Disagree	1%	

Mean Score: 3.4

Results displayed in Table 4 indicate that most (79%) agree that it is ethical for organizations to monitor what their employees are writing on their blogs. Only ten percent believe it is inappropriate for companies to do this monitoring. The mean score of 4.0, reported in Table 4, like all of this study's mean scores, is based on a five-point scale ranging from "1" for "strongly disagree" to "5" for "strongly agree."

Table 4

Responses to the question: *Do you agree or disagree that it is ethical for representatives or organizations to monitor information their employees have written on world wide weblogs?*

Strongly Agree	32%	
Agree	47%	79%
Uncertain	11%	
Disagree	10%	
Strongly Disagree	0%	10%

Mean Score: 4.0

As Table 5 shows, a majority (59%) say it is ethical for an organization to discipline an employee who writes negative statements about the organization on a blog.

Only 19% disagreed and 21% were uncertain.

Table 5

Responses to the question: *Do you agree or disagree that it is ethical for an organization to discipline an employee who writes negative statements about the organization on a world wide weblog?*

Strongly Agree	21%	
Agree	38%	59%
Uncertain	21%	
Disagree	19%	
Strongly Disagree	0%	19%

Mean Score: 3.6

Given the increased use of blogging by representatives of certain labor unions, we also thought it important to ask subjects in this study whether or not they considered it was ethical for elected representatives of unions who, while acting on behalf of a union, wrote negative statements about the organizations they work for on a blog.

Table 6 shows that about half (53%) of the study's respondents thought this was ethical while about one quarter of them (27%) disagreed. The response of "uncertain" was received from 20%.

Table 6

Responses to the question: *Do you agree or disagree that it is ethical for an elected representative of a union (acting on behalf of the union) to write negative statements about the organization he or she works for (the company not the union) on a world wide weblog?*

Strongly Agree	24%	
Agree	29%	53%
Uncertain	20%	
Disagree	27%	
Strongly Disagree	0%	27%

Mean Score: 3.5

We also wanted to know if public relations practitioners thought it was appropriate for organizations to discipline these employees. As Table 7 indicates, more than half (54%) agreed that such discipline was ethical while 20% disagreed and 26% were uncertain.

Table 7

Responses to the question: *Do you agree or disagree that it would be ethical (ethical – not legal) for an organization to discipline the employee described in the question above?*

Strongly Agree	22%	
Agree	32%	54%
Uncertain	26%	
Disagree	20%	
Strongly Disagree	0%	20%

Mean Score: 3.6

Since research is such an integral part of the corporate public relations process, this study asked three questions specifically related to measurement and employee blogs. The first of these sought opinions as to whether or not it was ethical for an organization to conduct research that focused on information their employees are writing on blogs. Results in Table 8 show that a very large majority (89%) believe it is ethical to take such measures while only four percent say it would be unethical.

Table 8

Responses to the question: *Do you agree or disagree that it is ethical for an organization to conduct research or measurement studies that focus on information their employees are writing on www blogs?*

Strongly Agree	29%	
Agree	60%	89%
Uncertain	7%	
Disagree	4%	
Strongly Disagree	0%	4%

Mean Score: 4.1

However, as results displayed in Table 9 indicate, in spite of those results, only a very small number of organizations appear to have commissioned or conducted such research or measurement.

Table 9

Responses to the question: *To the best of your knowledge, has your organization ever commissioned or conducted a research or measurement study that focused on information employees communicated on www blogs?*

Yes	3%
No	77%
Uncertain/ Don't Know	20%

Furthermore, fewer than half (46%) of the organizations who have not measured what their employees are writing on blogs believe their companies ever will commission or conduct research to study what is happening in this area. Results from Table 10 show that while only 14% of the study's respondents do not think their organizations ever will measure what their employees are writing on blogs, a very large number (40%) are uncertain.

Table 10

Responses to the question: *If you answered "NO" to the previous question, do you agree or disagree that your organization ever would commission or conduct a research or measurement study focused on information employees were writing on www blogs?*

Strongly Agree	4%	
Agree	42%	46%
Uncertain	40%	
Disagree	11%	
Strongly Disagree	3%	14%

Mean Score: 3.3

Subjects also were asked if their organization had a code of ethics – 86% did and 14% did not. Those from companies with an ethics code were asked if it specifically addressed whether or not it was ethical to monitor communications behavior of individual employees – 31% said theirs did, 39% said theirs did not, and 29% were uncertain.

ADDITIONAL ANALYSES

The study’s questionnaire asked several demographic questions which permitted data analyses to include measures of central tendency comparing differences between mean scores of various respondent groups. T-tests were computed comparing men and women as well as international respondents vis-à-vis those from the United States. Analyses of variance measures (ANOVAs) were used to compare responses from subjects employed within different segments of the public relations industry.

Statistical significance was found more frequently when comparing American and foreign respondents than during any other of the study’s central tendency measures. ANOVAs comparing means of international and US responses were significant at <.05 on four of the study’s 12 measures. These included the question asking if subjects were aware of any situations where employees had blogged. As Table 11 indicates, American respondents were significantly more likely to be aware of these situations.

Table 11

T-Test analysis comparing US and foreign responses to the question: *Are you aware of any situations where employees of your organization (or a client’s organization) have openly communicated on world wide weblogs?*

	N	Mean	SD	t	DF	p
American Responses	128	1.71	.66	3.03	38	.003
Foreign Responses	164	1.56	.81			

Mean scores analyses for Tables 11 through 14 involved onl responses of “yes” and “no” and are on a two-point scale where “1” = “no” and “2” = “yes.” Consequently, the higher the mean score the greater the agreement.

In the three other situations – as shown by results in Tables 12, 13 and 14 – American respondents also had higher mean scores than their foreign counterparts. As such, US respondents were more likely to work with organizations that (a) had commissioned or conducted research that focused on employee blogging; (b) have a code of ethics; and (c) have a code of ethics that addresses whether or not it is ethical for the organization to monitor communications behavior of individual employees.

Table 12

T-Test analysis comparing US and foreign responses to the question: *To the best of your knowledge, has your organization ever commissioned or conducted a research or measurement study that focused on information employees communicated on www blogs?*

	N	Mean	SD	t	DF	p
American Responses	126	1.34	.51	2.48	44	.014
Foreign Responses	161	1.08	.39			

Table 13

T-Test analysis comparing US and foreign responses to the question: *Does your organization have a code of ethics?*

	N	Mean	SD	t	DF	p
American Responses	125	1.87	.40	1.78	67	.046
Foreign Responses	162	1.63	.29			

Table 14

T-Test analysis comparing US and foreign responses to the question: *If your organization has a code of ethics, does this code address whether or not it's ethical for your organization to monitor communications behavior of individual employees?*

	N	Mean	SD	t	DF	p
American Responses	112	1.62	.83	2.78	35	.006
Foreign Responses	142	1.47	.71			

Although results were not statistically significant, foreign respondents were more likely to agree that it was ethical for employees to write negative statements about the organizations they work for on a weblog, but they also were more likely to agree that it was ethical for organizations to discipline such employees. American respondents were more likely to agree that it was ethical for organizations to monitor information their employees write on weblogs. They also were more likely to agree with the study's two questions concerning blogging by employees represented by labor unions.

When ANOVAs were conducted and the independent variable was what segment of the public relations industry respondents worked in, results showed statistical significance on only one question. As Table 15 shows, this happened when subjects were asked if they agreed that it was ethical for an organization to conduct research or measurement studies that focused on information their employees are writing on blogs. Research suppliers and educators were significantly more likely to approve of conducting such research, but corporate, agency and consultancy employees also strongly approved of it.

Table 15

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) analysis the segment of the public relations industry respondents work in and responses to the question: *Do you agree or disagree that it is ethical for an organization to conduct research or measurement studies that focus on information their employees are writing on www blogs?*

	N	Mean	SD	t	DF	p
Agency	128	4.22	.51	3.03	6	.046
Consultancy	164	4.12	.67			
Corporate		4.07	.68			
Education		4.50	.62			
Government		3.60	1.52			
Not-for-Profit		3.89	.93			
Research Provider		4.80	.45			

Although statistical significance was not found in any of the t-tests comparing mean differences between male and female respondents, women were more likely than men to believe it was ethical for employees to post negative statements about their employers on weblogs.

However, men were more likely to agree that it was ethical for organizations to discipline these employees. They also were more likely to approve of research measuring what employees are writing on their blogs.

SUMMARY

Results of this international survey of public relations practitioners found nearly half (45%) of those who responded are aware of situations where employees of their company (or of a client's organization) have openly communicated on weblogs. Although employees who blog are writing both positive and negative things about their organizations, it appears that the positive outweighs the negative. Nearly half of the study's respondents (49%) think it's ethical for employees to write negative things about the organizations they work for on a weblog.

A large percentage (79%) of the public relations practitioners who responded to this survey believe it is ethical for organizations to monitor information their employees have written on weblogs, and 59% say it is ethical to discipline employees who write negative statements.

The greatest agreement on any of the study's questions resulted from the question asking if it is ethical for an organization to conduct research or measurement studies that focus on information their employees are blogging. A huge majority (89%) said this was permissible and only four percent disagreed. However, in spite of this only three percent of the respondents said their companies had ever commissioned or conducted such research. Nearly half (46%) of those from organizations not currently measuring employee blogging believe their companies will do so eventually.

Respondents were less likely to criticize, and more likely to disagree with disciplinary action, in cases where labor union represented employees, acting on behalf of the union, write negative statements about the organization they work for on a blog.

Tests comparing various demographic groups found the greatest amount of statistically significant differences between American and foreign respondents. Less significance was found when comparing responses based upon gender or the segment of the public relations industry respondents were employed in.

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