



# New Persuasion and Old Unethical Problem in Blog

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## Abstract

This article mentions that technology of Internet has been developed and caused new communication tools. They make human communicate more conveniently and rapidly. They also create new media - blog, which is like a personal webpage in which the owner can write and share information, idea and whatever they like with other people who can simultaneously access and add comments. Therefore, blog becomes a new media channel that is quite popular and is used for marketing communication, advertising, and public relations. As the blog is new and interesting, it can create word of mouth marketing, and make the information rapidly reach the consumers with less expenses. It is not surprising that blogs promptly becomes the well-known marketing medium.

Consequently, its popularity causes ethical problems-especially the problem about trustworthiness of information in the blog. This article also illustrates the Wal-Mart case study in which a dishonest PR company has made up the story to promote the positive image of organization in the blog.

This article aims to initiate and update the principle and framework of professional code in the advertising and PR business, to be used concurrently with the development of technology. The code is initiated to prevent and control the unethical problems - dilemma of digital media- that are happening and will inevitably happen in the future.

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้กล่าวถึงการพัฒนาเทคโนโลยีทางด้านการสื่อสารที่พัฒนาก้าวหน้าจนทำให้เกิดเครื่องมือการสื่อสารใหม่ๆ ที่สามารถทำให้มนุษย์สามารถสื่อสารกันได้อย่างสะดวกสบายและรวดเร็วยิ่งขึ้น รวมถึงอินเทอร์เน็ตทำให้เกิดสื่อใหม่ซึ่งได้แก่ บล็อก (Blog) ซึ่งเป็นเหมือนเว็บไซต์ส่วนตัวที่เจ้าของสามารถเขียนแสดงข้อมูลและความคิดเห็นต่างๆ โดยผู้สนใจสามารถเข้าไปอ่านรายละเอียดและร่วมแบ่งปันข้อมูลรวมถึงเชื่อมต่อข้อมูลต่างๆ ร่วมกันได้ ปัจจุบันบล็อกกลายเป็นสื่อใหม่อีกช่องทางหนึ่งที่มีความนิยมและถูกนำไปใช้ในการสื่อสารการตลาด การโฆษณาและการประชาสัมพันธ์ ด้วยคุณสมบัติที่น่าสนใจผู้สนใจสามารถสร้างกระแสความนิยมและแพร่กระจายข้อมูลสู่ผู้บริโภคอย่างรวดเร็ว โดยใช้งบประมาณจำนวนไม่มาก จึงไม่แปลกที่บล็อกกลายเป็นเครื่องมือเพื่อการสื่อสารการตลาดที่ได้รับความนิยมอย่างรวดเร็ว

ในขณะที่ความนิยมของบล็อกทำให้เกิดปัญหาการกระทำผิดทางจริยธรรมทางสื่อใหม่ตามมาเช่นกันโดยเฉพาะในเรื่องของความน่าเชื่อถือของข้อมูลต่างๆ ในบล็อก ในบทความนี้ได้มีการยกตัวอย่างถึง กรณีศึกษาของวอลมาร์ท ที่บริษัทให้บริการด้านการประชาสัมพันธ์ไม่ซื่อสัตย์โดยใช้ข้อมูลและความคิดเห็นที่ถูกตกแต่งและสร้างขึ้นเพื่อการประชาสัมพันธ์ภาพลักษณ์ที่ดีให้แก่องค์กรเผยแพร่ลงในบล็อก

บทความนี้ต้องการกระตุ้นและเรียกร้องให้เกิดการสร้างและปรับปรุงกรอบแนวคิดและหลักการเกี่ยวกับจริยธรรมและจรรยาบรรณในการนำเสนอข้อมูลข่าวสารในสื่อใหม่เหล่านี้ โดยเฉพาะในแวดวงของการโฆษณาและการประชาสัมพันธ์ เพื่อให้สามารถนำหลักจริยธรรมและจรรยาบรรณไปใช้ให้เท่าทันกับเทคโนโลยีที่พัฒนาขึ้นทุกวัน เพื่อป้องกันควบคุมปัญหาเกี่ยวกับสื่อใหม่ที่กำลังเกิดขึ้นในปัจจุบันและกำลังจะเกิดขึ้นต่อไปในอนาคต





## Introduction

At present, communication technology has rapidly developed so that the internet has become a vital medium for sharing, searching, and exchanging information as well as for entertainment. Sheehan (2004) mentioned that what life would be, if we lived without internet. The revolution of internet supported us from academic tool to electronic bazaar. It is the network of networks that has been developed until it becomes the important new media for this era. Moreover, the number of internet users has continuously increased. According to the IAB survey, in 2011 there are 2 billion internet users around the world. (Internet World Stats website "Internet usage statistics: The Internet big picture: World Internet users and population stats," 2011).

The technology advancement and network connection in the Internet create the new online media and new communication such as e-mail, website, instant message, social network site and blog. Blog is the new media that totally changes the traditional media because the receivers in this age do not only follow the news from the mainstream media. In contrast, they are active audiences searching for and share information as well as express their opinion. Smith and Hendricks (2010) commented that current receivers were more technologically savvy to choose and use new media tools including video on demand, blogs, citizen journalism, and podcast. Bagdikian (2004) also mentioned that the new generation people were born with technology skill and accustomed to it. They are the hope and ally to report and audit news and situations, especially the political issue in the new media which is alternative from the traditional media.

Blog is a kind of development and movement of Web 2.0 which is a personal webpage that the owner can write and share information and idea. Blood (2004) also defined blog as frequently updated, reverse-chronological entries on a single webpage. Blog is not the same as web providing information for searching like the organizational website. The development of blog is similar to that of the traditional media that has been initiated since Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1440. Then, the information has been spread until it became a model for

mass media. There was a gatekeeper who controlled the flow of information. It represented the power of media impacting to the audiences. On the contrary, blog is the place for sharing information and opinion from people around the world. It is the bottom-up media, the voice from people - the ordinary people who have a chance to express idea and reflect what happens in the society. The important thing is that there is no charge. Many advantages that make blog become popular. Many organizations turn attention to this kind of media and use it as a tool to survey market and collect information. Then, it becomes another communication channel of public relations. Blogs createare opportunity and breakpoint for the advertising and public relations people (Kline & Burstein, 2005).

With many outstanding functions and advantages, blog is the new target that advertising and public relations agencies and companies hope to reach the space there for ads as they do with the traditional media. Pedersen (2010) described that the blog advertising is very attractive and it develops to become a part of media agency. With this situation, there are new problems about ethical issues, i.e., when the advertisement of product and service is mixed up with blog information and comments. It is unfair, if the positive comments for the product or service in the blog are paid to publicize in the blog. The consumers will be confused whether the information is reliable. As the new media, there are always new functions in the blog; for example, word of mouth in the social network and the hyperlink to the webpage that may be more advance than the rule and regulation of technology using. Therefore, what will be the framework and standard of using this new media - blog - and how to protect and preserve this value source of information to be the center of sharing information and comments for people in the society?

## Blogs as new media

Weblogs or Blog is defined as frequently modified webpages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence, are becoming an increasingly popular form of communication on the World Wide Web. Herring, Scheidt, Wright, and Bonus (2005) defined blogs as



a frequently edited webpage whose main use is recording individual articles and displaying them in chronological order. Whereas Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, and Swartz (2004) suggested five basic purposes for blog as follows: documenting the author's life, providing commentary and opinions, expressing deeply felt emotions (the blog as catharsis), working out ideas through writing (the blog as muse), and forming and maintain communities or forums.

The mass communication extensively uses blog to report, follow up and gather information being public favor. It helps to share comments and opinion for other people and to promote advertising and public relations. Blog is also the successful marketing and communication tools that can reach the consumers and is particularly useful for establishing and exploiting niche audiences as well as making profit for the blog owner from the advertisement (Pedersen, 2010). Additionally, Chiang and Hsieh (2011) found that blogs provided convenience to those who want to search information about product and make decision to buy it, especially the review from other people's experience. If they need novelty, they can use blogs's interactivity to get information about popularity and specialization. Kline and Burstein (2005) stated that it is difficult for all organizations to audit and control messages in the blog due to the inability to screen daily and fresh comments. Besides, advertising and public-relations context overwhelmingly spread in blogs and sometimes, leading to propaganda. Frequently, a product owner purchases the space in the popular blog so that the blogger will promote the product and service. As it is the new media, there is no clear law to control. The information in the blog is thus not reliable as well as it is unfair to the consumers unless the blog clarifies the sponsor and clearly states the source of information.

### **Blog as unethical tool for persuasion?**

Advertising and public relations are the marketing tools. They are usually used in many patterns of communication to persuade and motivate the consumers to purchase products and services. It also encourages and promotes the corporate image. In the detail of advertising and public relations, it is the supportive concept to promote the product.

Nowadays, the Internet has become a channel of new media and it is very helpful for advertising and public relations. However, it becomes the concern about the unethical action of advertising and public relations on new media, especially blogs. For example, Wal-Mart launched the campaign "Wal-Mart families" taken care by Richard Edelman. Wal-Mart families were the informative section in Wal-Mart's website. The point of unethical action occurred when he promoted the blog, the section of Working Families for Wal-Mart, and paid to people who positively posted information and photos in the blog. The story was made that Wal-Mart employee was so kind that it created the good image to the organization. The story was that two bloggers described their cross-country trip in a recreational vehicle (RV car), which they parked in Wal-Mart parking lots at night. After that, it was found that the said story was made up and Edelman paid the freelance photographer and reporter to publicize this PR for Wal-Mart, even though Edelman's PR firm was one of the committee drafting the code of ethics for the Word of Mouth Marketing Association. The policy mentioned that there should be the honesty of identity: you never obscure your identity. Edelman's action violated the code of ethics for advertiser and PR. (Black & Roberts, 2011)

This situation is clearly the problem of the unethical issue in advertising and public relations in the context of new media. Therefore, it is necessary to review and reconsider about the principles and frameworks of public relations to analyze the unethical issue and provide the solution for each situation and problem that might occur in the new media. As the new media technology has been developed, we need to prevent and control the unethical problems that may happen in the future.

### **Professional ethics in mass communication in digital age**

Professional code of ethics is the principle of reliable working, especially in the mass communication area including journalism, radio and television and advertising and public relations. This profession is related to the people and benefits the society and nation.



From the original ethics, moral is the fundamental factor that everyone should have in one's right mind - what to do and not to do. It proceeds to the ethics proposed by many scholars such as Aristotle and Golden perspective emphasizing on the actors, who have to balance action between extremes of excess and deficiency and Kant's Categorical Imperative emphasizing on the action and duty - we should know what should and should not do. The latter is similar to Pluralistic theory of value mentioning that the ethical judgment requires more than one ethical values to perform the moral weight from the highly personal nature of duty. Additionally, the utilitarianism focuses on the consequence and outcome while the Bok's Model proposes three steps of decision making: 1) consult your conscience 2) alternatives - which expert devices to be utilized, and 3) discussion among related parties such as imaginary discussion providing views and perspectives about outcomes (Bok, 1978). Potter Box by Ralph Potter are the four steps of ethical judgment: 1) understanding the facts, 2) outlining the values inherent in the decision, 3) applying relevant philosophical principles and 4) articulating a loyalty". The moral stages of Kohlberg provide moral development three levels as level 1: pre-conventional including stage 1: heteronomous morality, and stage 2: individualism; level 2: conventional including stage 3: interpersonal conformity, and stage 4: social systems; and level 3: post-conventional including stage 5: social contract and individual rights, and stage 6: universal ethical principles (Patterson & Wilkins, 2011). All mentioned theories and perspectives are the framework and tools to judge which principle to be applied when there is an ethical problem.

At present, when the technology especially the internet develops, the mass communication area has to encounter the complicated ethical problem in online media. Berkman and Shumway (2003) mentioned that it would be better, if there were an updated professional code as well as the explanation and example of the solution for the dilemma of digital media. Although we experience more ethical problems of online media, we lack of knowledge and updated code to handle with these problems. For example, CNET internet media site employs over 300 editors

and journalists to create their own ethics code as the instruction for all staff. There are the code of editorial and advertising content, the rule of linking external site, and the regulation not to take any gifts and services from the customers and the principle of information disclosure in the business relationships in editorial content whenever relevant. Contrarily, Blood, the weblogger and author writing the weblogs, believes that ethical webloggers should publish the truth and what is believed as truth. The online material provides the reference link that you can edit or add misinformation rather than rewrite or delete. This causes the disclosure of any conflict of interest and the questionable and biased sources.

Another problem of new media is that it can be created by anyone, who has freedom and right to express opinion. The professional code may not draw attention for other people. Moreover, internet is the worldwide media to the worldwide audience. Smith and Hendricks (2010) mentioned that internet has impacted the global reach of media. Therefore, there will be the acknowledged moral to be the universal framework. According to Bugeja (2009) comment about the Manuel Castells, currently there are millions of blogs worldwide. It seems like an explosion of "I" mass media across culture. There is a question whether it works, if the occidental culture is like the universal principle. However, Christians (1997) concluded that the protonorm was gathered from the universal tenets of human nature. It was a part of the genetic code as an ethics code consisting of three categories: 1) Human dignity, which are duty, fairness, freedom, integrity, justice, responsibility and trust. 2) Truth-telling: truth and 3) Nonviolence - generosity, happiness, pleasure, respect and sanctity of life.

### Wal-Mart's case

If we consider the action that Edelman performed his job as PR for Wal-Mart in the view of public relations officers to build a good image of the organization, it is an interesting communication strategy to use the blog media. It is the modern way as in the technology age, but the good PR people have to consider more about the information, truth and audience. According to the code of ethics by



Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), Edelman broke all codes, especially the issue of honesty and fairness to take responsible to Wal-Mart and people because the information published must be honest to the profession, and organization. The PR people are the practitioners who required both art and science skill. It needs the strategic communication planning on how to use media to persuade people but it must rely on the truth and honesty as well; otherwise, there will be abundant of irresponsible information in this profession. In the long term, the PR profession will not be accountable and then, decline.

If we consider the condition of time and content, it does not show that Edelman has no choice. As Heath and Coombs (2006) mentioned, PR people need to plan for the communication - how to communicate to the target audiences. It is the strategic planning to choose the communicative channels and tools which are suitable to the situation. In this case, Edelman may waste his time to search for the information sources by interviewing the Wal-Mart staff and customer. Then, he should encourage staff to comment in the blog or produce the music video like a TV ad posted on the blog to build the warm image to the company as a PR plan. It can refer to the real source of information. It sounds complicated, but it is the reason why the company hired Edelman and his PR firm to do this as a valued professional. On the contrary, Edelman made up the story. This was irresponsible to the employer, the audience for the defraud information and the profession workmate for discrediting the honor of profession.

In this case, Edelman had many choices to do the right thing, but he did not choose the right one. For example, the duty principles of Pluralistic theory of value or utilitarianism focused on the outcome of the action. The international ethics mentioned that the truth is the best for one and all. Another issue is that is also the responsibility of Wal-Mart that should not let this PR attempts spread to the public. To encourage PR people to follow the ethics, the organization has an essential role to support. Baker (1999, 73) stated that "...business do well (financially) by doing good (ethically), and it is, therefore, in their bottom-line interest to engage in good deeds and ethical behavior".

The standard of ethics helps and supports the profession performance. It is necessary because it will be the principles and frameworks as Wright (1989) described that public relations field needs the development for ethical decision making as practitioners need some basis of value, guidance and ethical principle to judge what is right or wrong to do. Actually, the PR task is difficult to make decision. According to Place (2010) 's research, public relations practitioner made ethical decision by respecting others, communicating honesty and relying on the assistance of decision-making protocol. Sometimes, it is more difficult, when it is related to the factors about situation, rushed, and constrained nature of public relations work as well as lack of experience and customers' requirement. Decision-making and the ethical field is in accordance with Davis (1994)'s research about ethics in advertising decision making. In this case, young advertisers with less professional experience would have individual decision making influenced by business consideration, whereas the older and slightly more professional experience were most influenced by legal consideration and the oldest had the most experience influenced by ethical consideration.

The advertising and public relations task needs the framework of professional ethics, experience and practice to support the decision-making. With the advancement of technology, there should be the revision and amendment of code of ethics for the mass communication field. The Public Relations Society has to pay more attention to the unethical media by manipulating the updated rules and regulation to support the technological media. The companies and media agencies serving for the blog should strictly follow the regulation as well as the staff and the audiences or blog users should transparently disclose the sponsor and separate the blog information from advertisement. Moreover, the individual ethics of moral universal to publicize the information should be encouraged to people so that the blog will be used efficiently. ◆



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