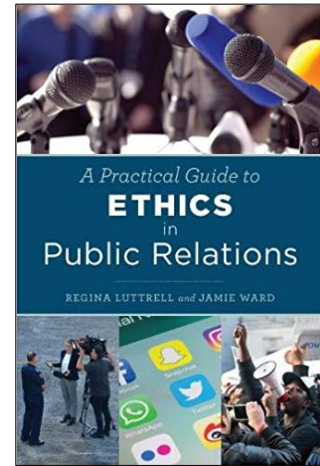


Regina Luttrell and Jamie Ward, **A Practical Guide to Ethics in Public Relations**, Lanham, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, 242 pp., \$68.47 (hardcover), \$26.98 (paperback).

Reviewed by
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Although their book considers the ethical conduct germane to those studying and/or pursuing careers in public relations, what authors Regina Luttrell and Jamie Ward have to say in **A Practical Guide to Ethics in Public Relations** has value for a much broader readership. This is especially pertinent at a time when many professions appear to be fraught with behavior that raises concerns for appropriateness, moral defensibility, and impact on the well-being of others. For those who make the effort to read the volume carefully, not only will their understanding of ethically questionable conduct in the workplace and organizational life generally be enhanced, but so too will their prospects for minimizing its intrusiveness and successfully addressing it when it manifests.



Luttrell and Ward have divided the contents of their book into three main parts. Part 1: Ethics in Public Relations comprises two chapters. The focus of chapter 1, “Why Ethics Matter,” is foundational. In addition to addressing definitional matters, it introduces the reader to a variety of theoretical perspectives concerning what ethical behavior entails, including ones focusing on consequences, responsibility or duty/obligation, situational constraints, evolutionary development, and character. One also finds attention to the distinction between those accenting nearly absolutistic positions concerning what constitutes morally and, thereby, ethically defensible/appropriate behavior versus views reflecting a more relativistic perspective. Chapter 2, which carries the same title as Part I, particularizes ethics within the context of public relations as a profession, as well as the academic discipline the authors represent but nevertheless, as does the first chapter, provides a good deal of information pertaining to ethics outside the realm of primary concern.

Part 2: Public Relations Society of America’s Code of Ethics consists of seven chapters, with six, namely chapters 3–8, each addressing and reflecting substantive subjects centering on a specific value in the PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) Code that the authors want readers to understand as an aspect of work in the field of public relations, as well as how it pertains to ethical issues that may surface within that context. These elements and the corresponding titles of the chapters focusing on them, in order, are “Advocacy,” “Honesty,” “Expertise,” “Independence,” “Loyalty,” and “Fairness.” Chapter 9, “Ethics Matter; Choose Action,” is an examination of recourse for PR specialists when they encounter ethical issues in working on behalf of their clientele with external publics and may feel uncertain about how best to address them. This can be an even more difficult situation in which to find oneself when the time for response is sharply limited.

Part 3: Award-Winning Case Studies from the Arthur W. Page Society Case Study Competition has no chapters as such, but functions more as an appendix in which a reader can find instances of responses to ethical issues reflected in the general discussion in chapter 9 in Part 2 of the volume. It might, therefore, be tempting for a reader to skip this part of the book, but that, in my judgment, would be to sacrifice—or at least carry such a risk—the development of useful insights into the types of ethical matters that can all too easily arise in the work of the PR professional and for which there are possibly few, in any, readily apparent lines of response. Even if one is not working in the profession, the cases covered can provide valuable clues as to how one might confront ethically questionable aspects of others' behavior, or even his or her own behavior.

A Practical Guide to Ethics in Public Relations is well written and appropriate in the assumptions the authors make concerning what level of knowledge, as well as experiences, readers are apt to possess in respect to both ethics in general and public relations as a field of study in particular. They appear to have in mind an audience not especially knowledgeable in either domain, but whose constituents are both interested in the subjects of interest, that is, ethics and public relations, and willing to learn much more about the connections between and interaction of the two.

The overall organizational structure of the volume is both clear and conducive to achievement of the objectives that Luttrell and Ward identify in their Preface. The Foreword by Teresa N. Dougherty, ethics chair of the Colorado Public Relations Society of America, moreover, clearly reinforces this characterization. More specifically: "Ethical practice is the most important obligation of all public relations and communications professionals, and this book provides the know-how and techniques to understand, exercise, and pursue ethical communication in a world that moves at lightning speed" (p. viii). The internal organization of the individual chapters is also facilitative of the achievement of the cognitive and behavioral objectives the authors appear to have in mind in the characterization of their specified approach (see p. ix).

Further worthy of commendation are the sources and the types of information from which Luttrell and Ward draw. At the beginning of each of the chapters 1–8, the reader encounters "an expert in ethics" who poses a set of questions on which the reader needs to focus and for each offers a rationale that serves not only to make clear that the question is of importance to one's understanding of, as well as ability to recognize and respond to, ethically sensitive, often problematic issues in the work of public relations professionals. The use of input from the "experts" in these chapters enhances the credibility of what the authors themselves seek to share with the readers, adds variety in point of view concerning the subject matter, serves to sustain both interest and attention, and provides bases for action.

As I mentioned previously, another positive aspect of the authors' development of the content of their book is the inclusion of case studies that help to illuminate matters raised in parts 1 and 2, but that also are, or should be, independently of interest, inasmuch as they involve actual events that many readers may know something about and establish connections to other content. Case Study 1, for instance, concerns a confrontation between Apple and the FBI relating to the unlocking of an iPhone that the former felt would constitute an unethical invasion of privacy and be contrary to its commitment to its customers. The second case study concerns an Amtrak fatal derailment and how the question of

responsibility should have been dealt with. Case Study 3 takes the reader into the realm of corporate social responsibility and focuses on how Starbucks came to commit to a level of social activism for which it had no previously noteworthy reputation. The next case deals with the Department of Veterans Affairs and a crisis stemming from inordinately long delays in the receipt of care to which veterans were entitled, as well as how the situation remained largely unresolved, at least as of 2015 when the study was undertaken. The final case relates to the Boston Marathon bombing and how social media were implicated in preventing the situation from becoming worse than it was when at the same time there was reluctance in some quarters to use social media for fear of just the opposite occurring. All of the cases in Part 3 are of recent enough origin that most readers, I suspect, will be able to recall them in a way that will enrich their grasp of some of the attendant ethical issues they raised or otherwise pointed toward.

A Practical Guide to Ethics in Public Relations contains ample reference and source material for those readers who may be inclined to acquaint themselves with additional material relating to the subject. Chapter 9, for example, contains a useful set of websites, academic and trade journals, and blogs to which one can turn for more extensive information relating to the subjects the authors cover (see p. 130). The bibliography (pp. 219–227), without any apparent padding or overkill, can also help one identify additional material to consult. This is exclusive of references appearing at the end of the case studies. Finally, each chapter is well documented and has notes readers can follow up on to be more selective about which items in the bibliography may be of value.

As introductory textbooks tend to go, Luttrell and Ward's in my judgment is an exception. Even if one were not inclined to adopt it for use in a course, I should think it would have a place in the professional library of anyone in public relations who is also interested in ethical aspects of its practice as a profession. In addition to individuals studying public relations or who already are working in the profession, others simply interested in communication, ethics, or some combination of the two and how they can affect decision making in a variety of realms will find what the authors have to say illuminating.