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# **Public relations interactions with Wikipedia**

## **Abstract**

### **Purpose**

This paper presents an analysis of public relations interactions with Wikipedia using an economic perspective based on the Institutional Analysis and Design (IAD) framework from public choice economics.

### **Methodology**

The paper is primarily theoretical and attempts to use an established economic theory to improve understanding of how and why clandestine edits of common pool media assets such as Wikipedia are undertaken. Additionally, an illustrative case study research approach was used to organise and analyse two instances of edits of Wikipedia by public relations agencies.

### **Findings**

The application of the IAD model to two cases of Wikipedia editing suggests that economic imperatives and incentives for public relations professionals to deliver value to clients override the community interests of the common pool resource, professional codes of practice and the ethics considerations. The economic value of public relations as a gatekeeper and distributor of information assets is threatened by the power of many unpaid authors contributing to common-pool media resources such as Wikipedia.

### **Practical implications**

The paper includes implications for public relations practice in its interactions with common pool media along with theoretical implications for its role. In theoretical terms, the economic value of information held by public relations professionals has been undermined by the collaborative nature of common pool media, which has consequences for the place and value of public relations in future.

### **Originality/value**

The paper applies an economic theory and related literature public relations practice. The intention is to stimulate further research into the application of economic ideas to public relations practice and to encourage discussion on the place of economic theory in public relations knowledge.

## **1. Introduction**

Any form of advocacy in written entries for the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia breaches one of the Wikipedia Foundation's five principles, which is that all articles should be written from a neutral point of view or NPOV (Wikipedia, 2014a). Beyond this general principle, Wikipedia considers that paid contributions, such as those submitted by public relations professionals, are likely to have a conflict of interest. Wikipedia's terms of use state that such potential conflicts should always be disclosed by those submitting new entries or making edits to existing material (Wikipedia, 2014b).

This interdisciplinary research paper uses the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework developed by the 2009 Nobel prize winning economist Elinor Ostrom (1990) to help understand how and why public relations (PR) practitioners make clandestine alterations to Wikipedia on behalf of clients. This paper applies Ostrom's IAD framework to two high profile cases of undisclosed deletion and editing of Wikipedia entries by UK public relations agencies on behalf of clients. The intention is to describe the nature of the interactions and to understand why PR people decide to breach Wikipedia's rules, professional codes of practice and ethical norms by making illicit edits. The paper is intended as a contribution to the theory and practice in the area of public relations interactions with common pool media. The project also confronts the emerging behavioural and economic dilemma for public relations practice in dealing with common pool media and offers guidance on this area of activity. The originality of the work is the application of economic analysis based on the IAD framework to explain the incentives in the professional dilemma associated with Wikipedia and to offer an alternative explanation to that offered by public relations ethics alone.

## **2. Media relations, new media institutions and public relations practice**

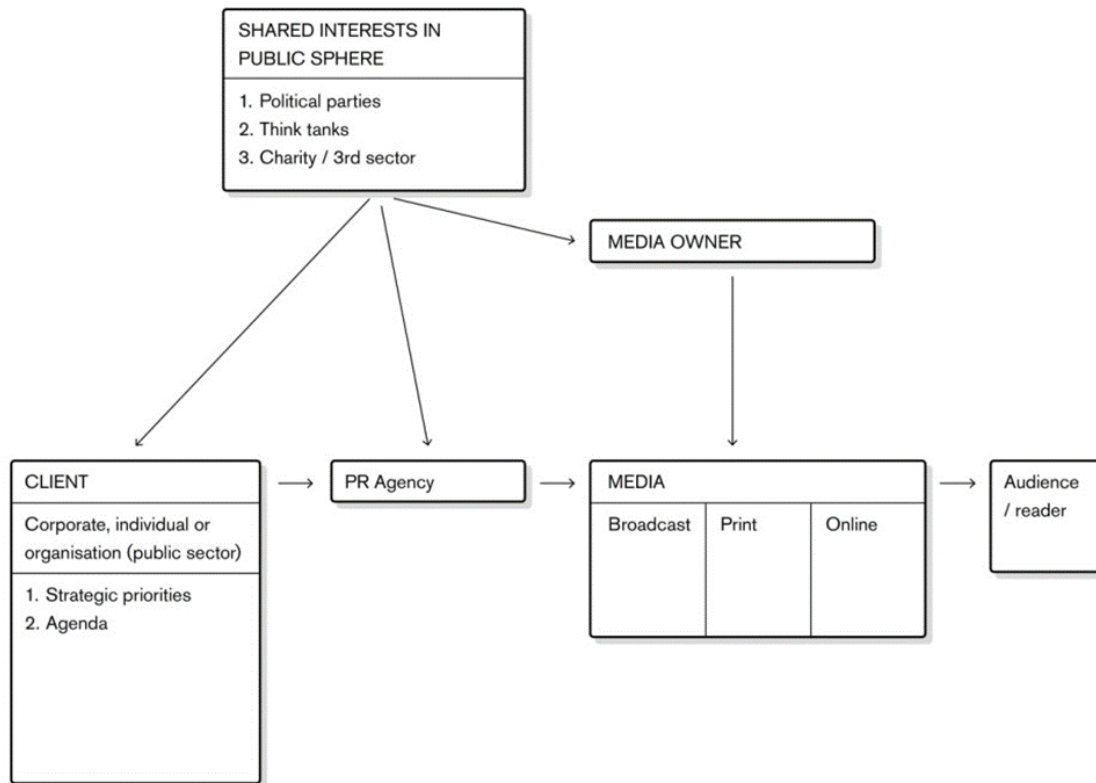
Coombs and Holladay (2013, p.102) have described media relations as a "foundational element" in public relations. It is the area of practice which seeks to influence the dual

audiences of the news media and the intended public (Hendrix and Hayes, 2010). The move to digital media has posed challenges to traditional media relations practice. In particular, while plurality of provision has emerged in online media as predicted by Negroponte (1995), there has been a concentration of consumption into relatively few titles, leaving many more with small readerships. This skewed or heavy-tailed distribution has been described by Anderson (2006) as the long-tail effect and in this media environment, Wikipedia has become increasingly important as audiences spend more time on fewer media websites. One metrics provider (Alexa, 2014), rates Wikipedia as the sixth most popular site on the World Wide Web and the highest ranking fact-based content site. This concentration effect has intensified because of the way Wikipedia's scale of content - along with levels of usage and links to and from the site - fit the algorithms of Google search criteria so well. This means that any Google search on a topic will often display Wikipedia at the top of the suggested pages. So rather than diversity and plurality in online media, the top-ranked search engine Google recommends the top-rated information site, Wikipedia. In effect, this turns the web into a feedback loop between the two and in this digital duopoly, "the amateur-written encyclopaedia has become the world's all-purpose information source. It's our new Delphic oracle" (Carr, (2007).

For more than fifty years, media relations in UK print and broadcast media has been based on shared understanding of a pro-business agenda that comes from corporate media ownership, typified by News International's global operations. With the exception of the BBC, this corporate ownership influenced the prevailing model, in which public relations agencies or in-house professionals represent the interests of their corporate or political clients to the media. The channels for messages and sequencing (summarised below) are well established and have the additional overlay of shared interests in areas of the public sphere. This can include support by media owners for certain political parties, either in the form of

finance or positive coverage, and public policy interests through sponsorship of think tanks or giving policy ideas editorial space in papers.

Figure 1: A corporatist model of media relations



In this corporatist model of media relations, predominantly privately-owned media institutions create content in the hierarchical production system of a traditional broadcast, print or online outlet, with journalists reporting to a series of section editors (for business, politics and so on) with the publication editor exercising overall control. Importantly, the editor acts as final arbiter in balancing the interests of owners, and corporate or political interests against readers in the final printed product.

According to Davies (2008, p.87) for every story the public relations industry has generated, it keeps out another. Named journalists – and the editor in particular - are a clear point of contact for senior public relations people to promote their clients’ interests or to seek

to keep stories out of the media. Such patterns of interaction between public relations people and journalists can indicate a power imbalance and according to Cave and Rowell (2014, p.84), “the relationship is rarely one of equals.” For Davies (2007, p.97), journalists have become like “babies in a high chair, waiting to be spoon-fed their stories.” Lord Bell, founder of Bell Pottinger, for example, is reported by one ex-journalist and corporate public relations person to open calls to journalists with “Hello, my love” regardless of gender, in a combination of “chummy familiarity and false deference” (Burt, 2012, p.33)

### **3. Wikipedia and peer-production of the media commons**

The new digital Delphic oracle of Wikipedia sits apart from this corporatist model of media relations. Instead, it represents the new institutionalism as defined by Ostrom and Ostrom (2004), with its polycentric structure of multiple volunteer editors. This has presented difficulties for some public relations practitioners who have struggled to adapt to such a fluid and dispersed institutional structure. For Lord Bell, for example, Wikipedia is “a ridiculous organisation.....created by a bunch of nerds” (Cave and Rowell 2014, p.95). The fact that Wikipedia is free to use, is not copyrighted and is produced by a loose group rather than named individuals marks it out from traditional media. O’Sullivan (2009, p.1) has described Wikipedia as a community of practice which is “alien to our cultural traditions in several ways.” The organisation’s volunteering and community nature differs from the individualism of society in general and the commercialism of traditional media in particular. These points of difference (summarised in table 1 below) are having profound impact on the nature of public relations interactions with Wikipedia and other common pool media.

**Table 1: Old media and Wikipedia: Points of institutional difference**

	<b>Old Media</b>	<b>Wikipedia</b>
Ownership	<b>Clearly defined</b> Either corporate (eg GE) or proprietorial (eg Rupert Murdoch, Richard Desmond, Barclay Brothers)	<b>Less clear/Not for profit</b> Website is owned by the not for profit Wikipedia Foundation. Content is owned by the original authors but published under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike licence as free content
Management structure	<b>Clearly defined.</b> Highly visible owner (eg Murdoch). Hierarchical management structure with output controlled by editor	<b>Peer-based structure</b> Loose affiliations of volunteers who remain anonymous. Governance by non-for-profit Wikipedia Foundation.
Content production system	<b>Named professionals</b> Named professional individual journalists generate content for sections of paper or programme with editors co-ordinating content creation.	<b>Anonymous groupings</b> Anonymous, amateur and part-time volunteer Wikipedia editors write material with no (or minimal) co-ordination.
Interaction with PR and corporate interests	<b>Not transparent or visible</b> Negotiations, interactions and information exchanges are not seen by readers.	<b>Transparent and visible</b> Interactions are recorded in the Wikipedia editing system and can be tracked back to the previous version.
Opportunity for revisions	<b>Limited</b> Apologies and corrections can be made but the article is set on paper once published. Apologies and corrections are made reluctantly and given little prominence	<b>Extensive</b> The ongoing content creation system and additions is at the heart of Wikipedia which means revisions occur continually. Online corrections can be made easily
Economic model	<b>Paid – protected content</b> Either paid subscription or purchase for paper version or online pay per view – plus advertising revenue in both cases. Copyright protected.	<b>Free</b> Wikipedia is non-proprietary and free at point of use. The content is not copyright protected and can be shared freely under the Creative Commons Deed. Relies on donations.
Role of Readers	<b>Passive</b> Limited opportunities for action or interaction in print and even online, while comments are welcome, content creation opportunities are rare.	<b>Active/Opportunities for Action</b> Readers can create and amend articles in Wikipedia and are encouraged to do so as long as they comply with the Terms of Use.

Wikipedia generates content using a system of peer production in which anonymous groups collaborate to produce articles through consensual discussion. Once articles are published, readers are invited to actively participate in the ongoing production process by making revisions. Benkler (2006) has offered a framework for commons-based peer production in software which explains Wiki methodology and suggests that successful commons-based communities collaborate through two evolutionary phases of content creation (or utterance) and quality control, in which the peer production community makes an effort to define standards and implement low-cost quality control mechanisms. The software infrastructure to support wikis allows keeps a history of all edits and copies of previous versions along with discussion pages. So, unlike its printed encyclopaedia counterparts (and print media in general), the process of generating and revising articles on Wikipedia takes place in public view and a documentary record of edits is published online. The resulting content has been described as the media commons which, according to Tapscott and Williams (2008, p.12), is “owned by no-one and authored by tens of thousands of enthusiasts.”

#### **4. Common-pool resources and the work of Elinor Ostrom**

Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel Memorial Prize for Economics in 2009 (in a shared award with Oliver Williamson) for a lifetime of work on the governance of physical common-pool resources such as fisheries, grazing land and irrigation systems, which go beyond the dichotomy of either private or public ownership. Her work also explores the motivating factors for the different actors involved in common-pool resources and was a response to the publication by the American ecologist Garrett Hardin (1968) of *The Tragedy of the Commons*, in which he argues that when a resource such as a fishery is jointly-owned, people will tend to undermine their long term interest in its survival by taking in a way that depletes



it. The tragedy of the commons, Hardin said, was this tendency to overexploit rather than conserve and protect common pool resources. Ostrom responded that to avoid a tragedy of the commons, common pool resources require the following governance conditions:

1. All individuals entitled to using the resource should have a say in its running
2. Clear boundaries to keep out those who are not entitled to the resource (the free-rider problem)
3. Appointing monitors who are trusted by users
4. Straightforward mechanisms to resolve conflicts

(Ostrom, 1990, p.90)

In Ostrom's terms, whether the common pool resource is a shared irrigation system or an online media resource such as Wikipedia, the important elements for attention – and which constitute the institutional analysis and development framework - are the rules, the roles of different participants and the resources controlled within the common pool. The way the rules are made and applied by the different actors in resolving action situations or areas of conflict defines the outcome of interactions, which may enhance, harm or be neutral to the common pool resource. The situation can be complicated by different actors playing several roles within the common pool institution. For example, a farmer using an irrigation system may also be a local politician and someone who helped to build the system, i.e. he is not just a consumer of the common pool resource but a constructor and legislator too.

Ostrom defines four levels or types of arenas for action by the participants involved with common pool resources: the operational level that governs daily routine activities; the collective level which concerns mechanisms for administering and changing the rules; the constitutional level, which concerns the level of governance needed to define how rules are made and changed; and the meta-constitutional level, which includes the influence of tradition, social and moral norms on the institutional rules. So while Ostrom's theoretical

contribution to the design of new institutions that can sustain common pool resources is founded in the economics of public choice – and in particular the incentives driving individual choice – her work also embraces aspects of sociology, politics and cultural studies.

Researchers have already successfully used Ostrom's IAD model to frame their analysis of common-pool digital resources. Viegas *et al.* (2007, p.1), for example, applied Ostrom's work to the operations of Wikipedia, making the important observation that the well-structured and bureaucratic approach to content management “runs counter to the naive depictions of Wikipedia as an anarchic space. The site boasts myriad guidelines, policies and rules.” The relevance of using Ostrom's IAD tool to examine interactions by public relations practitioners seems confirmed by the observed overlap between Wikipedia and the principles that Ostrom observed from studies of the physical commons:

That Wikipedians have independently arrived at some of the same governance answers as in offline communities suggests some of these principles are universal. (Viegas *et al.*, 2007, p. 5)

Another element of economic theory that Ostrom extended in common-pool governance is the concept of co-production, in which consumers play a part in the production process. Along with collaborators (Parks *et al.*, 1981), Ostrom developed a model for co-production centred on a trade-off between regular producers and consumer-producers based on the relative costs they encounter, including - for consumers - the opportunity cost of getting involved in the production process. Ostrom's concept of co-production also accurately describes the participatory process of content creation in Wikipedia in which readers can become writers who add to the information resource.

## **5. Ethics, rules and codes for public relations engagement with Wikipedia**

Elinor Ostrom does not explicitly address ethics in her work on common pool resources. This is no surprise as her focus is on public choice which is itself largely based on assumptions of the economic self-interests of the various actors and how these resolve in different action situations. However, elements of social and reputational pressure are implicit in what she calls the normative criteria and there is some potential overlap between normative pressures in Ostrom's action situations and what those considering ethics in public relations have identified as the situational ethics of public relations practice (Pratt, 1993). Similarly, while Ostrom described the economic conflict of incentives by different actors, Seib and Fitzpatrick (1995) considered the same issue under the heading of duty ethics and identified the potential for conflicts at the ethical level (between the different loyalties of duties of practice, which were defined as duty to self, to client (or employing organisation), to profession and to society. Gaus (2011, p.6) combined ethical and economic dimensions in his suggestion that when participants can derive a personal sense of utility from knowing they have done the right thing – such as interacting with good faith in the case of Wikipedia – they are more likely to comply with the rules in use (formal and informal) despite the costs to themselves.

Edits or content produced by anyone who has a paid interest are in conflict with one of the leading formal rules on Wikipedia, which is the need for contributors to remain impartial and maintain a neutral point of view (NPOV). The “complementary postures” of NPOV and a good faith enable collaboration (Reagle, 2012, p.45). In this good faith culture, every contributor or participant in the production process should be able to confirm to themselves and others that they acted in good faith, interacting with patience, civility and humour. Yet according to O'Sullivan (2009, p.123) the issue of NPOV “generates most heat among contributors” and “mandates that writers refrain from advancing their own opinions or value judgements; one should merely assert facts.” Some professional bodies in public relations

have already published codes for dealing with online media that reflect the need for maintaining NPOV. In June 2012, for example, the UK's Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) published guidelines it had developed in association with members of the local Wikipedia community. The document acknowledged that public relations professionals with a vested interest in an organisation, individual or client "naturally have a potential conflict of interest" and will find it difficult to maintain the required neutrality on Wikipedia (CIPR, 2012, p.4), going on to urge those whose mode of operation includes spin to "steer clear of Wikipedia altogether in the performance of your job."

Informal groups such as the Corporate Representatives for Ethical Wikipedia Engagement (CREWE) Facebook Group have emerged to help address the "great tension between companies and Wikipedia" that founder Phil Gomes claimed arises from volunteer maintenance of a resource that has a responsibility to be accurate because of the prominence of its content in search results (Gomes, 2012). Gomes, a senior vice president for digital communications at the US-headquartered public relations consultancy, Edelman, had earlier written an open letter to Jimmy Wales in January 2012, in which he stated that "a truly serious conversation needs to happen about how communications professionals and the Wikipedia community can/must work together" (Gomes, 2012). In early 2014, Wikipedia proposed amendments to its terms of use in relation to paid contributions. In closing the consultation period, Stephen LaPorte (2014), legal counsel for Wikimedia Foundation commented that "with over 6.3 million views of the proposal and almost 5,000 edits in the discussion.....this unprecedented exchange has shown how important the handling of paid contributions is to the community."

## **6. Methodology: Research questions and process**

A review of literature on Elinor Ostrom's IAD framework and the media commons established that while a deep and wide set of scholarly material existed on common pool

resources in general and Wikipedia in particular, there was little previous consideration of interactions with this digital media resource in public relations practice. The literature review gave a clear picture on how edits are made in Wikipedia but the research sought to investigate the nature of public relations interactions in more depth, with the aim of developing new theoretical perspectives based on economic analysis. In particular, the project sought to go beyond the “how?” question relating to operational aspects and address the following matters using the IAD framework:

What incentives led PR specialists to breach Wikipedia’s rules, professional codes of practice and ethical norms in making clandestine edits?

What insights can the IAD analysis of public relations interactions with Wikipedia offer to future public relations practice, in both theoretical and practical terms?

The paper is primarily concerned with theory. It seeks to apply economic theory to help understand a new area of public relations practice while also developing new theoretical propositions for public relations interactions with Wikipedia. The rationale for this theoretical approach is that in questions of media effects, theory “enables us to generate informed and logically coherent hypotheses about how and why phenomena occur” (Robinson, 2002, p.19). By applying an established theory of commons governance to the case of Wikipedia and public relations interactions, the paper seeks to improve existing knowledge of common pool media and public relations in a systematic manner, while providing opportunities for future researchers to critique and develop the ideas presented.

The conceptual infrastructure is built around analysis of two high profile episodes of clandestine editing of Wikipedia by two UK consultancies using the IAD framework. With the object or phenomena defined as the clandestine PR interactions with Wikipedia, the selection of cases was validated using Stake’s (2006, p. 23) criteria for multiple case study analysis, which include relevance to the object of investigation and opportunities to learn

about complexity, with a recognised emphasis on the “particular and situational” (p. 8). In analysing these episodes, the writer has used elements of the illustrative case study approach in order to demonstrate the theory in action and to “illustrate certain topics within an evaluation...in descriptive mode” (Yin, 2003, p. 15). This research approach is viable for “examining contemporary events” (Yin, 2003, p. 7) such as the two recent episodes selected for this paper. This approach is also consistent with the “instrumental” approach (as opposed to “intrinsic” approach of a piece of work built solely around casework) in the way it uses a case study example to aid general understanding and offer insights (Stake, 1995, p. 3). While some elements of case study research approach have been used to describe, present and analyse the two episodes of Wikipedia editing, no claim is made that the two incidents described here are formal experimental case studies. However, a serious attempt has been made to use the episodes to investigate “a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context,” (Yin, 2003, p. 13) in a way that is consistent with inquiries based on a case study approach.

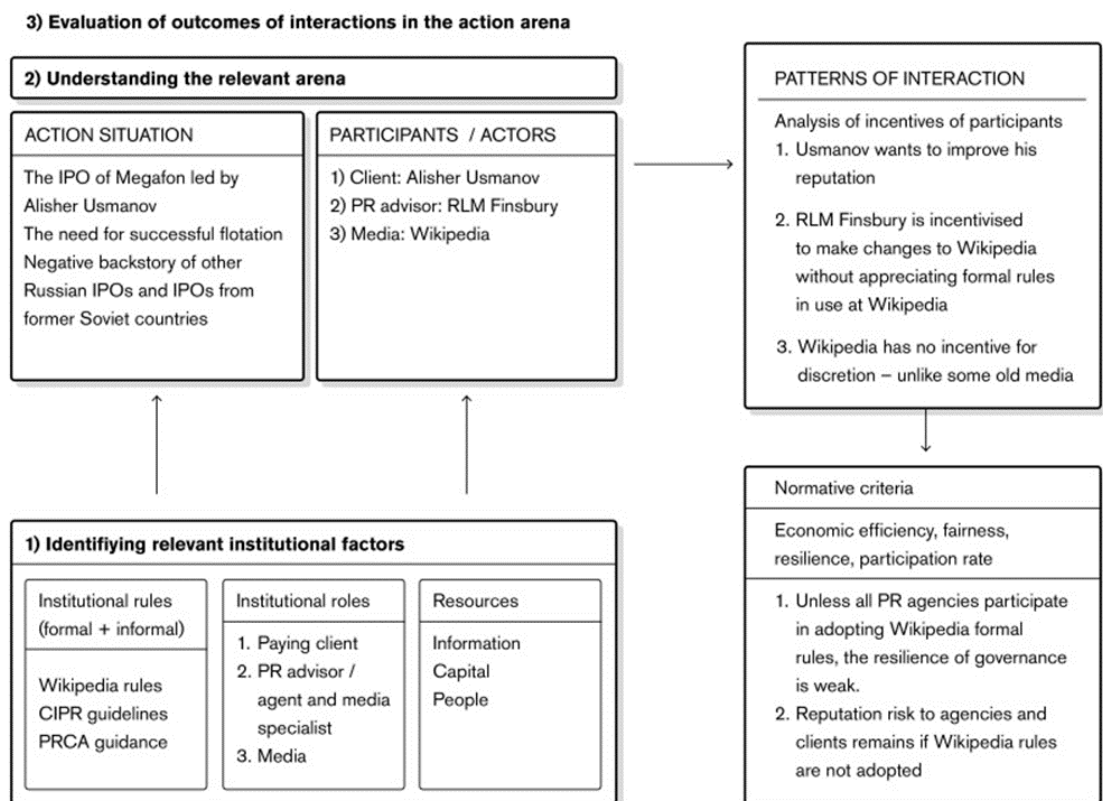
The case study work was part of a research process included the following components:

1. A literature review of academic articles, books and news articles on Wikipedia, common pool media resources and public relations practice.
2. Gathering of a judgemental/selective sample of media coverage relating to the two selected episodes in order to build a full picture of the case studies.
3. The key behavioural points in the interactions in the cases were interpreted using Ostrom’s IAD framework. The methodology was qualitative and manually classified in tabular form any “strong patterns” or “correspondence” (Stake, 1995, p. 83) between the theoretical conceptualisation of the IAD framework and the content in the coverage of the cases describing the behaviour of the PR firms, including quotations from executives. Analysis was undertaken at the three levels – operational, collective

and constitutional – as specified in Ostrom’s (1990, p. 53) description of the “choice areas.”

This material was the basis for producing an integrated analysis (summarised in Figure 2) which then formed the basis of the findings and the discussion that follows.

**Figure 2: Adapted from Ostrom (1990, p.53)**



## 7. The cases of RLM Finsbury and Bell Pottinger

### 7.1 RLM Finsbury

In November 2012, one of the UK’s largest public relations companies, RLM Finsbury, was exposed in *The Times* newspaper (Kenber and Ahmed, 2012) as having edited the Wikipedia entry of its client, Mr Alisher Usmanov, Britain’s richest man. The original article remains the subject of a legal complaint by Mr Usmanov. The edit was made as Mr Usmanov

prepared a £1.25bn float of 20% of his Megafon mobile phone business in London. RLM Finsbury was engaged for corporate and financial communications work on the flotation. As part of that project, the firm deleted information from Mr Usmanov's Wikipedia account relating to a Soviet-era criminal conviction along with mentions of the disappearance of a shareholder in Megafon.

According to front-page report in *The Times* by Kenber and Ahmed (2012):

PR professionals at Finsbury removed from the Wikipedia entry all mention of a 'freedom of speech' row that erupted after Mr Usmanov issued legal threats against bloggers who repeated allegations made by Britain's former ambassador to Uzbekistan (Craig Murray) that the oligarch was a 'gangster and racketeer.'

The Wikipedia entry had previously described a series of legal actions undertaken from 2005 onwards on behalf of Mr Usmanov by the specialist media lawyers, Schillings, a firm which describes itself as offering "law at the speed of reputation" (Schillings, 2014). Mr Murray refused to take down the content but his blog was shut down in 2007 as a result of legal action by Schillings against the web hosting company FastHosts Internet (Lawless, 2007). In addition to deletions, RLM Finsbury inserted new content describing Mr Usmanov's philanthropic activities and art collection. One Russian newspaper reported that RLM Finsbury had been hired "to edit the past" (St Petersburg Times, 2012).

Instead of improving reputation – which is often the expectation of clients who engage public relations specialists - the end result was highly damaging to Mr Usmanov. Press coverage gave extensive circulation to facts about his past that would not otherwise have been so widely distributed. The episode also led to negative coverage for RLM Finsbury and the firm apologised for its clumsiness, claiming this work was not authorised by their client: "This was not done in the proper manner nor was this approach authorised by Mr Usmanov. We apologise for this and it will not happen again" (Sparkes, 2012).



## **7.2 Bell Pottinger**

RLM Finsbury's embarrassment was not an isolated incident. Earlier in 2012, Lord Bell, chairman of the quoted holding company, Chime Communications and the public relations firm Bell Pottinger, invited the Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales to address fifty of his London staff. The visit followed media reports that nineteen Wikipedia accounts based on fake identities used for editing entries on the site had been traced to the London offices of Bell Pottinger. In an earlier response to the incident, Bell Pottinger insisted that it had "never done anything illegal," (Bradshaw and Pickard, 2011) According to one account of the 2012 meeting, Mr Wales alleged that Bell Pottinger had a "history of wrongdoing" on Wikipedia, including concealing changes to pages in the required descriptions of edits (Bradshaw, 2012), while in response, Lord Bell was unapologetic about the content changes that had been made, maintaining that "we have done absolutely nothing wrong whatsoever." In this context, Bell Pottinger's defence that the firm had done nothing illegal attracted particular criticism from Jimmy Wales, in which he emphasised the ethical and normative aspects which apply to Wikipedia, as well as the commercial downside to the agency as a result of its clandestine editing work:

I am astonished at the ethical blindness of Bell Pottinger's reaction. That their strongest true response is that they didn't break the law tells a lot about their view of the world, I'm afraid. The company committed the cardinal sin of a PR and lobbying company of having their own bad behaviour bring bad headlines to their clients and did so in a fashion that brought no corresponding results. (Burrell, 2014).

Despite these warnings from Wikipedia, it seems that as the number of entries has grown along with online viewers on the demand side, so has the importance of Wikipedia in reputation management firms such as Bell Pottinger. The resulting commercial pressures have been described by James Thomlinson, head of digital at Bell Pottinger as "the pressure

put on us by clients to remove potentially defamatory or libellous statements very quickly, because Wikipedia is so authoritative” (Bradshaw, 2012). In reacting to the two episodes, chair of the UK’s Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA), Francis Ingham did not urge members to abide by the Wikipedia terms of use and engage with the good faith culture. Instead, he stated that “while we would not condone PR professionals anonymously amending Wikipedia entries, we understand why frustration sometimes drives them to do so” (Cartmell, 2012). Ingham also claimed that the site’s internal process for amending inaccurate or inflammatory material were “opaque” when in fact every revision is displayed online and is fully transparent.

## **8. Findings**

### ***8.1 Institutional roles and the action arena of public relations***

In the main case under consideration, the participants in the action arena are the client, Alisher Usmanov and his various corporate interests, the public relations adviser he hires, RLM Finsbury, and Wikipedia, the online media property which is edited on Usmanov’s behalf. The action situation has several components but the dominant influence is the planned London flotation of Megafon, the company majority-owned by Alisher Usmanov. The financial significance of the flotation (at a value of over £1bn) and the need for a positive image for the client is also relevant to the action arena. In particular, the pressure on the public relations advisers to establish a good reputation for their client was acute in view of the associations with poor corporate governance which had arisen in previous public offerings from the former Soviet Union, such as the natural resources companies ENRC and Kazakhmys plc.

Institutional rules were in place at Wikipedia for editing entries as already explained in this paper. These were long-established, publicly available in the Wikipedia Terms of Use and included specific guidance on “paid contributions” (Wikipedia, 2014b).

## *8.2 Patterns of interaction: The influence of rules and normative criteria*

The conflict which arose in this action situation was a result of a pattern of interactions with Wikipedia by RLM Finsbury that was damaging to the common pool media resource because the firm deleted material and breached the operational rules. This deficiency was caused by a combination of incentives which led the agency to ignore the operational rules and more informal governance criteria which apply in the arena of common pool media. Beyond terms of use, informal rules of operation also exist on Wikipedia. These rules have been influenced by the communal and voluntary nature of the production process and focus on transparency and recording when changes are made to support multiple authors as they develop content. However, the systems are not readily visible to users, nor is their operation always widely understood by those seeking to make edits. Ostrom (1990, p.185) argues that the most successful systems for common-pool governance have strong monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, which are widely adopted by participants even though there may be short-term costs associated with compliance. The digital and highly automated nature of Wikipedia's content generation systems means that monitoring is both highly effective and low cost although there may be a time lag in volunteers identifying a suspect edit that has been flagged by the system. However, these systems are not visible and their operation always widely understood by users. Unlike traditional media, changes made on Wikipedia do not always involve adding new material and interaction with the site can also involve deletion of existing content, as in these two cases. In the short term, the impact on Wikipedia of deletions by public relations professionals acting for clients is that they erode the media commons for other users – the tragedy of depletion for short term gains to which Ostrom's governance models for offline commons were originally created to offer an alternative. Despite the risks of breaching the Wikipedia Terms of Use to delete material in a clandestine way, a study suggests that there is no long term advantage gained by removing information: "In the case of Wikipedia, the process of deleting information tends to be short-lived. More information is

added to an article than is removed and where information is deleted it is often either restored or replaced with a new version,”(Page, 2013, p.47). This finding is reflected in the outcome of the Usmanov case, in which his current Wikipedia entry (at October 2015) retains mentions of alleged criminal convictions, is significantly longer than the version edited in 2012 and includes material on suppression of online criticism.

More fundamentally, perhaps, both these large and successful agencies were exposed to negative press coverage about failing in their own area of professional expertise of public relations. RLM Finsbury and Bell Pottinger both suffered reputational damage to themselves and their clients because they misunderstood the changed nature of the action situation of media relations with Wikipedia. They interacted with Wikipedia using a mixture of traditional corporatist media relations and a view that they could edit and delete at will, while working in the shadows to carry out the work they were incentivised to do as paid agents.

## **9. Discussion and limitations**

### ***9.1 Theoretical implications***

The IAD analysis of the two cases offers a compelling theoretically-based economic explanation of the incentives that led the PR specialists to breach Wikipedia’s rules, professional codes and ethical norms. The economic incentives of a paid PR agent acting for a client were more simply more rewarding than complying with the institutional rules of Wikipedia and normative codes of professional practice. Specifically, the commercial incentives of the PR companies to deliver and profit from media relations services clashed with the Wikipedia incentives to maintain a neutral point of view in its content. Common pool digital media resources such as Wikipedia rely heavily on automation to support the way new entries are generated, referenced to other online material and displayed using a content management system. Similarly, the way changes and edits to existing entries are monitored using automated systems has a profound effect at a theoretical level on the place of public

relations in the media relations value chain for common pool media. In particular, it impedes public relations intermediations on behalf of clients to generate new material and makes any clandestine attempts to edit or delete visible through a transparent system of recording. This aspect of common pool media potentially erodes the economic value that public relations has historically delivered through media relations using various important conceptualisations from theories such as excellent communications (Grunig and Hunt, 1984), rhetorical exchanges (Heath, 2000), relationship building (Heath, 2001) or dialogic expertise (Pieczka, 2011).

This paper has focused primarily on bringing an economic perspective to interactions with Wikipedia but the findings also suggest implications for the ethical dimension of PR theory and practice. In particular, there may be a case for extending the scope of a duty of practice to include a responsibility not to harm common pool media assets through illicit editing. This duty of practice will be more readily adopted if public relations people are more aware of the risks of being detected if they breach the Wikipedia rules for editing entries and the consequent reputational damage to them and their clients if the incident is made public by Wikipedia. In the context of transparency associated with Wikipedia interactions, the duty of practice towards common pool media may include an educational or risk advisory role for PR specialists to ensure that clients understand the downside associated with illicit edits on Wikipedia, whether undertaken directly or on their behalf.

## ***9.2 Practical implications***

RLM Finsbury got away with short term editing but was exposed and confronted publicly by Wikipedia, suggesting the agency felt it would not be detected or that the reputational damage resulting from non-compliance would be minimal. Bell Pottinger similarly underestimated the effectiveness of the automated monitoring and enforcement infrastructure of Wikipedia and was swiftly confronted despite trying to cover up clandestine editing work

by using nineteen false accounts. Sitting apart from the Wikipedia community, making no meaningful contribution to the media commons, both agencies seem to have judged the utility from compliance as worthless compared with the financial incentives to try to influence the media resource and to disguise their identity while so doing. At a practical level, the agencies failed to accurately estimate the high risk of detection due to a misunderstanding the nature of the common pool resource, the rules for its use and the efficacy of the enforcement mechanisms. While the resulting publicity from these and similar incidents has led to greater awareness of the issue, professional training and education in PR firms to ensure public relations staff are aware of the Wikipedia rules, professional body guidelines and the policy of their firm on Wikipedia engagement would help to prevent recurrences.

At the time of the 2012 Bell Pottinger and RLM Finsbury cases in the UK, Francis Ingham, chair of the PRCA claimed that “too many of the people who edit Wikipedia do not understand PR” (Cartmell, 2012). Yet the IAD analysis – and the unfolding of events since 2012 - has proved that the contrary is true: Wikipedia understands public relations very well and categorises the sector as a potential free-rider, shirker or - at worse - a polluter of the media commons. Wikipedia, like other successful common pool resources, displays a “rich mixture of ‘private-like’ and ‘public-like’ institutions defying classification in a sterile dichotomy” Ostrom (1990, p.14). In future dealings with common pool media, public relations people will need to more swiftly understand an action arena they may find difficult to classify and which may be difficult to manage compared with traditional media.

Ostrom (1990, p.15) predicted that getting institutional design right would be a difficult, time-consuming, conflict-invoking process if it was to prevent shirkers and free-riders. In the case of Wikipedia, the process has been difficult, full of conflict and - by comparison with fisheries and forests - mercifully swift, but with public relations interests losing out in favour of the long-term health of the common pool resource itself. Ostrom’s IAD model suggests

that communications professionals and their clients will have to continue to adapt to this new action arena for media relations, in which it can be better not to participate than to free-ride, damage the media commons and risk the resulting reputational damage.

### ***9.3 Industry implications and recent developments***

Wikipedia is an important institution in today's information society. The Wikipedia Foundation is solvent with a zero-advertising and not-for-profit operating model. These economic factors alongside its dominance as an information-based institution combine to give it power. This power means that it has no incentive to offer corporates and high-profile a voice on their terms, nor does it have any incentive to offer the public relations industry special treatment simply because it represents a concentration of professionals who have traditionally acted as information gatekeepers in the media relations ecosystem. More than two years ago, Phil Gomes of Edelman (Gomes, 2012) signed off his open letter to Jimmy Wales calling for dialogue with Wikipedia with the words "over to you." The silence has been deafening and after more than two years of lobbying Wikipedia by CREWE and others, the public relations industry has little to show for its efforts. In the interim, there have been more damaging stories of firms "abusing" Wikipedia (Burrell, 2014) including the specialist Wiki-PR company, which had three hundred false accounts.

Application of the IAD model to two cases of edits to Wikipedia has confirmed and explained the downside risks of opportunistic behaviour by public relations practitioners in their interactions with media commons. Although the core team of Wikipedia editors is small, the strong monitoring and enforcement system draws on readers, online discussion groups and collective blogs hosted by activists such as Wikipediocracy. This transparent governance regime works against any free-rider or polluting effects in cases where public relations practitioners attempt clandestine alterations. Despite the frustration and sense of powerlessness on the part of some elements of the public relations industry, according to

analysis using Ostrom's model, the sector has no option but to exercise the good faith quality of patience as it learns to interact with Wikipedia and other common-pool media resources. Wikipedia has built its content base to almost 5 million articles without professional journalists, editors, researchers, and advertising salesmen, so is unlikely to give in to calls from public relations professionals just because they get louder. On the contrary, with the growing success and momentum of common-pool media production, Wikipedia becomes less inclined to risk any pollution of its information resource by what it sees as the biased representation of commercial and individual interests.

In June 2014, a joint statement from eleven leading public relations firms, including Edelman and Ogilvy & Mather, was published on Wikipedia (Wikipedia, 2014c). The online post seemed to indicate the firms' acceptance of the role of public relations professionals as just another set of participants in common pool media who must abide by Wikipedia's policies. The statement explicitly recognises Wikipedia's "unique and important role as a public knowledge resource" and that it is "wise for communications professionals to follow Wikipedia policies as part of ethical engagement practices." The agencies agreed to follow Wikipedia's policies and guidelines, particularly those related to conflict of interest and to report any potential violations as they become aware of them. This move by the public relations industry – which effectively gives up on lobbying for change at Wikipedia - confirms that ongoing lack of compliance was going to harm the sector, as Ostrom's model suggests. In order to resolve the incentive problem with clients and competitor agencies, the statement says that the agencies will "counsel our clients and peers to conduct themselves accordingly."

This stance from a grouping of the world's largest public relations firms confirms the power of Wikipedia and acknowledges that in the action arena of common pool media, the site has few incentives for change. On the contrary, Wikipedia's open and transparent rules



seem to work well for all participants apart from the public relations people who have preferred to operate the old rules of corporatist media relations. The bargaining chip that the public relations industry brought to the media relations table for the last fifty years or more is information assets (Thompson, 1995, p.8) that have value to the media, whether that asset is a news story, financial results, survey findings or a photograph. The application of the IAD model to Wikipedia suggests that the role of public relations as a gatekeeper and distributor of information assets is unlikely to endure as a source of economic value, undermined - in the case of Wikipedia, at least - by the power of many unpaid authors contributing freely to a rich set of information in a common-pool media resource.

#### ***9.4 Limitations***

This paper has attempted to apply Ostrom's IAD model to two cases of illicit editing of Wikipedia from the UK. The limited geographical scope and sample size is a limitation and further work is needed from other countries and cultural settings. The application of the IAD model to public relations interactions was undertaken at the conceptual level only and built on the earlier work of Viegas (2007) on Wikipedia. Fieldwork to gather detailed quantitative data by scoring the different criteria in the cases to populate the framework was not undertaken due to a lack of access to gather detail, and the existing sample of two cases is too small for meaningful statistical analysis if it were processed. This limitation opens up the possibility of future studies based on fieldwork in order to further test and develop the conceptual application of the IAD framework to Wikipedia and other common pool media resources in order to draw lessons for public relations interactions and the rules required for enduring governance of the media commons.

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