

Cynical Society

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Cynic: A person who believes that only selfishness motivates human actions and who disbelieves in or minimizes selfless acts or disinterested points of view. (Random House Webster's College Dictionary, 1997).

A dictionary definition obscures cynicism in daily life. Cynicism defines reporters who analyze every word a politician says to determine “real” motives behind it. It describes the journalist who assumes all CEOs are greedy. It characterizes CEOs who believe all reporters slander CEOs because reporters are out for self-aggrandizement. Cynicism motivates regulators to burden companies and executives with rules because no company can be trusted to do the right thing for society at large. Cynical doctors believe patients see them and their insurers as piggybanks. Cynical prosecutors parade indicted individuals before reporters and leak information to win cases. Cynical reporters make suspect deals to get the information first in order to get the scoop.

Anywhere you look, you can make a case for cynics and cynicism, and both make public relations difficult. For how does one relate to a public when the public and its gatekeepers in the media assume you are only out for yourself?

Idealism is what precedes experience; cynicism is what follows. David T. Wolf (1943 -)

Cynicism v. Skepticism

It is important to understand the distinction between cynicism and skepticism. Philosophically and in everyday living, the cynic and the skeptic have two views of the world. The views may be close, but they never meet.

Skepticism questions what we know and how we know it. In classic philosophy, a skeptic believed no one could know anything, and nothing could be verified as fact or truth. In modern usage, a skeptic is one who gathers data to test explanations for natural events. An explanation becomes provisional fact when tests show the explanation fits evidence. It never becomes final fact because new evidence can change the explanation. The scientific method is at the core of a modern skeptic's ideology. It includes:

- **Observation:** Gathering data.
- **Induction:** Drawing general conclusions from the data by forming a hypothesis.
- **Deduction:** Making specific predictions from the general conclusions.
- **Verification:** Checking the predictions against further observations.

Unfortunately, neither the news media nor the public have the time or interest to use the scientific method. An inherent problem of all communications and life is lack of time. A reporter on deadline can't do much beyond gathering data and writing it into a story – observation and induction. The harried citizen has neither skill nor wherewithal to test facts personally. The citizen relies on gatekeepers – the media – to do that. But, a reporter often has no more time than to provide a partial recitation of *who, what, where* and *when*. *How* and *why* are left unstated or inferred from partial facts – a suspect action. Because the journalist has no time to test evidence, credulity and spin are always an issue. With reporters under time pressure, differences between the cynic and skeptic can result in stories that appear objective or biased. The problem is that bias –lack of objectivity and knowledge – exists at every level of communications and injects inaccuracy:

- **The subject (s) interviewed.** Individuals, knowingly or not, might fail to relate all or the most appropriate facts and a correct interpretation of events.
- **The reporter.** The reporter, knowingly or not, might not be listening carefully and miss facts and have preconceived assumptions.
- **Editor, headline writer and/or producer.** They might not understand the subtlety of what the reporter wrote or filmed.
- **The reader, listener or viewer** might not read, listen to or watch a story closely enough and might assign an unjustified *why* and *how*.

With multilevel bias, it is understandable how errors get into media reports and propagated repeatedly, but it is also amazing how many facts actually do get through. Still, there is an old cliché that history cannot be written until 20 years after an event. It takes that long to let passions settle and evidence to emerge.

Scientists using the scientific method should be modest about their insights because they know explanations are provisional based on knowledge of the time. However, much of the time they aren't. Good reporters also should be humble, because they deliver first and incomplete drafts of events, but they too show strong egoism. The result is predictable. It is easy to jump from fact to interpretation and indeed, some editors push reporters to do so. The day of “just-the-facts” and “he-said-she-said” reporting are largely gone. In its place, however, is not a better solution. For a skeptical reporter to draw conclusions on partial facts is a daring leap into the unknown and in retrospect, frequently wrong. That is why the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) badgered reporters for years not to assign causes to air crashes: It takes time to sift wreckage for a likely cause, if not definitive one. However, the NTSB may not conclude an investigation for up to 24 to 48 months after a crash – hundreds of news cycles after primary reporting.

The NTSB has made progress in getting reporters to defer the *how* and *why* of air crashes, but other areas of reporting have been less successful. Media

continue to produce copy with conclusions and/or implied motivations that often border on or are credulous. For a celebrity of the hour, most of what he or she says is golden. For an ogre of the day, words and deeds are suspect and incredible. Some reporters stand back and observe dispassionately, but not many. Reporters, as well as PR practitioners should approach stories and events in a spirit of caution. That they don't adds to cynicism.

The power of accurate observation is commonly called cynicism by those who have not got it. George Bernard Shaw (1856 - 1950)

Cynicism: Skepticism + motive

Skepticism founders when it assumes the *why* behind events is self-interest. It is easy enough to do because much human action is selfish, and most stories reporters cover are those of people acting out of self-interest. Thus, it becomes a small step for the skeptical mind observing and inducting conclusions to lapse into cynicism. But not all reporters or PR practitioners are this way: They are a mixed bag of personalities varying from trusting to cynical.

For the most part, however, we should expect reporters and PR practitioners to be skeptical until they find facts to support a story, and we hope they report facts accurately. In reality, this is rarely the case. The reporter knows he or she is being used by the person interviewed, as much as the reporter uses the person interviewed to gather facts. The PR practitioner knows he or she is paid to get organization's facts and point of view across to the reporter, and the reporter knows it too. Both the PR practitioner and reporter know the facts and point of view could be "spin" or proper interpretation – or both.

This is especially true in the political arena where "spin" is frequently over the top, and there is no pretence of standing by facts. Think, for example, of candidates' flacks who leave a debate between contenders and shout "We won!" whether or not their candidate stepped on facts and mangled lines. The flacks then give reporters every reason why their candidate triumphed, whether or not any of those reasons are congruent with dispassionate observation. The flacks, of course, are hoping reporters will quote them – and some media do. No wonder good reporters become cynical about others' motives. Ditto, PR practitioners.

Cynicism and its emphasis on selfish intention also are a reflection of the times. There are periods of optimism and pessimism in every culture and frequently, they exist concurrently with one element of society bullish and in control and another suspicious and downtrodden. Cynicism we see today smacks of disillusionment left from the 1990s. Remember?

- During the Internet Bubble, everyone was going to get rich.
- In the late 1990s, online was going to sweep away old companies and replace them with new, wired ones.

- The medical/pharmaceutical establishment was going to win the war on cancer.
- Citizens would always have a job as long as the US is more productive than any other country.
- A cleaner environment would make for better living and a better world.
- Government regulation would stop abusive behavior of large corporations and protect investors.

In a post-Bubble era, it is not only fashionable to be cynical, but it also explains much behavior of a previous period.

*CYNIC, n. A blackguard whose faulty vision sees things as they are, not as they ought to be. Hence the custom among the Scythians of plucking out a cynic's eyes to improve his vision. **The Devil's Dictionary** (1911). Ambrose Bierce.*

Cynicism has a sour connotation now, but it wasn't always so. Original cynics strove to be virtuous and ended a bit smelly in the process. Antisthenes (Born 440 BC ?), the founder of the philosophy of cynicism, said desires lead to misery, and therefore, the virtuous person abstains from pleasure and pleasure seeking. One neglects the body and its maintenance and focuses on the soul: One must achieve self-sufficiency to achieve true happiness.

Over millennia, the focus on virtue shifted to humans' lack of it. Cynicism today combines assumptions about human psychology bolstered by experience. The modern cynic believes self-interest trumps altruism. Some have called it "disillusioned idealism" in which a mind that once saw potential for doing good is now suspicious of personal motivation and desire. True cynics think all are self-serving in everything they say and do. They validate their view by examples of selfishness, self-dealing and personal aggrandizement they see about them. If this describes the world-weary reporter, police detective or defense lawyer, it is intentional.

Cynicism is an unpleasant way of saying the truth. Lillian Hellman (1905 - 1984), "The Little Foxes," 1939

Cynicism is debilitating

The cynic who does not believe humans show altruistic behavior can easily behave in a self-calculating way. Cynicism becomes a debilitating game of who is "spinning" whom, of wheels within wheels of selfish motive and intent that converge on conspiracy and paranoia. The true cynic also feels a freedom to attack popular beliefs or to use them to personal advantage. The true cynic may scorn social norms and prize individualistic behavior but need not stand apart from society. He or she may work deeply within but consider oneself a free thinker by comparison to "social pretenders who don't understand." The cynic

may deride conventional wisdom and morality and be disinclined to get involved in anything that defends accepted principles of society and government 'because nothing will change no matter what I do.'

However, it appears that most individuals are not true cynics who view all behavior as selfish: They are cynical about some things. They can and do distinguish between selfish and altruistic behavior. They are influenced by facts, by experience, by interpretive bias and by prevailing perceptions. They also know that cynicism runs in patterns: It is acceptable to be cynical about some people, e.g., politicians, lawyers, PR practitioners, the wealthy. They may forget that sweeping conclusions about groups unfairly vitiate individuals who may work from different motives. For example, general statements about the "greedy rich and overpaid CEOs" used in political demagoguery are unfair but effective, as corporate PR practitioners know. As for individual cynicism, nearly everyone has an issue about which he or she is convinced that an organization or person is acting purely out of self-interest.

Most individuals have not formulated a consistent set of beliefs with which to face and interpret the world for better or worse. They balance contradictory notions because they accept that the world is not logical. They accept that cynicism can give away to altruism. We know from history that even persons who have acted heinously can have elements of goodness. Both Hitler and Stalin, murderers of millions, were fascinated by and kindly to little children. Mobsters could rub out an opponent, then send flowers to the funeral and express sympathy to the grieving widow. "It was just business." Even public good, perceived to be altruistic, can be self-dealing. A reason the US helps another country might not be out of altruism, but because policymakers want to stop the influence of another political group from taking root. This was true during the Cold War and with the war against terrorists, most of whom are radical branches of the Muslim religion. Muslims, in turn, are well aware of the reason that the US is interested in rebuilding Iraq, and some have rejected the reason with violence, kidnappings and bombings. On the other hand, a terrorist might accept that individual Americans have acted altruistically. It is a conscious decision to like "you" while "despising the organization behind you."

*No matter how cynical you get, it is impossible to keep up. Lily Tomlin
(1939 -)*

Cynicism and public relations

Public relations stands on a principle that organizations and individuals build relationships for a common good: Organizations cannot exist without relationships. Both sides in a relationship may use the other selfishly, but they must accommodate each other and the outcome of give-and-take is better than not relating. Relationships must involve communications, or there is no relationship. Thus, one can be cynical and enter a relationship that benefits one selfishly. Cynicism and PR can and do co-exist and complement each other in

many relationships and communications among individuals and organizations. The challenge is that the two positions do not complement each other in all relationships and communications. This is a PR problem.

A PR practitioner should not rule out axiomatically the notion of altruism because the notion of “spin” too easily becomes acceptable and personal credibility discredited. If one always acts with selfish interests in mind, then one’s credibility is, by definition, suspect. For when can one know that another has acted honorably and when not, if the ultimate reason for acting is what is best for me or an organization I represent? It is nearly impossible to conclude that one has relayed all the facts and a correct interpretation for selfish reasons in this instance but not in that one. It is better and safer to conclude one can never trust what he or she is told in either facts or interpretations. This explains why many reporters disdain PR practitioners and why PR will remain suspect in the minds of the media and citizens.

On the other hand, by dint of consistency in relaying facts and doing what one says one is going to do, even cynical PR practitioners can build working relationships with journalists over time. Reporters and practitioners both accept the selfish interests of the other and agree to respect them. Thus, a reporter may trust you, while despising the business of PR because acts speak louder than words. “I hate PR people but you’re OK.”

Consistent accuracy and service to reporters harried by deadlines, over time can build reliance on service-oriented PR practitioners. The reporter adjusts his or her mental windage for the practitioner’s bias, and the practitioner does not insist on terms that compromise journalistic ethics. The reporter knows he or she can rely on the fact set, if not the interpretation of the fact set. The PR practitioner knows that the reporter may reject the interpretation, but he or she tries anyway. This position, however, leaves one exposed in instances where individuals or organizations could be said to have acted altruistically. There is little reason for skeptical reporters to accept that interpretation and many reasons for reporters to search for self-interested reasons behind words and action. The cynical reporter, of course, will reject out of hand any altruistic explanation.

Cynicism is not realistic and tough. It's unrealistic and kind of cowardly because it means you don't have to try. Peggy Noonan (1950 -)

Countering the cynic

The best way to counter cynicism is transparency. Be open about self-interest where it exists and eschew “spin.” There is nothing wrong with saying publicly that “this is good for the company and for the CEO.” It is truthful and more likely to maintain credibility than not. At the same time, when an organization has apparently acted altruistically, one should say so. A company jeopardizes credibility the most when it tries to gloss a profit motive, and such buffing rarely works. Citizens and reporters assume organizations, and CEOs pursue selfish

objectives. Denying it is out of character, and a setup for journalists to investigate. Yet, economic principles strictly speaking do not relate to views about motives. One can increase wealth for any reason. John D. Rockefeller, for example, believed God ordained him to make lots of money and then, to give it away. Bill Gates at Microsoft has been accused of using monopolistic practices to build the company, but one cannot overlook his generosity to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Chester Carlson, the inventor of xerography, was only happy when he could give away the millions he earned from his invention. From a selfish point of view, honesty is the best policy. That is easily written but devilishly difficult to achieve with flashpoint issues over an individual's or organization's action and citizens' views of public good.

Is a CEO who is paid \$20 million annually overpaid if the CEO adds \$5 billion to the equity of value of the company each year? The CEO's pay is just 4% of the value that the CEO has added to shareholder wealth. On the other hand, the CEO might be making 400 times the amount of the lowest paid worker in the company. Is the CEO worth that much or is it selfish greed? The PR practitioner will point to the first fact set, the activist to the second. Both are true. Only society can determine through political discussion and regulation – or lack of it – which fact set carries the day in terms of persuasion and maintenance of key relationships that allow a company to survive and succeed.

Does a utility company's use of soft coal in power generation negatively affect the atmosphere? Yes. Is it less expensive to use abundant supplies of soft coal than scarcer natural gas? Yes. Do consumers want clean air? Yes. Are consumers willing to pay a lot more for electricity to offset the cost of natural gas? No. The PR practitioner will point to the total fact set, the environmentalist to the consumer's desire for clean air. It would be silly for the PR practitioner to maintain that scrubbers make air as clean as natural gas boiler fuel unless that can be proved definitively. Both reporters and activists will find out soon enough what the facts are. It is better, even from a cynical point of view, to cut to the issue of cost and to engage in discussion there. This can be bruising enough because activists will allege that power companies artificially inflate costs, while utilities try to prove they don't.

Cynical activists are a different issue. Frequently one's worst critic is a disillusioned idealist who wants to change the world. Many activists won't listen to reason and any effort to bridge points of view are doomed by an attitude that whatever the corporation does is selfish and profit-driven. (This view is at least one-half right.) Such cynicism infects a broad range of interest groups from environmentalists through unions that are out to get theirs from "greedy CEOs who rip off employees and ship jobs out of the country." There is little that a PR practitioner can do with groups like this except to search over time for someone who is reasonable and willing to discuss issues or to isolate the group from others through action that makes the group irrelevant or casts it in a bad light.

PR practitioners themselves should maintain a skeptical view of their own organizations that borders on cynicism. Individuals and organizations justify self-interest – sometimes acceptably and sometimes not. Several companies that got into trouble after the collapse of the Internet Bubble resorted to cheating to keep stock prices high. Their justifications were that it was in the best interest of shareholders, but it was also in the best interest of CEOs' compensation packages and egos that would not tolerate failure. A PR practitioner should be smart enough not to fall for explanations that are patently self-serving and the practitioner should be courageous enough to resist phony explanations that can kill a company's credibility instantly in the markets as well with citizens at large. This was a trap into which Enron fell.

Public Relations is not opposed to cynicism, but it should not be captive to it. A balanced view of facts should allow for both altruistic and selfish reasons for individual and company word and action. It also should allow for ignorance of motivation. "We are doing this, but I don't know why." But, one should look carefully at facts to arrive at a working hypothesis of what the motive is. In the event of doubt, the company that pays one should get the benefit of it.

Reporters would call this "spin," but it isn't any more "spin" than reporters themselves create when they automatically interpret corporate action as selfish. "Spin" happens where one knowingly twists intent to the benefit of an organization or individual with clear evidence that points the other way. "Spin" is based on the gullibility of citizens, and that is why PR practitioners who want to build personal credibility avoid it. There is far too much "spin" in marketing, corporate communications and politics, and it sacrifices credibility that individuals and companies need to act.

Benchmarking facts is a way to indicate intent without opening oneself to charges of self-interest. Rather than saying that the company didn't do X or Y, one shows fact sets that provide strong evidence that the company was unlikely to have been engaged in X or Y. That doesn't convince the cynic but it might be enough to convince regulators and prosecutors. A company accused of abusing foreign nationals develop a set of facts over time to show the charge just wasn't true. That did not stop bad stories, lawsuits and Congressional hearings, but it allowed the company to get on with its work less defensively. It gave employees and shareholders evidence they needed to regain confidence in the organization. Within the larger political realm, it also provided the company the rebuttal it needed to address concerns from members of Congress.

Summary

Is cynicism an accurate or distorted point of view? That is not a question a PR practitioner has to answer because it is a personal matter based on one's beliefs about human nature. I believe there is altruism, but you don't have to. We can still work together. However, it is an issue that PR practitioners confront. That is why it is essential to say when an organization is self-interested and when not.

Portraying altruism for selfish reasons heightens suspicion about individuals' motives. Secondly, even if an act is self-interested, do what you say you are going to do. The act and fact speak more loudly than the word. This is common sense that is ignored constantly. The job of the PR practitioner is not to be altruistic but to help an organization be consistent with message and action in order to maintain the relationships an organization needs to survive and grow. In a society steeped in cynicism, this is difficult enough.

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