

Public Relations

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Opening music

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WGVU's Jennifer Moss:

Your'e listening to Tilting the Earth's Praxis, a weekly discussion of important issues that impact civil society. With host Salvatore Alaimo.

Salvatore Alaimo

The ideal stated as the following The organized systems of collective, collective human experience, including economic exchange, political governance and social relationships that enable citizens to prosper, reach their potential, and flourish as human beings. So you might be wondering how will this week's topic, public relations, somehow play a role in this ideal of civil society? Well, our three esteemed guests are going to help us connect the dots. Normally we go outside of Grand Valley State University for our national expert. This time he's homegrown. Tim Penning, professor at Grand Valley University. Grand Valley State University. His resume is impressive. He's been teaching public relations for a long time. He's had regional and national awards. He has served in the Public Relations Society of America. And he is a member of the Phi Kappa Phi National Honor Society. Welcome, Tim.

Tim Penning

Thank you.

Salvatore Alaimo

We also have, as part of our weekly format, Grand Valley State University alumni. Steven Szymanski is the program associate at Great Lakes Political Academy. Welcome, Steven.

Steven Szymanski

Thank you.

Salvatore Alaimo

And last but not least, we have Jason Manshum. He's a principal at 45th Parallel Strategies, LLC. Welcome, Jason.

Jason Manshum

And thank you for having me.

Salvatore Alaimo

Great. So, Tim, let's start with you. Help us connect the dots. How do we how would public relations somehow connect to this ideal of civil society? What can we say about that?

Tim Penning

Well, we have two topics here that are not well understood by the public at large, one being civility or civics civil discourse. And you read the definition. A lot of people don't understand that. They think of civics as well. That's the local government or something. But it really affects all citizens living together in harmony and productivity as a short a way of saying that public relations is also misunderstood. I tell my students in an intro class and pretty much everyone I meet that public relations is either minimized or demonized. It's minimized as merely getting publicity or raising awareness. That is how it started formally in the 1920s, and I've written a paper about that in the media, did not portray it accurately back then. There's always been an animosity about what public relations is, and then even though that is a part of it, it's much more than that. It's basically about relationships with any publics or stakeholders that any organization would have. So in the United States, that would be not just corporate sector, but the nonprofit sector and the government sector and those relationships. A lot of scholarship has been expended on how do you measure those? They need to be of mutual benefit. They need to be based on trust, satisfaction, something called control, mutuality, which is very related to civics. Control mutuality is a fancy way of saying either party can start the conversation that the organization listens as well as initiates conversation. And yes, while we try to persuade and inform, we also are accountable and we also have responsibility. And so it's much broader than that. So so public relations is as minimized as just media relations, a one way tactical function. It's really a management exercise where the best. I'm also a member of the Page Society named for Arthur Page, who is the first vice president of public relations starting in 1927 for AT&T, the largest corporation in the world at the time. And he developed seven principles. He didn't write them down, but his fans and colleagues, when AT&T was split up into the Ma Bells, they kept meeting together because they liked each other. And they said, Arthur used to say this and they they put them together and they start with, tell the truth, prove it with action, run public relations like the whole company depends on it. And that resonates today in a society of over 1200 chief communication officers who try to practice in that manner in a very civil manner, I would say. And unfortunately, a lot of just the demonize part is a lot of people say, oh, that's just PR, and that often they're looking at somebody who's not a public relations person saying something dishonest or putting lipstick on a pig or trying to gloss over something, working on image which can be created as opposed to reputation which has to be earned. And so we take the brunt of unknowing people blaming, looking at legitimately bad acts, but calling it public relations. And it continues to be unfair if you ever talk to a real public relations person. We make the distinction between professionals and practitioners. Professionals are civil practitioners do whatever it takes to get ahead.

Salvatore Alaimo

And so what I'm hearing you say is that the Public Relations Society of America has a code of ethics that its members.

Tim Penning

Yes, six values and six provisions in the code of ethics. I teach it all the time. They also have a paper, a white paper on civility. So they actually, at the leadership level across the country, they consider civility something that's not only important for public relations people to practice, but to lead on it. They also believe that public relations of all the functions in an organization, from management to human resources, all worthwhile functions. But public relations of all of them should be the ethical conscience of the organization, just like the lawyer would advise the CEO on matters of law, and that's appropriate. It's the public relations person who should advise the CEO or the elected official or the nonprofit executive on matters of ethics. Because we are about relationships with all stakeholders, not just the media.

Salvatore Alaimo

Building off of that. I'll start with you, Jason. Tell us a little bit about your work and how what Tim was just describing maybe has played a role in some of the things that you've done.

Jason Manshum

Sure, I'd be happy to. Upon my graduation here from Grand Valley State, I have been practicing public government affairs for the last two decades. My career has taken me from the health care sector to the energy sector, food and beverage and others. Where I really see this playing out in my career has been never more prominent than when I was in the energy industry. I mean, we're living in a society where we are making strides towards green energy, but we're not yet there. We're still heavily reliant on fossil fuels. So there is this larger debate across the globe on where energy comes from, how it's used. At what cost, you know, to the environment. I worked for a company that was highly controversial in this area because of an incident that they had or there is a large spill that polluted 40 river miles here in the state of Michigan of crude oil. So the company at first was, was not well known. There's very little awareness of them until the incident, which means they had next to zero relationships built within the state with all of the key stakeholders at the local state level, even in Washington, D.C. And so, you know, to Tim's point in trying to come in and build relationships when you're already behind the eight ball makes it extremely challenging. This is an emotionally charged issue because at the end of the day, you know, if you're looking for common ground, I think it's you know, everyone expects clean water, everyone expects access to it. It's not a privilege. It's a right that we all have as citizens here and in the United States. And so trying to forge relationships with those key stakeholders when the relationship was formed because of an environmental disaster, makes things exponentially, you know, more difficult. And that's where, again, where in my career specifically, you know, trying to to learn from different experiences. The stakeholders have tried to get to the gist of what is our common ground and where can we build from here? Because what we can't change is what happened, right? But we can change the relationship going forward. And to Tim's point again is built on trust and it's built on our personal ethics. And we, as the public affairs or public relations professionals, are the literal face and the voice of the organization and that liaison with those stakeholders who are impacted.

And, you know, that particular period of my career has to truly shaped what I'm doing today and will I'll be doing until the day I finally retire.

Salvatore Alaimo

Thank you for sharing that. Absolutely. How about you, Steven? Want to build off of Jason's comments and kind of blend in with Tim was talking about?

Steven Szymanski

Absolutely. So a little background. When I graduated from Grand Valley in 2021, I was in the marketing industry for about four months and then I made the jump to politics because I just wanted to be involved and I wanted to help make a change in the state. So, I got involved with the State House reelection race down in Kalamazoo, Christine Morse, and speaking to both Dr. Penning and Jason's points. As a campaign manager, you're kind of in a full time public relations role. Not only are you trying to manage a campaign making sure that their reputation is solid and if there's anything bad coming out about them, you kind of have to get out in front of it. But you yourself are also representing that campaign manager and or that candidate and trying to connect with voters, the stakeholders. So. It's a lot about building that bipartisanship, trying to cut through all the noise and. Christine Morse got reelected. Because of that, we were able to cut through the noise and we saw a lot of people in politics, which I wouldn't have expected, split their ticket, voting for Christine Morse and going the opposite way for the governorship, voting for Tudor Dixon. So it was very interesting to see that. From a public relations side of things. If the federal government does something that the state or voters in the state don't like, that kind of influences how they vote for governor. If they don't like how the governor acts, that's going to impact state rather than as low as a city council. It was insane to think that. Good or bad, public relations in politics and a midterm race could really make or break a candidacy.

Salvatore Alaimo

You mentioned the key phrase, cutting through the noise. So it prompts the question, how important is it just generically speaking for individuals and organizations to simply have the ability to tell their story?

Tim Penning

All of the noise has increased. I mean, years ago, if you were in broadcasting, they talk about the signal to noise ratio like actual static and that's how noise is right now. There's so much static. Even doing this podcast, I asked at the beginning, How are we going to manage turn taking? I try to be an informed individual and I like to listen to people who have used that are not my own. And I think that we've lost that in this country. People shout at each other on the you know, they have the three or four screens and CNN or FOX will just name, you know, both sides. And it's unfortunate, we have to say sides, they should just be different media outlets. But all media have chosen sides, especially at the national level. And they the bias is seen in what they cover and how they cover it. But it's all about ratings, too. If you have two people screaming at each other, it's a traffic accident and people stop and turn and look. I mean, I hate to put it that bluntly, gone are the days when you can be informed. I used to watch a lot more television than I do now. I'd much rather read and consume where I can. You know, you're kind of

cognitively at it. And I read, you know, *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* and I read, you know, other national media sources. And first of all, it's very striking the difference in, again, what they cover and how they cover it and how they frame things. But even to your podcast's theme about civility, how we talk to other people apart from the news, and you see that on social media amplified. But even in, you know, interpersonal face to face conversation, it's much more important to be civil face to face, and people feel more pressure to do so. But on social media, it's really easy to make snarky comments and to do Mike drop moments and say that if somebody disagrees with you that they're one of two things or evil or stupid. And I try to encourage people and I remind myself, frankly, that the goal here is not always persuasion, it's mutual understanding. And Jason spoke to that, too. You know, he had, he has particular deep expertise across a lot of companies in public affairs. And that's a form of public relations where you're trying to deal with a group of citizens. They're not another organization and publics don't always coalesce over things like they're all employees or they're all investors or donors. Sometimes it's all they're very passionate about an issue that rises and falls with the moment. So public affairs is very challenging, as Jason described it, that there too, you're trying to find, as he said, common ground and you're trying to say, you know, get you know, bring the temperature down and reduce that noise and say, you know, we're not trying to do this to hurt you. There's competing interests here. Maybe there's a compromise, a different way of doing it. And we've lost that in society in large part. And I wrote a blog post recently about, you know, public relations more than journalism is seizing this opportunity to bring some civility and some dialog and informed decision making back to the citizen, because it's hard to be fully informed. You need all the marketplace of ideas. You need all sides represented. And now public relations people don't like, Jason would have advocated for the company that paid his salary, obviously, but he does that ethically. He does that so that the public fully knows. I'm advocating our point of view. You can get alternative points of view over there and we're not going to do anything unethical and try to prevent you from seeing the alternative point of view. When I teach writing, I even say you should absolutely, if you're writing a position paper or a speech, you should bring up the opposing points of view and then you should refute them and do so in an honest civil way. Because if you don't mention them, people think you're ignorant of them or that you are trying to deceive people. And if you do bring them up and you don't refute them, you may persuade people the other way. And so psychological research has shown that to the recipient if this person's saying we believe A now there's also views B and C, but the reason we don't accept those is this. So back to our point of A, which we believe is the best solution, that's a very civil and strategic approach to communication.

Salvatore Alaimo

Is, is it getting harder for the average citizen, the cliched average citizen, to somehow decipher between normative and non-normative statements. We see so many opinions now being presented in a way in terms of wording, tone, intonation, very affirming, really, often on some of these news programs, as if they're facts. So, are you seeing this to this increasing difficulty in us being able to decipher between the two and then make good decisions as consumers or as students or patients or citizens?

Steven Szymanski

I think so. I mean, I saw this a lot while I was knocking on doors, just trying to communicate with people. There would be a lot of voters that were really stuck in their ways and they wouldn't really want to see it from the other point of view. Now, there were a lot of great voters, great people I was able to talk to where we were able to come to a mutual understanding that. A lot of these issues that we all care about as Michiganders or American citizens, we all want them solved. We just have a very different way to solve them. So. A lot of these voters that I would talk to, we would agree to disagree or they would see my point of view and I would see their point of view and whether or not that transferred to a vote for Christine. You know, I didn't at the end of the day, I didn't really care about that because if I was able to cut through that noise that we mentioned, just a I don't want to say enlightened, but just have them see it from a different point of view. You know. That's like worth \$1,000,000 right there. But what I did see was even if I approached the door and I said who I was representing, sometimes it was immediate door slam. So I think. Because of how divided politics is in general. And you have the increasing use of social media and people trying to do those mike drop moments and trying to get a win on the other aisle, you know, on the libs or whatever. It's becoming increasingly difficult, but I think there's still a certain amount of hope for public relations officials.

Jason Manshum

You know, I would very much agree with that. I think one of the things that we can do as public relations professionals to really help, you know, cut through the noise and to help people understand factual information is also to push back on the very people that we are advocating for. As Tim said earlier, yes, I'm going to advocate for the company that gives me a paycheck every two weeks. However, there are times when, as the liaison between the company and their stakeholders, you might need to address an issue and politely, you know, push back has pros. I think we've learned over the years when we need to literally step on the accelerator and when maybe we need to step on the brake a little bit, it's up to us to determine that. But there are, sometimes are decisions being made, you know, at the executive level that could have negative impacts on their stakeholders. And it's not done so maliciously. It's not done so with intent. Maybe it's just not something they're seen in the moment. And that's where oftentimes we can get back to the very companies again that we advocate for, whether we're in-house or we work with clients and push back. I think that helps companies cut through the noise. I think that will help assist in providing factual information and to make sure that sometimes we don't lose the you know, that we stop seeing the forest through the trees, because we get so narrow minded and focused when we're in turtle. Because it's it's so easy to say, well, here are the facts for us. And if we don't lose any sleep over it. Stakeholder you shouldn't either. But that's not how the stakeholder views it. Right. So we, as again, as those professionals in the public relations world, need to be able to push back as appropriate. And I've learned that's one great way again to help cut through the noise and at the end, build trust.

Tim Penning

I want to echo what Jason said there. One of the things we say to students and talk as professionals is you need to speak truth to power. And the public relations person should be at the management level. They should be making the decisions, not just communicating them. Because, you know, if I study crisis communications and other brands of public relations, you see a lot of the crises. 75% of them are caused by bad management, not because there is a hurricane or you are a victim of something. It's because they made largely an unethical decision or just a poorly strategic decision that was short term as opposed to a Jason saying long term, you have to think about stakeholder relationships and treat people as people with dignity and respect and rights. So speak truth to power and, you know, manage the organization. Be part of that room that's making the decision. I also wanted to really quickly dovetail off Stephen with his political experience. I just this morning heard some national data that a 50 some percent, like 52% of Americans now identify as independents. And the rest are split almost evenly between, you know, the low 20 percents between Democrat and Republican. And that's largely because to your question, Sal, they don't see a middle ground by the parties. They don't see compromise. They see gotcha moments and winning and playing, playing sport as opposed to compromise and serve. Most Americans really want people to work together, but we all like a train wreck, unfortunately, or we like the fighting. And what the consultant I was watching said is, unfortunately, a lot of these independents states have registered closed primaries. So you have to be a Democrat or a Republican to vote, since they're not only the extremist vote. So that's why we keep getting more and more polarized candidate choices. And the people who might be independent are saying, really, we have 320 million Americans and we got to pick between these two. And it's because of the party driven, the party keep the base keeps winning. And I don't know if Stephen experienced some of that, too, that those candidates who are moderate are struggling to win the primary. And so more and more independents, we either need to change the structure so that primaries are open, but then you have some nefarious, nefarious things happening or we need everybody to just register and then vote their conscience in the general, but try to get more moderate candidates from both parties who can be civil, not only in how they campaign, but how they govern.

Salvatore Alaimo

You know, all three of you collectively have been contributing to this discussion and conveying what I see as the value proposition for public relations. And it's making me think that without it, legislation might not get passed. Nonprofits not might, might not be able to raise money. Social norms. I'm thinking back to 1964 when the surgeon general told us that smoking cigarettes causes cancer. And look at how the number of people smoking in this country has dropped since. So sometimes when you need to think about the value of something, you imagine that it no longer exists. So, I don't know how a lot of these major shifts in our country could take place without public relations. So, do you

want to comment further on that in terms of the value proposition and really how it's impacted society and in ways that maybe we take for granted?

Tim Penning

I'll let my former students and colleagues address this. But quickly, I'll just say you say value proposition. That's a good term. But one of the things that I like to say in my ethics class is role morality. So, every profession has a role morality or if you are a profession, there's different ways of defining what a profession is. But I like to say you play some positive role in society. So for public relations, that in a nutshell is informed decision making in a democratic society. If people can't make informed decisions, we lose. It starts with individuals losing, making bad choices or not realizing alternatives that were there. But eventually it's a big societal problem, and we're starting to see that manifest because we have polarized media, polarized politicians. We have people being de-platformed and canceled merely for expressing their point of view, people unwilling to accept alternatives as opposed to being curious about, you know, it's mutual understanding, not persuasion. You know, we, Sal. You and I might disagree on some things, but I love you as a friend and I'm interested to know what you think even and maybe even especially if it's different than mine, because that makes me better. And it might modify my opinion, I might change my opinion, or I might hold it more strongly. All of all three of those possibilities are positive. So public relations needs to contribute to that. Journalism should. I was a journalist first. That was my bachelor's degree and I practiced as a journalist. So I grieve it. But I have to say that they are letting go their societal role and becoming more propaganda than public interest.

Steven Szymanski

I do want to say pertaining to politics, and I do want to touch on a point you brought up earlier about there being moderate candidates. I think everybody would be surprised to hear that a good chunk of candidates that I talked with, at least down in Kalamazoo, I'm not sure if this is similar across the state, wouldn't be surprised. A lot of them were afraid to take moderate stances because of how polarized everything is and. It's sad because a lot of them were our great candidates were great candidates. And I believe that if they played on to that moderate role a little bit, instead of pigeonholing themselves into one camp, voters would be a lot more happy. We would be getting things done. And I think, as public relations professionals, we need to stress that more at least speaking from a purely political point of view. I feel like a lot of good would be done locally in the state and at the federal level if we just all put our pride aside. And no matter if you're a progressive, conservative, Democrat, Trump supporter, Republican, whatever it may be at the end of the day. We all want policies that will help each other out. And instead of just focusing on one extreme and we need to all, I don't know, maybe do a public relations campaign to where if there's one specific idea, we can all just brainstorm and see where we can all agree on and meet halfway. So that way both sides can get it. Instead of just being concerned with scoring points for your team's jersey, it just something's got to change.

Jason Manshum

And I think, you know, to that point, I often speak in terms of having the social license to operate. You may have a license to do your business, but how well does your company have the ability to socially conduct their life of business in the communities in which they serve? And oftentimes there is that conflict. And it does require, I think, you know, some compromise there to have the social license to operate. You might have to change some of your business operations. And I think, again, public relations professionals can help the organization kind of weed through the noise that we've talked about and find that compass to head toward so they can continue their social license to operate and will always be smooth. Well, they always appease every stakeholder. Absolutely not. However, you know, over the course of time, and I like to think of public relations campaigns, is just that it's, it's time, it's a journey. And you're always going to that destination, and nothing happens overnight or that quickly. But over the course of the destination, you can really improve an organization's social license to operate regardless of the sector, regardless of if the company makes products or if they provide services. It's, it's a regardless of that. And I think, you know, to that end, there oftentimes is professionals, we are accused of selling propaganda. I heard Tim use that term earlier. Why? Because we get that paycheck, you know, from the company. I can recall one instance where I had a very angry community member at an open house stick her finger, her index finger right in my chest. She's angry at me and right in my face. And she blatantly told me she would not believe a word I said because of the logo on my shirt, which I had a polo shirt under the company logo at this open house because I get paid by said company. So it's you know, it's in those situations where as professionals, we are tested, but we have to try as best we can, you know, to find that mutual understanding, to build that relationship. And doesn't always work. But that's, I think, the goal that we have. And and I think that's where we can make the biggest strides.

Salvatore Alaimo

I want to circle back to something you talked about, Tim. The the subset or branch of public relations, crisis communications we've seen throughout history in many different crises. And how important is it to have effective public relations when a crisis comes out, particularly maybe one that might impact the health or safety of citizens? Because we've seen situations where maybe bad public relations can put more gasoline on that burning fire. So, what, what can you say about that? What advice do you have for enacting sound PR during the time of a crisis?

Tim Penning

That's a huge topic and there's a whole lot of theory on that. And there's typologies of crisis response that are dependent on what was the origin of the crisis or the nature of the crisis. But, first of all, it's usually advisable that you have a crisis plan in place and you can't anticipate everything. But like if you're a school, you can anticipate, unfortunately, a shooting or if you're a manufacturing company or you can, you know, a boiler blows up or a strike or you can anticipate the sorts of things. And the first part of

that is what are our values? A lot of people don't realize that it's usually what are we going to do? The best CEOs and the best PR counsel to CEOs always remind at the time of a crisis what are our values? And let's live out those values. Statistically, data shows, you know, everybody most people know about Tylenol from the 1980s and they at great expense to themselves walk the walk, they walk the talk, they live their values and took an immediate financial and reputational hit, but a long term financial and reputational gain because they just did the right thing. That's a yeah, that's not considered.

Salvatore Alaimo

That's been called the gold standard.

Tim Penning

It has but recently there've been some critics of it, but I just think they're looking for something to say. And it was in the eighties and you know, situations are different now. There are other more contemporary cases like JetBlue had a situation where they had people sitting on an airplane for 8 hours because they pulled back and there was weather and the tower said they couldn't take off and TSA said they couldn't go back to the gate. Southwest is in it. I just heard again today and you know, their CEOs are out there and using terms like I'm mortified or mortification is actually a crisis response strategy. And they're actually using the term from Edward Benoit and Image Restoration Theory or Timothy Combs and situational crisis communication theory. We talk about if you are to blame, you know, you fix the problem, you offer solution, you compensate. Unfortunately, a lot of people will go, you know, immediately to denial or they they they want to get the spotlight to them or go off. That's the wrong instinct. The spotlight is appropriate right now because you're dealing with something that affects a lot of people and they understandably want to know. So the first thing you should do is, is if it is your fault, admit it. Give all the information immediately, rip off that Band-Aid, don't dole it out first. Strategically, that becomes it gives the story a shelf life and it's all bad news. Get all the bad news out right away strategically. So you get that over with and you can start turning to what we're doing about it and solution. But also that's the most ethical and civil thing to do because you address the problem fully. A lot of times crises are compounded by the uncertainty or the doubt, and I would blame the public relations person or the manager for that part. The crisis may or may not have been their fault, but their response can be worse than the crisis. And if you just think about how would you like to be spoken to if you were a passenger or an employee or whatever the case may be with honesty and immediacy and responsibility. So that's just best. You've seen you've seen cases where crises really go awry and you have multiple stories out there because they're not being responsive. So the media will so we'll find out somehow or the public these days can have a cell phone video or a blog where whereas those who say we're going to have a conference at this time and they share everything and we're going to come back in 2 hours, and they, they are the source of all of the information. And the information is honest, accurate, credible and timely. They tend to manage that crisis well. It's hard in the moment to take punches, as Jason said, but you take it and you just keep consistently doing the right thing in the long term, that's better for you and

your reputation as an organization. And it's better for your stakeholders because they've been informed.

Jason Manshum

If I can just add to that real quickly, because I think what Tim said is spot on. But I would say when it comes to the planning aspect, which as he correctly identified is extremely important, that's the foundation of all your crisis response. The plan is, in my opinion, useless if you create it one time and then it sits on the proverbial shelf somewhere in the cloud, and you never look at it again. Plans can look great on paper or on your screen, but you don't really know how effective they are until you roll them out. Which is why I would advocate for every organization, regardless of sector, regardless of size, to practice a response in a drill, at least annually. And you know, the degrees to which they're there, they're role play in that can vary. You could be a simple tabletop. It can be a full scale exercise. It can be, you know, as realistic as you want it to be. But that is where you really start to look at potential holes in your response planning to try to make those changes. There's nothing like learning from actually doing, right? So, I would say in addition to the planning, it's a you have to, you know, again, practice that annually. And that really comes from a commitment at the top. The executive leadership of any organization has to be committed to that and making sure that, you know, those plans can be evergreen and they're fluid and can and will change.

Salvatore Alaimo

So, I want to circle back to get us to that 30,000 foot level society, societal, macro level that we began with at the beginning of the show. Can or should public relations play a role in impacting culture and social norms for good?

Tim Penning

I've wrestled with that. I actually wrote a blog post about the importance and courage of neutrality, because when you talk about social norms and norm in a in culture, culture is based on norms. Normative behavior is what everybody assumes we all do like we always do this or we would never do that. But there's variance there, too, based on everything from ethnicity to geography to faith to other things. But I think that there's a lot of activity right now. And, and Jason and Steven know this and all of the acronyms DEI, CSR, CSR. So diversity, equity, inclusion, corporate social responsibility has now become corporate social advocacy. I'm all in favor of the responsibility. I'm cautious about the advocacy unless it aligns with that organization's own values. But here's the problem. If you're a large enterprise and you say, we're taking a stand on this, you represent 2,000, 30,000 employees. You may not all identify with that. So then you're running the risk of employee employee engagement being bifurcated, like, well, yeah, I just work there. I don't agree with that. But, you know, that's just what they say where I work. And also, what about all your other stakeholders? Look at Bud Light right now and look at I'm trying to think of other examples. There's a lot of old Harry's is like the they're now in grocery stores, but they started out offering by mail men's shaving and grooming products. And then they stopped advertising on *Daily Wire* because daily wire is conservative, and Harry's is not. So Jeremy, the owner of *Daily Wire* now has Jeremy's razors and he's selling his own products and his marketing is hilariously anti-woke and

is then, you know, we can laugh about it, but isn't that kind of sad? But the consumer choices and people, even Stephen and Jason might disagree with me, but I think we should tread lightly into a situation where it's not the features and benefits of a product or the quality of a service or alignment with a cause. But it's all of these other, yes, cultural, but also tangential issues. You want that to be part of your social brand? We've always had social brands, but it used to be philanthropy and purpose. So, Kellogg has a really good purpose statement. It's not just about we sell food, but, you know, making nutritious meal accessible and affordable for American families. I may not have said that accurately, but it aligns with what they do. That makes sense. But as soon as you start, you know, having your own gay pride parade or doing, you know, I don't know, an immigration thing either side of that you run the risk of. Try, starting out with civil intentions and creating more incivility in the process.

Jason Manshum

And I think the challenge to that is in today's world, organizations are being looked at to take some sort of a stance. Right. Where do you fall company, ABC or X, Y, Z? We need to know which side. Talk about sides earlier you fall on. And so you run the risk to this to play devil's advocate, right? You're on the risk that if you say nothing, at least publicly and in you, you don't tend to take a side on any issue that we're faced with. Then what happens to your stakeholders? Do your customers go somewhere else? Do you lose prospective customers? What about your employees? What, what do they feel if they're not advocating? Right? So, I think there's a there's a risk regardless of the direction you go. But I know that, you know, the top organizations are being asked more and more to be vocal about where they stand on issues. In a company I always think of is Patagonia. You know, they are so entrenched in environmental causes, So, you know, if you were a customer or a prospective customer, you know what you're getting when you're getting something. Patagonia It's not just outerwear, it's it's not just the apparel. It's about what they stand for. I think same thing as an employee. If I worked for Patagonia, I would know very clearly their stance on environmentalism. And if that didn't match my personal values for some reason, then I'd have a choice to make if I wanted to continue my employment there. But I think, you know, there are organizations like that that have done very good work and are effective in certain issues.

Tim Penning

And, I would agree with that. You know, that again, there is a piece in *Harvard Business Review* about that says don't, don't take a stand on every issue. Pick two, maybe three that you associate with and make sure that they're on brand. So, Patagonia makes perfect sense for environmentalism or Ben and Jerry's for product sourcing, you know, around the world. And, things like that makes perfect sense because it's intimately tied into either their product or their overall mission.

Steven Szymanski

But, I do think there should be a level of neutrality because what's good today could be bad tomorrow or vice versa. I think we see that a lot over the last few years. And again, speaking purely from a political point, Democrats and Republicans weren't the same in the 1920s and 1940s, what have you. I mean, we've seen shifts from Rockefeller,

Republicans to Reaganites to people that enjoy Trump and even, you know, progressive conservatives like Eisenhower and Coolidge, uh to Democrats like FDR, Jimmy Carter, Obama, Bernie AOC? You know, Democrats are Republicans. Their values are always changing. And I worry that if companies take a certain stance and they're automatically associated with that side, I think as public relations officials, we should air on the side of caution, look and see. You know, we can look at the short term benefits, but see what the long term of it is if it's only going to benefit companies in the short term it almost seems pointless. But if you look at the long term of that and you can see positive increasing, you know, profits and whatnot, it could be valuable, But I think as things are becoming more, I'll say toxic, we should be approaching things from a neutral standpoint, see both sides and how we can approach it better.

Tim Penning

That's why I said neutrality is courageous. You ask if people should, should a company take a stand on social issues? Almost 100% will say, yeah. And you look at and say which stand on which issue. And there's deafening silence. So, people assume that they should take a stand in agreement with me. We have to get to a point where we talk. We used to say, you know, coexist and diversity. Well, diversity implies difference. You know, if diversity is such a mantra right now, why are we not tolerating different viewpoints? People are using diversity as a cudgel to get everybody to fall in line with one perspective. Not everywhere. I mean, and I'm not against diversity, but I think we should try to. I mean, I just did a blog post today about a Latina and a Black woman student, and I was celebrating. That's great that they both, you know, made some accomplishments together. That all is great. But when it comes to perspective and to your point about cultural norms and things like that, we need to get back to understanding and to be nondiscriminatory, nondiscriminatory, and not celebratory about a single point of view.

Salvatore Alaimo

And that's a good segue into the final point I'd like us to cover. What do the three of you see looking ahead on the horizon? What does the future hold for public relations?

Tim Penning

I don't care. I'm going to retire before these two. So no. Go ahead, Jason.

Jason Manshum

You never know how some of us may advance a little more quickly. You know, I wish I had the magic eight ball in front of me. Right. But since now, I don't. I would say this. I would say, what's not going to change? I'll start with that are our foundations and that we've talked about earlier, you know, our practices based on relationships, relationship building. And, you know, those relationships are not always based on an agreement or an understanding of one another. Sometimes we, we disagree and that's okay. Sometimes we need to be pushed into the uncomfortable directions that we're heading, and that's okay too. I think I would start with that as saying that I don't think that will ever change. The technology of course, very much changes. I think about when I when I walked out of Van Andel arena with my degree, with my diploma back in and I'm going

to age myself here, in 1998, how much technology has changed and how you actually practice what you're doing today? I can't pretend to fathom that I'll know what it looks like in another 20 to 25 years. But I think, you know, that's one area in which we'll see more rapid changes over the next two decades.

Steven Szymanski

I do think we'll have to adapt with the coming ages. It's, you know, to Jason's point, having that magic eight ball, it's kind of hard to predict how everything is going to play out over the next decade or two. But, I do think as public relations officials, our roles or maybe this is me being an optimist, but I do feel like we are going to start playing a way more important role as things are seemingly getting more out of control. So, we'll have to adapt with the times and just be there to serve the public the best that we can.

Tim Penning

Yeah, what they said and you know, this is written about all the time. The future of PR by our trade publications is probably true of any industry, what's the future of accounting and so forth. But I think what Harold Burson said, Harold Burson started a public relations firm called Burson-Marsteller, and he just passed away a few years ago. And before he did, he published this wonderful book reflecting on his career. And he had a line in there that he said PR people started out being asked by CEOs what to say, and then there was an era where they were asked how to say it. And increasingly, they were being asked what to do. So it's not just PR is not about communication, it's about behavior. And I think we're going to see more and more of that in the future. I also with artificial intelligence, augmented reality, that's where everybody's talking about. I've been asked to speak to a corporate communication meeting and to our regional chamber of commerce about this issue. And I'm not an expert on it, but it's to Jason's point, you know, what are your core values just as a human being, ethically, morally, but also what are our professional values as public relations people? And I think the future is going to be increasingly global. It's going to be increasingly immediate, and it's going to be increasingly moderated or augmented by technology. And so, even Elon Musk and others have signed a document saying, you know, put the brakes on it. You talked, Sal, about being in Czechoslovakia and not knowing the language. The person at Google who contributed significantly to the invention of AI was surprised he doesn't know how it happened, but an MRI machine learned how to speak Finnish without being programmed to do so. So it's like a Frankenstein's monster. I mean, and all technology, starting with the computer, even starting with a telephone or even going back to the clock as a fundamental technology. All of them are a two edged sword. There's tremendous opportunity for good. You think about doctors using artificial intelligence to speedily diagnose health information's big data by aggregating all of these symptoms. And then somebody comes in. What a wonderful opportunity, cure for cancer, things like that. But then my wife was just telling me this morning a story of a woman who got a phone call and it was her little daughter's voice on the other end saying that she had been kidnaped. She calls her husband and says, no, she's with me right now. So, using artificial intelligence for crime or there's all kinds of legal ramifications, privacy, defamation, copyright. You know, we're going to have to think about that in public relations. It's not about whether or not we adopt technology going forward. It's how we

do it consistent with our longstanding values as public relations professionals, and I would just say as humans,

Salvatore Alaimo

It's a great way to close. And I would just say, for those of you listening, I'm sure you would agree with me that and join me and can thinking that moving forward, we're not going to be looking or thinking about public relations in the same way ever again. And that's thanks to our three esteemed guests that we've had today. Dr. Tim Penning, public relations professor at Grand Valley State University. Stephen Szymanski, program associate at Great Lakes Political Academy, and Jason Menschen, Principal at 45th Parallel Strategies, LLC. Thank you again for joining us. Please tune in next week for another episode of Tilting the Earth's Practice.

Closing music

WGVU's Jennifer Moss

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