

Political Espionage or Politics as Usual?

The Case of Political Campaign Tactics

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As a college sophomore and first-time intern, Nicole Miller felt honored to be selected as an intern for the most closely followed political campaign of the year. Being new to interning and new to politics, Miller believed she should do what was asked of her without asking questions. Initially, she did not question “strategic thinking” and other so-called clever ways to win the political campaign. However, as she was given more responsibility and asked to do tasks she found ethically questionable, she began to wonder if she should question what she was being directed to do. How could she support a candidate whom she believed in, still play what she believed to be the “political game” and follow directions from her supervisor while maintaining her own values?

Because the political candidate Miller represented is still involved in politics, and Miller works for a strategic communications firm that represents public affairs as an area of interest, the name of the candidate has been omitted from this case and Miller’s name has been changed to a pseudonym.

THE SITUATION A HIGH-PROFILE POLITICAL CAMPAIGN

As a strategic communications major at Elon University, Nicole Miller was headed into her first internship to support a political candidate in a presidential primary. Miller had already been dedicating her time outside of school to support the candidate, so she was eager to play an active role in the campaign while fulfilling her internship requirement.

At the time, Miller had not been exposed to the world of politics and wasn't sure what to expect, so she thought she would experience it through the internship. Each day presented Miller with new opportunities to interact with the press, community members and surrogates who spoke on behalf of the political candidate. Although Miller said this internship was the most exciting one she had during college and that it made her a better writer and strategic thinker, it also convinced her that she did not want a career in politics.

Ethics came into play as the political party Miller represented came into contact with the opposing party on a regular basis. Campaign events were well attended by supporters of Miller's candidate; however, the supporters of the opposing candidate also came in force. She didn't understand why an event kept secret until hours before it happened was filled with people her team sought to avoid.

She quickly figured out the "game," though; both sides played it very well. An inquiry to her campaign manager revealed the many strategies used: strategically placed supporters with signs opposing the competition, fake social media accounts to follow key influencers on the competition's side and inaccurate media advisories to keep the competition away.

THE CHALLENGE MISREPRESENTATION AND DIVERSION

Now able to recognize the decoys used by both sides of the campaign, Miller began to question how ethical it was for her to contribute to the situation. While doing her work as an intern, she was asked to assist with "strategically" placing protesters at competitor events and follow and interact with the competition via "dummy" social media accounts.

She was asked to equip her party's supporters with signs of opposition and to ward off the "follows" from the opposing parties' fake social media accounts. She had to sift through decoy press that made their way to the campaign office and send out media advisories that purposely miscommunicated information about events to "throw off" the competition.

For example, Miller had to coordinate protesters outside a local restaurant where an opposing candidate was having lunch with small business owners. She took signs that questioned various aspects of the candidate's agenda to the restaurant and distributed them to the staged protesters outside.

The fake social media accounts she managed for her campaign were designed to follow the competition not comment; however, she did have access to accounts used to oppose tweets made by the competition. These Twitter accounts with their fake personas responded to challenges made to her candidate's recent statements.

Miller also saw these "fake" accounts being created by the opposing party. As Miller said, "We identified these accounts from the other side by researching the name used to see if they were even a registered voter in the state. I'm sure the other party did the same because not all tweets were responded to."

The misleading media advisories she created were brief announcements about upcoming events, appearances or speaking engagements. Sometimes she produced multiple versions. Some had the correct event information, but some were misleading about the time and place of the event, and those went to individuals from the opposing party who might attend.

Miller believed she was at a crossroads: Should she support her party and her employer or follow her sense of ethics. The two paths were consistently obscured by her learning curve of the political area and her own moral compass.

"This situation was tough for me. I fully supported the candidate and the overall morale of the team and campaign, which made it difficult to question anything that my moral compass flagged as potentially unethical," Miller explained. "I often ignored the red flags or disregarded them simply because I saw the 'other side' doing the same things."

Political experts state that “dishonest campaigns” are commonplace with “little distinction between fact and fiction.”¹ Scholars such as Dulio, Medvic and Nelson² suggest that “campaign ethics is an oxymoron” as practices become increasingly questionable with each new political campaign. Political ethics and ethical expectations are often defined based on organizational codes of ethics. As Medvic states, these professional codes create moral obligations or ethical expectations for individuals entering into roles as agents in order to advance their own interests or those of their clients.³

“The situation regarding social media was somehow easier to disregard,” Miller said. “I found myself more conflicted with situations that required me to interact with people. When I was sent to provide supporters with signs of opposition, I felt that I was unnaturally interrupting individuals’ rights to support their candidate of choice.” In these situations, Miller believed she had to put herself in the shoes of individuals wanting to represent their candidate—just as she wanted to represent hers.

However, she explained: “In addition to being completely annoyed that protesters were placed at an event, I worked hard to organize for the candidate I was supporting; I would feel that my rights to support my candidate of choice were being violated.” Miller believed strongly in individuals’ rights of free speech and their right to have a say in the political process.

“Although our choice in candidate differed, we shared a longing to support our candidate uninterrupted,” she said. Efforts that interfered with this part of the political process made Miller stop and think a bit more

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1. C. Jaffe-Pickett, “Ethical Issues for Political Candidates,” Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/focusareas/government_ethics/roundtable/elections.html.
 2. D. A. Dulio, S. K. Medvic, and C. J. Nelson, *Shades of Gray: Perspectives on Campaign Ethics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2002).
 3. D. E. Miller and S. K. Medvic, “Civic Responsibility or Self-Interest? In *Shades of Gray: Perspectives on Campaign Ethics*, eds. D. A. Dulio, S. K. Medvic, and C. J. Nelson (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, 2002) 18–38.

about what she was being asked to do. “I didn’t think it was right,” she said. “I didn’t think it was necessary.”

THE RESPONSE STICKING TO “MY MORAL COMPASS”

When faced with these situations, Miller said she had to “stick to my moral compass.” As a sophomore, Miller had not yet taken her university’s communications law and ethics course or many of the courses specializing in her major. She had focused on ethics more minimally in her curriculum to that point. As such, she relied more heavily on her own values,⁴ but she was somewhat familiar with codes of ethics such as those of the Public Relations Society of America.⁵

“Honestly, my own moral compass did a lot of the guiding in this situation; however, I was consistently forced to balance advocacy with honesty,” Miller said. “I was extremely loyal to the candidate, campaign and my team and sometimes felt that questioning the ethics of the situation didn’t make me a ‘team player.’”

Although she hadn’t taken a law and/or ethics course yet, Miller was able to identify the various factors at play and how they related to the PRSA ethics code. Miller approached her supervisor and let him know that she was uncomfortable with some of the tasks she was being asked to perform.

“My supervisor admired my taking a stand on what I was not willing to do,” she said.

Bruce Weinstein, also known as “The Ethics Guy” and a contributor to Business Week and CNN, proposes a code of ethics for politicians

4. L. Austin and Y. Jin, “Approaching Ethical Crisis Communication With Accuracy and Sensitivity: Exploring Common Ground and Gaps Between Journalism and Public Relations,” *Public Relations Journal* 9, no. 1 (2015). <http://www.prsa.org/Intelligence/PRJournal/Vol9/No1>.
5. Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), “Member Code of Ethics.” <https://www.prsa.org/aboutprsa/ethics/codeenglish>.

TOOL FOR THOUGHT: PRSA'S Code of Ethics

PRSA's code of ethics lists professional values as advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty and fairness. The professional value of advocacy states that professionals serve the public interest through acting as responsible advocates for clients or organizations. For the value of honesty, representatives should show accuracy and truthfulness while advancing interests of the party they represent. Also, for example, loyalty stresses the need to be "faithful to those we represent, while honoring our obligation to serve the public interest."¹ Lastly, fairness stresses the right to respect all opinions and to support free expression.

In this case, Miller was trying to balance advocacy for a cause in which she believed with honesty and fairness. Honesty was one of the more obvious ethical quandaries in her case; some of

the tasks Miller was asked to do were not reflecting complete accuracy and truthfulness while she tried to advance the interests of her candidate.

In her case, these decisions became even more muddled at times because she strongly believed in her candidate and that person's ability to make a difference. As such, she also believed helping this candidate get elected was serving a greater public interest. Ultimately, however, fairness came into play because she wanted to support free expression and support the rights of the opposition to share their opinions and support their candidate while having the same rights to support her candidate.

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1. Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), "Member Code of Ethics." <https://www.prsa.org/aboutprsa/ethics/codeenglish>.

rooted in honesty, responsibility, staying focused on the issues and the goal of the campaign, avoiding personal attacks, listening, keeping

promises and spending fairly, among other values.⁶ The American Association of Political Consultants has put forward a similar but more detailed code of professional ethics including the following: treating colleagues and clients with respect, respecting confidence of clients, avoiding discrimination in appealing to voters, promoting equal rights and privileges, refraining from false or misleading attacks, fully documenting criticisms of opponents, honesty in interactions with media, and appropriate use of funds.⁷

“Generally speaking, I strayed away from any tasks that made me feel like I was deceiving the public/voters,” Miller said. “I refused to distribute any messaging that was inaccurate or that I felt defamed the competition.” Miller was unwilling to spread messaging that might tarnish the reputation of the other candidate in the eyes of the voters when she was not sure if the message was based on factual information. Her experiences going through this process made Miller more cautious and more thorough in examining sources and information.

THE AFTERMATH POLITICALLY AWARE

Once Miller expressed how uneasy she was about going into these situations, she was not put in the same position again. She continued to monitor the competition’s posts via social media, as instructed, because she viewed these posts as public information and believed she was gathering information that would eventually steer strategic thinking for her candidate’s campaign.

“My supervisor was very understanding and let me know that politics was a different arena and took some time to get adjusted to,” she said. “He did his best to explain why they did these things and how much was at stake.”

6. B. Weinstein, “A Code of Ethics for Politicians,” *Anderson Cooper 360*, CNN. <http://ac360.blogs.cnn.com/2008/06/10/a-code-of-ethics-for-politicians>.

7. American Association of Political Consultants, “AAPC Code of Professional Ethics,” <http://theaapc.org/member-center/code-of-ethics>.

Although Miller did not believe the arena of politics as described by her supervisor was something she wanted to “get adjusted to,” she tried to make the best of her internship without compromising her sense of ethics.

“I learned that there is a very thin and blurred line between strategic and unethical thinking,” she said. “I concluded that because everything we dealt with was public, it wasn’t unethical. The campaign simply came up with strategic ways to access the information.”

Thinking It Through

1. In Miller’s case, her campaign was performing the same kinds of deceptive practices the other side was. What could Miller have done to follow her ethical principles but still give her candidate—a candidate she believed in and wanted to win—a fair chance?
2. In this situation, Miller felt comfortable with the fake social media accounts if they were used to monitor information that was public about candidates and not used to post information under a false identity. Are there situations in which a fake social media account could be appropriate, and, if so, what are these?
3. Although Miller was able to remove herself from personally performing acts she believed were ethically questionable, the campaign was still performing these acts while Miller was interning. Does this present an ethical dilemma, and, if so, how should it have been resolved?
4. What would Miller’s options have been if her campaign supervisor was not willing to take her off the tasks with which she felt uncomfortable? What should she have done?

What If?

In Miller’s situation, she was being asked to utilize fake social media accounts to follow accounts for the opposing candidate—accounts that shared information publicly to followers and supporters. What if Miller

had been asked to create fake social media accounts, posing as an average citizen supporting the campaign with the intention of posting positive comments about her candidate and posting negative remarks about the opposition on various comment threads and pages?

Consider the following scenario. You've been hired to work as a representative on a political campaign for a candidate running for state governor. You believe in this candidate and her mission, so you want to see her become the next governor of your state. Your responsibilities include writing online about the candidate via blogs and social media.

Recently, a statement your candidate said was taken out of context. Your campaign manager has asked you, as an official representative of the campaign, to make several fake Facebook accounts with fake pictures, job descriptions and educational backgrounds, so you can go into discussion forums and comment threads related to news stories on this controversy. Once there, you need to defend the candidate, stating the candidate had merely been taken out of context.

So, in essence, your campaign manager has asked you to falsely represent your identity in these forums to help correct public misperception about your candidate.

Would you agree to create the fake Facebook accounts and post comments about your candidate? Why or why not? What factors would make you more likely to consider it, and what factors would make you less likely to do so? If this scenario is ethically troubling for you, what could you suggest instead to your campaign manager that would still help to correct public misperception about your candidate?

Let's take this scenario a bit further. If you were asked to use these fake Facebook accounts to go onto discussion forums and comment threads to comment negatively about the opposing candidate, would you do this? Why or why not, and, if so, under what circumstances?

Go Online for More

The Arthur W. Page Society, an association of educators and senior public relations executives:

<http://www.awpagesociety.com>

Association of Government Relations Professionals code of ethics:
<http://grprofessionals.org/join/code-of-ethics/>

Association of Government Relations Professionals code of ethics:
<http://grprofessionals.org/join/code-of-ethics/>

International Association of Business Communicators code of ethics:
<http://www.iabc.com/about-us/leaders-and-staff/code-of-ethics>

Public Relations Society of America policy on reporting ethical violations:
<http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/AboutEnforcement>

Public Relations Society of America advisory on deceptive online practices:
<http://www.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/Ethics/ProfessionalStandardsAdvisories/PSA-08.pdf>

Society of Professional Journalist's, Ethics Committee Position Paper on Political Involvement:
<http://www.spj.org/ethics-papers-politics.asp>

United States Office of Government Ethics, code of ethics:
<http://www.oge.gov/Education/Education-Resources-for-Ethics-Officials/Resources/Code-of-Ethics>

Word of Mouth Marketing Association ethics code:
<http://womma.org/ethics>