Public Relations *Online*: Lasting Concepts for Changing Media

Applied Research and Evaluation

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My aim is to orient you sufficiently for you to ask for help effectively.

—Earl Babbie, introducing a text section called "Social Research in Cyberspace" (1998, p. A10)

Overview

Aside from tying the ends together in the loop of responsive, cyclical public relations, research and evaluation serve practitioners well to demonstrate what their bosses and clients are getting for their money. This chapter introduces the online offshoots of public relations research methods including surveys, experiments, interviews, focus groups, and content analyses. Usability and methods for tracking online communication also are discussed as ways of seeing that online public relations efforts are effectively interactive.

The Value in Evaluation

Some methods for determining the value (i.e., evaluating) of online communication efforts are online extensions of traditional research methods. These include surveys, experiments, interviews, focus groups, and content analyses. Other methods, particularly those that focus on types of human-computer interaction, are particularly appropriate for computer-mediated communication. Usability testing is a prime example. These are all *primary research methods* because they require that you go out and set up your own studies to collect your own information. Remember, however, that the Internet has drastically increased our access to data from research that has already been done.

When you work from data that someone else has collected and analyzed, this is *secondary research*, and in many cases, secondary research can be very informative and cost-effective. Census data, online scholarly journals, trade organization data, knowledge blogs, public opinion polls, library holdings, and even case studies of prior public relations efforts are all available online.

We talk a big game about research in public relations classes at colleges and universities. We make students do it over and over again. But why? And why is it worth covering yet again in a text on online public relations?

Lynne Sallot and Lance Porter conducted a series of studies on how U.S. public relations practitioners were using the Web and how they thought their own Web use influenced their power in their organizations (Porter & Sallot, 2005; Sallot, Porter, & Acosta-Alzura, 2004). They found that Web access was helping practitioners—even solo practitioners and those working in small organizations—to "easily conduct sophisticated evaluation," and that the Web offered "a tangible way to measure results" (Sallot et al., 2004, p. 274).

When Porter and Sallot (2005) asked more than 400 public relations people how often they used the Web for an array of 17 tasks ranging from improving pitches to managing issues, they found that the following five uses of the Web loaded onto a single factor (i.e., clumped together in the statistical results): (1) tracking press release usage, (2) doing research, (3) evaluating public relations work, (4) monitoring the competition, and (5) subscribing to customizable news alerts (p. 115). Moreover, Porter and Sallot found that those who scored higher on this research-and-evaluation factor were more likely to attribute their success in getting promoted to their Web use. The research-and-evaluation factor also was a key component of a practitioner profile that Porter and Sallot called a "super user." Super users of online media credit much of their achievement, as well as their expertise and prestige in organizations, to Web use.

Besides power and prestige, two often-cited reasons for adopting online research techniques are speed and

economy (Johnson, 1997; Springston, 2001). Surveys, for example, can be distributed online much faster than they can be mailed, and there is no extra cost for postage. Keyword searches of online articles are much easier than scanning the pages of newspapers and magazines the old-fashioned way. And getting a group of people from several different continents to discuss your latest campaign in an online forum can be a lot cheaper than buying everyone plane tickets. But every method of research available online also has some drawbacks. Let's consider the pros and cons of some specific examples of primary research in online public relations.

Surveys

Writing and design. Those little check boxes and radio buttons are so easy to make on a Web page, it's no wonder the Web is full of surveys and response forms. And commercial Web survey services have made it even easier to design surveys for online data collection and analysis. As with any research, though, design-ing a useful online survey means asking the right questions. This is largely a matter of strategy—what do you need to know from your publics to help you make informed decisions about your public relations efforts? Once you've determined your general research questions, you will need to convert those questions into rela-tively simple and understandable survey items. This is where public relations practitioners are forced to start thinking about their survey research from the perspective of the people responding rather than the people who want the answers to the questions. Are the questions easy to follow? Are there too many of them? How far do respondents have to scroll down each page of the survey, and how long will the whole survey take? What would motivate someone to spend the time and effort needed to complete the survey anyway? Writing a good online survey requires thinking through all these questions as well as the questions you're out to get answered by online publics. Yet writing and designing surveys is only part of the process of survey research.

Sampling and response rates. Finding the right people to complete surveys is a big challenge, whether you are doing your surveys online or not. One advantage of online sampling is that researchers can reach publics who otherwise would be very hard to find, at least in self-organized groups (Wright, 2005). Weather fanatics, Volkswagen drivers, auction enthusiasts, religious youth groups, poker players—you name the topic and chances are you will be able to find some group of interested people online. But just because you find them doesn't mean you have a statistically representative sample of the larger population to work with. For example, people involved in the discussions on http://www.vwworld.com all may have some interest in dis-cussing Volkswagens, but they don't necessarily represent the whole universe of Volkswagen drivers. Again, the researcher must go back to his research questions to determine whether the actual population—let's say "people who have posted a question or response on the http://www.vwworld.com Web site in the past six months"—is the group he wants to hear from. If this more narrowly defined population is indeed one of inter-est to the researcher, then he faces two more issues: How many of these people would be willing to respond to the survey (some in the group might even find a survey request to be spam-like and offensive), and how can he get in touch with them?

If e-mail addresses are available, the e-mail list might provide a sampling frame. The researcher then could send a plea to the list for people to go to a specific URL and complete a survey. Even then, however, those who choose to respond probably won't accurately represent the whole group of people with valid e-mail ad-dresses. Most probably will ignore the request. Some may reply with bogus responses. Some may respond multiple times just to be funny. Response tracking software can help with the last concern by requiring people to provide an ID number or e-mail address, but this might deter some people from responding at all.

Assuming the researcher is willing to accept some compromises in developing a suitable sampling frame for his survey, the next challenge is getting enough people to respond to make the aggregate data meaningful. By adapting ideas that have worked for paper and telephone surveys, and by trial and error, online researchers have come up with some tips for increasing response rates (Gaddis, 2001; Jensen & Bhaskaran, n.d.; Wright,

2005):

- Personalize invitations to participate
- Tell people how you found them and why you're contacting them
- Be up front about who you are and what you are trying to accomplish
- Think through the costs and benefits (to respondents as well as to you and your organization) and explain them concisely
- Respect and protect respondents' identities with clearly explained procedures for handling their personal information
- Offer incentives such as coupons or entry into prize drawings
- Offer to share the results of your study
- Let people ask you questions, and answer them promptly
- Appeal to people's interests in expressing their own opinions
- Send polite follow-up requests to those who haven't responded (but if possible, try not to bother those who have responded—response tracking software can help here)
- Don't bother those who have given any indication they don't want to participate (this includes implicit and explicit rules for online forums)
- Make your survey user friendly
- Give people a deadline, just don't make it too soon

Experiments

Survey instruments can be applied as part of experimental design. As with scientific survey research, the careful design of valid experiments requires some knowledge of statistics and research methods. But the general logic of experimental design can be applied with varying degrees of validity, ranging from casual pseudo-experiments to very scientific studies. A key concept in any experimental design is control. The more control a researcher has over the conditions she is observing, the clearer her understanding will be of which independent variables are affecting which dependent variables. That is, she can make a better cause-effect argument to show the value of her work.

By controlling the conditions that survey respondents experience, you can turn survey research into experimental research. In a very simple scenario, you could design two different Web pages, then randomly direct users who go to your organization's home page to just one of the two pages. You would ask users to review the page and complete a survey. Offering an incentive like a gift certificate or entry into a prize drawing would increase your chances of getting enough people from both conditions to fill out the survey.

The random assignment to one group or the other is so that you can realistically expect that any differences in responses between the two groups probably are not related to outside variables. If your assignment process is truly random, then Volkswagen enthusiasts, salsa fans, pinochle players, waveriders, and retirees are just as likely to end up in one group as the other. That way you don't expect one group to respond in a certain way because its members included more surfers or retired people or some other category you're not interested in measuring. If the groups are big enough (any less than 12 in each group and you will likely have some statistical problems), and the assignments are truly random, then the only real differences you would expect between groups would be caused by the differences in the Web pages they reviewed. Because you control that part, you are in a good position to observe cause-effect relationships. If the survey results show that one group trusts the organization more, found online information faster, or is more likely to make a donation, then you just might have some proof that the Web page that group reviewed is a better public relations tool for your purposes than the Web page the other group reviewed. Statistics could be applied to determine the significance of that difference.

Of course, expert experimental design means making a whole bunch of careful decisions: sampling and group assignments, question wording, design of conditions, and statistical analyses to name a few. But the payoff is being able to make a more compelling case that public relations outcomes (e.g., trust, news story interest, donations, volunteers, etc.) are caused by public relations tactics (e.g., a newly designed Web page, an on-line town hall forum, podcasting service, etc.).

Interviews and Focus Groups

Although surveys and experiments yield numbers and statistics (i.e., quantitative data), interviews and focus groups give researchers more qualitative information to work with. Qualitative methods allow participants to discuss issues in terms more true to their own experiences. In a direct interview, the researcher asks a respondent some carefully thought-out questions then lets the respondent elaborate on her answers. The researcher follows up with probes and other questions as appropriate, being careful not to lead the interviewee to unauthentic answers and discussion.

Focus groups involve a similar balance between the researcher's interests and the respondents' own thoughts and words. Focus groups are basically small-group interviews. Online interviews and focus groups can work for public relations practitioners who are looking to brainstorm ideas, tap the thinking of key publics, or evaluate new products, promotions, and campaigns (Gaddis, 2001).

Taking traditionally face-to-face techniques such as interviews and focus groups online may offer some of the same benefits as more quantitative methods, namely, speed and economy. Naturally, you will face some limitations as well. Here are some issues to consider when conducting or analyzing interviews and focus groups via e-mail, chats, and discussion forums.

Time. Perhaps the most important time-related issue in online communication is the distinction between asynchronous and real-time discussion. Real-time discussion happens faster, making it quicker in terms of collecting data. But the usefulness of those data in text-based real-time communication may be limited by the fact that people often can't type as fast as they think and talk. This is even more of a problem in group communication—by the time one person finishes typing a response to a topic, another already may have posted a question or comment taking the discussion in a whole different direction. Although the transcripts of such real-time discussions can be archived and analyzed later, the actual text may be fragmented and limited in the amount of careful thought it reveals. But online media do allow people to conduct voice- and video-based real-time conferencing, which are closer to the "real thing" of conducting face-to-face interviews or focus groups. These technologies are getting cheaper and more accessible.

Asynchronous communications have the advantage of letting people think through their responses before sending them. Of course, this takes more time for both the researcher and the respondents, but the outcomes may be worth it. One-to-one interviews can be conducted by e-mail. Online focus groups can be held in researcher-moderated forums, which could be password protected if the topics of discussion are sensitive and candid responses are a primary concern. Asynchronous communications also make it possible to collect responses across time (i.e., longitudinally). Reactions to a pilot public relations campaign, for example, might change as the campaign progresses, and a series of discussions over time can reveal those changes.

Space. Online qualitative researchers Nikihilesh Dholakia and Dong Zhang (2004) make a distinction between research spaces that are researcher defined and those that are subject defined (as well as those that are mutually defined). Researcher-defined spaces are hosted by the researcher. A special discussion forum set up on a company intranet is an example. Participants (or "interviewees" or "subjects") can then go to that online space to take part in the study. Subject-defined spaces include existing bulletin board systems, chat rooms, or blogs in which the researcher joins a discussion that already may be in progress. Although these forums might at first be attractive as ready-made places to get a study going, dropping in uninvited poses

some netiquette issues. The researcher must be especially careful not to make himself unwelcome by trying too hard to control the direction of a conversation. He also must be careful not to deceive participants regarding his identity or intents.

Anonymity. Although a researcher should not deceive interviewees and focus group participants about his own identity, he might find it worthwhile to allow respondents to remain anonymous. The idea is that people might be more forthcoming and candid if they are not worried about their identities or possible repercussions from an employer or social group. In conducting interviews with employees about management practices, for example, researchers likely will get more candid responses if employees aren't worried about their bosses' reactions to them personally.

Bias. As discussed in the section on survey research, sampling bias can be a limitation in interpreting how well information gathered from a specific group of people online represents larger populations. Because qualitative research very often is conducted with smaller groups of people selected for specific criteria, the researcher's goal usually isn't to form a sample that statistically represents some large population. So sampling bias is usually expected—maybe even built in—in focus groups and interviews. A researcher might want to talk to disgruntled bloggers specifically because they *are* disgruntled bloggers, not because they represent some larger population of global Internet users.

Interviewer bias, on the other hand, is normally a much greater concern in qualitative research. To what degree does an interviewer influence the responses of participants? In both online and face-to-face contexts, careful wording can help an interviewer avoid "leading" interviewees too much. But avoiding nonverbal cues is easier in online interviews. Nonverbal cues include the wide eyes, reassuring smiles, crossed arms, subtle nods, puzzled brows, and so forth that suggest to respondents whether they are on the "right track" with their answers. With online media, an interviewer can stick to careful wording and avoid sending extra signals (Gaddis, 2001). So an interviewee's responses may be less likely to represent a larger population, but at least those responses in qualitative studies will be more likely to represent their own thinking and feelings rather than the interviewer's thoughts and ideas.

Participation. Although walking the line between drawing meaningful ideas from participants and over-influencing their responses can be tricky, so too can be getting participants to participate at all in a group context. Even once people are on board for a focus group, they may choose to remain relatively silent, especially in groups in which some people just tend to say more than others. Gaddis (2001) suggests that online focus groups can be moderated in such a way as to level out the responses. The tendency for some individuals to drown out the contributions of others may be "lessened by the fact that each respondent answers the moderator's question simultaneously behind the 'safety' of a screen name" (Solomon, 1996, p. 10).

Another benefit of online media for participation is the convenience of getting people from all over the globe, or maybe just all over the office, to participate at times and places that are convenient to them.

Usability

Although the rapid rise of the Internet has given public relations practitioners new opportunities to show their value by offering tools for research and evaluation, at the same time, it has encouraged haste among professional communicators caught up in "an unbridled rush" to make a presence online (Hallahan, 2001, p. 223). Usability research offers an antidote to cases of hasty-Web site syndrome, which includes symptoms such as bad link structures, confusing layout, and inadvertently hidden information. Web design consultant Jakob Nielsen (2003), whose name is more commonly associated with the concept of Web site usability than any other, defines *usability* as "a quality attribute that assesses how easy user interfaces are to use" as well as "methods for improving ease-of-use during the design process." What makes usability so important in public relations is how it gets practitioners to take into account the way publics experience mediated communication

with organizations.

Three key steps are essential to the process of usability testing: (1) getting a sample of users, (2) asking them to perform tasks that represent the things you hope others like them will be able to do, and (3) observing them as they try to do these tasks. The same sampling issues discussed previously apply here—you'll want your test users to represent a larger population, but you will also probably need to accept some compromises to work with a manageable number of people (Nielsen, 2003, recommends at least five) who are willing to participate without requiring budget-breaking bribes. The second two steps are what really separate user testing from the other research methods discussed thus far. Watching and listening to people as they work with your Web page or other online interfaces is different than having them fill out a survey or discuss the process in an interview. In examining usability, "Listening to what people say is misleading: you have to watch what they actually do" (Nielsen, 2003).

Unobtrusive Methods

The range of research options discussed so far goes from primarily quantitative methods (e.g., large-sample surveys with numerically analyzed results) to much more qualitative methods (e.g., direct observations or analyses of longer written responses in asynchronous online interviews). What all these methods have in common is that they let you hear directly from the people you are most interested in. Direct responses are usually a good thing in communication research, but as we've seen, getting direct responses sometimes means bothering people who are important to you, which usually isn't very high on your list of public relations goals. At times, it might make better sense to use less-obtrusive measures.

Server data. Practitioners can look at server log files to identify the general locations and patterns of use of people and computers that access an organization's online resources. Server log analyzers are software programs that make it easier to make sense of the data, showing the number of "click-thrus" from one page to others and information identifying the search engines and referring pages that lead visitors to your Web site.

Online clipping and tracking services. These services offer public relations people the chance to see where in the online world their names and issues are popping up. Although the numbers are important in tracking mentions, more qualitative aspects of real-time and archived online fodder perhaps are even more valuable. "We look at the blogosphere as a focus group with 15 million people going on 24/7," Rick Murray, executive vice president of Edelman public relations told the *Wall Street Journal* (as cited in Bulkeley, 2005). The *Wall Street Journal* article discussed how public relations practitioners and brand managers are using automated blog-tracking services with features such as "natural-language processing" and "unstructured data mining" to speed up a process that otherwise would take near forever—culling through all the blog content on a particular topic.

Although such fee-based, content-analyzing, blog-tracking services reached six-digit annual costs for large accounts in 2005, some services with fewer features remain very inexpensive if not free. Among the major options are Technorati, "a real-time search engine that keeps track of what is going on in the blogosphere" and the Yahoo! buzz index, which offers a "buzz score" by computing "the percentage of Yahoo! users searching for that subject on a given day, multiplied by a constant to make the number easier to read" ("About Technorati," n.d.; "Yahoo! Buzz Index Help," n.d.). Straight quantitative services such as keyword counts are generally cheaper than services that offer more sophisticated quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Content analysis. Content analysis is "a systematic reading of a body of texts, images, and symbolic matter" (Krippendorff, 2003, p. 3). Just as surveys, experiments, focus groups, and interviews all have their online offshoots, so too does content analysis. And just as the other methods range from do-it-yourself techniques to high-end, high-powered scientific analysis, content analysis varies across the spectrum from casual and barely valid to statistically sound.

Being systematic is key in getting worthwhile results that aren't overly biased. The typical process includes the following steps. First a researcher must carefully identify what she is looking for (i.e., her research question). What are bloggers saying about our new Google ads? How are other environmental groups portraying our organization online? The second step is sampling. Instead of getting a sample of people though, the researcher works to find a sample of media content; ideally, the sample will represent a larger population of content. Computer analyses also allow online researchers to look at whole populations as well as samples. For example, a researcher might be able to find every single mention of her organization's URL in a particular online forum. The next step is to think through the procedures for coding data. In analyzing media coverage of an organization or product, a very simple coding scheme might include categories of "positive," "negative," and "neutral." Getting multiple people to look at the data is important here to make sure that there is some agreement on what constitutes a "positive," "negative," or "neutral" comment. The people who do look at the data are trained as coders. The idea is to avoid bias in coding. The number of times that multiple coders look at the same data and agree on the categories yields a statistic called intercoder (or interrater) reliability. Then, once all the data have been coded, the researcher can get into the actual analysis stage. The process includes characteristics of both quantitative and qualitative research.

Social network analysis. Online social network analysis seems especially appropriate for public relations (Paine & Lark, 2005). Whereas typical units of analysis in social research are individual people and their characteristics such as demographics, knowledge, attitudes, and behavior, as well as the contents of their communication, research on publics and organizations often calls for analysis of groups and the relations in and among the group members. Major online social networks include Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook. As online researcher Caroline Haythornthwaite (n.d.) puts it, "To understand how people work together, form communities, or gain access to information, it is necessary to examine the types of interactions they engage in."

What to Evaluate

Although wikis and Web forums, pressrooms and podcasts, and e-mail and extranets can be seen as the outputs of online public relations, the real products of social research and usability tests are people's perceptions of and experiences with these communication tactics. Perceptions and experiences, and the changes in people's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that go along with them, are better thought of as *outcomes* of online public relations. Of course, relationships are essential outcomes of online public relations, and one indicator of the quality of those relationships may be the quality of the contents of online conversations. Haythornthwaite's (n.d.) approach to studying social network relations reminds us of one underlying concept that, like the process of communication itself, can be seen as both the output and the outcome of online public relations. That underlying idea—a lasting concept—is interactivity.

There's a buzzword that techies use—"Web 2.0." It refers to the interactive, dynamic, user-generated, socially networked world of wikis, MySpace, bloggers, personal syndication, and peer-to-peer resource sharing. This is a different place than the more static Web we knew in the late 1990s. Its participatory, conversational style is right in line with public relations theory and research (i.e., relational approaches, contingency theory, etc.). But making sense of the dynamic processes that characterize this fluid network of networks and finding metrics for the outcomes are some of the most important challenges for online public relations. Then we'll be on to Web 3.0—whatever that will look like!

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Hands-Online Activity

Online Research

Choose a public relations program or campaign to consider for this exercise. Here are some options

you might work with:

- public relations project that you are working on in school

- public relations campaign or program that you are working on in your job or volunteer work (or that you would like to start soon)

- hypothetical campaign to support one side of the issue that you identified in the Chapter 8 Hands-Online Activity

1. Peruse studies, reports, and data that are available online that might be relevant to your program or campaign. Some collections to get you started:

   a. Pew Internet & American Life Project—A "non-profit research center studying the social effects of the Internet on Americans" (see http://www.pewinternet.org/).

   b. *The Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*—"A web-based, peer-reviewed scholarly journal. Its focus is social science research on computer-mediated communication via the Internet, the World Wide Web, and wireless technologies" (see http://jcmc.indiana.edu/).

   c. Eurobarometer—"The website for the Public Opinion Analysis sector of the European Commission" (see http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/).

   d. Asiabarometer—"The largest ever, comparative survey in Asia, covering East, Southeast, South and Central Asia" (see http://avatoli.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~asiabarometer/).

2. Identify one specific study, report, or data set that you might use to inform your project. This is secondary research. Name and reference (or URL):

3. Discuss the specific ways that you can use this research in your project. (What does it tell you that will help you develop a strategy? Does it suggest ways that you can measure the outcomes of your work? Or does it offer data that you can use for comparison with your specific project and publics?)

4. Most secondary research is limited in how specifically it can be used in public relations programs and campaigns. This is why primary research is so important.

   a. Name one specific research question or hypothesis you might put forward *after* reviewing the secondary research.

> b. What method of primary research would you look into first to answer this question or hypothesis? Is online research an option for that method? Is it the best option? Explain your answers.

- public relations
- usability
- online interviews
- group interview
- focus groups
- online survey
- surveying