Public Relations *Online*: Lasting Concepts for Changing Media

Systems Everywhere

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Overview

Online networks are described as models illustrating the systems in which public relations people and their publics work and live. Then some basic concepts from systems theory are covered as they apply to online public relations. But understanding computer systems in public relations is only useful to the extent that we consider the social systems these technologies serve. The chapter shifts from looking at computer systems as models for public relations systems to looking at computer systems as tools for public relations people interacting with other real people inside and outside of organizations.

Systems Online

You may not be able to judge a book by its cover, but you can learn a lot about an organization by its Web site. Some site designers build their Web sites for all their major publics. Others seem to cater exclusively to certain groups such as customers or stockholders. Looking at a college or university home page, you are likely to find links to entire sections of the Web site for students, prospective students, faculty and staff, alumni, sports fans, the media, and library users among others. This makes it easy to identify the school's major publics.

An airline's home page, on the other hand, may be dominated by links for customers. Go ahead and book a flight from Moscow to Tokyo and order a window seat, but if you're an airplane food vendor, investigative reporter, or airline retiree seeking benefits information, you will have a harder time finding what you're looking for. If you are doing a report on an airline's competitive business strategy or how they have handled plane crashes, you might not find much at all. This doesn't mean the information isn't there, just that it is not accessible to everyone who stumbles on the main homepage. For example, until June 2004, American Airlines hosted two major Web sites for external publics—http://www.aa.com and http://www.AMRCorp.com. The first site is the one most of us would find via a search engine or list of travel links. The second site was designed for media and financial publics (who probably wouldn't be looking to book flights). News releases, corporate fact sheets, and financial information were available on http://www.AMRCorp.com. In 2004, http://AMRCorp.com was integrated into http://aa.com "in the interest of making public information about AMR Corporation, American Airlines, American Eagle Airlines, and other AMR entities available in the same location" ("http://AMRCorp.com," 2004). In any case, the Web site is a 24-hour-a-day seven-day-a-week public communications tool, so naturally site designers might be reluctant to post information that gives away trade secrets, personnel information, or anything that gives visitors a negative impression.

In other words, not all online media need be available to all external publics. Following September 11, 2001, American Airlines used its employee intranet to communicate sensitive information during a time of tremendous environmental and legal constraints (Downing, 2004). Intranets use the same basic technical protocols as the Internet at large, but intranets can only be accessed with permission. Internet networks such as Web sites and intranets represent the systems in which public relations people work. The Internet at large represents the ever-changing environment in which network systems operate.

What Makes a System?

Systems are sets of interrelated parts, or objects. Systems theorists look at how the objects are related to each other, how the whole system differs from the sum of its parts, and how the system interacts with its envi-

ronment. To understand what systems theory means for online public relations, we should first explore some of the key concepts.

Hierarchy. *Subsystems* are embedded in *suprasystems.* A university is a suprasystem that includes several subsystems: academic departments, student organizations, administrative offices, and so forth. The university Web page links to pages representing major subsystems. If you click on "academic departments" on a typical university Web site, you will find links to the colleges and schools that are subsystems. You will also find that the colleges are not just subsystems of the university, but that they're also suprasystems for departments such as public relations, advertising, and journalism.

Thanks mostly to Tim Berners-Lee, who is credited for inventing the World Wide Web, we don't have to start at the top of a hierarchy and work down every time we want to find information on the Internet. His invention helps computers work more like natural systems such as the human mind:

> A computer typically keeps information in rigid hierarchies and matrices, whereas the human mind has the special ability to link random bits of data. When I smell coffee, strong and stale, I may find myself again in a small room over a corner coffeehouse in Oxford. My brain makes a link, and instantly transports me there. (Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 1999, p. 3)

When computers make these seemingly random, but human-designed connections, we call it *hyperlinking.* Of course, search engines on the Web help too, but the concept of hyperlinking shows how systems are usually linked to each other in ways beside strict hierarchies.

Boundaries. Defining boundaries helps us identify the systems we wish to examine separate from the environments in which systems live. Domain names could work for this purpose. For instance, if we were examining American Airlines' Web site, we might say that any Web page that starts its URL with http://www.aa.com in the United States or any of American's other domains, such as http://www.aal.co.jp in Japan, count as *internal* to the system and anything else counts as *external.* This allows us to look at how systems communicate by accepting input from the external environment, including all suprasystems. If you go to the American Web site, fill out an online reservations request (don't forget the window seat), and hit submit, you are giving American Airlines input. After your request is processed (sometimes called *throughput)*, your electronic ticket is issued, and that's *output.* In a very basic sense, this exchange is communication between a system and its environment.

Homeostasis. Have you ever heard the saying, "The more things change, the more they stay the same?" This is the basic paradox of homeostasis. *Open systems* communicate well with their environment. They accept input and adapt to changes in the environment. They change their output as well, which affects the environment, which in turn has an effect back on the system. This cycle of adaptation is the essence of an open system. Yet all this change is a necessary part of an effort to remain stable. As Littlejohn (2002) puts it, "The open system is oriented toward life and growth," whereas *closed systems* move "toward chaos, disintegration and death" (p. 37). These outlooks for open versus closed systems represent the extremes, so we are better off thinking of systems as ranging on a continuum from relatively closed to relatively open. Homeostasis is the overall stability of more open systems, which is achieved via self-regulation and adaptability.

Cybernetics. Cybernetics, introduced by MIT mathematician Norbert Wiener (1961) in the 1940s and 1950s, is the study of communication, feedback, and control in goal-directed systems (Heylighen, 1997). *Control* and *self-regulation* are important concepts in cybernetics. Cybernetic systems exercise varying amounts of control in goal seeking by monitoring feedback.

Businesses and nonprofits that refuse to actually change themselves, simply trying to talk their way out of uncomfortable situations, operate more on the closed-system end of the spectrum. By not adapting to the environment, they set themselves up for failure. The public relations practitioner who cannot effect change in

her own organization basically operates with her hands tied. It takes much more than just putting a positive spin on an event to help an organization adapt to its environment. If the goal of the organization is to remain competitive in business, fundraising, politics, or social activism, internal change and adaptation are absolutely necessary for success.

Purposeful activity. Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968), the biologist who first proposed general systems theory, and the person from whom I borrowed the title of this chapter, emphasized the goal-directed nature of systems. We are going to continue under the assumption that good, strategic public relations are purposeful and goal-directed. With this in mind, we will shift our focus from online media as systems representing organizations to online media as tools used by real people trying to achieve goals and objectives within the context of organizations.

Putting the Systems Vocabulary to Work

While the online reservations system at an airline automatically takes orders (input) and issues tickets (output), a real human might be monitoring the whole process to maintain homeostasis (although I doubt this real human would spend much time talking to friends about "maintaining homeostasis"). If she sees a spike in the number of requests for organic meals, she might take that input and try to learn what kind of changes in the environment are causing the requests. After some research on diet trends, she might check with others at the airline who have contact with the airline's external publics—in this case, the external publics are customers.

Now suppose our airline employee learns that flight attendants are handling many onboard requests for organic meals, especially among business travelers. (This example makes the risky assumption that U.S. airlines will even serve food at all anymore by the time you read this.) Working toward a general goal of retaining or increasing the airline's market share of business travelers, she recommends to upper management that organic meals be offered to all passengers at check-in. This means that the airline must actually change the way it handles special-meal requests. After a trial run of the program and research on customer satisfaction (i.e., getting feedback), the airline's management learns that travelers like the service. They begin including mention of the service in their advertising and in the confirmation e-mails they send to customers who have just purchased tickets. They also pitch the story about their new service to health and fitness magazines, TV shows, and online forums for vegetarians. Media coverage is analyzed and more passenger feedback is then solicited to see how well the program is working, if at all. Perhaps organic meals become even more of a factor in consumer ticket purchasing decisions as a result.

This is an example of cybernetics in public relations. Someone working for an organization senses environmental pressure from both online and in-person sources. She recommends changes in the way the company does business. The organization adapts, and the changes are then communicated back into the environment. Feedback is continually monitored in an effort to achieve a longstanding goal to remain competitive in the business traveler market. Sound far-flung?

During a 2004 trend in low-carb dieting, a simple keyword search for *airline* and *low-carb meals* yielded a chart that compared major airlines in terms of their meal options and how much advanced notice was required to order special meals. (In case you're wondering, they ranged from 6 hours to 24 hours.) Airlines offering low-carb meals were featured in bold text with a friendly little airplane logo. The page's purpose?

> Trying to get the message across to national and international service providers that low-carbohydrate eating plans are an important consideration to a large part of their clientele can be difficult. From restaurants to airlines to caterers, those that serve us our meals as we go about our daily routines need to learn to offer us the same allowances that they've been serving up to the low-fat crowd for years now. As you'll see below, some airlines are already taking the hint. I want you to be aware of them because those airlines that have listened to us deserve our business and the others need

to keep hearing the message. When you fly, ask ahead of time for a low-carb meal option. Let them know this is imperative for you! ("Low-Carb Friendly," 2004)

What were the actual costs of providing low-carb meals? Would it have made sense to provide the meals with less than 24 hours notice, if at all? These would have been important management questions for public relations professionals to be involved in. It is also important to keep in mind that the low-carb crowd, as well as the "low-fat crowd," was a group that was practicing their own public relations. Just as the airline sites are public relations tools, so are sites such as http://www.lowcarbluxury.com.

A year later, a *Washington Post* story reported that the fad had faded (Pressler, 2005). One study showed that in 2004, 9.1% of Americans said they were on the low-carb tip. In 2005, that statistic was 2.2%. According to the article, many businesses that had catered to the vanishing low-carb crowd had quickly changed their course (Pressler, 2005). Such is the changing nature of marketplace environments, which require constant communication, monitoring, and adaptation for long-term success.

Systems, Online Media, and the Day-to-Day Roles of Public Relations People

Many of the terms we commonly use to identify excellence in public relations make clear sense in the context of systems theory. Let's consider the implications of online media for these common public relations role concepts.

Boundary spanning. Lots of people who work for organizations, such as ticket agents at airlines, work at the boundaries between organizations and their publics. But public relations people are uniquely positioned by their very job titles to support an interactive process of communication at these various points of contact. This is sometimes called the boundary-spanning role of public relations.

In discussing hierarchies, Koestler (1967) elicited the Roman god Janus to describe the dual faces of system boundaries. Janus, the god of gateways and doors, was depicted with two faces looking in opposite directions. Boundary spanners simultaneously face out to the environment and suprasystems and in toward the internal system and subsystems. Likewise, public relations people are often tasked with *informational boundary spanning*, which means collecting and interpreting environmental information, and *representational boundary spanning*, which means interpreting an organization's internal workings to those outside the system (Leichty & Springston, 1996).

With the boundary-spanning role in mind, and after a particularly frustrating online search for a campus parking map to send to a guest speaker at the University of Hawai'i, I had a brilliant idea. I ran down the hall to share it with fellow professor and new media design expert, Colin Macdonald. The University of Hawai'i, I explained, should design its Web site exactly like its organizational flow chart. That way the complex organization would be completely transparent to everyone. Macdonald just laughed.

The University of Hawai'i, like most organizations its size, is really complex. He asked me to imagine how hard it would be to find the parking Web page if I had to first learn the whole hierarchical structure of the flow chart that traced "Parking & Transportation Services" up to the university's board of regents.

He was right. New media should be designed with the users in mind. Representational boundary spanning means representing the organization to publics in ways *they* find useful—making complex internal workings easy to use for those outside the system.

Macdonald then pointed out that the parking page was readily available at http://www.hawaii.edu/parking/.

Pretty tricky, huh? After getting over the minor ego embarrassment, I came away from that conversation with a new appreciation for the challenge of the online boundary-spanning role.

Managers, technicians, internals, and externals. Some public relations theorists have found it useful to distinguish between *manager* and *technician* roles in describing the day-to-day function of public relations people in organizations. "Managers make policy decisions and are held accountable for public relations program outcomes," whereas "technicians carry out the low-level mechanics of generating communication products that implement policy decisions made by others" (Dozier, 1992, p. 333). It's useful to think of these concepts along a continuum, with some public relations people practicing more of a manager role and others more of a technical role. It's unlikely that many practitioners fit exclusively into one of these categories.

Several scholars have elaborated these roles further. In fact, the overlapping roles of public relations people can also include *internals* or *externals.* Internals, like managers, counsel an organization's management, make communication policy decisions and coordinate internal public relations efforts. Externals represent their organizations to external publics, advocate for the organization, conduct research, and generally play an active role as the "public face" of their organizations (Leichty & Springston, 1996; Porter & Sallot, 2003). Again, the roles of internals and externals are not mutually exclusive.

Porter, Sallot, Cameron, and Shamp (2001) surveyed public relations practitioners to see if and how they were making use of fee-based online databases such as Lexis/Nexis and Dow Jones News Retrieval as well as Web engines like Yahoo and InfoSeek. They found that those who were using these online resources were more likely to report involvement in managerial decision making. They also found that online database use "improved two-way communications between internal and external environments, thereby increasing manager role enactment in public relations" (Porter et al., 2001, p. 182).

A few years later, Porter and Sallot (2003) followed up with a national e-mail survey of U.S. public relations people (mostly Public Relations Society of America members). The survey focused on Web use. They found the following:

1. Managers use the Web more than technicians for research and evaluation activities.
2. Managers use the Web more than technicians for "productivity and efficiency," including tasks such as preparing for public relations campaigns, monitoring the news, and identifying issues.
3. Technicians scored highest in activities such as two-way communication, monitoring online communities, communicating in online communities, and using Web traffic to show public relations results.

Although going online may at times seem more like a "technical" activity, recent research shows that online media are important in the functions of all public relations people, especially as they span the boundaries between their organizations and the environment.

In short, Janus, who could do it all, would make a fine public relations person. Most public relations people serve overlapping roles. Someone charged with managing an employee listserv or intranet will very likely work to keep the internal channels (and the decisions made there) up to date with outside news. And a media relations expert who primarily manages an organization's online pressroom and news distribution efforts will be wise to stay in touch with buzz in the organization by keeping up with intranet content, employee blogs, and so forth.

Proactive and reactive strategies. As Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2000) pointed out in *Effective Public Relations*, relatively closed systems are likely to react to the environment only after external pressure has reached the point at which it can no longer be ignored. Maybe today you can ignore those organic dieters, environmental protestors, budget-conscious students, or thrifty business competitors. But what if your organization

starts losing passengers, community allies, students, or customers as a result of ignoring issues until they become crises? Your public relations options become fewer, and your work becomes more damage control than effective management of relationships between your organization and its publics. Public relations people operating in more-open systems actively monitor the environment for positive opportunities as well as potentially negative issues. This allows them to play a larger role in the organization's overall management, effecting change in the organization while the outcomes can be more about positive change (adaptation) than trying to control the chaos that characterizes crises. As we've learned from cybernetics, self-regulation is how systems manage to thrive in changing environments. But being proactive requires knowledge of what's going on in the environment.

The four-step process. A common approach to public relations work is to think of it as a four-step process: (1) research, (2) planning, (3) action and communication, and (4) evaluation. Note the cyclical, systemic nature of the process. *Research* gathers information from internal and external sources. *Planning* means deriving objectives from organizational goals. Purposive *action and communication* strategies are developed to meet these goals. And *evaluation* is used to get feedback and determine the effects of our efforts. In many cases, the evaluation of one effort is the foundation of further efforts.

Questionable Claims

It's all "Pull" Media Now!

Systems theory can be complicated. It is like trying to get a handle on the whole chicken-or-egg question. We all find it easier to process more straightforward claims, such as E. W. Brody's (2004) statement that "the supply-push age has ended and the demand-pull era has begun" (p. 8). But we might be better off looking at this statement as a fitting point of departure for discussing online media in public relations than as a declaration of fact.

Push media are media that push content to us as consumers of information. *War of the Worlds* was pushed into America's living rooms. No pay-perview back then. Today if you want to listen to the broadcast, you might go online and pull down an audio file. If you don't like what Bill O'Reilly has to say about Hillary Clinton, you can go to the Web, Internet radio, or another cable channel on your desktop computer and pull an entirely different perspective. Think of what this means for public relations. Rather than pushing information with news releases and public service announcements, public relations people have to find ways to convince people to actively seek their information. As Brody (2004) points out, cultivating loyalty and long-term relationships with publics is a big part of the job.

So is the text in your hand right now "push" or "pull?" If you're a student reading this as assigned reading, your answer might be, "It depends."

What about podcasting? This technology must be demand-pull-era media, right? But again, it depends.

You may find that getting into a good book means that you to go to a bricks-and-mortar bookstore or library and literally pull something from the shelves. On the other hand, some people use podcasts to be surprised by what turns up on news and music programs making podcasts more "push."

So whether the media are push or pull may have less to do with the era in which they were developed than with the uses people make of them and the gratifications they seek from these media. Building on the work of Cantril and Lazarsfeld and other early mass communication researchers who realized that audiences are more than just passive masses (see Chapter 1), uses-and-gratifications research became prominent in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Doing research to understand and anticipate the uses and gratifications sought by those choosing online media to communicate with an organization is an important step in effective online public relations. You'd interact differently—perhaps with different communication tools—with someone seeking to purchase an airline ticket than with someone seeking to write a report about the airline's safety record.

Systems, push, pull, loyalty, relationships, uses, and gratifications—these are lasting concepts that help us make sense of changing media. The answers are not always simple, but good theory and research help us avoid jumping to conclusions without considering context. This explains why scientists are so fond of their dependent and independent variables. Good theory helps us fill in the blank after "It depends on. …"

Why Systems Theory Matters for Online Public Relations (and Why We Need other Theories, Too)

As we learned in Chapter 1, to be useful, knowledge about online public relations must be taken in context. The most important information in this chapter is not that public relations practitioners in the 1990s used Lexis/Nexis and InfoSeek as databases. It's not the online presence of low-carb dieters. Nor is it the URL for parking maps of the University of Hawai'i. Communication technologies, online communities, and URLs change much too fast to be considered lasting concepts.

The more lasting concepts are ideas such as cybernetics, feedback, self-regulation and control, boundary spanning, and the cyclical public relations process. These concepts put the day-to-day practice of online public relations in a meaningful context.

These concepts matter because public relations practitioners must see how they are a large part of the human element that is so important in the way their employers interact with real people in the online environment. Although computer systems operate online 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and although organizations have come to depend on online systems for much of their day-to-day business, we must remember that computer systems are the technological tools of real people.

In the study of public relations—online or otherwise—we are mostly concerned with communication among these real people. I consider it poor customer relations when the computer system is blamed for my lost order, as if a person couldn't possibly be held accountable. Although Web sites, intranets, and relational databases lend themselves to systems-based design, the ones that are used for public relations purposes must work with us living, breathing people as well as they work with each other.

Systems theory alone isn't enough to make an organization's online Web presence a success in terms of public relations. Whereas systems theory helps us understand the technological tools of online public relations,

and it puts our work in and among organizations in context, we need other theories of human communication to better understand how individuals communicate online. The next few chapters cover other ways of thinking about how public relations people use online media as tools in the interactive process of identifying, building, and maintaining relationships between organizations and publics.

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Hands-Online Activity

Linking Systems

1. Find a Web page for a local nonprofit organization or for your own school. Make sure you pick a page that has plenty of links to other Web sites.

Name of Web page:_____

2. Name two different organizations that can be reached within one click of the home page (or two clicks if necessary).
   - Organization 1: _____

   - Organization 2: _____

3. Discuss:

   a. Would you say these organizations are subsystems, suprasystems, or separate systems altogether in relation to the nonprofit or school you started with?

   b. In what major ways, if any, might the linked systems have an effect on the nonprofit or school you chose?

   c. In what major ways, if any, might your organization have an effect on these other systems?

   d. In which cases, if any, do you think a public relations person should be in charge of managing the communication between the systems? Why or why not?

- public relations
- boundary spanning
- University of Hawai'i
- airlines
- intranets
- online systems
- web sites