Public Relations *Online*: Lasting Concepts for Changing Media

Server-Side Public Relations

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First we thought the PC was a calculator. Then we found out how to turn numbers into letters with ASCII—and we thought it was a typewriter. Then we discovered graphics, and we thought it was a television. With the World Wide Web, we've realized it's a brochure.

—Attributed to DouglasAdams
(Original source unknown)

Overview

Public relations models and public relations practitioner typologies are presented to illustrate how online public relations can be practiced with a primarily "server-side" view. Then more specific communication tactics such as gathering, packaging, and disseminating information are discussed. Even primarily one-way tactics can be used to support interactive relationships between organizations and publics.

Server-Side Public Relations

Think about what a computer server does. If an organization hosts a Web site, what it really offers to people who visit the Web site is a bunch of data, computer memory, and processing power. These resources are housed on the organization's servers. When you type in http://www.yahoo.com or http://www.census.gov, you get access to all sorts of data, memory (disk space), and processing power. You might customize your census inquiry by seeking the numbers of native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders in the state where your organization is recruiting new members, or you might just want to check your e-mail on your Yahoo account, but either way, your computer, referred to as a "client" in the client-server model of computing, requests help from the server.

Internal publics use server-side technology too. If you're a college student, you probably have e-mail on the college server. If you work in an office and work with large databases, chances are the data is saved (or at least backed up) on a server separate from the machine in front of you at your desk.

Just as computer networks can be seen as models of the social systems of public relations as well as tools for the practice of online public relations, client-server network architecture can be used to illustrate general approaches to online public relations. Although a server indeed "serves" information to other computers, the server holds most of the resources. The server-client relationship certainly involves two-way communication, but the greater balance of the relationship implies a more one-way process in which most information flows from the server to the desktops, laptops, media players, printers, and handheld devices of those receiving that information.

One-Way Approaches to Online Public Relations

James Grunig and Todd Hunt's (1984) models of public relations have been the target of much critical review and revision, but these models offer a useful framework for studying how public relations has been, and continues to be, practiced. Two of these models describe primarily one-way approaches, meaning that most the information flows from the organization as a source to publics as receivers in much the same way that data in a client-server connection flows from the server to clients.

Publicity and press agentry. Here, public relations people are most concerned with getting attention. Apple Computer, Inc., is famous for its publicity efforts to launch new products, dating back to 1984 when Apple introduced their Macintosh computer with a high-impact Super Bowl ad proclaiming, "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce the Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like '1984.'" In a paper on the Apple advertisement and its place in the cultural history of computers, communication professor Ted Friedman (1997) described how the ad generated "mountains of extra free publicity" and helped secure Apple's American mindshare on the concept of personal computing (not to mention soaring stock values in the years that followed).

Yet America saw plenty of technology startups with mounds of publicity flop during the dot-com boom and bust in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Investors were so caught up in the hype that they lost sight of fundamental business principles. Lots of media attention translated into increased stock sales for a while, but eventually it became apparent that media attention alone wouldn't pay dividends. When dot-com startups failed to turn profits, and when the tech bubble burst, speculative investors were disappointed to realize that they had bought into hype, not substance. In the end, many businesses that shined on cleverly designed Web sites and in 30-second Super Bowl ads had little to offer when it came to substantial exchanges of resources.

The contrast between Apple's successes with publicity and the failure of so many dot-coms illustrates how publicity can be used as an effective tactic to support an organization's larger mission, but publicity alone doesn't guarantee success.

Public information. Chris Barnett, co-founder of the media relations newsletter *Bulldog Reporter*, put it this way in 2001 following the dot-com bust:

> Bottom line: Web sites with genuine news are a tremendous informational source for the consumer. However, as high priority publicity vehicles, they've run out of gas. (p. 33)

What separates the public information model from the publicity and press agentry model is an emphasis on accuracy and utility. Genuine news and valid information are the coins of trade for those in the business of public information. Think of all the layers of information available from http://www.census.gov. Resources range from population clocks on the main U.S. Census Bureau home page that show current estimates of the total U.S. and world population numbers to sophisticated analytical tools such as customizable data maps that allow users to see geographical population patterns based on recent census data. Of course, the census site also includes a newsroom with news releases, fact sheets, and broadcast and photo resources. The U.S. Census Bureau was never able to make this much information so easily available to so many before the Internet. Any end user working with a client computer can gather and analyze a mind-boggling amount of information from the census servers. Likewise, organizations of all types—government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, nonprofits, blue-chip corporations, and home businesses—can use computer servers to provide information to publics without breaking their budgets on staffing, production, printing, and postage costs.

In fact, there is so much public information online that it can be really hard to make use of it without some careful attention to source credibility and search strategies. Both sending and receiving accurate information, then, are important skills for those practicing professional communication online.

Practitioner Typologies

Another way of looking at what public relations people do online is to consider typologies. *Typologies* are categories for classifying and analyzing concepts. In this case, the lasting concepts are the roles of public relations people. Betteke van Ruler (2004) started with the Grunig and Hunt models, then reviewed some 50 years of literature relevant to the field of "communication management" (p. 125). *Communication man-*

agement is generally used in Europe to describe what would be called public relations in the United States. She also compared theory to professional perspectives of the field and found several typologies that describe what communication managers and public relations people do.

The town crier. van Ruler's (2004) town crier makes announcements for his organization but is limited to sending information about decisions that already have been made. "Segmentation of target groups is no problem, since town criers have a list in their computers of groups or individuals they want to reach" (p. 130).

The steward.[1] This typology highlights the pampering function of public relations. The steward makes sure that an organization's doors remain open. Keep in mind that open doors do not mean open systems. Mingling and socializing are a big part of her job. When I landed my first internship, I had never had a class in public relations. I asked my roommate what he thought I'd be doing. "Probably hosting cocktail parties and stuff like that," he said. He was picturing the steward type.

In 1994, one of the first examples of broad-scale consumer public relations on the Web was the MGD Tap Room, a site hosted by Miller Genuine Draft to "tap into what's brewing on the lifestyle scene" (PRNewswire, 1994). It was worth a try, but hosting cocktail parties on a computer server is a pretty tall order.

The traffic manager. The traffic manager takes a more professional approach to communication. He focuses on strategic targeting, timing, and distribution of information. Although more sophisticated than the town crier and steward types, the traffic manager's claim to fame is still primarily one-way communication. He researches clips of stories placed in news media and sometimes measures audience recall of these stories or their key messages.

You may have received e-mails from organizations you belong to that highlight all the media "placements" the organizations have garnered. Most of these mentions can be retrieved online. Newspaper and magazine articles that run in print media generally have counterparts online, although the online version of the stories can be updated as new information emerges. Broadcast transcripts are available online, often for a small fee. And, of course, many placements are in media that are published exclusively online. The traffic manager sees the placement of each story as evidence of effectiveness. Getting the right message to the right audience at the right time is key, but without measuring more than recall, he must depend on his intuition and experience to gauge how effective his communication efforts are in terms of public response.

The conductor. The conductor harmonizes her organization's communication performance. The conductor moves her audience by leading all the instruments of communication with the same score. The score itself is written by the organization's top managers, who decide how they would like the organization to be positioned in the minds of its audiences and publics. The conductor, who also operates from the organization's upper echelons, orchestrates communication to fulfill the goals of positioning. This brings to mind the idea of integrated communication, in which all of an organization's communication functions—marketing, advertising, and public relations—work in sync, to speak in a single voice. Although the concept of integrated communication has been around for longer than the commercial uses of the Internet, it has been illustrated more vividly in recent years as online media converge with traditional communication channels, and the lines between advertising, marketing, and public relations become blurrier. For example, is an organization's Webmaster a public relations person? Or is she a marketing person? Or is she better characterized as an information manager? Or maybe even a communication manager? Regardless of title, this person is most likely concerned with the consistency of an organization's image on the Web. Furthermore, she might report to someone who makes sure that information posted on the Web site is consistent with information going out via all the organization's other channels. This is the conductor type in action.

Gathering, Packaging, Disseminating

Dot-com press agentry, online public information, database-driven town criers, virtual cocktail parties, digital traffic managers, and semiconductor symphonies; aren't these all just the traditional one-way functions of public relations taken into new media?

In many ways, yes. In his chapter entitled "Cyberspin," which focused on emerging communication technologies at the turn of the millennium, Edward Lordan (2001) suggested, "Regardless of the complexity and haphazard evolution of these technologies, they still are used primarily to gather, package and disseminate information" (p. 584).

Information gathering. Although gathering information is certainly in line with applied research conducted as part of two-way models of public relations and is an essential step in the cyclical four-step process of public relations, Lordan (2001) also suggested that computer technology is helping practitioners like the town crier target their one-way communication.

Databases in particular have been a big source for practitioner optimism about computers in public relations work. The Internet itself can be seen as one huge database. But just as a well-stocked rolodex of a few dozen personal contacts is often more useful than a million-person list of names and numbers in the white pages, an organizational database that includes data on people important to the organization will be more useful than the results of general Web queries.

For example, a university relations executive might keep a database of alumni, donors, state legislators, students, faculty, football season ticket holders, and so forth. Basic information on each person can be gathered at every opportunity to build and maintain this list. If law and policy permit, the university relations executive might start with a list of graduating seniors provided by the registrar. Then she might enter the names of donors from an alumni association database. Online season ticket order forms might provide information from the school's athletic association that can be shared with the office of university relations, and so on.

Obviously building and maintaining such a database has become much easier with the evolution of computers and server-side technology. If you've never had to hand address (or hand type) a large batch of snail-mail, be thankful. Although generating mailing lists and mailing labels with a computer is standard practice now, you can probably understand why public relations people were so optimistic about the dawning of the digital age. Although a mailing list is still a mailing list, the effect of computers on the day-to-day work of professional communicators would be hard to overstate.

What is making database use in public relations more interesting is the growing use of relational databases in managing public relations work. Suppose our university relations director has learned that a prominent state legislator is planning to attend a tailgate social at homecoming. With a relational database, she can quickly generate a list of recent graduates who have donated money in the past year, who now live in the legislator's district, and who hold season football tickets. Then the people on this list can be invited to RSVP online. When the alumni-donor-constituent football fans sign in to the RSVP page hosted on a university server, they can be greeted with a personalized message and confirmation. What follows once the RSVPs are in may begin to look more like a two-way approach to public relations, but the idea of using databases to collect information on target publics highlights how even the one-way tactics of the town crier can be eased by information-gathering technology.

Questionable Claims

The Internet Grew Faster than Any Medium in History!

In an overview of how public relations professionals were using emerging media in public relations for primarily one-way communication at the turn of the millennium, Lordan (2001) attributed the rapid adoption of new media in public relations to "unparalleled growth" in six related areas, including the amount of information available (p. 583). It would be hard to argue with Lordan that the nature of the Internet is much more information intensive than "traditional" media, but what about the growth of the Internet itself? Middleberg (2001), for example, offered public relations people some statistics that were hard to ignore, such as, "Seven people log on to the Internet for the first time every second" (p. 34). What other medium can touch that?

Kent (2001) cites FitzGerald and Spagnolia (1999) who cited an Associated Press article in the *Washington Post* that reported the following: "Internet traffic doubles every 100 days. While it took radio 38 years to establish 50 million listeners and television 13 years to attract 50 million viewers, in four years the Internet acquired 50 million users" (FitzGerald & Spagnolia, 1999, p. 12).

Hannemyr (2003) began to wonder about quotes like the following from a book called *Successful Cybermarketing in a Week:*

> Cyberfact: It took 38 years for radio to attract 50 million listeners. 13 years for television to attract 50 million viewers. In just 4 years the Internet has attracted 50 million surfers! Those figures can hardly be balked at, especially when you consider the Internet's beginnings. (Gabay, 2000)

Sound familiar? Hannemyr (2003) thought so too, so he tried to chase down the actual sources of such information. He found that these quotes often have been attributed to as many as a dozen different sources, that they often lack specifics such as times and dates, and that the data are usually referenced to an individual person (e.g., "Bill Gates once said …"). He went on to seek the best statistics available on Internet usage in the United States, such as those from the U.S. Census Bureau. Realizing that there was no one "correct" data set, he consulted several sources, and more important, put the data in context and used theory to give it some meaning.

For instance, what does it mean that the Internet had an estimated 79 million U.S. users in 1999? Based on actor-network theory and diffusion theory, Hannemyr (2003) makes a fairly compelling argument that 1989 can be used as the "base" year of the Internet as a theoretically irreversible social phenomenon. This is when commercial Internet service providers went online and the Internet was no longer confined to military, academic, and scientific communities. We could say then that the Internet as we know it was 10 years old in 1999.

For radio, Hannemyr (2003) points to 1920 as a base year, when commercial broadcast radio was born, and shows that 10 years later, in 1930, an estimated 56 million people in the United States were radio users. For television, he argues that the base is 1945, when the post-war electronics industry began to produce televisions for large consumer markets. As a budding 10-year-old in 1955, television had about 80 million viewers in the United States. Compare that now to the Internet's 79 million U.S. users on its 10th birthday as a commercial medium. Driving the point even further, Hannemyr converts the estimated number of users to percentages of the population to calculate adoption rates. When the

numbers are crunched like this, that figure of 79 million Internet users means an adoption rate of about 30%, whereas television's 80 million viewers in 1955 and radio's 56 million listeners in 1930 indicate adoption rates closer to 50%.

Information packaging. The conductor typology reminds us of the importance of information packaging in professional communication. Public relations people are often in charge of how an organization presents itself, and for this, public relations people are often criticized. Much of this criticism is aimed at "fluff," information presented to look or sound good that carries little substantive meaning. The advent of desktop publishing software and the Internet as an infinite source of graphics have made it possible for non-graphic-design people to produce their own brochures, newsletters, Web sites, and other materials that used to require the services of professional printers and graphic designers. The good news is that just about anyone with a computer can publish on behalf of his or her organization. The bad news is, well, that just about anyone with a computer can publish on behalf of his or her organization—with very little quality control.

Without clearly presented information, an organization will have a hard time communicating with its publics. Like a mumbling spokesperson or a news release with a typo in the headline, a Web page with poor graphic design and broken links usually will not win much third-party media coverage. Not only will news media seriously question the credibility of the poorly designed Web site, so will consumers, donors, investors, vendors, volunteers, and members of any other public who might come across it.

Depending on the function of your online communication efforts, you may need professional help. A small nonprofit organization may do just fine with online materials produced from the single desktop computer of a sharp public relations person. For example, a public relations person might produce a monthly newsletter that she e-mails to members, a basic Web site, online volunteer sign-up forms that are used to update a volunteer database and mailing list, and a CD-ROM or a DVD produced for potential donors that features the organization's mission and history. Each of these items will require basic skills in writing, editing, layout, and design.

On the other hand, a Fortune 500 company competing with other Fortune 500 companies will need a level of expertise in producing its online operations that far exceeds the skills of any one person. Specialists in Web design, video production, and database management among others will be needed to produce a quality online presence. This really isn't much different from pre-Internet media, in which a small organization can communicate with its local publics with mostly in-house resources, but the national and international communication efforts of large corporations require professional help from advertising agencies to produce spots suitable for global airing and publication. Making messages sound or look good is critical, but it isn't enough. Public relations people must see to it that the content of communication is meaningful and accurate.

Information dissemination. Much online public relations essentially consists of traditional tactics translated into new media. Many Web sites are basically online brochures, referred to as *brochureware.* E-mail messages with "To:," "From:," "CC:," and "Subject:" headings are online memos. Here are some other examples:

- **Online news releases.** Although these might include some features such as links to Web sites and more detailed background information, most e-mail news releases still serve the basic function of providing journalists with news about an organization. Actual news value and clear writing—what you

learn in a news-writing course—are still the primary criteria for success. Targeting the right journalists for your news is also key, as it always has been. Without printing and postage costs, it might be tempting to blast your news releases out to the widest available distribution list available, but this strategy carries the risk of backfiring by just annoying receivers who will see your news as spam. Online media relations is an important part of online public relations.

- **E-zines and newsletters.** These are the electronic versions of magazines and newsletters, although the formatting decisions you make in writing and designing these publications are different online. For example, you must take into consideration each receiver's software capabilities. Many experts still advise sending e-mail newsletters in plain-text format. This is the only way to ensure that all your readers will get the basic information without graphic mishaps. Many readers have the capability to view e-mail in HTML and richer formats, but set their e-mail preferences to show only plain text. There are ways around this for the sender, like sending newsletters as attachments (e.g., as MS Word or PDF files) or sending receivers to your Web page to see your newsletter or magazine, but these require your receivers to be more than just receivers. They must be active information seekers who choose to take your material. However, as long as you treat e-zines and newsletters as push media, in which you push the information to receivers and hope that they take it, you are basically working with traditional information dissemination tactics.
- **Public service announcements (PSAs).** If e-mail, e-zines, and online newsletters are the digital versions of public relations' favorite print tactics, online PSAs, and to some degree, video news releases (VNRs), are their counterparts for broadcast media. Rather than sending analog audio and videotapes via UPS or FedEx, public relations practitioners can digitize their audio and video materials and send them over the ether. (FTP and Web downloads directly from the organization's server usually work better than e-mail for transferring big files, but it's still often more practical to just send a tape, CD, or DVD.) In any case, the underlying purpose of PSAs remains to support the overlapping interests of your organization and its external publics: wearing seatbelts, planting trees, saying no to drugs, and the like.
- **Streaming audio and video.** Whereas PSAs and VNRs are generally delivered as recorded materials, which are viewed, replayed, edited, and often trashed at the will of station producers, journalists, and anyone else with access to the digital files, streaming audio and video are the online versions of live radio and TV signals. Listeners and viewers hear and see the signal as it is sent from your server, rather than waiting for the entire file to download before playing it or editing it. From a consumer's perspective, streaming media really aren't any newer than traditional radio and TV. These media do, however, illustrate the concept of technological *convergence* of previously separate media channels. As consumer television begins to operate more like the Internet, with receivers gaining more control of what they see and when they see it (e.g., pausing and replaying "live" TV), and as the Internet begins to look more like TV, with audio and video broadband signals being delivered at a speed and quality more on par with cable, the distinction between online and traditional is less meaningful.

Although providing targeted, useful, and aesthetically pleasing information is still very much a key function of public relations work—it is necessary in the practice of public relations—it is not sufficient for successful public relations, or even successful publicity. Although online media allow professional communicators to bypass the editorial process often required in getting information out through traditional news outlets in print or broadcast media, the catch is that credibility still has to be earned, online or not. An article in *The Wall Street Journal Online* will still carry more weight with most readers than a news release posted on a Web site of an unknown company. Publicity stunts may get attention, but that doesn't mean they will build credibility. Psychologists have defined credibility as a function of both trustworthiness and expertise. Establishing trustworthiness and expertise in the minds of those with whom you communicate takes a lot more than just getting their attention.

One-Way Tactics and Interactive Public Relations

E-mail news releases often lead to almost instant feedback from reporters, quickly becoming more an issue of interactive relationships with journalists than one-way dissemination of information (O'Keefe, 2002). Effective e-zines require both an understanding of user interests and technical capabilities. Online PSAs will sit untouched in cyberspace unless receivers see the benefit to someone besides the sender. Effective use of streaming media means understanding receivers as active people rather than clients who retrieve information from an organization's servers. Real interactive public relations online depends on how people are using online media as tools to interact with organizations, even when the organization seems to hold most the resources involved in the exchange.

Note

1. This definition of *steward* shouldn't be confused with Kathleen Kelly's (2001) concept of stewardship in fundraising, which suggests "Public relations practitioners are attentive to every aspect of the organization's behavior that might affect relations with supportive publics" (p. 284).

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Hands-Online Activity

What's New in Online Public Relations?

Suppose you work for *PRWeek* (http://www.prweek.com/), *PR Tactics* (http://www.prsa.org/_Publications/magazines/tactics.asp), or a similar public relations trade publication.

1. Find an online public relations tactic that would make for an interesting story for your readers—maybe a unique way of distributing news releases, a live video feed, a corporate blog, a PDA message delivery service, or an intranet feature that you have access to. Hint: If you use a search engine to find public relations blogs, you'll probably find some leads from public relations bloggers.

   Tactic:_____

2. Write the first paragraph or two of your story to describe what's happening and what makes it worth reading about. If you are working in a class that has an online class discussion forum, this might be a good way to open new threads for discussion.

3. Discuss: Do any of the typologies or models discussed in this chapter offer a good fit for the tactic you describe? Which comes closest? Why does or doesn't this typology/model match the tactic well?

- public relations
- newsletters
- web sites
- zines
- publicity
- databases
- e-mail