Public Relations *Online*: Lasting Concepts for Changing Media

News-Driven Relationships

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Overview

To many people, public relations is publicity, and they're right… sort of. Publicity is undeniably a very large part of public relations work—a point that will be underscored in this chapter. Public relations people must consider both push and pull strategies in engaging journalists and others in interactive, news-driven relationships. To be effective in online news operations, public relations practitioners design and manage online communications with journalistic values in mind.

Publicity in the Big Picture

The whole idea of publicity—getting news out—is sometimes seen as the primary task of public relations. Let's say a public relations practitioner e-mails a news release to a reporter who takes some of that word-processed information and pastes it into a news story, which is then published in a large-circulation traditional newspaper. If the public relations person sees his job as done at that point—if he sees publicity as an end in itself—that's server-side public relations. That's the town crier or the publicist at the top of his game. Yet even a publicity-focused promoter needs to build and maintain relationships with news media to be effective in the long run. Interactive communication is still critical.

When media relations are going well, public relations people provide journalists with useful and accurate information, and journalists report fairly and accurately on topics of interest to the public relations people and the organizations they represent. Over time, sources and reporters may develop mutually dependent relationships in which public relations people speak for their organizations and journalists report news in the public interest. Such symbiotic source-reporter relationships are easily seen as interactive relationships at the interpersonal level, regardless of whether the publicity generated serves organizations and publics as a tool for one-way communication or as an open line in an open conversation. These relationships are interactive because what journalists report often depends on what public relations people provide, and in turn, public relations people often act and communicate based on what they learn from journalists.

In any case, online media can ease the communication between public relations people and journalists as well as other news-driven publics such as bloggers.

Online Media Relations—What Needs to Be in Place?

The antecedents of news-driven relationships include factors related to the technology of online communications, the people themselves, and the cultures in which people work (Hallahan, 2003).

Technology and Content

Web sites. Web sites designed for news media are often labeled pressrooms, newsrooms, media centers, or news centers. In 2001, Coy Callison of Texas Tech University analyzed a sample of 195 Fortune 500 sites with pressroom-type Web pages (Callison, 2003). Table 6.1 shows the elements Callison (2003) found most common (those included in at least 10% of the sites). These features are listed side-by-side with recommendations made by Kent and Taylor (2003) and O'Keefe (2002) to give you a sense of what a typical pressroom might contain. Online vendors provide help with these tools and tactics (for a fee, of course). The standard

services offered by such vendors may help explain the consistencies in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Typical Contents of Online Pressrooms

Callison's (2003) Most Common in Fortune 500 Pressrooms	Kent and Taylor's (2003) Checklist for Media Relevance	O'Keefe's (2002) "What should the site contain?"
Press releases or news releases (97%)	News releases	Current news
Contact information (75%)	Contact information for public	Contact information
Executive bios or profiles (51%)	Bios of key organizational members	Staff profiles
Executive photographs (49%)	High-quality, downloadable graphics	Artwork
Company fact sheets (35%)	Fact sheets	Product and service descriptions
Annual reports—financial (34%)	Annual reports	Financial information
Company history (32%)	History of organization	Corporate history
News alert service for media (31%)		Opt-in news service
Company staff speeches or presentations (30%)	Downloadable speeches or commercials	Speeches and other transcripts
Product or company in-action photos (28%)	High-quality, downloadable graphics	Product and service descriptions
Press release search engine (26%)	Searchable archive	News release archive
Company logos for use in publication (23%)	High-quality, downloadable graphics	Artwork
Media kits (21%)	E-media kits (backgrounders)	Press kits
Corporate profile (20%)		
Quarterly reports—financial (17%)		Financial information
Material presented in archived video (17%)		Multimedia archives
Company philanthropic activity (16%)		Community activities
News published and aired about company (16%)	Links to stories about your organization	
Company perspective pieces on issues and trends (10%)	Position papers	Legislative initiatives

Press releases and news releases. As text author and senior public relations counselor Fraser Seitel (2001) put it, press releases are "the granddaddy of public relations writing vehicles" (p. 255). Given that your news-

driven publics include bona fide journalists as well as others who read and report news online, the term *news release* seems to work better online than *press release.*

Keep in mind too that many online news services provide information almost directly from the sources, blurring the line between news releases and news stories. For example, Science*Daily* (http://www.sciencedaily.com) reprints news release text from sources such as NASA, universities, and professional associations that report scientific advances. Science*Daily* includes links at the bottom of such stories to the original source.

Online news releases can be useful to disseminate information to already-interested audiences. Those who work in science communication at NASA sometimes call the people who read their stories and visit sites like Science*Daily* "science interested." But if you are relying on journalists to take your news beyond your actively topic-interested publics, you will probably want to extend your communications well beyond the effort it takes to simply post a news release on a Web site.

News releases can be distributed to journalists through paid wire services such as Business Wire (http://www.businesswire.com/), PR Newswire (http://www.prnewswire.com/), or Bacon's Information (http://www.bacons.com/). Distribution services allow you to feed your news to targeted media contacts in local, regional, national, or global news organizations.

Questionable Claims

Using Online Media to Cut Out the Middleman

On the sliding scale that goes from controlled to uncontrolled communication tactics, sending a press release to a journalist weighs heavily at the uncontrolled end.

So why bother—especially online where you can post your own news as easily as you can "release" it to the press? The most common answers are cost and credibility. Placing a news release doesn't carry the direct costs you have to pay to place advertising. If you pay for an ad, part of what you get for your money is some control of when, where, and how that ad will be presented. Of course, you'll find costs in placing news releases too (e.g., employee salaries, fees for media distribution services, the costs of charitable donations or special events that make your organization newsworthy in the first place), but publicity is generally thought of as cheaper than advertising.

And what about credibility? Common wisdom holds that if a journalist covers your story, publics will see that information as much more credible than if you deliver the news directly. Having a third party deliver a message gives it more credibility …. Or does it?

Research calling this assumption into question has yielded mixed results. Hallahan (1999), for example, looked at the findings of 11 different experiments, and found "only qualified support" for the claim that publicity is superior to advertising in terms of credibility. He attributed much of the advantage of publicity over advertising to people's predispositions about news as opposed to their predispositions about advertising.

> In a more recent analysis, Callison and Youngblood (2004) concluded that research has "established that the public does in fact attribute bias to practitioners and their messages that speak favorably of employers, which ultimately negatively affects the credibility of both" (p. 8). They then ran an experiment and found that undergraduate students who read information attributed to news media rated it as more credible than students who read the same information when it was attributed to a corporate source. As for media differences, information presented on corporate Web sites was seen as less credible than the same information delivered in basic paper formats. In this case, the research supports common wisdom. The upshot is that just because online technologies make it easy to do so, online corporate communicators shouldn't be too quick to "cut out the middleman," as Callison and Youngblood put it.

Other sources. On the other side of the news cycle, "reporters" of all levels, from a United Press International bureau chief to a high school MySpace blogger, now can get their news from a number of competing sources with much greater speed than the days before the rise of online media. Consider this advice for aspiring online journalists from *Online Journalism Review* at the University of Southern California, Annenberg School of Journalism: "Online reporters can find thousands of stories lurking within public data. Government databases on crime, school test scores, population statistics, accident reports, environmental safety and more can keep a motivated writer busy for years" ("How to Report a News Story Online," n.d.).

Trends in how this information is communicated tell us something about how online media are changing the way people manage publicity efforts in a competitive information environment. For example, iPressroom, a Los Angeles-based vendor, reported that between November 2005 and February 2006, the number of inquiries for pressroom tools and services (mostly pull media) exceeded requests for news wire distribution (push media) for the first time in the organization's history. "And beyond just making sure people can find your news on the Web, the real opportunity of online PR is using your news to introduce constituents to your online presence, by participating in relevant digital conversations," said Eric Schwartzman, the company's president ("Internet Pressrooms Displace News Distribution," 2006).

> Much as the news of the day presents an opportunity to get a company, brand or product in front of the media, that same information online presents an opportunity to attract and build a digital constituency, by providing people with information when they want it, rather than when you decide to push it over the news wire. ("Internet Pressrooms," 2006)

In fact, the "news cycle" as we once knew it has changed dramatically. Daily newspapers and nightly news broadcasts no longer set the pace for the interactive exchange between sources and reporters. Making information available immediately regardless of the time of day is now much more important. The characteristics of online media ease the process of keeping up with a perpetual news cycle that might revolve in minutes rather than hours or days.

Alerts, feeds, and RSS. Timeliness, of course, is a major news value. One way to address the issue of whether the news you post online is seen as actual news, as opposed to "archives," is to let key publics know

the minute you post it. As you establish relationships with news-driven publics online and off, you might ask them if you can include them on an e-mail list for news alerts—what O'Keefe (2002) calls an opt-in news service. Account executives at Edelman, working for Wal-Mart, have extended the opt-in idea to bloggers by getting in touch with key bloggers to see if they're interested, then "feeding them exclusive nuggets of news, suggesting topics for postings and even inviting them to visit its corporate headquarters" (Barbaro, 2006).

RSS and related syndication and subscription technologies such as podcasting come into play by helping public relations people balance their interest in getting information out with journalists' and others' interest in filtering for relevant information. Retaining the plus sides of Web pages and e-mail, RSS allows you to publish information at any time. But RSS also gives control to subscribers to only receive feeds from people and organizations from whom they want to hear. You might set up a newsroom RSS feed that only includes information that certain news-driven publics would find interesting. Reporters, bloggers, and anyone else who subscribes can then check their feeds separately from their e-mail to get summaries of new posts from your organization. These feeds can include news-release material as well as basic announcements of special events, interview opportunities, or changes in contact information.

By including recent RSS posts blog-style (reverse chronological with links, etc.) in your online pressroom, you allow people to see a sample of the type of information they would get immediately if they subscribed to the feed. So, if a journalist covering your company visits your pressroom on June 22 and learns from an archived news release that a new vice president was hired on June 1, she might just blow that off as old news. But if she sees that the story had been posted immediately as an RSS feed and that she could have had that story delivered to her own news aggregator on June 1 (or maybe even earlier), she might see the benefit in subscribing for future news tips. RSS subscriptions can be password verified, but consider carefully whether controlling access is a good idea from the perspective of those you hope will subscribe.

Newsworthy content—the good, bad, and ugly. As shown in Table 6.1, many organizations include philanthropic efforts in their online pressrooms, but considering the perspectives of news-driven publics means questioning how newsworthy such information is. Although it is common practice to tell people about all the good things your organization is doing, especially when those things are newsworthy based on their currency and positive effect, remember that struggle, conflict, and negative effects also are news values. If your Web site, RSS feeds, and the like are blatantly blind to any bad news, your online communications will be of far less news value to serious journalists. Just ignoring the bad and the ugly news probably is not the best way to convince people that you're really concerned about helping them report. And online, if you don't comment, someone else will.

During a conflict or crisis, people, especially journalists and bloggers, are going to report about your organization anyway, so you might as well work with them to make sure your side of the story gets out quickly and accurately.

As a final piece of advice for setting up online news operations, remember to make information that is treated legally and ethically as public information easily available. Again, there's no use hiding information—good or bad—that a reporter can and should access while covering your organization. Links to certain financial reports, legislative actions, and published position papers ought to be easily accessible.

The spirit of openness and transparency, of course, is as much about human attitudes and relational processes as it is about technology.

Journalists as People—Pushing, Pulling, Tugging, Dancing

The concepts of push and pull media show how understanding the role of technology in public relations means understanding how actual people use the technologies of online communication. Although we must consider bloggers, investors, consumers, donors, federal regulators, and a host of other digital constituents in news operations, the relationships between professional public relations people and professional journalists illustrate the balance between organizational interests and public interests particularly well. The pros, after all, have been at this a long time and have developed norms and procedures for professional practice that apply across media platforms.

When public relations people push an appropriate amount of information, and when journalists feel they can pull the information they need, a dance metaphor fits the source-reporter information exchange. When journalists get frustrated by the amount or quality of information coming from public relations people, or when public relations people irritate journalists by over-jockeying to manage the news, the battle for control is better described as a tug of war. Whereas public relations people value advocacy, journalists value independent balance. As stated in the Society of Professional Journalists' (1996) code of ethics, it is their job to "distinguish between advocacy and news reporting" and to "deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage."

But public relations people do have influence in the news process, and this influence does not necessarily lead to unethical favored treatment. Public relations scholars call this influence "information subsidies," meaning that public relations professionals support the work of journalists by giving them pieces of information that they value (Shin & Cameron, 2003, p. 253). Online media offer us many formats for delivering information, but the value of that information depends on the values of the journalists who receive it.

Dancing well online requires a keen respect for journalists' interest in fairness, independence, timeliness, and accuracy:

- **Respect journalists' independence and fairness** by getting your side of the story out while realizing that journalists are also inclined, if not obligated, to get other sides of the story. You might even help them find these other sources online if you can. If your nonprofit group is involved in a community issue, consider participating in an open Web forum on that issue and inviting journalists to the discussion.
- **Respect deadlines and deadline pressure.** Keep your Web site current. Send short e-mails. Keep Web content concise. Use links in e-mails and Web pages to give journalists access to more detailed information while keeping the "pitch" short. Schedule Webcasts at times that will allow journalists to meet editorial deadlines.
- **Respect accuracy.** Check your general facts—this is easier online than it has ever been before. With online access, you've got a world-class almanac, dictionary, encyclopedia, atlas, and entire library at your fingertips (Goldsborough, 2002). And for goodness sake, edit for grammar and fact errors. Sure, online writing is usually more casual than offline printing, but fact errors and sloppy grammar will still fly red flags indicating questionable professional credibility. Of course, you are expected to be the authority on the organization you represent. If you post or e-mail a mistake that gets published by a journalist and the embarrassing error ends up under her byline, no doubt you will have damaged the relationship.

Culture in Media Relations

National and geographical diversity. We must consider how international and cultural norms affect the source-reporter relationship online, where we may cross national and geographical boundaries every time we

log on. Unlike picking up the phone and making a call to a friend who works at the local TV news station, effective online media relations demands that you extend your perspective beyond your local cultural and professional norms and values.

Just as you might do research on a foreign country before traveling there, you ought to try to get an understanding of regional differences in source-reporter role expectations before extending your online media relations efforts beyond your own cyber-backyard.

For example, U.S. practitioners might find Asian news media in countries such as India, Korea, and Japan to be even more untrusting of official organizational communications than journalists in the United States. Journalists in these countries are likely to favor less-direct forms of communication such as dinners, social outings, and cocktail parties (Sriramesh, Kim, & Takasaki, 1999). Sriramesh et al. (1999) calls this the personal influence model of public relations. Van Ruler (2004) might call it the steward model as it applies in Europe. But how might such differences play out online?

According to international public relations scholars Jae-Hwa Shin and Glen Cameron (2003), "Technological change passes through the filter of the cultural context, being altered in subtle ways by cultural mores and news-gathering practices" (p. 255). Exploring the idea that Korean professionals are more likely to prefer offline social interactions, they looked at how South Korean and U.S. journalists and public relations practitioners perceived the following online source-reporter contacts: e-mail news releases, multimedia press kits, streaming clips, Web chatting, homepages, Web site pressrooms, Internet conferences, and online discussions. They found that journalists and public relations people in Korea are in closer agreement on the influence and credibility of offline contact such as phone calls, speeches, private meetings, and even golf outings than journalists and public relations people in the United States. Shin and Cameron suggested that Korean public relations professionals and journalists place a greater value on face-to-face "human factors" in source-reporter relationships than media professionals in the United States.

This is not to say that South Korean media professionals are pessimistic about the use of online technology, but it does show how U.S. public relations practitioners place different values on online contact than Korean journalists and even U.S. journalists. Shin and Cameron (2003) advise public relations people in both cultures to improve the outcomes of online international source-reporter relationships by providing resourceful, timely, accurate, and easily obtained news.

Pat Curtin and Kenn Gaither (2004) analyzed 10 English-language government Web sites in the Middle East and found that, by Western standards, online media relations (e.g., press releases) are not integral to the online international public information functions of these governments. Rather, they described what they found as "executive showcasing" more in line with Sriramesh's personal influence model, concluding that "who says something is more important than what is said" in many instances of online governmental public relations in the Middle East (Curtin & Gaither, 2004, p. 33, citing Zaharna, 1995). But this notion is not entirely foreign to Western public relations, particularly in sports and entertainment communications. Organizational culture and journalistic beats also have an influence in online source-reporter relationships.

Organizational and beat diversity. A U.S.-based computer-magazine writer will differ from an Australian sports broadcaster, who will differ from a Tanzanian government reporter in how he feels about public relations people as online sources of information. In addition to national and geographical differences, the news-gathering routines of different news organizations and different beats will come into play.

Hachigian and Hallahan (2003) surveyed computer-industry journalists in the United States to see how they perceived public relations Web sites. They found that computer-industry journalists' preferences for online public relations material were positively related to three things: their overall use of online media, their per-

ceptions of the content value of online information, and the reputation of the source. The last item—source reputation—seems right in line with Sriramesh etal.'s (1999) personal influence model, showing some commonality among news routines across cultural and international boundaries.

In broad-sampled surveys and content analyses, public relations practitioners working in science communication, corporate communications, and university relations all have been found to make regular use of the Web in their efforts to establish visibility, credibility, and support. But the results show that online public relations efforts are often weak, failing to take full advantage of the Web's ability to deliver comprehensive content, useful links, and strategically valuable data for evaluating media relations outcomes (Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2004; Duke, 2002; Silverman, 2004).

Making Yourself Useful

News media are working themselves into a frenzy about shark attacks as I write today. In the past week, one shark killed a swimmer and another seriously injured a fisherman, both in a small area of coastline in the Florida Panhandle. The story has grown from simple reporting on the details of the attacks to full-length features on sharks and shark encounters. If you were a journalist asked to produce a magazine piece or an extended feature segment on shark attacks, wouldn't you be interested in the following?

- Your readers' or viewers' risk of being bitten by an animal in New York City or injured in an accident involving home-improvement equipment relative to the risk of being attacked by a shark
- Comprehensive shark-attack data (1990 to date) and long-term trends in the past century, including data by nation, state, and even county
- Statistics on the Florida population and tourism trends as related to shark attack incidents

These are just a small sample of the data that researchers (and public relations people, no doubt) at the Florida Museum of Natural History have made available on their Web site for the "International Shark Attack File" (http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/fish/Sharks/ISAF/ISAF.htm). Do you see how they have made themselves useful as resources in the journalistic task of storytelling?

A Google news search, limited to only articles occurring in recognized news media in the past 30 days, for the exact phrase *Florida Museum of Natural History* returned 1,180 results. No wonder the very first result returned for a basic Google search on the two words *shark attack* is a link to the Florida Museum of Natural History.

At the level of online publicity, there may be no greater reward than seeing your organization's Web page as the top result returned on a Google search. But as John Guiniven (2005) at Elon University put it in his "Ask the Professor" column in *Public Relations Tactics*, trends such as the rise of blogs, open-source movements, and nontraditional reporting mean that online public relations is about much more than online publicity through traditional journalistic channels. Strategic online public relations, he predicts, will more often take place in "an uncontrolled, two-way environment" (p. 6). Concepts like peer-to-peer networking, push/pull media, and contingency interactivity remind us that even publicity is about real relationships with real people.

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Hands-Online Activity

Newsworthiness Online

Surf Business Wire (http://www.businesswire.com/) or PR Newswire (http://www.prnewswire.com/). Take the perspective of a journalist.

1. List the headlines, dates, and times for the five most recently posted stories.
    a.

    b.

    c.

    d.

    e.

2. Rank the stories in order from 1 = *most likely to get published* to 5 = *most likely to get trashed.*

3. What makes your Number 1 ranking newsworthy?

4. Go back online a few days later and use unique key words from the releases to search for any stories that were "placed" from your list. If you find any, how were they used? Were you able to predict which ones would get published?

- public relations
- journalists
- news
- online reporters
- media relations
- publicity
- release

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