Public Relations *Online*: Lasting Concepts for Changing Media

Issue-Driven Relationships

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Connecting everyone (on the Net) to everyone (on the Net) has made the world a smaller place by breaking down geographical barriers. It has not, however, enabled everyone to work with everyone else!

—TimBerners-Lee (2005)

Overview

Online, any group can organize into an "organization," and any organization might be considered a "public." Whether people can even access online media, their individual activity online if they do have access, and the power in numbers of social networks and formal alliances are all covered as antecedents to issue-driven public relations online. Common features of activist and nonprofit Web pages are discussed. The promise of the Internet to serve as a tool for relationship building and productive social discussion is discussed along with the Internet's capacity as a hotbed for malice and misinformation.

Issues and Online Organizations and Publics

This chapter looks at how online media work in an environment in which any group can organize into an "organization" and any organization might be considered a "public." Grunig and Hunt (1984) have suggested that one of the defining features of a public is a common issue of concern to all its members. Issues are socially defined and normally brought to our attention by people advocating for one side or another. That Microsoft generated more revenues than any other software company in 2005 (and 2004, and 2003 …) is not disputed—it's more of a fact than an "issue." But whether Microsoft is a good corporate citizen is often debated—that's a socially defined *issue.* People working for Microsoft, particularly in public relations-related functions, might argue that Microsoft is "doing good by doing well." Microsoft critics, such as the Project to Promote Competition and Innovation in the Digital Age (http://www.procompetition.org), make arguments that Microsoft does more harm than good in the competitive business environment. Both sides are advocating in the online marketplace of ideas. Issues most often involve disputes about fairness, security, or environmental concerns (Hallahan, 2001; Heath, 1997).

In the last chapter, we looked at big pizza businesses as organizations, and we approached activists posting to sites like http://www.papajohnsucks.com as publics. In this chapter, we might think of the people behind http://www.pizzadeliverydrivers.org or http://www.procompetition.org as organizations, with corporations like Domino's and Microsoft as their publics. Indeed, http://www.pizzadeliverydrivers.org represents an effort by pizza delivery drivers to organize into a labor union to gain power in the relationship.

Among critical scholars in public relations—those studying the balance of power in relationships between organizations and their publics—some have seen the Internet as a "potential equalizer," or a place where the virtual playing field between the relatively powerful and the relatively powerless may start to be leveled somewhat (Coombs, 1998; Heath, 1998). The word *potential* is an especially important qualifier in this context.

What Needs to Be in Place?

As with news-driven and commerce-driven relationships, issue-driven relationships among online organizations and online publics depend on the technology and content of online communication, the individual people

involved, and the networks people form online.

Technology and Content

Discussions in the previous two chapters on media relations and e-commerce were based on the assumption that most working news media and most investors and customers with discretionary income have access to Internet technologies. When it comes to communication about issues, however, we have to be a lot more careful in assuming that publics have access to online media content. The potential for the Internet to level the field between the haves and have-nots is very much dependent on the idea that everyone involved has a voice in cyberspace. Scientific and philosophical debates about the "digital divide" have underscored this point. Although some argue that Internet-related technologies are social equalizers, others argue the opposite—that people and societies with access to information technologies are advancing further as a result of these technologies, whereas those without access are falling further behind.

In any case, the first question for people considering online public relations is whether the organization and its publics even have access to and are willing to use the channels of online communication. In all likelihood, the fact that you are even reading a book on the topic of online public relations means you can access the Internet with a few taps of your fingers. Public relations people must be careful, however, not to assume that all—or even most—of the people they should communicate with are online. Many of the most important global challenges in public relations are about communication among people who do not have access to the Internet.

Many may not even have proxy voices online. For example, public relations critic Mohan J. Dutta-Bergman (2005) at Purdue University examined the political economies of the Philippines, Chile, and Nicaragua to call into question how well public relations can really serve the interests of those with no access to even the most basic media technologies. He reminds us that the interests of people living in "marginalized spaces of the world" are not necessarily served by public relations tactics of the "transnational elite" (p. 267). Although such criticism doesn't make for light reading, it highlights the bitter contrast between the promise of Internet-based international public relations as an equalizing force with the economic reality that much of the world does not participate in online marketplaces, or even marketplaces of ideas as we know them in more developed countries.

Nonetheless, many individuals—ranging from people opening free e-mail accounts at public library computer terminals to Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who have earned wealth and influence for their roles in pioneering online media—are using the Internet as a landscape for new types of negotiation. The topography of this landscape differs markedly from the even-more-limited-access, even-more-expensive world of communication via mass media such as network TV and high-circulation print media. New players step foot on this landscape every hour. Many find ways to make their voices heard louder than ever before. The tables presented later in this chapter show how issue-driven organizations have access to many of the same online tools for presenting information as the commerce-driven organizations discussed in the Technology and Content section of . In most cases, access to the Internet marketplace of ideas comes much cheaper and easier than access to the mass media marketplace of commerce.

The lack of systematic editorial controls that people might expect from traditional mass media means organizations and publics of all sorts can publish news and facts online with minimal checks on veracity. This can be especially problematic when communicators remain anonymous because reputation and credibility become less effective as controls. Whereas crooks and terrorists use easy access and anonymity to cover their tracks and elude laws, those managing legitimate marketplaces of commerce (e.g., eBay, Amazon) and marketplaces of ideas (e.g., Wikipedia, Slashdot) have pioneered new systems of balancing easy access with concerns for reliability and veracity. eBay's "feedback" system and Slashdot's "karma" are evolving forms of reputation management in these evolving forms of online communities.

Individuals—Putting the Active in Interactive Media

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, several U.S.-based authors and scholars started to look at what online media meant for public relations, issues management, and activism (e.g., Coombs, 1998; Esrock & Leichty 1998; Heath, 1998; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). In an effort to get a handle on how this initial flurry of U.S.-based inquiry into the effects of online communication might apply elsewhere, Elizabeth Dougall, Andrew Fox, and Lorelle Burton (2001) surveyed Australian public relations practitioners to learn how computer-mediated communication (CMC) was changing the way they communicated. The results of the survey showed that these practitioners generally agreed in principle with most of the main tenets of growing bodies of scholarly and professional literature on online public relations. This snapshot captured some lasting ideas about the way public relations people feel about online media that appear to generalize across borders and, so far, across the years since the study was conducted:

- Online media offer more opportunities for public relations practitioners to engage in two-way communication and broader dialogue between organizations and publics.
- The landscape of online communication is volatile. Respondents "strongly supported the contention that special interest groups wield more power in the on-line environment and agree that CMC makes it even harder to control what is being said about their organizations" (Dougall, Fox, & Burton, 2001, p. 29).
- Online media are important tools in issues management.
- Online media will continue to grow in importance for public relations, but offline communication channels are still of paramount importance.

Given that individual public relations practitioners see the importance of online media, a logical next question is how people who may or may not think of themselves as public relations practitioners get engaged in online communication between organizations and publics.

Public relations-specific research on what gets people to step up and become active members of publics has benefited from James Grunig's (1997) situational theory of publics. Basically, this theory suggests that people range from being members of latent publics to being members of active publics based on levels of problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement. People who meet the following criteria are more likely to take action, or become members of active publics: (a) high problem recognition—they see an issue as a problem and get concerned, (b) low constraint recognition—they feel like they can actually do something about the problem, and (c) high involvement—they see the problem as relevant to their own lives.

Although situational theory helps us understand the processes by which individual people change their communication behaviors, what makes it important to online public relations is how it provides a foundation for understanding the formation of networks of like-minded people who are motivated and able to take action using online media.

Active Social Networks

Getting organized to take a stand on an issue historically has been easier for people working in established organizations such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or multinational corporations such as ExxonMobil. With budgets to contract for public relations campaigns, such organizations have been executing strategic public relations for decades, if not centuries. Edward Bernays's work in 1930 to promote cigarettes to women is a classic example (Cutlip, 1994). Bernays, hired by the American Tobacco Company to promote Lucky Strikes cigarettes to women, worked behind the scenes to orchestrate a publicity stunt in which 10 of New York City's debutants marched down Fifth Avenue in an Easter parade while flaunting their "torches of freedom" (Cutlip, 1994, p. 210). Armed with psychoanalytic ideas about the social oppression of women, and

basic market demographics showing that about half (the female half) of the U.S. market for cigarettes was yet to be tapped, Bernays provided historians a classic example of the power of public relations to alter social definitions. According to Bernays, the campaign was a success in breaking down the taboo of women smoking in public. What was absent from Bernays's environment, however, were online anti-tobacco groups and bloggers working to uncover and report the connection between torches of freedom, Lucky Strikes, Edward Bernays, and the American Tobacco Company.

Fast forward to the early years of this millennium. Log on to the Web and type in a keyword search for *tobacco issue* or *environmental issue* or even *pizza delivery issue.* I just did the last one for kicks and the first result—the I'm-feeling-lucky return from Google—was an essay by economics professor Thomas J. DiLorenzo (1997) entitled *Life, Liberty, and Pizza Delivery*, in which Dominos' policy of not delivering pizzas in neighborhoods that it has deemed too dangerous for its drivers is framed as a civil rights issue for pizza-craving people in those high-crime neighborhoods.

Finding publics and organizations clashing over more traditional issues online is just as easy. For example, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER, http://www.peer.org) and the Stop ExxonMobil Alliance (http://www.stopexxonmobil.org) are at the forefront of online opposition to the public relations tactics of the EPA and ExxonMobil, respectively.

In 2005, the EPA was called to task in the *New York Times* for contracting public relations help:

> WASHINGTON, July 17—The Office of Research and Development at the Environmental Protection Agency is seeking outside public relations consultants, to be paid up to $5 million over five years, to polish its Web site, organize focus groups on how to buff the office's image and ghostwrite articles "for publication in scholarly journals and magazines." (Barringer, 2005, pp. A1, A16)

It appears PEER provided the tip for the story:

> "The idea that they would take limited science dollars and spend them on P.R. is not only ill advised, it's just plain stupid," [PEER director Jeff] Ruch said in an interview. (Barringer, 2005, pp. A1, 16)

Similarly, ExxonMobil was the focus for A-list liberal blogger Markos Moulitsas Zúniga, who posted a biting critique of ExxonMobil in his Daily Kos blog for the "funding of think tanks, religious groups, media outlets and other organizations, to spread doubt about the reality of global climate change" (2005). His source? http://StopExxonMobil.org.

Although the arteries running through both these critiques are the money trails leading to powerful institutions, the network-supported public relations tactics executed by StopExxonMobil and PEER reveal how Bernays's idea of the "engineering of consent," particularly by way of building alliances, is not the exclusive domain of blue-chip corporations and well-heeled government agencies. StopExxonMobil lists the following organizations as members of its alliance that are "dedicated to committing ExxonMobil to socially responsible behavior":

- Alliance for Democracy: http://www.thealliancefordemocracy.org
- Amnesty International USA: http://www.amnesty-usa.org
- Free the Planet: http://www.freetheplanet.org
- Greenpeace: http://www.greenpeaceusa.org, http://www.exxonsecrets.org, http://www.dont-buyexxonmobil.org
- Institute for Policy Studies: http://www.seen.org
- International Labor Rights Fund: http://www.laborrights.org

- Pacific Environment: http://www.pacificenvironment.org
- PressurePoint: http://www.pressurepoint.org
- Refinery Reform Campaign: http://www.refineryreform.org
- Students for a Free Tibet: http://www.studentsforafreetibet.org
- Uproar: http://www.uproarnow.org
- U.S. Public Interest Research Group: http://www.uspirg.org

Ironically, many of the very tactics criticized by organizations such as PEER and StopExxonMobil are the ones these organizations are applying themselves. By banding together like-minded people and like-minded organizations, they're fighting fire with fire, and online media are fueling the flames.

Shifting from Active Publics to Active Organizations

Juliet Roper (2002) at the University of Waikato in New Zealand analyzed 150 Web sites that she selected based on their global scope and their activist nature. She found that activist organizations were using the Internet as a tool to gain power in public policy discussions, with publics shifting their roles from being "consumers" to being "citizens." According to Roper, as consumers, people are influenced by corporations directly. Corporations also influence people indirectly when corporations affect public policy. "The dominant corporate view here, supported by governments, is that individuals are dependent upon business for products, jobs, and welfare" (Roper, 2002, p. 115). When people take the role of citizens, however, the pattern of influence can get turned on its head. Publics "reassert their political primacy and governments, in turn, reassert legislative power" (Roper, 2002, p. 122).

So how exactly do active publics use the Internet to pull off such a shift? Roper found that organization and information are critical.

Organization. This one word really sums up a shift in perspectives from a public as a target for some other organization to a public as an organized entity in itself—an organization. Networking, strategy coordination, and training are all part of the process of organizing online. Networking brings groups together—sometimes groups of groups—to build a large alliance of people ready to take action. That action often comes in the form of mass e-mail campaigns or other coordinated tactics to demonstrate the magnitude of concern over an issue to legislators or other decision makers. The major result of such organizing and alliance building is that organizations construct the "capability of generating mass responses to events and policies that might otherwise have passed unnoticed" (Roper, 2002, p. 119).

Information. Information is power in this context. Research conducted and gathered by organizational members helps active publics gain power in policy discussions. For example, GE Free, a New Zealand alliance opposing genetic engineering, used its Web site to provide unmediated information to constituents. The information included international opinion surveys, scientific reports, and information about field trials of genetically engineered crops in other parts of the world. The campaign was "highly successful in raising public awareness of the issues involved and gaining public support for a GE free stance" (Henderson, 2005, p. 129). Organizations also commonly post campaign development materials (media lists, sample news releases, fact sheets, tutorials on how to conduct research, etc.) online for their members to use.

Kang and Norton (2004) explored how a sample of 100 large nonprofit organizations were using the Web. The authors used a 2001 list of the largest U.S. nonprofit organizations to draw the sample. Typical content for these pages included mission statements, press releases, policy issue statements, and community service information (see Tables 8.1 and 8.2). Many nonprofits also included information about social responsibility

and speeches from the organizations' top leaders.

Table 8.1 Common Items Tallied by Both Kang and Norton (2004) and Taylor et al. (2001)

Kang and Norton's (2004) Characteristics of Largest U.S. Nonprofit Organizations' Web Sites	*Taylor et al.'s (2001) Occurrence of Dialogic Features on 100 Activist Web Sites*
Details on how to become affiliated (98%)	Details on how to become affiliated (91%)
Logos and icons (95%)	Prominent logo (95%)
Mission statements (94%)	Statement of mission or philosophy (100%)
Details on how to donate money (91%)	Details on how to contribute money (82%)
Press releases (88%)	Press releases (60%)
Policy issue statements (81%)	Positions on policy issues (99%)
Updated information request function (68%)	Things that can be requested by e-mail or mail (96%)
Calendars of events (58%)	Calendars of events (76%)
Downloadable files or documents (48%)	Downloadable information (33%)
Speeches (28%)	Speeches (22%)
Downloadable graphic images (26%)	Downloadable graphics (18%)
Announcements of regularly scheduled news forums (10%)	Regularly scheduled news forums (21%)
Links to other nonprofit sites (8%)	Links to other Web sites (73%)
Online polls (3%)	Opportunity to vote on issues (44%)
Online surveys (2%)	Survey to voice opinion on issues (46%)
Statement inviting users to return (2%)	Statement inviting users to return (2%)

Table 8.2 Content Analysis Items Reported by Kang and Norton (2004) but Not Taylor et al. (2001)

Kang and Norton's (2004) Characteristics of Largest U.S. Nonprofit Organizations' Web Sites
Contact information (100%)
Organizational history (96%)
Disclaimer or privacy policy (91%)
E-mail addresses (85%)
Size information about the organization (82%)
Community service information (81%)
Information about social responsibility (79%)
Annual reports (74%)
Links to local branches (59%)

Form to allow users to join organization online (57%)
Feedback forms (45%)
Discussion forums (8%)
Chat rooms (4%)

Relational Goals and Outcomes

When it came to including features that Kang and Norton (2004) called "interactive," fewer Web sites had the goods. Less than 10% included discussion forums, chat rooms, online polls, or online surveys. Of course, the top 100 nonprofits in the United States make for a far different sample than organizations normally classified as "activists." Taylor et al. (2001) sampled 100 Web sites hosted by organizations that they defined as activist. Tables 8.1, 8.2, and 8.3 highlight some of the similarities and differences in the ways these two different categories of organizations were using their Web sites shortly after the turn of the millennium.

Table 8.3 Content Analysis Items Reported by Taylor et al. (2001) but Not Kang and Norton (2004)

Taylor et al.'s (2001) Occurrence of Dialogic Features on 100 Activist Web Sites
Identification of member base (81%)
Posting news stories in last 30 days (54%)
Links to political leaders (39%)
Frequently asked questions or question and answers (28%)

The relative lack of large U.S. nonprofits using the Web to promote alliances with other nonprofits suggests a different type of online positioning for these organizations. Only 8% of the big U.S. nonprofits linked to other similar organizations. Their goals for relationship building might be different than smaller but more global alliances that rely more on each other to gain power in numbers.

Relationships in alliances. Of the relational strategies discussed in Chapter 5, social networks and task sharing stand out as especially important strategies for building trust, satisfaction, and commitment, which are key relational outcomes in organizations and in alliances. For the nonprofits, we might infer the importance of these factors from Kang and Norton's (2004) findings on the prominence of contact information, details on how to become affiliated with the organization, information on how to donate money, information request functions, online forms allowing people to join the organization, and links to local branches (all included on more than half the nonprofit Web pages).

For the broader population of activist organizations discussed by Henderson (2005) and Taylor et al. (2001), the prominence of cross-linking among activist organizations, ways to contact political leaders, and member-base rosters offer evidence of social networks and task sharing as common relational strategies. What brings these diverse alliances together is a common stance on issues.

Relationships among adversarial organizations. Although building and maintaining an organization is a major goal of activists, their primary goal is to "rectify the conditions" that they have agreed among themselves are problematic (Smith & Ferguson, 2001, p. 294). Engaging adversaries in policy discussions is often paramount to achieving such goals. Issue-driven relationships include relationships formed from opposing sides as well as the relationships or alliances formed based on a common stance. Control mutuality is an especially important outcome to organizations that contest an issue initially as underdogs. As discussed in Chapter 5, control mutuality is "the degree to which the parties in a relationship are satisfied with the amount of control

they have over a relationship" (Grunig, 2002, p. 2).

You will notice a sharp contrast between strategies designed to open conversations and strategies designed to shut them down. When opposing parties and their audiences see an issue as a legitimate topic of debate, heated discussion may ensue. For that debate to have any real meaning and to have any chance of turning into negotiation, both sides must acknowledge some balance of control in the conversation—control mutuality. Consider this September 6, 2005, entry on http://www.pizzadeliverydrivers.org/, the now defunct Web site for the Association of Pizza Delivery Drivers (APDD, 2005):

> IPHFA [International Pizza Hut Franchise Association] & PHI [Pizza Hut International] now taking APDD seriously!
>
> After months of denying that APDD is a concern to them, and almost denying knowledge of APDD's existence, Pizza Hut International has made it's *[sic]* counsel (lawyer) for litigation and Human Resources, Erika Burkhardt, available to help franchisees. PHI encourages it's *[sic]* franchisees to be watchful for union activity by making sure operators are trained to recognize and respond to union activity.

The response to union activity turned out to include "union avoidance training," making it clear that the drivers still had a way to go in realizing mutual control in the relationship with Pizza Hut.

In more extreme cases of conflict, organizations may deem their detractors to be no more than online vandals. In these cases, public relations people are advised to work forcefully to chill the gears of the rumor mill. Take, for example, the advice of Parry Aftab (2005) to readers of the *Public Relations Strategist.* Aftab specializes in privacy cases in which organizations feel they have been flat-out attacked online, as opposed to engaged in meaningful dialogue. Far from shared control or relationship building as a response, Aftab calls for "cyberwarfare" in dealing with "cyberattacks":

> Individuals (or competitor entities) may send hateful anonymous e-mails; launch IM, e-mail, text messaging, denial-of-service and spam campaign attacks; destroy or deface Web sites; or create Web sites that threaten companies and management. (p. 28).

In preparing for such warfare, Aftab (2005) recommends implementing policies to protect confidential information and to discourage rumors and harassment of company officials. She also recommends using electronic monitoring software and trained supervisors to review employee communications for policy violations. Penalties must be swift and strict, and a cyberbashing SWAT-team should be called in for follow-up.

Would you want to work at an organization with these policies in place? What do you think the relational outcomes of such strategies would be? Control mutuality? Trust? Satisfaction? Commitment? I doubt it—at least not without some serious discussion of the reasoning behind such measures. There is a thin line between freezing malicious misinformation and chilling productive dialogue. As she points out, "This is where good PR professionals can show their worth" (Aftab, 2005, p. 30).

Making Peace

Just as the Internet can be seen as a place for wars and battles, it also can be seen as a gathering place. Although it would be naïve to suggest that the Internet is some great elixir to social conflict, public relations people should be as ready to recognize its potential as an equalizer as they are to see it as a frightening place of cybercrime and cyberwarfare.

In 1988, Dean Kruckeberg and Kenneth Starck published a provoking book advocating the role of public rela-

tions in restoring and maintaining a sense of community in societies that they observed as increasingly fragmented. Although they recognized that more personalized communication technology was in some ways part of the problems of social fragmentation and anomie, they also pointed to the capacity of the same technologies to bring communities together. More than a decade later, Starck and Kruckeberg (2001) followed up on their work, taking into consideration trends in globalization and the rapid advance of online technologies in the 1990s. They remained optimistic: "Community building can be proactively encouraged and nurtured by corporations with the guidance and primary leadership of these organizations' public relations practitioners" (p. 59).

The potential for online public relations in issue-driven relationships lies with the practitioners. Although it will be necessary at times for practitioners to take defensive measures in protecting an organization's reputation (Aftab, 2005) and its digital assets (Hallahan, 2004), public relations people must work to balance protection and privacy with openness and transparency in online communication.

Professional advice and scholarship on relationship building in public relations gives us the nuts and bolts needed work toward such high ideals. The next chapter looks at how relational maintenance strategies like openness, positivity, task sharing, and networking can be translated into tips for building and maintaining online relationships.

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Hands-Online Activity

Truth or Consequences

Find online news coverage of an issue that interests you. The story you find should meet three criteria: (1) be published or posted by a news organization you consider to be reputable, (2) be presented as a news story and not as an editorial or opinion piece, and (3) cite at least two named organizations that can be found online to discuss opposing sides of the issue.

1. Complete the following.
    a. Brief definition of the issue:

    b. Name of news organization:

       _____

    c. Name of organization/public on one side of issue:

       _____

d. Name of organization/public on a different side of the same is-
sue:

_____

2. What are the controls on veracity of information for the online information provided by each of the three sources of information? That is, what are the consequences of not being truthful that keep these sources honest? (You might have to work on assumptions here.)

a. News organization?

b. Organization/Public 1?

c. Organization/Public 2?

3. Choose one of the organizations/publics. If "rectifying the conditions" of the issue is a goal for that organization, and if that organization hired you to consult them on their online public relations efforts related to the issue, what would your main ad-vice be?

4. In what ways can online media help the organization/public that you chose to side with to achieve its issue-based goals without the news media? Name at least two specific tactics.

- public relations
- Microsoft
- nonprofits
- web sites
- community information services
- alliances
- activism