The Impact of Public Relations on News Coverage

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Abstract: With the increasing scope of news from varied sectors especially business and politics, since the last 15 years, the role of Public Relations (PR) practitioners has also augmented as a communication strategist and facilitator of information. Both the journalists and PR practitioners share a symbiotic relationship and help in disseminating information to their target audience. This theoretical paper identifies various PR strategies like news framing and paid PR which play an important role in influencing news coverage.

Keywords: Public Relations; journalists; media influencers

Introduction

Does a Public Relations campaign hold the power to affect the news content? Are there other factors besides PR that may influence news stories? Well ethically, the answer should be no, but factually the answer is yes. The field of journalism and Public Relations (PR) is centuries old and has been practiced across cultures. The journalists and PR professionals share a synergetic relationship making each one of them dependent on each other. From writing the traditional form of press releases to creating speeches and quotes for the spokespersons, to managing corporate pseudo-events, PR practitioners have become the communication facilitators for the media. While the practice of PR is considered to be inclusive of persuasion, information, communication management, etc; journalism is about ethically reporting the piece of news. Though it is more in theory than in practice and the business of Public Relations continues to evolve with time.

Role of PR in framing news

PR practitioners have been known as image-makers as well as spin doctors of news. Studies have identified the importance of sources in shaping the content of the news and PR practitioners play an important role as one of the sources. PR has been associated with structured messaging and framing is an extension to this. Thurlow (2009) in a study using in-depth semi-structured interviews asked PR practitioners to examine their own perception of their professional identity along with the negative societal perception of the profession. The results indicate that PR practitioners are trying to construct a good image of themselves and their profession. However, they mentioned that their commitment lied with the organisations they represented and if their practices were unethical, it was a challenge for them too. Hence, the study indicated that the perception of PR being a spin doctor can actually be turned-around once the practitioners demonstrate ethical practice. However, alignment between the organisation’s messages and the communication role of PR practitioners may create a situation of conflict. The study identified that it is organisation that promote and allow the concept of spin of information.

In a study, De Vreese and Elenbaas (2009) found that in politics specifically, journalists tend to apply a strategic frame when covering press and publicity processes. Even the initial pitch that a PR shares with the media, helps in framing the agenda of the media house (Athal, 2014). In fact the mis-interpretation or inaccuracy in the news
stories can be a result of an inaccurate frame.

Hallahan (1999) argued that PR practitioners play a central role in constructing frames to influence media and public perceptions. Organisations should hence create their own frames in order to establish effective relationship with their respective stakeholders. Calabrese (2016) identified that a media campaign without a frame will not be successful. For PR practitioners, framing of messages is intended for the target audience of the organisation they represent. The media relations experts, direct the framed message in the form of a press release, statement to the journalist.

As per Holody (2006), the press releases sent out by PR practitioners place the most important information in the beginning and the least one near the end. Information shared in the form of statements or press releases from the PR department challenge the objectivity of journalism and the audience eventually is not able to understand the message as the majority of the news will be around the initial sender of information (Romy, 1994). Many studies have also highlighted that for many years that information in American newspapers was driven by PR.

The ultimate objective of two professionals like PR and journalism is to get a news published whether it is on a particular corporate, politician, non-profit organisation or an individual and so on. And some of the main factors affecting news coverage lie in its intrinsic process which is presented under the following four headings: simplification, identification, sensationalism and the news barrier. It is an editor of the publication who decides if the news is worthy or is quality news. Sometimes a good rapport with the journalists also helps in getting a mention or two in the paper.

Grunig, J, et al (1992) identified four models of PR which focus on the role of PR representatives in disseminating information to the media. These models are as follows:

- **Press agentry model** includes a one-way communication format for disseminating information from the sender to the receiver. It does not include a feedback mechanism, for instance a PR representatives in the 19th century shared one-way information on the organisation’s story, USP, products and so on with their target audiences. This practice was more like imposing the information on the user and in the absence of a feedback mechanism, the information could be incomplete as well as distorted. This has been especially used for reputation management as it also involves manipulation with positive information only. This practice is commonly used by PR practitioners who represent high profile clients or organisations to influence their respective publics with media coverage (Beke, 2014), somewhat like exclusive celebrity stories, fake rallies and photographs circulated in a magazine, TV or online who attract unwanted media attention – good or bad (Powell, 2013) rather than any understanding on the reason behind the news coverage. Even few educational and non-profit organisations also practiced this form as it would not just include reaching out to the stakeholders through press releases, but also through other communication tools like a website (Butterick, 2011). It is hence unquestionable to say that this model is being practiced till date, not just because of the corruption it has brought in the system with freebies and gifts but it is also because of the curiosity of the target audience on the nature of event or the individual or organisation; however, it is difficult to comment on its ethical aspect.

- **Public information model** emphasises on circulating relevant and meaningful information related to an individual or an organisation through the various publics of the same. It is contrary to the press agentry model which only focused on unwanted media coverage which was not of much relevance.
except being entertaining for the target audience. The communication agents following this model need to have a flair for writing and should be good at compiling their thoughts in a strategic manner and communicating either through a press release, video release, newsletters, brochures, magazines, online blogs and so on. Such PR tools usually help to convey the relevance of a product or service or development by an organisation to its target audience. According to Theaker (2004), this model does not aim at persuasion and it only focuses on sharing accurate information. Morris (2014) highlighted that Ivy Lee recommended his clients to be truthful with their approach even in crisis situations through a press statement or press release. Lee was both appreciated by clients for good and honest media coverage, but was also criticized by many. This model can be correlated with the current scenario but in an exaggerated form, that is PR representatives are highly criticized by journalists for spamming their inboxes with the information in the form of a press release which may not always be news-worthy.

- **Two-way asymmetrical model** involves the two-way communication between the sender and receiver. According to Theaker (2004), the model is different from the earlier two as it introduces the concept of feedback mechanism along with persuasion and manipulation, in an unbalanced nature. In this the aim is to understand the attitude and requirements of the target audience and accordingly implement the communication PR campaign. It however does not impact the working of the organisation.

- **Two-way symmetrical model** amongst the other three PR models, is the most ideal and relevant approach. This model adopts a two-way approach of the feedback mechanism to enhance organisation’s reputation and position the brand among the target audience. The use of social media by organisations in the current scenario is the perfect example to explain this model. Organisations use social media portals to enhance their brand’s visibility and reputation using the feedback mechanism. Even in critical situations when a customer uses the medium to complain about a particular product or service, the brand can respond with their side of the story. Cameron (2008) pointed out the example of Starbucks which uses this model to make its brand and products better.

- Buterick (2011) highlighted that it is not necessary that a PR practitioner will only use a particular PR model while devising the communication strategies. It completely depends on the environment in which they are being implemented. Hence, according to Murphy (1991), PR practitioners actually follow a mixed motive model.

- **Excellence model** includes features of both symmetrical and asymmetrical model that is a PR strategy will either focus on altering an organisation’s behaviour or of the publics. With this model, the difference between the mixed motive and two-way symmetrical model disappears (Heath 2001).

**Use of Paid PR route to influence media**

Even though the concept of new age media and digital PR has become extremely prevalent across the globe, India is still growing on its traditional media. Similarly, the demand of the media hungry organizations, sectors, brands is not just fulfilled by the regular traditional PR approach and tools. Hence, there have been some noticeable instances which have almost blurred the lines between PR and marketing and have increasingly
questioned the credibility of the former. This falls under the broad category of ‘Paid PR’ which includes sponsored content or advertorials, exchange of gifts or exchange of bribes and private treaties. In 2009 assembly elections across Maharashtra, the real political issues took a back-seat and the positive coverage basis paid route became the flavor of the season. (Sainath, P. 2011).

The in-sufficient subscription revenues have given rise to the trend of paid or sponsored content. Advertorials or sponsored content are nothing but paid editorials which are gaining a lot of attention and corporates are showing preference towards it- simply because it ensures a one-sided content and details information about their products, services and top management. In fact, instead of the word ‘advertisement’, other terms like media marketing initiative, special promotional feature, etc. are being used in the case of advertorials. However, some advertorials mislead the readers as their identities as advertisements are not fully or obviously disclosed. This is in a way against the individual’s right to information (Thakurta, P.G., 2012).

Another grey area which has sparked a lot of attention of the organizations is the private treaties scheme which is an exchange of favorable media coverage in return of stakes in the firm. This is why there exists an obvious conflict of interest when the media house who has a private treaty with an organization starts to report on them in positive light.

Exchange of bribes or expensive gifts as part of the press kits during pseudo-events have also crept in as a regular practice now. These have become a common strategic way to influence the media and raise their expectations. PR professionals especially strategize on the innovative and creative gifts they can share with the media during brand launch. This unethical practice was initially noticed by journalists and in the 1980s for a brief time two publications from the Express Group as part of their editorial policy started mentioning at the end of news report what was given to select journalists who attended an organization’s press conference- irrespective of the size, shape and quantity of the gift (Thakurta, P.G. 2012). Another practice to ensure positive coverage are the sponsored trips or media junkets or a paid- for- visit by the organizations for the journalists (Haq, R. 2015).

Despite of all the above techniques, the final story which usually gets published is different from that expected by a PR personnel. This is because a journalist connects with both direct as well as indirect sources of information for his or her story. Direct source can be through PR representatives of the organization who share a particular news and indirect source can be people unrelated to the organization (Shoemaker, P.J and Reese, S.D, 1996) and keeps the story balanced. Beyond these the organization’s internal editorial, marketing and promotion policy can play a role in affecting the journalist’s decision to write on a particular organization. This paper attempts to analyze some of these factors by asking journalists on what according to them affects news story and their perception of the PR industry.

**Conclusion**

The competition in brands, markets, sectors, and so on, have enlarged the role of PR practitioners in the current scenario. The paper identifies the growing demand of PR practices and multiple strategies adopted by organisations globally to get free editorial news coverage, which in a way has both pros and cons. In a positive way, the PR practitioners understand the concept of newsworthiness and accordingly frame the news or information for the media. On the contrary, the greediness for news coverage or stories have led organisations to follow unethical practices like the paid PR route which include freebies or gifts, private equity, etc which in a way are blurring the lines between PR and marketing.

**References**


