

Public Relations and Circumvention of the Press

By Kirk Hallahan

Journalism and public relations are inextricably wedded to one another. And, like many marriage partners, news people and publicists enjoy a love-hate relationship.

The press chastises PR for cluttering public communication channels, for failing to tell the whole truth, for incessantly putting a positive spin on stories, for failing to be responsive to inquiries, and for blocking access to newsmakers. Now, we can add yet another item to this litany of domestic squabbles: the prospect of infidelity.

A clear trend in public relations today involves sources of all kinds successfully bypassing the traditional press to reach target publics. This *circumvention of the press* by information sponsors parallels the shift in expenditures by advertisers from traditional media to alternative forms of promotion.

The use of alternative media by PR practitioners is not new. Yet, new technologies are being introduced at a dizzying pace.

Satellite feeds, customized and localized 800-numbers and telemarketing capabilities, computer bulletin boards, advanced mail list merge/purge capabilities, CD ROM publishing, simultaneous multi-location fax transmission, videobrochures, interactive video, electronic couponing, and home shopping networks didn't exist a decade ago. All these technologies represent ways to reach audiences more directly and efficiently than ever before.

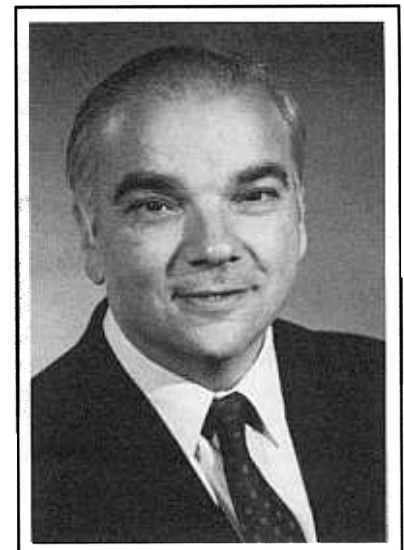
The differences in the cost of disseminating information through alternative media are also shrinking. Early in the 20th century, traditional journalism was the only game in town to reach large numbers of people quickly at low cost. Today, with many more options available, PR pro-

fessionals are much less dependent upon mass media for publicity. This is a trend that will continue in the future. Indeed, publicity — at least as we know it now — could become a dead art.

The "New News"

The presidential election of 1992 dramatized how traditional press relations are no longer business-as-usual, at least in the political arena. The election marked the beginning of what Jon Katz of *Rolling Stone* termed the "New News."

For example, H. Ross Perot gained his fame on the Larry King talk show, *not* interviews with the Washington press corps. Bill Clinton reached out to young Americans by playing his saxophone, while George Bush courted the "teeny-bopper vote," both on MTV. Satellite press conferences with local and state editors allowed the candidates



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to focus their message on local issues and to tell their story directly to editors around the country and to dodge the Conventional Wisdom mongers inside the Beltway.

Since the election, the Clinton administration has thrown out an antiquated phone system at the White House and replaced it with voice- and e-mail. Computer-assisted journalism is flourishing, as the federal government's computerized information networks swell in size.

Today, a reporter can access the White House's electronic bulletin board to obtain copies of presidential remarks and reports. Citizens with a computer modem can do the same thing — or retrieve research findings, regulatory proposals, or the daily political pabulum from other governmental agencies.

Sources' reduced dependence on the traditional press can also be seen in the sizable and sophisticated *internal mass communications systems* established by large, complex organizations. One of the reasons that public relations, as a field, is thriving today is that organizations of all types recognize the importance of news and information — and are willing to invest in their own distribution capabilities.

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Ford and other big manufacturers, for example, broadcast company, industry and business news live to plants worldwide several times a day, while video production operations are found in even middle-size organizations. Meanwhile, sponsored newsletters and magazines are proliferating. Today, the largest-circulation magazine in America is *Modern Maturity*, the 22-million circulation monthly that evolved as the house organ of the powerful American Association of Retired Persons (AARP).

Publicists no longer rely on the wire services or networks to transcend former geographic limitations. Instead, they can use facsimile, modems or overnight delivery services, or transmit video news releases by satellite. During 1994, direct broadcast satellite (DBS) service will enable North Americans to downlink programming on home dishes, similar to the capability enjoyed by Europeans for sev-

eral years. It will be only a matter of time — and economics — until certain satellite frequencies and at least a portion of the much ballyhooed Information Superhighway will become dedicated commercial conduits.

In the decade ahead, the largest American corporations could underwrite entire, sponsored channels. Organizations such as Procter & Gamble might circumvent public media altogether and subsidize programming that combines promotional and otherwise conducive messages — news, talk shows, infomercials, or sponsored entertainment or sports. (Yes, the soaps might even return to sponsor origination!) Shows such as "Entertainment Tonight" stand to become the prototype for programming of tomorrow, in which the *source* doubles as the *deliverer* of the message.

The big advantage, of course, is that information sponsors will be able to eliminate the waste that now exists in the advertising and public information system. While per-impression costs will be higher, channel sponsors will be able to reach coveted super-heavy users, or active or aware publics, with highly tailored messages over which they exert complete control.

Too Many Options?

While having alternative means of access to audiences might seem appealing, I'm not convinced that all these options are either necessary for effective public relations or are good for society.

One concern is that audiences will become lost or isolated in the glut of information. Alternatively, they could become galvanized into special interest groups, further fragmenting society. Depending on public policy, the Superhighway could become readily a clogged commercial corridor, where audiences dismiss or discount *all* content as hype. Also, a sponsored-channel system would give a clear advantage to well-capitalized conglomerates that can amortize costs over a large base of operations — a clear disadvantage to smaller and upstart organizations with a story to tell. Under these scenarios, the value of media publicity, and media institutions themselves, might be jeopardized.

In particular, I wonder whether having so many options will dilute the importance of legitimate media institutions in our society. People depend on the press to tell them what is important to know, to provide timely and expert advice, to analyze community problems, and to serve as watchdogs over public institutions. All are valuable functions, and we have a vested interest in preserving the institutions that perform them.

This problem strikes at a central question about the content that might appear on the Information Highway. Will it be just sponsored or subsidized

“information,” with the Information Highway serving as the equivalent of a common carrier? Or, will the content carry the added-value dimension characteristic of news?

At least one observer thinks there is hope: In *The Future of the Mass Audience* (Cambridge U. Press, 1991, p. 163), W. Russell Neumann suggests that production and promotion costs, and economies of scale required for the new electronic media, put natural constraints on special-interest, small-audience programming. He writes:

“People will continue to rely on the editorial judgment of established news media to relay what are deemed to be the significant headlines of the world and national news. Packaging, formatting, filtering and interpreting complex flows of information represent the valued-added components of public communications. In a more competitive, complex and intense communication environment, that value-added component will be equally important to the individual citizen, if not more so.”

Recent trends in media content raise some doubts as to whether all media organizations fully recognize that providing this *added value* is the key to how they will survive — and thrive.

The advent of “hybrid messages” that blend news and advertising are troublesome because they can confuse the audience about the respective intents and roles of the medium and of the information sponsor. Every time that a newspaper produces an advertorial section that *offers* free puff pieces to advertisers ... and every time that a television station presents an infomercial in the guise of programming ... media organizations cheapen the value of their product.

Serious Implications

While public relations professionals might well benefit from the current technological revolution — and information convolution — publicists need to consider thoughtfully their implications and the changing rules of the media game.

In the future, public relations professionals certainly will spend more time developing messages for increasingly specialized audiences — and will tap many of the new technologies in creative ways. However, we will continue to need public media that enable us to reach the broad spectrum of society. While PR people might circumvent the press occasionally, we aren’t going to want to do so all the time.

The challenge facing media institutions themselves will be not to fritter away their existing franchise by positioning themselves as mere packagers of information for specialized audiences, or by abandoning the added value they provide when information is presented as news. Journalists and

publicists alike need to stake a claim for the future of the legitimate news.

In particular, public relations practitioners need to consider the degree to which the recent circumvention trend undermines media institutions. Is it good that people find it increasingly difficult to differentiate between types of media?

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When a news medium covered a story in the past, the information sponsor gained more than mere exposure. The client, product or cause gained salience, stature and legitimacy. Two media researchers, Robert Merton and Robert Lazarsfeld, termed this the *status conferral* role of the press. Some people went as far as to say that media coverage represented an *implied third party endorsement* by the press.

Will such status conferral or endorsement be possible with so many media options available? By circumventing the press, are publicity-seeking organizations diluting one of the most valuable assets that media publicity provided in the past — the credibility of news appearing in the public press? It is fallacious to believe that sponsored media can fully emulate the legitimate media, or to presume that the public won’t eventually be able to tell the difference?

Obviously, technological advancement will not be reversed. My comments are not intended to discourage use of any of these important new communications options. However, as public relations professionals embrace these new techniques, we must do so intelligently. We can’t kill the goose that laid the golden egg. A loss of public reliance upon and confidence in the mass media could be devastating for public relations, for journalism, and for society-at-large.

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