

Elite and Popular Newspaper Publication of Press Releases: Differential Success Factors?

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This study examines for the first time whether elite and popular newspapers are influenced differently by public relations practices of PR¹ agencies. Based on 373 press releases, 71 potential variables were tested for successful press release publication in two types of Israeli newspapers: popular (Yediot Akhronot and Maariv) and elite (Haaretz). In addition, 32 journalists (including 6 editors) and 13 PR agency managers were surveyed. A mathematical formula was devised to pinpoint the central success factors. The main findings highlight success elements for each type of newspaper: news importance, novelty and usefulness; writing quality and timely transmission to the paper; press release source (agency/manager/practitioner experience; reputation; educational level; and mutual trust relationship with journalists/editors). The implications of the basic findings are explored.

INTRODUCTION

Press releases are considered a central component in the PR practitioners' arsenal (Conarroe and Conarroe, 1991). They constitute a well defined message transmitted to all/most relevant newspapers and/or their journalists/editors that cover the specific subject area (Limor and Mann, 1997), thus enabling organizations and businesses to communicate with their audiences (Walters and Walters, 1992) and attain their goals: maintaining reputation; assistance in obtaining financial support; achieving useful public policy; etc. (Nelkin, 1987).

Over the past several decades, numerous studies have investigated the factors that underly successful press release publication. However, none have asked whether there is a difference in such success elements depending on *type of newspaper*. The present research study will attempt to fill this lacuna by comparing press release publication in popular and elite Israeli newspapers through a comparative examination of a wide array of PR tools/factors.

One should note that because Israel does not have yellow journalism newspapers such as America's *New York Post* or England's *The Sun*, this study is limited to newspapers that deal mainly with actual news, albeit with varying styles and levels of sophistication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Types of Newspapers: Popular vs. Elite

Research literature has found five main elements distinguishing popular (mass) from elite (quality) newspapers: content, target audience, design, paper format, and

¹ The abbreviation "PR" in this article is not meant as a derogatory connotation but rather is used here merely to present a more readable text.

journalistic ethics. Regarding content, the elite papers act as watchdogs of democracy within their self-belief of the need for a civic, social conscience. As a result, their focus is on "hard news", i.e. domestic and foreign policy, economics, national security etc. (Nir, 1984). In addition, they tend to devote significant space to background information and analysis of events and phenomena (Paletz, 2002). Popular papers, also called (not always correctly) "yellow", "cheap", "sensational", "mass", and "infotainment", tend not to consider social responsibility as part of their mandate (Dahlgren and Sparks, 1992). The popular papers concentrate on "soft" news that is more colorfully people-oriented: crime, sports, sex and gossip, along with a modicum of hard news (Hartley, 1996; Winch, 1997).

Moreover, whereas quality papers are more serious, rational and text-based, their counterparts play on the readers' emotions by using striking visuals, bold design, and colorful wording (Nir and Roeh, 1992). Thus, quality papers have more text overall and longer articles, while popular papers offer larger headline size, more pictures, and greater use of graphics (Limor and Mann, 1997). All these are usually found within a tabloid page format for the popular papers as opposed to the larger broadsheet.²

As to audience, quality papers, as a general rule, write for an educated and middle to upper class audience, i.e. opinion leaders (Goren, 1993), as opposed to the popular press that has more of a less educated and lower socio-economic status (Johansson, 2007).³

Finally, regarding journalistic ethics, there is a general assumption (obviously, measuring this aspect is very difficult) that quality papers adhere to a higher level of ethical practice than the popular press (Goren, 1993).

All this is the traditional description of the elite-popular press divide. However, the previous decade or two have witnessed a blurring of (what once were considered) each type of newspaper's clear traits. On the one hand, within the world of print papers increasing questions are rising as to whether such a dichotomization continues to be tenable, especially when the internet is "expanding the definition of what constituted hard news and challenging journalistic norms and standards" (Gower, 2007: 179). As a result, some researchers have called for a hierarchy of news formats running the gamut from "supermarket tabloids" at the bottom to "serious" papers at the top (Sparks, 2000).

A few researchers have attempted to "rehabilitate" tabloid journalism, arguing for its utility in different eras and regarding certain population groups (Örnebring and Jönsson, 2004). Others have pointed to altogether new types of news, generically called "new news" (Harrington, 2005). Even the waters of journalism ethics have become muddied, as glocalization trends have led to hybridization of international

² In the recent past, this has begun to change with increasing numbers of quality papers moving to a tabloid or slimmed-down broadsheet format. For example, England's *The Guardian* successfully changed to a tabloid format. A similar trend has begun in Israel with the *Ha'aretz* economic supplement published daily in tabloid format.

³ This does not mean that quality papers always have a smaller readership. In New York City, for example, *The New York Times* has a wider audience than its "popular" competitors *The Daily News* and *The New York Post*.

norms along with local customs, mores and professional traditions, i.e. what Wasserman and Rao (2008) call "resignification". In short, as Harrington suggested in a later article (2008), it may well be time to devise a new paradigm regarding types of newspapers specifically and news providers in general.

The purpose of the present study, however, is not to attempt such a wide-ranging re-paradigmatization but rather to examine whether two of the main newspaper types relate to one of their key sources of information – PR agencies through press releases – in different fashion. If the answer is yes, then what would add ammunition to those calling for a reassessment of news venue categorizations; if no, then perhaps it is too early to undertake such a reassessment or at the least this would indicate the need to examine all the parameters of the newspaper typology, including source of news and not just the style and substance of the final product.

Factors and Means for Successful Press Release Publication

The research literature points to a list of factors determining a press release's chances of publication, among them frequency and newsworthiness. Morton (1986) discovered that the chances of success are greater in papers and magazines that appear less often than every day as compared to dailies. "Newsworthiness" includes success elements such as the item's news longevity, i.e. extended relevance (Turk, 1986; Covasnyano, 1998), as well as local news relevant to the paper's distribution area (Ashley, 1968; Aronoff, 1976; Baxter 1981); indeed, the lack of local relevance was found to lead to a 72% rejection rate (Minnis and Pratt, 1995).

A number of studies have shown usefulness (service-to-the-reader) to be another news element increasing the chances of publication. Morton (1986) examined 408 press releases sent to 191 Oklahoma papers and found that whatever the frequency of the paper's publication, service-to-the-reader items were published at a higher rate than other types of news items. Morton and Warren (1992) had similar results in a followup, albeit somewhat different, study.

Still other important factors discovered in the research literature: timing of press release transmission, i.e. quick notification of a one-day event (Elfenbein, 1993; Grunig and Hunt, 1994); clear and concise writing style (Limor and Mann, 1997; Covasnyano, 1998; Walters, Walters and Starr, 1994; Bollinger, 1999); sending to the right editor/journalist covering the specific field (Walters and Walters, 1992; Soffer, 2000); connection of the news source to a respectable institution/organization (Goddell, 1975); readership size (Stone Morrison, 1976); quality of prior material sent by the PR professional (Dunwoody and Ryan, 1983); news item authenticity and accuracy level (Gans, 1979); personal relationship and mutual trust between PR practitioners and journalists (Walters and Walters, 1992). Jefkins (1986) adds that PR agencies employ skilled workers with higher education relevant to their PR bailiwick because they are judged on the basis of their trustworthy judgment and ability to supply actual news. PR agencies with such a positive reputation, emphasizes Best (1986), have greater influence and success regarding what actually gets published in the paper.

Anderson and Lawrey (2007) recently found additional factors contributing to PR practitioner success in shaping news content: organizational resources; organizational prominence in the community; level of the subject's complexity. Thus,

a powerful organization (resource-rich, highly profitable, with a staff located within the paper's distribution area) with a high income readership can provide the paper with abundant useful and effective information, especially when the organization's practitioners are skilled in forging good relations with local journalists. Moreover, PR professional practitioners who specialize in medicine, science, engineering and finance tend to have greater influence because journalists tend not have the requisite education and knowledge in such complex fields. Recent continued newspaper cutbacks prevent the training or hiring of reporters with the necessary skills and knowledge, thus reinforcing the PR practitioners' influence over daily newspaper content.

Some researchers have investigated a combination of influential elements. Latane (1981) and Bollinger (2001) have found that when three elements exist simultaneously – news strength (new community-oriented news), immediacy (close to the relevant event), and the number of important subjects within the news item – the chances of publication increase significantly. Moreover, as Morton discovered (1995), when choosing which stories to send to whom one has to also take into account gatekeeper demographic factors (e.g. differences between male and female editors), psychographic factors (older editors vs. younger PR practitioners), and sociological ones (editors tend to prefer conflict stories vs. PR professionals who are wary of conflict elements in their press releases). On the other hand, it is worth noting that research studies such as Toth and Cline (1991) and O'Neil (2002) did not find gender differences among PR workers within organizations (the present study focused on workers and other variables from within PR agencies).

The means of transmission are also significant in successful publication. Journalists consider press release transmission by e-mail to be critical for their work (Garrison, 2004; WDG Research, 2008), due to its speed, low cost, convenience, flexibility, power and security (Reavy, 2001). Nevertheless, some researchers have argued that new media techniques have not resulted in abandonment of more traditional means of transmission. For example, almost a decade after the Web's introduction in the early 1990s, Hill and White (2000) and Duke (2002) found that e-mail and the internet have not replaced face-to-face communication among journalists. To a lesser extent, this still held true in 2007, where results from a British survey among journalists found that a phone conversation with a PR practitioner (15%), receiving a press release (15%) and a press conference/event (13%) were considered "the most important research method for...a journalist" (WDG Research, 2007: 4). This reinforces the conclusion of Ledingham and Bruning (1998) that efficient professional relationships demand a wide array of communication techniques, and cannot be based exclusively on e-mail.

Moreover, several studies have found that techniques and means of press release transmission are culturally dependent. Cameron and Shin (2002), for example, discovered that South Korean PR professionals, as opposed to those in America, are more traditional-technique oriented (phone, fax) and have lower motivation to adopt new technologies. In another South Korean study among 225 PR practitioners and journalists, Shin and Cameron (2003) found that while the former considered online means effective, ethical and professional, the journalists perceived offline means as being more trustworthy. This provides a cautionary note regarding generalizations across countries – just as internet penetration for the general population around the

world has advanced at a different pace depending on country, so too journalists and PR practitioners among various cultures will not all adopt newer means of press release transmission in similar time frames.

Different success outcomes can also be a function of news source and the subject area of the PR item. For example, in the aforementioned study it was found that Korean journalists tended not to trust printed information emanating from organizations but rather preferred informal information acquired through personal communication as this enabled them to preserve their journalistic independence in deciding what was newsworthy. On the other hand, Walker (1991) discovered that PR publication success also depended on the subject area: consumer news (especially fast food) was 96% successful; political news 98%; editorial commentary 92%; fashion trends 72%. From the reverse perspective, editors claimed that 60% of lifestyle news items originated in PR releases, whereas significantly higher percentages were offered for health (90%) and entertainment (75%). Other studies in this vein found that science journalists depend heavily on press releases (Nelkin, 1995), while 94% of soft news in Israeli newspapers originated in PR releases (Covasiano, 1998).

Notwithstanding the large array of publication success variables noted in this section, the careful reader will have noted that none of these studies differentiates between different types of news venues – they all test their variable(s) against a homogeneous dependent factor called newspaper. The present study will try to redress this overly generalized approach by testing and comparing public relations elements differentially between *mass/popular* and *elite/quality* newspapers. As a significant byproduct, it will examine many elements (emphasis on the plural) instead of the single variable approach of almost all the aforementioned studies, i.e. it shall offer a unified, comprehensive and simultaneous investigation of sundry factors that influence successful press release publication in (the different types of) newspapers.

To be sure, this is not the first study to test a large battery of independent variables within the PR field of study. Contingency Theory in public relations that has evolved over the past decade and a half, based on empirical research, was the first to relate to numerous factors underlying the connection between the organization and the public. For instance, "organizational effectiveness and ethical consideration of its public[,] result from fitting many variables to explain the stances or strategies of an organization and its public" (Shin, 2004, p. 192).

Cancel *et al* (1997) suggested a matrix of 86 contingent variables, categorized into eleven main rubrics along two axes: external and internal variables. The former included: threats, corporate environment, political/social/cultural environment, communities, and issues on the public agenda. The internal variables included organizational features, PR department characteristics, management practices, internal threats, personal characteristics, and elements related to proximal relationships. Later studies (Cameron *et al*, 2001; Reber and Cameron, 2003; Shin *et al*, 2005) also found most of these variables to be valid.

The next step was taken by Shin *et al* (2006) who tested these 86 variables on the activity of practitioners within corporate PR departments. Based on a questionnaire (that included 86 variables) sent to 1000 PR members of the Public Relations Society

of America, their study found that some organizational characteristics and professional capabilities were most highly correlated with level of PR activity.

The present study, though, differs from these Contingency Theory variables in two ways, albeit building on that theory. First, it will test several additional variables -- e.g. socio-demographic factors; the commercial field of the specific client organization -- that have not been studied heretofore. Second, it focuses on the variables underlying the PR *agencies'* (and not internal organizational PR departments') success in convincing the press to publish their *press releases*, as noted earlier.

Case Study: Israeli Daily Press

As this study is based on an examination of three Israeli dailies, the following brief background is offered.

Israel's newspaper map has undergone profound changes in the country's sixty-plus year history. Most palpable is the virtual disappearance of the dozen or so party newspapers that were an integral part of the media scene during the early decades (Barness, 1961). Their demise was a function of two social trends: sharp increase in socio-economic living standards and education that brought forth different audience needs and demands which the party papers conceptually were not able to adapt to (Lowenstein in Ben-Ami, 1988); their lack of financial wherewithal to introduce new printing technologies that would offer a higher quality, modern look (Caspi and Limor, 1992). Their place was taken up by the independent papers whose readership share continued to grow.

Significant change also occurred within this latter group as well. First, they all became morning papers as a result of *Khadashot* ["News"], a brash newspaper that first appeared in 1984 (Caspi and Limor, 1992); its initial popularity also forced the other three into modernizing their style and look (*Khadashot* folded in the early 1990s). Second, the former leading paper *Ma'ariv* ["Evening"] lost its primacy to *Yediot Akhronot* ["Latest News"] sometime in the 1970s; the latter was the country's dominant paper until 2010 (see fn 7 below). Third, the introduction of Cable TV in 1990 and then commercial television in 1993 reduced newspaper advertising revenue and also pushed the papers into making significant changes in substance (less space devoted to op-ed commentary and more to useful information), writing style (shorter articles) and design (greater use of color and larger headlines, more space devoted to visuals) (Limor and Mann, 1997; Seletzky, 1998).

These changes transformed *Yediot Akhronot* and *Ma'ariv* into clear exemplars of popular papers as distinguished from *Ha'aretz* (which actually increased the amount of background analysis and commentary at the expense of hard news). Nevertheless, despite the former papers' tabloid format (except for the Friday paper, equivalent to Sunday editions elsewhere), they are different from many other popular papers in the world in that the main news pages do not focus on crime, sex and celebrities but rather on real, hard news. In addition, while offering a plethora of visuals and bold colors, they also produce serious literary supplements and other respectable cultural coverage, something not found among most of the world's more sensationalist tabloids (Limor and Mann, 1997).

For the purposes of our study these changes are important in that (as will be explained below) the present study includes the magnitude of press release publication, as expressed in use of color, size, placement and accompanying visuals.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The study's five hypotheses were formulated after a review of relevant prior studies as the basis for such hypotheses formulation (Morton and Warren, 1992; Morton, 1992; Walters and Walters, 1992; Capps, 1993; Walters et al, 1994; Batelman, 1995; Best, 1986; Wilcox and Nolte, 1995; Wilkins, 1997; Covesenyano, 1998; Cameron and Shin, 2002), as well as on personal interviews conducted with the relevant editors and journalists who dealt with the press releases. The first four hypotheses are expressed from the perspective of the PR agency professionals. Given the time constraints under which (Israeli) journalists and editors work, they would/could not review each of this study's many press releases, as the PR agency personnel were able to do.

H1: Press release source

I. Professional and Interpersonal

H1a: Strong professional variables (experience, seniority and reputation) of the PR agency are equally correlated positively to publication success in the two popular dailies but more weakly to success in the elite paper.

H1b: Stronger interpersonal variables (personal connections, mutual trust level) of the PR agency (vis-à-vis the journalists/editors with whom they work) are correlated positively to publication success in the two popular dailies equally but more weakly in the elite paper.

II. Socio-Demographic

H1c: Relevant academic education (communications, journalism, etc.) of PR agencies' managers and practitioners correlates positively to publication success in equal measure regarding popular and elite papers.

H1d: There is no significant correlation between the gender of PR agency managers/practitioners and successful publication of press releases.

H2: Means of transmitting press releases

H2a: A positive correlation exists between the number and simultaneous use of transmission means, and successful press release publication, equally between the popular and elite press.

H3: Press release's importance, newsworthiness and usefulness

H3a: A positive correlation exists between a PR news item's importance, currency (newness) and usefulness, and its successful publication equally in the popular and elite press.

H4: Clarity of press release and transmission within deadline

H4a: The press release's writing clarity and timely transmission within the paper's deadline correlates positively to its publication success, equally in the popular and elite press.

H5: Type of organization reported on

H5a: When reporting on for-profit companies, the press release's publication success will be greater in the popular press than in the elite press.

H5b: When covering not-for-profit organizations, the press release's publication success will be greater in the elite press than in the popular press.

RESEARCH DESIGN

As outlined in the Literature Survey section above, the majority of variables presented below have already been used in prior studies, albeit with a very limited selection of variables, respectively. A very few variables have been added here that have not been researched by anyone else.

Independent Variables

The five general categories of factors underlying successful newspaper publication of press releases are:

- (1) Source (including the sub-variables: professional experience; seniority; reputation; gender; education; personal connections and trust vis-à-vis the relevant journalist/s or editor/s);
- (2) Means of transmission;
- (3) Importance, newsworthiness/novelty, and usefulness of the press release;
- (4) Clarity of writing style and transmission within the deadline;
- (5) Type of organization covered in the press release (commercial, governmental, non-profit).

Because of the large number of sub-variables⁴ within these five comprehensive categories, those with a common denominator were combined in order to render the

⁴ *Source of press release:* 1 and 2 - PR agency manager's/employee's years of experience; 3 and 4 - PR agency's experience/reputation; 5 and 6 - PR agency manager/employee's gender; 7 and 8 - PR agency manager/employee's educational level; 9-12 - Relationship of PR agency manager/employee with editor/journalist; 13-16 - Mutual trust between PR agency manager/employee and editor/journalist.

Means of transmission: Traditional means: 17 - phone; 18 - fax; 19 - beeper; 20 - letter/messenger; 21 - other; Online means: 22 - email; 23 - online chat; 24 - other; Inter-personal means: 25 - face-to-face; 26- eating out; 27 - connections; 28 - pressure/repeated reminders; 29 - threats/demand to speak with editor; 30 - followup; 31 - other; News content means: 32 - exclusive information/scoop; 33 - other; Associated means: 34 - adding photo; 35 - adding transparencies; 36 - product samples; 37 - other; Incentive / additional means: 38 - overseas trip for journalist; 39 - local hotel accommodation; 40 - journalist choosing any product; 41 - other; Other means: 42- other.

Contents of press release: 43 - importance; 44 - novelty; 45- usefulness (for the readers).
Composition and timeliness: 46 - clarity of text; 47 - submission before deadline.

analysis manageable. For example, variable 2 combined the phone, fax, beeper, and regular mail into one sub-variable called "traditional-technical". In the end, nine "umbrella" variables were created:

1. professional;
2. socio-demographic;
3. inter-personal;
4. traditional-technical;
5. online-technical;
6. associated (pictures, etc.);
7. news content;
8. organizational;
9. incentive (e.g. free overseas trip for the journalist to cover the story).⁵

Dependent Variables

The two main success-related outcomes tested for: (1) The wording of the press release contents' included in the published news article (totally rewritten by the journalist; under 50% original text; around 50%; above 50%; [almost] identical). (2-6) The news article's impact based on five sub-variables: page; length; immediacy; accompanying photo; BW/color.⁶

Ten PR agency managers (of 13 agencies in the study) and twenty-six journalists/editors rated these dependent variables for their relative importance. The two groups reached near unanimity; in order not to unduly complicate the analysis and discussion, the statistical analysis was based on the ranking list of the PR managers. The results in descending order: 1. publication as news item; 2. prominent place; 3. item length; 4. immediacy of publication; 5. accompanying picture; 6. specific wording; 7. BW/color.

Each press release analyzed received a score based on the dependent sub-variables. The point system used here is based in large part on interviews with the journalists and editors; obviously there is a measure of subjectivity here and other points could have been assigned, but these do seem to have a common sense logic:

Page Placement:

Weekday supplements: front page (2 pts.); other pgs. (1 pt.)

Weekday interior sections: front page (4 pts.); other pgs. (3 pts.)

Weekend supplements: front page (6 pts.); other pgs. (5 pts.)

Main news section: weekend (wkd) and weekday (wkdy) – front page (wkd: 12 points; wkdy: 9 pts.); pages 2-5 (wkd: 11 pts.; wkdy: 8 pts.); other pages (wkd: 10 pts.; wkdy: 7 pts.)

Type of organization covered: 48- commercial; 49 - governmental; 50 - non-profit, public.

⁵ An additional category was offered – "miscellaneous" – in which the PR practitioners and journalists/editors could list additional factors based on their experience. Very few of these were suggested by the respondents, suggesting that the nine categories and their respective sub-variables are sufficiently comprehensive.

⁶ A seventh sub-variable was initially considered: positive/negative, i.e. whether the positively worded press release was published in negative fashion. However, in a pre-test, and again during the study itself, it was found that none of the PR releases underwent an "attitude switch" in publication, so that this sub-variable was not included.

Item Size:

Up to 1/4 page: 1 pt.; 1/4-1/2 page: 3 pts.; above 1/2 page-full page: 5 pts.; above full page: 8 pts.

Publication Immediacy:

Above 2 weeks: 1 pt.; 8-14 days: 3 pts.; within a week: 5 pts.

Visual Accompaniment:

Just text item: 1 pt.

Photo/ graph/table/illustration (not connected to the client or competition) + text item: 2 pts.

Photo/ graph/table/illustration + caption (no body text item): 3 pts.

Photo/ graph/table/illustration (connected to the client) + text item: 5 pts.

Other combinations (e.g. each non-client photo: 1/2 pt.; each client photo: 1 pt.): up to 9 pts.

B/W or Color:

B/W photo/graph etc.: 1/2 pt.; color: 1 pt.; other (each b/w: 1/2 pt.; each color: 1 pt.)

Original Press Release Wording:

All new text in journalist's version (based on original idea in press release): 1/2 pt.

Less than 50% from the press release; the rest being the journalist's original wording: 1 pt.

Approx. half press release and half original wording: 1.5 pts.

More than half of item's text identical to press release: 2 pts.

News item (almost) identical to press release: 3 pts.

Maximum "success" (relevant to the above research hypotheses) was scored when the press release was published in the paper in a prominent place, at length, immediately, with accompanying photo (if sent) in color, and with most of the original text.

Research Sample

As noted, three Israeli newspapers were examined: *Yediot Akhronot*, *Ma'ariv*, *Ha'aretz*, together read by the majority of Israeli, Hebrew news readers, certainly at the time of this study in 2004.⁷ In addition, 373 consecutively sent Israeli press releases were collected from the chosen thirteen PR agencies. 30 press releases were offered to a specific paper as an exclusive (19 to *Yediot Akhronot*, 8 to *Ma'ariv*, and 3 to *Ha'aretz*). Altogether, then, each newspaper received 351, 362, and 346 press releases respectively.

At the same time, the press releases were divided into twelve subject categories, based on the expertise of the respective PR agencies studied: automotive, consumer, micro-economics, food industry, welfare, culture, environment, agriculture,

⁷ In the first half of 2011, *Yediot* had 37% weekday readership, with *Ma'ariv* at 12.5% and *Ha'aretz* at 6.4% (TGI, 2011). A widely disseminated, free daily paper *Yisrael Ha'yom* ("Israel Today"), recently passed *Yediot* with 39.3% readership, but it did not exist when the present study was conducted.

aviation, telecommunications, macro-economics, literature/publishing.⁸ These specific topical fields have never been studied as a whole in the PR literature. Moreover, the automotive, agriculture, aviation and telecommunications fields have never been investigated at all in prior PR publication success research. As a result, the present study had no prior foundation for generating hypotheses related to "subject area". Nevertheless, they were included as variables in the study and tested for statistical correlations with type of newspaper, as will be reported below in the Findings section.

Methods

Statistical Processing

In order to discover which of the independent variables in each hypothesis above had the strongest influence on publication success, several statistical analyses were performed: step-wise regression; one-way analysis of variance; multiple comparison analysis; Duncan discrete choice analysis.

Quantitative analysis of the press releases

Through questionnaires and in-depth interviews, the PR agencies' managers were asked to review each of the 373 press releases and each of the three newspapers, and then assess the importance of the following variables: (a) the means used by the PR practitioner in sending the press release to the journalist/editor (26 possible means⁹); (b) the factors underlying successful publication in the paper (22 possibilities¹⁰); (c) the factors underlying publication failure in the paper (reverse image of the 22 possibilities).

Quantitative comparative analysis of press releases versus news items

The 373 press releases were compared to the 575 relevant news items that appeared in the three papers, based on the six variables for publication success that were mentioned earlier.

⁸ Two agencies specialized in social welfare and two others in environmental issues.

⁹ *Technical means*: 1 - phone; 2 - fax; 3 - beeper; 4 - letter/messenger; 5 - other; *Online means*: 6 - email; 7 - online chat; 8 - other; *Inter-personal means*: 9 - face-to-face; 10 - eating out; 11 - connections; 12 - pressure/ repeated reminders; 13 - threats/ demand to speak with editor; 14 - follow-up; 15 - other; *News content means*: 16 - exclusive information/scoop; 17 - other; *Associated means*: 18 - adding photo; 19 - adding transparencies; 20 - product samples; 21 - other; *Incentive / additional means*: 22 - overseas trip for journalist; 23 - local hotel accommodation; 24 - journalist choosing any product; 25 - other; *Other means (not mention above)*: 26 - other.

¹⁰ 1- PR agency manager's professional experience; 2- same for PR agency employee; 3- academic education of manager; 4- same for employee; 5- # of years agency in existence; 6- personal connections between agency manager and journalist; 7- same, with editor; 8- same for PR agency practitioner with journalist; 9- same, with editor; 10- feeling of trust between manager and journalist; 11- same, with editor; 12- same for PR agency practitioner and journalist; 13- same, with editor; 14- reputation of PR agency; 15- gender of agency manager; 16- gender of practitioner; 17- importance of item; 18- currency (newness) of item; 19- service (usefulness) to readers; 20- timely transmission; 21- clear writing style; 22- other.

Determining the relative success of the independent variables

This stage involved only the press releases that achieved publication success. However, in order to determine statistically the degree of publication success regarding each of the three newspapers, it was necessary to take into account press releases that were not published. To that end, a special mathematical formula was devised that analyzed the independent variables' success based on two indicators: *quantity* (the number of items published from one press release) and *magnitude* (relative "strength" of publication, measured by calculating the average of all six success elements noted earlier, i.e. placement, size etc.).

Four PR agency managers were asked for their opinion as to the relative strength of quantity (number) and magnitude (quality) of publication success,¹¹ and their suggested ratio was 1/3 quantity and 2/3 magnitude.

The following formula emerged in order to determine the degree of success in publishing PR releases:

Success =

$$[(\text{number}=2.4364407)/2.0546228+2*(\text{magnitude}=14.5909186)/3.2880845]/3$$

Key:

Average number 2.4364407 :

Standard deviation of number: 2.0546228

Average magnitude: 14.5909186

Standard deviation of magnitude 3.2880845 :

By transforming the variables *number* and *magnitude* into a normalized index, their differences of scale were neutralized and could be fit into the same formula. In addition, the formula also takes into account the number of published, as well as unpublished press releases, and how many times each published press release appeared as a news item in the three newspapers.

RESULTS¹²

Whether H1a was validated is a matter of interpretation. On the one hand, the correlation between the professional variables and PR press release publication success is statistically significant ($P < 0.0001$), and as hypothesized, also weaker for *Ha'aretz* (0.48042) than for *Yediot Akhronot* (0.50187) and *Ma'ariv* (0.54325). However, as the correlation data attest, there is no clear congruence between the

¹¹ As mentioned earlier, in the first stage of the study 26 journalists and 10 PR agency managers picked and then graded the relative importance of each of the sundry magnitude and quantity variables. As it was onerous to return to all 36 at a later stage, 4 PR managers were then chosen arbitrarily to decide on the relative importance of these two overall, major categories. In the event, all four agreed on the relative importance of the two categories so that it was felt that there was little need to try and ask more PR agency managers.

¹² It was not possible to perform Pearson correlations (the values in parentheses). In addition, several of the different, visually identifiable results were not significant. However, as the three newspapers' ranking is consistent across all the statistical analyses it is hard to argue that this is coincidental, i.e. these inter-newspaper results do display clear and real differences: the correlations with *Maariv* are stronger than those with *Yediot Akhronot*, which are in turn stronger than with *Haaretz*.

two popular newspapers on the one hand and the elite paper on the other; rather, here there seems to be a graduated spectrum from the first to the third, with the middle popular paper closer to the elite paper than to its popular counterpart. Almost exactly the same situation and results emerged regarding the H1b interpersonal variables effect on publication ($P < 0.0001$) – *Ha'aretz*: 0.47150; *Yediot Akhronot*: 0.49371; *Ma'ariv*: 0.52909.

H1c was disproved. Although here too the correlation between the socio-demographic variables and publication success was significant ($P < 0.0001$), as opposed to the hypothesis that no differences would be found, once again the tripartite spectrum emerged: *Ha'aretz* = 0.35919; *Yediot Akhronot* = 0.38367; *Ma'ariv* = 0.40515. On the other hand, H1d was validated as no significant correlation was found between gender of PR agency managers/practitioners and success in obtaining newspaper publication.

Regarding H2a, the significant correlations ($P < 0.0001$) regarding use of varied means of communiqué press release transmission are so close to each other for all three papers that for all intents and purposes we can say that the hypothesis was validated: *Ha'aretz* = 0.27844; *Yediot Akhronot* = 0.29355; *Ma'ariv* = 0.29430.

H3a was not validated. While the correlations between the news value variables and publication success were significant in all three cases ($P < 0.0001$), clear differences were found in correlation strength in contradistinction to this hypothesis: *Ha'aretz* 0.52380, *Yediot Akhronot* 0.60037, and *Ma'ariv* 0.62331. H4a had a similar finding. Despite a significant correlation ($P < 0.0001$) between professional-journalism variables and publication success in both paper types, palpable differences were found between the three papers, with the elite paper *Ha'aretz* (0.49470) scoring much lower than the popular papers: *Yediot Akhronot* (0.56191) and *Ma'ariv* (0.58534).

Finally, H5a and H5b were also not validated. Commercial enterprises were not more likely to be published in the popular papers. Rather, in all three papers PR communiqués press releases dealing with non-profit organizations had greater publication success. Specifically, coverage for the areas of culture, literature, environment and welfare had greater success than micro-economics, consumer affairs, aviation, macro-economics, food industry, telecommunications and automotive. The only exception to the non-profit rule was agriculture that did not have any publication success.

Table 1: Organizational Factors: Average Success of Field of Coverage

Field of Coverage	Type of Organization	Number of Press Releases	Average Score*	Degree of Success
Culture	Government	49	10	Maximum
Literature	Government	18	8.5	Very High
Environment	Government	29	6.5	Partial
Social Welfare	Non-Profit	24	6.5	Partial
Micro-Economics	Commercial	21	6	Low
Consumerism	Commercial	28	5.5	Low
Air Transport	Commercial	22	4	Low
Macro-Economics	Commercial	46	4	Low
Food Industry	Commercial	49	3.5	Non-Success
Telecommunications	Commercial	29	3	Non-Success
Automotive	Commercial	35	3	Non-Success
Agriculture	Non-Profit	23	0	Failure

* Degree of Success appears in decreasing order, based on a scale from 0-10.

Another important finding relates to the overall degree of influence (r^2) of the elements analyzed vis-a-vis the three papers. The strongest was found regarding *Ma'ariv* (0.4015), then *Yediot Akhronot* (0.3652), and the weakest for *Ha'aretz* (0.2396). Moreover, all of this study's independent variables taken together (the three newspapers taken as a group) explain more than half of the PR communiqué press release publication success (0.5491). This is quite high by social science standards and indicates that this study has incorporated a very significant number of the variables involved in getting press releases published. In descending order, the most influential are: (1) importance, currency and usefulness of the item: *Ma'ariv*: 0.6233; *Yediot Akhronot* 0.6005; *Ha'aretz* 0.5237; (2) clarity of writing and transmission within the deadline: respectively, 0.5856, 0.5619, 0.4947; (3) source of the communiqué press release (agency and/or personnel, excluding gender): respectively, 0.5436, 0.5088, 0.4821 ($P < 0.0001$ in all nine cases).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study's findings prove the existence of a large array of factors and methods that influence the degree to which PR professionals will be successful in placing their communiqués press releases within the daily press. Some are intrinsic to PR practitioners themselves or the agencies in which they work: *personal professional experience* as well as *agency reputation* and *seniority*. These constitute a shorthand sign for the journalist/editor as to whom they can rely on, and perhaps smooth the way for indirect and unspoken "give and take" between them. Unsurprisingly, then, *mutual trust* was also found to be a critical variable.

The reason for this is related to contemporary journalists' "time" problem. Working within a multi-channel, multi-media environment demands a very fast pace of investigating, double-checking sources and writing up the news item – before the competition can. Indeed, with 23% of British journalists also writing their own blogs

(WDG Research, 2008: 21) and 83% writing online articles for their paper (2008: 11), the workload has become burdensome indeed. Moreover, it is not just the output that has increased; the input side has turned into a flood with 30% of the polled journalists claiming to receive over 50 PR emails each day (17% receiving over 100 per day!), and another 31% receiving 20-50 press releases by email (2008: 4). In such a hyper-work situation, a trusted PR source that will not prevaricate, and does not submit non-news items in wholesale fashion, obviously relieves journalists themselves of having to perform (or at least enables them to safely cut corners regarding) some/all of the standard professional journalism requirements.

This explanation is strengthened by the fact that the professional and personal variables behind the PR press releases do not have the same influence on all types of newspapers. Here is the heart of this study: different factors between elite and popular newspapers in accepting/rejecting PR inputs. The results here show that such professional/personal variables have greater impact on the popular press and less on the elite paper. The reason most probably is that reporters in an elite paper have a greater identification with journalistic norms (e.g. investigation, double checking facts and sources) and therefore will not blindly accept material, no matter how trustworthy the PR source. This conclusion is all the more striking in that the study did not compare the elite paper to sensationalist, "yellow journalism" tabloids, but rather to mainstream "popular" papers that publish a significant amount of serious content.

The general, hyper-competitive news environment and the journalists' need to produce "unique" news – and to do so very quickly – also explains the importance of some other variables from this study. Clearly and concisely written PR press releases save the journalist time; meeting the paper's deadline ensures that the item will not languish 24 hours and perhaps be old hat by the morrow; usefulness for the reader has become more important in the recent past what with mere "straight factual news" only a keyboard click away for the average reader; and finally, novelty and (occasional) exclusivity are obviously the sine qua non of what constitutes "news".

Nevertheless, the general finding of this study that these "content" variables have a higher success rate correlation with the popular press than with the elite paper calls for explanation. On first thought, one might think that the reverse should be true: the elite press should take these substantive considerations into greater account than the popular press. However, there are a couple of aspects that might mitigate this and lead to the opposite result. First, the elite press deals more with news background and analysis as compared to the popular press; thus, the latter will be more prone to publish PR releases that by their nature only provide straight news and little of the "extra" sought by the elite press audiences. Second and related to this, "importance" and "usefulness" are very subjective terms. What the average consumer or citizen might consider "useful" is not necessarily a high priority for elite paper readers who might have different interests and concerns. One illustrative example: a PR release about a new bank savings account program will not overly interest elite paper readers most of whom have their money invested in stocks, bonds and real estate – not in the local bank. One can surmise that most PR releases are geared for the broad public, the majority of whom have different socio-economic (not to mention cultural-educational) interests than the typical elite press reader. The ramifications of this point will be discussed later on.

Regarding the issue of transmission, the technical situation is certainly changing but the "bottom-line" conclusion remains the same. This study found that journalists prefer a multi-modal approach to sending press releases – e.g. traditional media along with online, synchronously dyadic and asynchronously virtual. However, with the demise of print, traditional "snail mail", and perhaps to a lesser extent phone conversations, one might think that we are this research is moving towards a mono-modal situation. This is not the case, for the digital environment itself has created different means of sending content (email, twitter, SMS texting, etc.). With the contemporary journalist constantly on the move (no longer sitting in the paper's offices as in days of yore), PR practitioners will have to exchange regular mail and fax with newer forms of digital transmission, as any one specific means of transmission could easily get lost by itself in the flood of input with which each journalist has to deal. Only by sending a press release along parallel tracks can one feel relatively secure that it will be noticed, and in timely fashion.

It is instructive to look for a moment at another PR practitioner technique that was not discussed above: paid up "working trips" abroad along with lodging for the journalist. These were found to influence successful publication in *Ma'ariv* far more than in the two other papers. The reason for this probably lies in the paper's current owners' lack of journalistic ethos. Whereas both the elite paper *Ha'aretz* and the popular press *Yediot Akhronot* have a family tradition of quality journalism, *Ma'ariv's* owners (the Nimrodi family; Ofer Nimrodi acts as publisher) are businessmen who run the large Israeli economic conglomerate *Haksharat Ha'yishuv*, so that the newspaper for them is merely another business to be managed on economic grounds without due consideration to journalistic ethics. Thus, the phenomenon of journalists getting a free ride to report on foreign news is not viewed as something illegitimate,¹³ whereas *Ha'aretz* (and even *Yediot Akhronot*) hews to more accepted high journalistic standards of behavior.¹⁴

This is an important point because it suggests that one cannot distinguish automatically and blindly between elite and popular newspapers regarding modus operandi and purely economic factors that might influence publication of PR press releases. The "cultural tradition of journalism" in each paper might also inoculate it against certain other influential PR variables. This point adds a new wrinkle to the "resignification" studies regarding different ethical approaches among sundry nations and cultures. Such resignification (Wasserman and Rao, 2008), it turns out, might even occur at the level of the individual newspaper, perhaps as a result of new

¹³ *Ma'ariv* even had an official policy of "rotating" its journalists to receive these freebies, even if a certain journalist had no expertise in the story to be covered overseas! The overall policy acceptance of PR freebies changed in 2008 when two new editors were hired, in line with *Yediot Akhronot* that changed its somewhat more stringent freebie policy to a total prohibition in early 2008. *Ha'aretz* has prohibited the practice for many years.

¹⁴ A similar conclusion regarding the journalistic ethos (or lack thereof) of these three papers was reached a decade ago in an Israeli study that did not look at the PR side of the equation (Sharvit, 1999).

ownership (e.g. Nimrodi family for *Ma'ariv*, Murdoch for *The Wall Street Journal*)¹⁵ or other local factors.

As noted in the findings, relevant higher education of PR agency managers and practitioners also predicts publication success. This is probably in part a function of greater status that such education affords the degree holder, as well as the objective ability of higher educated professionals to supply the journalist with what is necessary for publication (clear writing; comprehension of complex material). On the other hand, the lack of any correlation between gender and publication success is probably less a function of greater "feminist sensitivity" on the part of journalists/editors and more related to the fact that the bulk of interaction between the PR professional and the journalist is done online and not face-to-face as in the past. Moreover, what counts for the journalist/editor is the product's quality and not social work traits such as perceived "authority", "decisiveness" etc. that are more salient in an ongoing workgroup situation.

Not all influential variables are endogenous to the agency and professionals working within them. One important exogenous variable that emerged in this study has to do with the type of organization being covered: PR press releases on governmental institutions and non-profit organizations had a greater chance of publication than those regarding commercial corporations. There are a few possible reasons for this.

First, the public is probably more interested in the former organizations than in the latter, if only because the latter are able to constantly place themselves in the public's eye through advertising. Indeed, it might even occasionally be the case that journalists will not publish a worthy item regarding a commercial firm because of that firm's ability to transmit that information through a paid advertisement. Publishing PR releases can theoretically harm a paper's economic interest if it enables the corporation getting the free coverage to avoid paying for advertising the same material.

Second, the number of PR agencies specializing in non-profits and government institutions is far smaller than those which deal with firms, so that they have less competition to deal with in their bailiwick – and the journalists will tend to receive less material from the non-profit sector as well, thereby raising the value of such a PR press release when it does appear. Nevertheless, this is not an iron law because a critical countervailing factor is perceived audience interest. The topic of agriculture is the exception that proves the general rule: only 2% of the Israeli population works in this sector (a proportion similar to that found in other advanced western economies), so that this subject area has few readers with any direct economic interest (store food news is categorized under "consumer affairs").

On the other hand, these factors seem to be equally influential on all newspaper types, as there was no statistically significant difference between them. This is probably a function of the universality of the two factors just noted above. Advertising

¹⁵ It is not a coincidence that both these examples have an international flavor: the Nimrodi family originated in Iran; Murdoch in Australia. Globalized journalistic "resignification" can occur as a direct result of foreign individuals purchasing a newspaper, and not only due to more amorphous "globalization" trends, whether cultural, economic or politico-military.

abounds in both elite and popular newspapers (although no study has been ever undertaken regarding whether either newspaper type tends to carry more corporate or public-organizational advertising, something that might mitigate the first reason). Thus, one would not expect both types of paper to prefer PR press releases on the lesser advertised type of public entity. The same holds true regarding the supply of press releases – the lesser number of PR agencies dealing with non-profits and governmental agencies means that elite as well as popular papers will receive fewer press releases from non-profits than from the PR agencies of for-profit companies. This not only means that the former are more "valuable," relatively speaking, but also that the journalist differentiating (even unconsciously) between the two main sectors can devote more attention to the fewer PR releases from non-profits arriving at the editorial desk.

Another possible explanation is that corporate economic issues tend to be more complex and in need of in-depth investigation than those of public, nonprofit organizations -- and the former as a rule interest the general public less except in cases of corruption, economic crisis or environmental problems.

Finally, the aggregate picture does strongly indicate differences in influence on the two types of newspaper, although the results are not completely dichotomous. As mentioned, the variables in this study had greatest influence on the popular paper *Ma'ariv*, then on the popular *Yediot Akhronot* and least of all on the elite paper *Ha'aretz*. This overall picture has to be divided between *quantity* (number of PR press releases published) and *quality* (the magnitude of its presentation in the paper). From a quantitative standpoint, the larger number of items appearing in *Ma'ariv* than *Ha'aretz* (200 against 182, respectively) can be explained by the nature of each paper and its ownership structure. As already noted, *Ma'ariv* is part of a larger commercial conglomerate so that "bottom line" considerations are paramount, i.e. it will use as small a journalism staff as possible and rely more on free PR press releases. *Ha'aretz* is owned and run by the Schocken family, whose journalistic roots go back many decades, so that here journalism considerations are paramount. Why, then, is *Yediot Akhronot* in the middle between them if it too is a popular paper? Before answering, it must be repeated that *Yediot Akhronot* scored much closer to *Ma'ariv* than it did to *Ha'aretz* in the aggregate influence score (as mentioned before) so that there is some evidence here of similarity between the two popular papers compared to the elite press.

The answers to the above question suggest the existence of at least two other variables that this study did not quantify. These could well moderate the influence of some of this study's variables. First, as just pointed out, ownership structure and journalistic tradition is an important variable. *Yediot Akhronot* is owned by the Moses family that also has had a longstanding tradition of serious journalism (going back to the 1930s). Second, the paper is also on very financially sound footing (as opposed to *Ma'ariv*) so that it can afford the luxury of a relatively large staff and does not need to rely overly on PR releases for news content.

The above analysis is consistent with Davies' (2008) argument that the large-scale use of PR press releases (in Britain) serves economic and political interests of publishers and others in the political establishment. The large number of press releases does not necessarily signify a plethora of actual real news; indeed, Davies

also points to the use of pseudo-groups (many financed by large corporations) that send news items to the media as if these are actually something noteworthy. These can be accompanied by pseudo-experts providing pseudo-proofs (through pseudo-evidence, e.g. poll data – cherry picked for the "best" results, and other forms of "research") even though they have no expertise regarding the issues at hand. In addition, he found that political organizations' public relations tend to offer these pseudo-news items on the condition of good page placement, with followup press releases that guarantee a steady series of articles for the overworked journalist. In the Israeli case, *Maariv* has suffered from readership and profit losses for a while, forcing it to cut staff and hire younger (and less expensive) journalists – a recipe for the kind of "PR journalism" that Davies bewails. In any case, future research can productively look into the extent of the pseudo-news phenomenon in various countries, possibly as a function of the newspapers' financial strength or weakness, as well as any economic relationship it may have with the general, corporate world.

Returning to this study's central research issue, a central practical question needs to be addressed: should PR agency practitioners consider investing some time in differentiating their press releases between popular as opposed to elite press papers? At this point one cannot answer decisively. On the one hand, the findings here clearly show the existence of some minor differences regarding the PR dependent variables' impact on publication between the two types of newspapers. However, other than "gossip"-type items, these differences do not seem to be large enough to justify the expense in time and effort of pursuing a dual-track, press release approach.

On the other hand, though, it is also becoming increasingly clear that press releases (and their production/transmission costs) are no longer what they once were. Specifically, with almost all PR releases written and sent by email – and not printed and mail delivered – the "cost" in using a differential (more tailor-made) press release approach for elite and popular press journalists has become only a matter of the time expenditure in digitally revising the PR release. Indeed, the vast majority of journalists now expect a more concise press release with an accompanying link to the organization's website or other sources of additional information, e.g. photo, video and/or sound clips (WDG Research, 2008: 8). In such a situation, the time spent writing different press releases depending on the level of the newspaper and/or even the personal style/content predilection of the specific journalist might very well be worth the effort. Moreover, if the PR agency has a relatively large staff with unequal levels of experience and education among the employees (another important independent variable as mentioned above), it might make sense to assign certain employees to the elite press and others to the popular press based on some of the PR practitioners' socio-demographic variables found to be relevant to each.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study sought to advance PR research in several ways. First, studying at one and the same time a whole panoply of variables that might predict success in press release publication; second, doing so while comparing their respective influence on the two main types of newspaper: popular and elite press; third, devising a mathematical formula that enables an aggregate assessment of publication influence with regard to two central aspects: number of items and magnitude of their

presentation within the newspaper; fourth, focusing on external PR agencies (as opposed to most such studies that focus on organizational in-house PR staff); and fifth, investigating a host of news subject areas, some of which have never been studied before (e.g. automotive; environment) within such a research framework.

While the study succeeded in obtaining a high level of explanatory power, there do exist a few additional variables that call for more in-depth, future study. Beyond these, other variables come to mind for investigation: the substance of the press release, based on the newsworthiness criteria of Galtung and Ruge (1965) and possibly others since then; the size of the PR client organization/corporation, in order to test whether such size influences press release publication in either type of newspaper. Third, as noted above only four PR managers were asked to determine the relative importance of the overall two major categories: *magnitude* versus *quantity* of news item publication. Future studies should return to this question, perhaps with a larger number of PR professionals, to see whether their consensual determination is replicated by others.

On the other side of the fence, further qualitative study is needed regarding what *journalists/editors* of each paper type consider to be the factors underlying publication success of press releases. Finally, as the present study was undertaken within one country, similar research needs to be carried out in other nations with somewhat different journalism (and PR) cultures to see whether the present findings are replicated there as well. Given some cultural differences that others have found regarding journalistic ethics, it would be surprising if all the present findings regarding the PR/journalism relationship were to be exactly replicated in other national contexts as well.

In conclusion, while this study focused on the two main types of newspapers – popular and elite press – they obviously do not exhaust the possibilities. Future research should undertake a similar study of sensationalist papers (e.g. *The Sun* in Britain; the *New York Post* in the U.S.) and perhaps even some intermediate category, i.e. middlebrow, papers such as Britain's *The Independent*. Moreover, because of Israel's small territory its press is national in scope; further research should look at local, metropolitan papers in other countries – once again by newspaper type. The last and perhaps largest sort of research project that needs to be undertaken is on online newspapers, especially those that accept digital video, audio and convergent media news releases from PR professionals. With news gravitating quickly to the internet, the world of public relations needs to utilize multimedia tools vis-a-vis online news purveyors (many of whom also work as print journalists) – with a news "paper" typology that goes beyond the standard dichotomization of popular/elite.

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