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**Dictating the News: Understanding Newsworthiness from the
Journalistic Perspective**

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Abstract

This study looks at previous research done in journalism and public relations to identify eight factors that determine newsworthiness. A survey was conducted first to confirm the importance of the eight factors among journalists and public relations practitioners. Then a content analysis of news releases from public and private corporations was used to determine if they contained the eight factors identified by the research. The study found that both journalists and public relations practitioners generally agree on the factors that contribute to the newsworthiness of public relations information subsidies; however, the analysis indicated that only two of the eight factors were being used regularly in the releases, and that the majority of the releases would not be considered newsworthy by either journalists or public relations practitioners.

Introduction

Writing well as a public relations practitioner is not a skill or an art, but rather a requirement. This is true not only for those practitioners who communicate with journalists on a daily basis, but also for any practitioner who writes newsletters, memos, or bylined articles. “Public relations is, after all, communication, and the basic form of communication is the written word” (Bivins, 1999; p. 2).

Just as aspiring journalists or copy editors are often given writing or editing tests when applying for their first job, public relations practitioners stepping into the corporate or agency world are frequently subject to similar writing tests. Employers realize that effective writing skills are a necessary trait; that the more effective as a writer, the more effective the practitioner will be when dealing with multiple audiences (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994).

However important writing is to the public relations generalist, it is perhaps most important for those who strive to practice effective media relations. Changes in the traditional media from network television, news wires, and newspapers to cable, blogs, the Web and social media present media relations practitioners with new challenges, but the importance of making a point clearly and presenting an organization well remains the same.

The most common form of communication with the media, no matter how it is delivered, remains the news release (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth & Van Leuven, 2004). Though it goes by a variety of names – media release, press release, media alert – the function is to get information to the media. The news release has been called the “workhorse” of public relations (Bivins, 1999), referring to the sheer number of releases produced and sent out each year. Bivins (1999) further states that the key to writing an effective release is determining when the information within the release is newsworthy. In this way, the public relations practitioner writing the news release needs to adopt the characteristics of a reporter and, more importantly, compose the release in such a way that it conforms to the standards of its targeted medium.

Although news releases may be the most common form of information subsidy (and the unit of analysis for this study), all communication initiated by public relations practitioners for the purpose of media relations must take newsworthiness factors into consideration. Understanding what journalists determine to be newsworthy is important for public relations practitioners, and this understanding needs to be implemented into practice, as well as understood in theory.

An effective communication to a media outlet needs to be newsworthy according to the receiving editors and journalists, not just to the public relations practitioner (Howard & Matthews, 2000). News releases should further serve the public interest, not the interest of the organization (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994). Therefore, constructing the news release should be of utmost concern to the public relations practitioner, especially if the practitioner expects the media to use the information. In 1922 Lippman wrote that there are no objective standards in the media, only conventions. Understanding those conventions, and the factors that lead to determining what information will constitute news is paramount for effective media relations.

Literature Review

Investigating what constitutes newsworthiness has been a topic of scholarly interest to both public relations and journalism researchers (Abbott & Brassfield, 1989; Berkowitz, 1991; Breed, 1956; Kopenhaver, 1985; Martin & Singletary, 1981; Morton & Warren, 1992; Rings, 1971; Turk, 1991; Walters & Walters, 1996). Journalists have always had to make decisions about information they receive as to whether or not it constitutes news, but with an increasingly shrinking news hole, selection of news items becomes even more important. Public relations practitioners interested in better serving their organizations by using media relations need to be aware of what journalists consider newsworthy, particularly the factors that determine acceptance of news stories (Cameron, Sallot & Curtin, 1997). Since news releases are a primary focus of research into the communication between journalists and public relations practitioners (Bollinger, 1999; Gandy, 1992; Hong, 2008; Morton, 1988, 1996; Morton &

Warren, 1992; Walters & Walters, 1992), it is important to understand ways that practitioners might be better able to construct releases through using factors of newsworthiness identified by journalists as important.

Studies that examine the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners have found that the primary basis of that relationship is the perceived credibility of the practitioner as a source or, perhaps more importantly, a perceived lack of credibility, by journalists who are the targets of their communication (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003). Journalists, historically, view public relations practitioners as using unsavory tactics to achieve free publicity. A more modern approach identifies the function of media relations as helping to meet the objectives of both the media and the organization that the public relations practitioner is representing (Howard & Matthews, 2000). This perspective indicates the necessity for public relations practitioners to establish mutually beneficial relationships with journalists through what Grunig (1984) labeled two-way symmetric public relations.

Unlike that within the public relations literature, however, the research done in journalism that attempts to show what makes something newsworthy has not focused on the source as a major determinant. Studies involving sources focus on the source-reporter relationship and assignments of credibility (Lynch, 1993; Singletary, 1976; Womack, 1986; Zoch & Turk, 1998). However, there has been little research done by journalists that specifically addresses public relations practitioners as sources.

Instead, much of the research has focused on looking at news items that either contain or do not contain certain elements that establish newsworthiness within a particular news piece. Much of this research has examined wire copy (Berkowitz, 1991; Bleske, 1991; Cutlip, 1954; Gieber, 1956; Jones, Troidahl & Hvistendahl, 1961; White, 1950), where immediacy and timeliness were found to be the most newsworthy elements and localness was found to be a primary element.

Other newsworthiness studies have focused primarily on international news (Casey & Copeland, 1958; Chang & Lee, 1993; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Ostgaard, 1965). These researchers found that cultural proximity and

sensationalism were major influences on news selection, and local demand and interest were also important factors in determining whether the international news was used. Further studies have attempted to identify factors of newsworthiness by examining editorial conferences, also called budget meetings, in both print and broadcast media (Chapman & Reisner, 1998; Reisner, 1992). These meetings revealed the role of the news advocate (Janowitz, 1975) as editors who established their choice of news and information, and then defend those choices during the conference. Reisner (1992) indicated that consonance in coverage operates as a major factor in determining coverage on the front-page of newspapers. Reisner's (1992) research further showed that newsworthiness was an important factor when determining whether information is determined to be news, but failed to identify what specific elements contribute to newsworthiness.

Other research has identified a broad spectrum of factors that contribute to newsworthiness. However, some factors appear more often than others, indicating they may not necessarily be case-specific, but may in fact be generalizable to what makes any news item newsworthy to a journalist. These factors include localness (Abbott & Brassfield, 1989; Burgoon, Burgoon & Wilkinson, 1981; Harless, 1974; Kim, 2002; Maclean & Pinna, 1958), timeliness (Abbott & Brassfield, 1989; Breed, 1956; Bridges, 1989), immediacy (Bollinger, 2001; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Howard & Matthews, 2000, Ostgaard, 1965), prominence (Breed, 1956; Bridges, 1989; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Morton & Warren, 1992), cultural proximity (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Ostgaard, 1965; Shapiro & Williams, 1984; Zaharopoulos, 1990), human interest (Bleske, 1991; Burgoon, Burgoon & Wilkinson, 1981; Jones, Troidahl & Hvistendahl, 1961; Kim, 2002), unexpectedness (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Lee, 2009; Morton & Warren, 1992; Ostgaard, 1965; Rosengren, 1974), and significance (Abbott & Brassfield, 1989; Burgoon, Burgoon & Wilkinson, 1981; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harless, 1974; Morton & Warren, 1992; Howard & Matthews, 2000; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006).

Localness is an important factor in determining reader interest, and therefore important to journalists in constructing the news (Burgoon, Burgoon & Wilkinson, 1981). Localness has been defined as being about the communities

that the media serves (Abbott & Brassfield, 1989) as well as the interests of those communities (Kim, 2002). Ostgaard (1965) stated that proximity, in the physical sense, is a “key element in reader interest” (p. 46).

Ostgaard further stated that news needs to be new, “at least as it is perceived by the handlers and recipients of the message” (p. 46). This is a basic definition of timeliness that is also identified by Bridges (1989) who found that timeliness was a key factor in determining front-page coverage. Casey and Copeland (1958) examined rejection rates of wire news stories, and stated that one of the main reasons for rejection of copy was that it either arrived past the newspaper’s deadline, or that the copy referred to events that had already occurred.

Immediacy is related to the concept of timeliness, but indicates a greater sense of urgency within the news item. Bollinger (2001) identified immediacy as one of the three important characteristics for examining news releases. Howard and Matthews (2000) stressed the importance of news as a “perishable commodity” (p. 31). Elberse (1998) found that immediacy was not only a factor important to journalists, but also to consumers of the media. His study indicated that media consumers want the day’s most current news stories before hearing other types of news.

The notion of prominence, according to Howard and Matthews (2000), concerns news about famous people, events, or that has received coverage in well-known publications. Galtung and Ruge (1965) hypothesized that news containing information about elite people and elite organizations would be considered more newsworthy. The findings of that study indicated that news has a tendency to be “*elite-centered*” (p. 68) [italics in original]. Peterson (1981) also found that elitism was a major determinant in acceptance of news and Bridges (1989) found prominence to be one of the top three factors in determining front-page coverage in newspapers.

Ostgaard (1965) stated that cultural proximity is a major asset for a news story. His study focused primarily on the treatment of international news and its likelihood of acceptance. He wrote, “...proximity in both a geographical and cultural sense, but probably more the latter, will tend to influence the news flow”

(p. 47). McCombs and Winter (1981) found that geography is a secondary determinant of reader interest, indicating that the idea of cultural proximity may in fact be a better gauge for newsworthiness. Zaharapoulis (1990) found that cultural proximity played a major role in the Greek media dealing with the presidential election in the United States. His research showed that coverage of Michael Dukakis (who is of Greek heritage) tended to be more positive than that of George Bush, which he attributed to cultural proximity to the candidate.

Studies in gatekeeping (Bleske, 1991; Snider, 1967; White, 1950) have consistently shown that editors are more likely to accept stories that contain human interest. Beam's (2003) study of newspaper market orientations found that newspapers with market-driven orientations were more likely to publish lifestyle stories that contained human-interest elements than news about government and public affairs. This study further showed that more newspapers were becoming market-driven in their orientation, that is, they were seeking to satisfy the needs of their consumers. Howard and Matthews (2000) have defined human interest as having an affective quality on readers; that it is news that causes people to talk about it. They further noted that human interest was of particular importance in "soft" news stories, which is where they say most media relations practitioners need to focus.

Galtung and Ruge (1965) showed that unexpectedness has a strong effect on acceptance of news. Unexpectedness can be characterized as news that is surprising (Howard & Matthews, 2000) or as a news angle that is unique, unexplored, or has a measure of oddity to it (Morton & Warren, 1992). Rosengren (1974) wrote that news articles that have flair or oddity have an impact on the journalist and thus his or her decision of whether or not the item is newsworthy. Lee (2009) and Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) identified unexpectedness as a variance from the expected, expressed as statistical deviance, social change deviance, or normative deviance.

Howard and Matthews (2000) defined consequence as "should know" material, or as information that has moral or social importance. Morton and Warren (1992) use the term "reader service" to identify news that is important to the well-being of the consumers, while Carlson (1960) used the term

“importance” to describe the same phenomenon, though perceived “usefulness” is the term used to determine whether or not a news item is in fact newsworthy. Significance (Abbott & Brassfield, 1989; Breed, 1956; Harless, 1974; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006) is another term used to describe the same basic idea. The theme that flows throughout the research is the idea that a news item that is of importance to the reader, is “should know” material, or somehow serves the consumer will more likely be considered newsworthy (Galtung & Ruge, 1965).

Public relations researchers have to some degree taken a different tack by examining how different types of organizations use news releases. This research has not necessarily been done from the perspective of the reporter accepting the release, but from the organizational perspective. Researchers have examined the news release in state agencies (Martin & Singletary, 1981; Turk, 1985, 1986, 1991; Walters & Walters, 1992), educational institutions (Rings, 1971; Morton, 1988; Morton & Warren, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c; Bollinger, 1999), interest groups (Griffin & Dunwoody, 1995) and the scientific community (Walters & Walters, 1996).

Public relations researchers have also examined news releases, and hypothesized about what factors are important to the reporter or editor in the construction of the release in order to increase acceptance. While these characteristics are not necessarily the same as those that journalism research has shown to be factors of newsworthiness, they are not entirely different; however, public relations research has approached the question from the message construction perspective, rather than from the end product. It is important to note, however, that the scope of public relations research has not stated that it is possible for practitioners to predict the outcome of releases, but that the opportunity for acceptance can be increased if releases contain certain characteristics that are important to the media. For example, Hale (1978) showed a positive correlation exists between length of the news release and length of coverage.

Some of the characteristics public relations researchers have identified as being important do support the factors of newsworthiness identified by researchers in journalism. For example, localness has been identified as being an important characteristic for public relations writers (Berkowitz & Adams, 1990;

Morton & Warren, 1992; Turk, 1991). Timeliness has also been shown by researchers in public relations to be an important characteristic of news releases (Rings, 1971; Walters & Walters, 1992).

Public relations researchers have also identified accuracy (Kopenhaver, 1985) and reader service (Kopenhaver, 1985; Turk, 1991; Morton & Warren, 1992), as being characteristics of an effective news release. Aronoff (1976) further identified releases that have an objective nature and are of interest to readers as those that are more likely to be accepted.

Cameron, Sallot and Curtin (1997) stated that identifying characteristics of news releases that increase acceptance serves a dual purpose. Not only does it increase the effectiveness of media relations, but it also serves to provide “journalists with what they want...Aligning the news values of source and reporter helps public relations practitioners better serve the media” (p.130). And by serving the media and giving them news in a format they can use, it attains the ultimate goal of better serving the publicity needs of the practitioner’s organization.

Understanding that a relationship between public relations practitioners and the media exist as a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship is important to understanding how news releases can be used effectively. Sallot, Steinfatt and Salwen (1998) indicated, “journalists and public relations practitioners are in agreement that public relations influences the news” (p. 366). Huckins (1999) and Sachsman (1976) further supported that statement by showing that public relations practitioners, specifically those practitioners working for government agencies or for special interest groups, influence journalists.

After reviewing the literature, the researchers determined that the factors identified most often as effecting the perception of newsworthiness to journalists and editors are: localness, timeliness, immediacy, prominence, cultural proximity, human interest, unexpectedness, and significance/importance/consequence. These factors come primarily from journalism research, though several have been identified in the public relations research as well. Therefore, for the current study, the researchers posed the following research questions:

RQ1a: Which factors of newsworthiness found in the journalism literature are most important to public relations practitioners and journalists in constructing or evaluating public relations information subsidies?

RQ1b: What differences exist between public relations practitioners and journalists in the perceived importance of the factors in evaluating information subsidies?

RQ2: Will media releases prepared by corporate practitioners contain one or more of the factors determined by journalists to effect newsworthiness?

RQ3: Which factors will be used most frequently?

Methods

Overview. The study consisted of two parts. The first was a survey of public relations practitioners and journalists to determine if the factors of newsworthiness found in the journalism literature were actually important to practicing journalists and public relations professionals.

The second part of the study consisted of a systematic and objective analysis of the contents of media releases produced by companies in a large metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. The researchers were particularly interested in measuring the frequency of use of the eight factors listed above that were determined by journalism and public relations researchers to contribute to the newsworthiness, and thus acceptability, of news releases produced by corporations.

Survey Research Design. This study used a survey of public relations practitioners and journalists in three states in the southeast, Midwest, and northeast. A stratified convenience sample of journalists and practitioners was constructed from each state. The survey consisted of a single mailing, which included a cover letter, questionnaire, and a postage-paid return envelope. The questions regarding newsworthiness factors were part of a larger study focused on media relations, however, the newsworthiness statements were a self-contained aspect of the survey, thus allowing for independent analysis.

In order to evaluate prospective respondents' views of the factors of newsworthiness, the questionnaire used a five point Likert scale (1=very

important, 5=not important at all) for each of the newsworthiness factors. Respondents were also invited to comment on the survey about additional factors. A total of 2495 surveys were successfully mailed. A total of 712 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 28.5%.

Content Analysis Research Design. For this portion of the study, the researchers chose the one-shot study as the overall research design for the investigation described in this paper because no attempt was planned to demonstrate causal inferences. According to Campbell and Stanley (1963), the one-shot study is appropriate when researchers primarily are attempting to describe the characteristics of a population or sample.

Measurement of (1) the presence or absence within a media release of eight factors culled from the literature as contributing to the newsworthiness of a story and (2) the public or private ownership of the organizations disseminating the media release constituted the dependent variables in the study. No change agent or other independent variables were introduced

Data Collection for Content Analysis. As Babbie (1995) wrote, “[c]ontent analysis methods may be applied to virtually any form of communication” (p. 307). Holsti (1969), in his classic text on content analytic methods, wrote that a broad definition would encompass “any techniques for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (p.14).

Categories

Themes related to the eight factors identified through a thorough literature review of research addressing newsworthiness served as the basic categories for coding in this study. According to Holsti (1969), a theme is “the most useful unit of content analysis. It is almost indispensable in research on propaganda, values, attitudes, beliefs and the like” (p. 116).

For the purposes of this research, the eight factors that are related to the newsworthiness of a media release (i.e., localness/proximity, timeliness, immediacy, prominence, cultural proximity, unexpectedness, human interest and significance/consequence/importance) were defined as:

Localness/proximity: pertains to local issues, trends or events.

Timeliness: is current, is a new angle on events or a new trend.

Immediacy: breaking news, usually preceded by “... announced today.”

Prominence: concerns famous or well-known people, institutions or events, has received other media attention.

Cultural proximity: making an otherwise non-local story relevant to local readers, connecting to local interests or geography.

Unexpectedness: “man bites dog.”

Human interest: is unusual, entertaining, about people in a personal rather than business sense, arouses emotions or will cause people to talk about it.

Significance/consequence/importance: educates and informs, has a moral or social importance, is “should know” material, is important to an individual’s lifestyle or ability to cope.

Coding Procedures

Using a southeast regional business journal, the top 25 companies with websites that contained media releases in the lists of “largest private companies” and “largest public companies” ranked by fiscal year gross revenue were chosen as the starting point. For public companies the researchers were forced to go to number 26 on the list because releases for the company listed as 25th wouldn’t download. However, all of the top 26 public companies had some number of media releases posted on their web sites. For private companies the researchers searched 49 websites to find 25 sites that contained media releases. The researchers chose to focus on corporate news releases for this study because corporate news is one of the most covered areas by the news media (Tyndall, 2013).

Originally the researchers made the decision to randomly select four media releases from each site. However, some sites contained only a few recent releases while others contained dozens of releases going back as far as 2000. On sites with fewer than four releases posted, the researchers used all the releases. Four releases were randomly selected from the remaining websites, with the

researchers selecting five from sites with dozens of releases. This over selection resulted in a total of 204 releases used for analysis.

Because of the small number of releases only two trained coders were used. Coders recorded the presence or absence of each of the eight factors related to newsworthiness. Themes relating to these factors could take the form of paragraphs, sentences, phrases or a few words. The coders discussed the factors and themes prior to the start of a coding pretest, and then coded the same ten releases. The factors found in those ten releases were then discussed. Coding took place over a five-day period with each coder analyzing 114 releases to again check for inter-coder reliability.

Inter-coder Reliability

Holsti's reliability coefficient was used because there were only two coders and a small sample. The coefficient of agreement was computed to be .92, which the researchers considered to be acceptable. No test of intracoder reliability was conducted, again because the small number of releases, and the short duration of the coding period.

Results

The answers to RQ1a: "Which factors of newsworthiness found in the journalism literature are most important to public relations practitioners and journalists in constructing or evaluating public relations information subsidies?" and RQ1b: "If so, what differences exist between public relations practitioners and journalists in the perceived importance of the factors in evaluating information subsidies?" were found in the survey data.

Survey Data. Both journalists and public relations practitioners indicated that all of the newsworthiness factors held at least moderate importance in evaluating public relations information subsidies. The most important factor for journalists was cultural proximity (μ 1.47), while the most important factor for public relations practitioners was timeliness (μ 1.47). However, as Table 1 indicates, many of the responses were very similar.

| Table 1: Comparison of Means of Newsworthy Factors (1=very important, 5=not important at all) | Journalist | PR |
|--|------------|------|
| 1. Immediacy | 2.59 | 2.63 |
| 2. Timely News | 1.60 | 1.47 |
| 3. Local News | 1.68 | 2.14 |
| 4. Significant News | 1.98 | 1.76 |
| 5. Prominent News | 2.62 | 2.66 |
| 6. Human Interest Elements | 2.28 | 2.07 |
| 7. Cultural Proximity | 1.47 | 1.82 |
| 8. Unexpected Information | 2.66 | 2.86 |

Although there were slight differences in how respondents from each profession answered, there were no significant differences between groups. Also, no respondents indicated any additional news values that are important for public relations information subsidies. This led the researchers to conclude that based on RQ1a and RQ1b, for the most part, journalists and public relations practitioners agree on the factors that constitute news for information subsidies, and there are not significant differences between the professions when it comes to the abstract evaluation of newsworthiness factors.

The answers to the two remaining research questions were found in the content analysis.

RQ2: Will media releases prepared by corporate practitioners contain one or more of the factors determined by journalists to effect newsworthiness?

RQ3: Which factors will be used most frequently?

Content Analysis. A total of 204 media releases were analyzed to determine if public relations practitioners were including any or all of the eight factors determined through a literature review that contribute to newsworthiness. The releases were obtained from the websites of 25 of the top public and 25 of the top private companies in a large metropolitan area of the southeastern United States. The lists were obtained from the local business journal's annual corporate

listing. Ninety-nine of the releases analyzed came from private companies and 105 from public companies.

Timeliness and immediacy, which were most often listed in the journalism and public relations literature as being related to newsworthiness, were also the most frequently used factors found in the media releases. One hundred of the 204 releases (49%) contained themes that indicated timeliness and 95 of the releases (46.5%) contained themes relating to immediacy. In terms of timeliness, coders looked for current news, or a new angle on events or a new trend. Immediacy was breaking news.

Localness, or themes pertaining to local issues, trends or events, was evident in 51 of the 204 releases (25%). One notable difference is that only 7 (6.7%) public companies including localness themes in their releases, with the remainder occurring in private company releases.

Themes relating to significance, or information that educates or informs, or is “must know” were found in 27 (13.2%) of the 204 releases.

Information concerning famous people, events or institutions, or that had received previous media coverage was considered to be the newsworthy element of prominence by journalism scholars. In the current study prominence was found in releases by 23 (22.9%) of the companies.

Cultural proximity, or the ability to make an otherwise non-local story relevant to local readers was used in only 42 of the 204 releases (20.6%)..

Only 21 (10.2%) of the 204 releases were found to contain a human-interest factor, or to be unusual, arouse emotions or cause people to talk about the item. Perhaps not unexpectedly, with a sampling frame of corporations, there were no releases containing the unexpectedness factor.

Therefore, in answering the second and third research questions, this study found that, overall, the factors of newsworthiness found in the literature were being used by practitioners in the sample studied. With the exception of unexpectedness, all of the factors were being used in some way, with timeliness and immediacy being used most often.

Discussion

To the authors, the most important finding, because of its usefulness to practitioners, was that journalists and media relations practitioners generally agreed about what makes an information subsidy newsworthy. Additionally, survey respondents from across the country generally ranked the importance of the eight values tested at approximately the same level. The following discussion addresses the newsworthiness factors in terms of the review of literature, survey and content analysis.

Newsworthiness Factors

In the review of the literature, the factor of localness was mentioned by the greatest number of researchers (8) as being an important aspect of newsworthiness, and was ranked third in importance (1.68) by journalists surveyed. Yet, as indicated in the content analysis, only 25% of the total releases analyzed were coded as having localness in them. This could be a fault of the sample, as the releases were taken from a major metropolitan area, known for its role in the international community. Future research should examine releases outside of major international news hubs, which the researchers believe would better represent localness as a factor of news releases.

Related to localness is significance because the nature of this factor is information that educates and informs, or is “should know” material. This type of information would change depending on the community demographics and the needs of the particular community. While the survey showed significance falling in the middle of the newsworthiness factors for journalists (1.98), it was found as a factor in only 27 (13.2%) of releases. Given that public relations practitioners surveyed indicated significance was a fairly important value (1.76), it is noteworthy that it did not appear more often. It is possible that not all the releases reviewed were necessarily meant to be sent to journalists, but instead merely served as a way to archive information on the corporations’ websites. However, it may also be that public relations practitioners recognize the importance of significance, but are not effectively implementing it as a factor in their news releases.

Timeliness and immediacy, or breaking news, as factors that contribute to newsworthiness, were also found frequently in the literature with five authors

referring to immediacy and four to timeliness. As reported in the results, 195 of the 204 media releases contained either timeliness or immediacy factors or both, and timeliness was considered the most important news value by public relations practitioners (1.47), and the second most important factor by journalists (1.60).

Timeliness and immediacy are drilled into the heads of public relations students and practitioners alike. We are told repeatedly not to put anything out there that isn't "news" with new being the important part. The phrase "For Immediate Release" has become almost standard on media releases and this timely, but not critical type of release is "by far the most widely used type of release" (Bivins, 1999). When attempting to get a story reported by the media on the same day (immediacy) the lead of the news release will usually include "today announced" or "announced today." Yet, current public relations practitioners rated breaking news at only the mid-point (2.63) in the 1-5 scale of importance in the survey results.

Is either immediacy or timeliness truly enough on its own to carry a media release? Is a release newsworthy simply because "something" is happening today? Apparently many practitioners think so. Of the 100 releases that included the timeliness factor 46 were coded only for timeliness and no other factors of newsworthiness, and of the 95 coded for immediacy 68 included only the factor of immediacy.

Immediacy findings show that even if there is really no information of interest to anyone but those inside the company there will be a release written simply because something new is happening. Is announcing a conference call for shareholders news to anyone but the shareholders? And shouldn't they find out about it through a more personal form of communication? The researchers believe that although both timeliness and immediacy make important contributions to newsworthiness they cannot and should not stand on their own as the main reason for writing a media release. This idea is supported by the survey responses of journalists, who ranked immediacy as one of the least important factors (2.59).

In the current study prominence was found in only 11.3% of the analyzed media releases. Because the media releases came from companies, the

researchers were not surprised that famous or well-known individuals were not involved. The only example found that was related to the prominence of individuals or events, was that of a construction company awarded the contract for Trump Royale, which was connected to Donald Trump. Most of the examples found were because a company had received an award from a well-known entity such as *The National Law Journal*, was listed as a top company by *Fortune* magazine, or was reporting that they had been written up in another well-known or national publication like *USA Today* or *Wine Enthusiast Magazine*.

Prominence, as a factor of news for information subsidies, seems to be a bit enigmatic. While we are constantly exposed to news about celebrities, the majority of public relations practitioners (2.62) and journalists (2.66) involved in the survey did not consider it very important. Although every attempt was made to include as many different types of journalists and practitioners in the study, it is likely that a study that examines those primarily working in the entertainment industry would have very different results than the current study.

Cultural Proximity appears to be a factor that public relations practitioners don't recognize the advantage of, as only 20.6% of the releases contained themes that worked to make an otherwise non-local story relevant to a local audience.

For a company based in a metropolitan area that does much of its business outside of that area, the cultural proximity factor could offer a way to connect to the local community. For instance Interim HealthCare, a company with franchisees, posted a media release about a franchise holder in California who spoke at a national conference about a program she started called "Retired to Hired" that offers retired senior citizens career opportunities in health care. Seniors seeking to reenter the workforce in almost any community would find this story of interest, especially a senior citizen-heavy area such as south Florida. Similarly, journalists would most likely appreciate both the connection to a community need and the human-interest component of the story, both of which make it newsworthy. And, as indicated in the survey ratings, journalists rated cultural proximity as the most valued of the newsworthiness factors at 1.47.

The final factor that was identified in the media releases was human interest, or news that is unusual, raises emotions or causes people to talk about it.

Only 21 of the 204 releases were found to contain human interest and they were almost evenly split between public and private companies. The researchers attribute this low number to the fact that many of the releases in the sample were investor related. Communicators writing for the financial media perhaps see no need to bring in something that would get people talking or arouse emotions, in fact the opposite would tend to be true – the less controversy and discussion about a company, aside from basic income and growth indicators, the better. However, journalists ranked human interest elements as being less important (2.28) than many other factors. It is possible that journalists would prefer to receive the information, and then determine whether or not the potential story should utilize human interest as an element. In addition, the importance of human interest elements could also vary depending on the type and style of the individual journalist.

Comparison of Survey and Content Analysis

Although the survey was primarily used as a means of confirming the factors of newsworthiness as discovered in the literature, it is interesting to note that practitioners were using different factors in their press releases than those they indicated as being most important in the survey. This can be attributed to several causes. First, it is very doubtful that any of the survey respondents were responsible for writing the press releases under scrutiny in the content analysis. In order to best analyze this, it would have been necessary to identify the original writers of the news releases, and to conduct a survey of those practitioners with regard to the newsworthiness factors. As the authors of this study did not set out to accomplish this, a direct comparison between the two sets of results is not possible.

However, it may be possible that public relations practitioners are in fact aware of what factors constitute news, and are simply not employing the factors that they feel are most important in their releases. This could be due to external factors, such as pressure from employers (or senior practitioners), stated client expectations, or simply the need to focus on more output in their media relations efforts.

What is needed to determine the reasons behind the differences is a future study with an experimental approach that examines the relationship and causal factors between what public relations practitioners believe constitutes newsworthiness, and what they actually produce for distribution to journalists.

Recommendations

While this study did not attempt to establish conclusively how public relations practitioners should construct news releases in order to increase their likelihood of use by journalists, it did attempt to examine which factors may be most important in terms of evaluating news releases. Based on the current study's results, and a review of the literature, the following recommendations are suggested for both practitioners and researchers.

For Practitioners

As with many studies that address media relations, it is clear that one of the most important factors in creating effective information subsidies is to understand that the needs of the journalist are of paramount importance. In fact, it has been suggested that public relations practitioners need to take a journalistic-centered approach in order to be effectively communicate with the media (Pang, 2010).

This study's survey results offer a snapshot of what journalists think are important factors for inclusion in information subsidies produced by public relations practitioners, and also examined the news releases being produced by companies. However, the journalists being surveyed were not likely the targeted audience of the releases in the analysis, which is likely good news for the companies under review, as their releases did not align with what the survey respondents indicated they were looking for. Clearly, timeliness and immediacy were being used most often in the releases under review, though for the journalists surveyed, cultural proximity and localness were the most important factors.

Practitioners need to understand what the journalists they are working with are looking for in information subsidies. According to the survey results, practitioners' views of newsworthiness factors are fairly well aligned with

journalists' views so, at least to some degree, there is agreement. However, practitioners still need to integrate the newsworthiness factors into their information subsidies. This may mean that practitioners need to be more judicious in their production of information subsidies, or at least, only send news releases to journalists if they are aligned with the news values of the targeted journalist.

Ultimately, practitioners need to determine which news values are most relevant for the journalists with whom they work. This may be dependent on the type of journalist, the outlet for which they work, and also the geographic location of the journalist as well as the characteristics of the population for which the journalist primarily produces news. However, the authors recommend that by incorporating multiple factors of newsworthiness as outlined here, and knowing which factors are most important to a targeted journalist, the likelihood that the journalist will consider the news release as truly news will increase.

For Future Research

Additional research needs to be done to determine whether newsworthiness factors change according to the medium for which a reporter or editor works – trade publications, financial publications, television versus newspapers, and daily versus weekly papers, community versus metro papers.

Although this study was based on content analysis and a survey sample, additional research could be conducted to compare media releases ~~actually~~ submitted to media outlets, to those actually published. In conjunction with this, there is a need to explore the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners a priori the releases being sent. Does an already developed relationship actually matter, as practitioners have been taught for years, or is it the strength of the release that makes the difference?

Cultural proximity was the one factor the researchers believe was not used to its fullest potential in the releases, and was not generally considered as important a newsworthiness factor by the practitioners as it was with journalists. This factor needs to be further explored by public relations researchers, rather than journalism researchers, to better understand how it can be used to benefit organizations.

This study examined corporate news releases, and while some interesting differences were found between public and private companies, future research could explore these differences to a greater extent. Future studies might also examine what differences there may be between corporate releases, and those releases produced by agencies, government institutions, and nonprofit organizations.

Finally, this study used a grounded approach to determining the news values via a comprehensive literature review. However, the newsworthiness factors presented here are not intended as an end-all, be-all list. Recent work by Shoemaker and Cohen (2006), and Lee (2009), among others, have sought to categorize news in different ways. In order to determine which newsworthiness factors are of most use to public relations practitioners, further research into varying aspects and definitions of newsworthiness is warranted.

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