

State Government Media Relations: Revisiting the “Adversarial” PIO-Journalist Relationship

Christopher Jon McCollough, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The journalist-practitioner relationship has been seen as “antagonistic” for several decades in both journalism and public relations scholarship. This study aimed to determine if the characteristics laid out in relationship management theory and journalist-practitioner literature applies to the contemporary media relationship between state government public relations officers (PIOs) and journalists. The study finds that traditional factors (institutional pressures, centralization of government, and the ethical conduct) are still central to shaping journalist-practitioner relationships. The study also finds that contemporary factors (economic pressure on journalistic practice and PIOs’ strategic use of technology) are fundamentally shaping relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Public relations and journalism scholars have long investigated the nature of media relations, specifically the working dynamic between journalists and public relations practitioners. The relationship has been categorized as both “antagonistic” (Jeffers, 1975a) and “symbiotic” (Ledingham & Bruning, 2007). In truth, the nature of the relationship varies at the individual level, depending on the characteristics of each relationship. This paper focuses on these relationships within the modern architecture of state governments and news organizations. The researcher strives to gain an understanding about the characteristics that shape relationships.

State government public information officers (PIOs) and journalists share a unique relationship, which is fundamentally different from that of private sector public relations practitioners and journalists. PIOs are public servants who must provide information to citizens about the work of their respective state agencies upon request, while private sector practitioners have the latitude to selectively provide information to the public.

Journalists who cover state government, specifically, provide primary conduits through which PIOs can communicate to the public. They are also a primary information source for citizens seeking to learn about the practices of their state governments. Together, PIOs and journalists who cover state government share a critical role in co-creating an enlightened citizenry. This study focuses on the working relationships between state government PIOs and journalists and the characteristics that shape these relationships.

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1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The objective of this study is to better define the work relationships between PIOs and journalists. To do this, the study seeks to identify the characteristics that shape PIO-journalist relationships and their current status. The following body of research in public relations focuses on the characteristics that aid in building and maintaining relationships.

1.1 What Are PIOs?

PIOs are the communication coordinators or spokespersons of certain governmental organizations (i.e. city, county, school district, state government, police departments, and fire departments). The primary responsibility of a PIO is to provide information to the media and public as required by law and according to the standards of the profession. This aspect of their job is conducted through media relations, through direct communication with the public, and by responding to citizen queries for information legally mandated by the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) (Garnett, 1992; Graber, 1992). One documented aspect of this working relationship is the power struggle over control of the message that reaches the public; the following section briefly discusses this struggle and its evolution.

1.2 PIO-Journalist Power Struggle

Public sector organizations and communicators have long struggled over the message that reaches the public. Government communication and the work of PIOs began with lobbying legislators and interest groups (Turney, 2009), then shifted focus to propaganda work during and after World War I (Bernays, 1928). Walter Lippmann (1922) led the response of journalists in calling for greater scrutiny, objectivity, and detachment in covering government because of the critical role that news media play in informing the public and because of past abuses of the news media and public manipulation by governments through inaccurate information and weak reporting on governments and military actions during World War I.

As the century progressed, PIOs embraced dual roles as information brokers to the public and reputation managers of their organizations. Governmental agencies would provide greater media access for emerging radio and television technologies, but they also controlled access to information. Part of this control was due to journalists' dependence on authoritative figures (Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Hallin, 1986; Schudson, 1989). Government agencies during the administrations of Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and John F. Kennedy were able to control media coverage through leverage of media access and perceived respect for the authority figures of the era (Gitlin, 1980; Hallin, 1986).

For journalism, rising social trends of cultural dissent, coupled with increased deception, stonewalling, and criticism from political authorities in the Presidential administrations of Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon in the 1960s and 1970s, gave rise to watchdog journalism (Gans, 1979; Hallin, 1986; Tuchman, 1978). Watchdog journalism

incorporated progressive era muckraking into the political journalism of the time. The efforts of journalists during the Watergate scandal built tremendous public trust in journalism and distrust in politicians and government (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). Journalism came to be perceived as filling a “fourth estate” role in government, overseeing the three branches of government on behalf of a concerned public (Cook, 2005; Hulteng & Nelson, 1971).

Watchdog journalism prompted an evolution from PIOs in their strategic approaches to media relations and public relations in general in the 1980s and 1990s. Emphasis among PIOs and practitioners shifted to relationship building, open and honest communication, and engaging citizens in ethical, two-way communication (Foster, 1984; Garnett, 1992; Graber, 1992; Grunig, 1992). PIOs obtained greater media access and public trust through honesty and by cultivating mutual respect (Garnett, 1992; Graber, 1992). Scholars in public relations began to emphasize strategic identification of publics and message crafting (Grunig, 1997; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and to focus on building relationships with publics over message crafting and dissemination (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998; Ferguson, 1984). Changes in economics and technology at the beginning of the 21st century have also opened the door for more symbiotic relationships (Cho, 2006; Howard, 2004; Sallot & Johnson, 2006).

1.3 Characteristics of the Journalist-Practitioner Relationship

Early scholarship noted that journalists viewed the relationship with public relations practitioners as antagonistic, based on misperceptions about the practice of public relations (Aronoff, 1975a, 1975b). Jeffers (1977) found that journalists perceive that practitioners lack professionalism and ethics. Chief issues cited by journalists for the antagonism is the lack of transparency, withholding information, a lack of ethics, a lack of professionalism, a lack of understanding of news values, and a lack of objectivity in providing news content to journalists (Sallot & Johnson, 2006).

Another source of antagonism is journalists’ ignorance about the work of practitioners. Kopenhagen, Martinson, and Ryan (1984) found that editors at Florida newspapers viewed public relations much more negatively than public relations practitioners viewed the practice of journalism. Previous negative professional experiences promote these perceptions and the adversarial relationship between journalists and practitioners. Journalists cite previous negative experiences with unethical practitioners and a sense that they are “used” by practitioners (Jeffers, 1975, 1977; Ryan & Martinson, 1988). Practitioners acknowledge their role in the antagonistic relationship. Ryan and Martinson (1988) found that practitioners suggest that their inability to ethically police themselves has created the antagonistic environment in which they work with journalists. Ryan and Martinson (1988) also found that practitioners believe that part of the negativity is due to their work being more focused on the client than on the needs of journalists.

Practitioners applying new technologies may be mitigating antagonistic relationships. Shin and Cameron (2003a) found that journalists were receptive to email news releases, home pages, and Web site pressrooms. Journalists rated these tools and the

practitioners utilizing them as useful, influential, credible, ethical and professional (Shin & Cameron, 2003a). Shin and Cameron (2003b) found that both journalists and PIOs see the Internet as a potential means of developing a positive, ethical approach to providing information and reporting on the news. They suggest that shrinking newsrooms, increased demand for news content, and reduced editing time may all have a positive impact on the practitioner-journalist relationship. Personal relationships are also proving essential for practitioners to successfully enhancing media relationships (Cho, 2006; Jo & Kim, 2004). Howard (2004) confirms this, but emphasizes the importance of paying attention to journalistic norms, routines, and needs.

This study examines the ability of PIOs to build symbiotic relationships with journalists, given the unique context of state government and PIOs' explicit roles as public servants that must inform the public and their shared responsibility with journalists in co-creating an enlightened citizenry. Understanding the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners provides an understanding of the factors that shape media relationships over time.

1.4 Relationship Management Theory

The focus on work relationships between PIOs and journalists is in keeping with public relations literature of the past 30 years. Scholars including Ferguson (1984) and Grunig (1992) called for public relations practitioners to emphasize building and maintaining relationships, rather than message craft, dissemination, and control. Relationship Management Theory (RMT) offers a body of research that puts the focus of practitioners squarely on the building and maintenance of relationships between organizations and their publics. RMT scholars posit that practitioners must fill a mediator's role between an organization to effectively build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships over time (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

Similarly, PIOs are liaisons between a state agency and their publics. It is critical to develop productive relationships between themselves, the agency, and the publics they interact with for long-term success. If the agency fails to meet the demands of its wide array of constituents, or it fails to communicate how it is meeting the needs of its constituents, the organization is more susceptible to scrutiny and penalties from the legislative bodies that set budgets and policy for the agency, and the governor who appoints agency administrators.

A critical public for PIOs on a daily basis is the news media representatives covering state government. The news media are a body of information conduits where the public regularly obtains their information. A failure to attend to the needs of the media could lead to misrepresentation of facts about agency practices and PIO-journalist antagonism.

Researchers commonly offer two interconnected definitions of relationship management that come from different perspectives. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) offer a definition that links relationships and impact: “[An organization-public relationship is] the state which exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural or political well-being of the other” (p. 62).

Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (2000) offer a transactional perspective with their definition of organization-public relations: “Relationships consist of the transactions that involve the exchange of resources between organizations . . . and lead to mutual benefit, as well as mutual achievement” (p. 91).

Both of these definitions are necessary for PIOs when considering how they interact with publics. Journalists play a critical role in helping PIOs and state agencies get information to the public and help shape the reputations of state agencies or state governments with the public. So, PIOs must be conscious of media relationships and the impact of those relationships on their agencies’ reputation over time. Thus, PIOs consistently meeting the transactional needs of journalists may be a strong factor in improving work relationships.

RMT specifically has its applications in media relations, the focus of this paper. Ledingham and Bruning (2007) make note of the “antagonistic” relationships between practitioners and journalists (Aronoff, 1975a, 1975b). Ultimately, delivering on promises, being honest and forthcoming, and working with the needs of journalists in mind all help improve working relationships and can help to change the culture of antagonism once so prevalent in media relations (Ledingham & Bruning, 2007). RMT provides a means of identifying how PIOs fill mediators’ roles between state agencies and publics, including the media.

1.5 Research Questions

On the basis of the literature on the journalist-practitioner relationship (Aronoff, 1975a, 1975b; Sallot & Johnson, 2006), the central research questions of this study are posed:

RQ1: What is the current nature of working relationships between PIOs and journalists?

RQ2: What impact do specific PIO characteristics have on PIO-journalist relationships? In order to better understand how the practices of PIOs shape their working relationship with journalists, the following research question is posed:

RQ3: What strategic approaches of PIOs influence their working relationship with journalists?

2. METHOD

The researcher utilized a case study analysis employing semi-structured, qualitative interviews and neutral observation of PIOs in their workplace (Bernard, 2002a, 2002b; Yin, 2009). The choice to employ qualitative methods was based on previous

experience with survey respondents which suggested that a survey instrument might be helpful in gaining a cursory knowledge of the relationship between both PIOs and journalists as groups. Deeper analysis of the specific characteristics of both parties, however, was necessary to understand the individual professional approaches, contextual differences, and challenges that both professions are currently facing that shape individual relationships between PIOs and journalists. In this case, an overarching case study methodology is employed that includes qualitative interviewing as the primary research tool, and makes use of neutral observation of PIOs in their work environment as a cross-check on the interview data (Yin, 2009).

2.1 Sample

The sample included current state agency PIOs, former state agency PIOs, current state-level political journalists, and former state-level political journalists. Former PIOs and former journalists were included because of high turnover rates common among PIOs (Garnett, 1992; Graber, 1992) and shrinking newsrooms prevalent in mainstream media (McChesney & Nichols, 2010). Various journalists working in print, radio, and television media were included because of the diversity of each of their professions, and the potential differences that these variances may create in the relationship with PIOs.

Nine interviews with current and former PIOs in each of three states resulted in 27 total interviews. Nine to 10 interviews with current and former journalists in each of the three states resulted in 27 total interviews. In total, 54 interviews comprised the data pool for analysis. PIOs at each state agency were contacted via e-mail and follow-up call with a request for an interview and an inquiry about the possibility of a research visit. In an effort to expand the pool of respondents after the initial sweep, the researcher also applied snowball sampling (Roulston, 2010). After the initial contact with current state PIOs and journalists, the researcher asked each PIO and journalist about anyone that they would recommend including in the study.

The three states selected for analysis were Iowa, Louisiana, and (the Commonwealth of) Virginia. The three locations were selected for their diversity in culture, population, and geographic placement. This selection process allowed for a wide variance in state social and political perspectives, as well as a great variance in the complexity and type of agencies contacted for observation and interview.

2.2 Data Analysis

The researcher employed a hybridization of Berkowitz's (1997b) approach to qualitative data analysis, facilitated with NVivo 9 qualitative analysis software. Using Nvivo, the researcher loaded the pool of data into the software and performed the coding process using Berkowitz's (1997b) approach to qualitative data analysis, each piece data file was read twice carefully, audio recordings were played while reading through each of the transcripts, and a broad initial coding of emergent themes was performed. NVivo expedites the process by permitting consolidation of large bodies of diverse text-rich research data into one central location where the researcher can more efficiently classify, sort and arrange information; examine relationships within the data; and combine analysis with linking, shaping, searching, and modeling (Nvivo 9, 2011).

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Institutional Pressures

PIOs must earn the trust, respect, and understanding of their colleagues within their state agency in order to be most effective in building and maintaining relationships with the journalists covering state government. PIOs must work to build a sense of understanding among agency staff and administrators about the role of PIOs, the value of open accountability to the media, and the challenges that manipulation and obstruction can create for state agencies and state governments with the journalists that report on their work. The pressure to control message and the information that reaches the public is grounded in an administrative desire to control public opinion about the practices of an agency, its staff, and its administrators. In state government, public opinion dictates the long-term viability of an agency and its effectiveness in performing tasks. Agency reputation is critical with legislatures and governors, because poor reputations can lead to budget reductions, unapproved policies for the agency, and changes in agency administration. Bob Johannessen, formerly of the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, discussed the dynamic between elected officials and his agency, and how it is often shaped by public opinion and political issues. He noted the need for sensitivity with elected officials when talking about developing health communication campaigns on controversial topics:

The key audiences you always had in mind were, “How is this going to be viewed by elected officials because they control your purse strings and they always had the ability to call you before a committee and chew you out?” . . . So, and that was a conversation I had over and over again with public health officials because they had a belief and they are absolutely right that in order to change a behavior amongst the public with public messages, you have to have a very strong message: “This is your brain, this is your brain on drugs.” But when it comes to sex and drugs, they are both third rails, and they are particularly strong 3rd rails of a Republican administration. And, but if you wanted to reduce the risk of AIDS and STDs in a commercial, a visual of a penis with a condom being rolled on it was a very graphic commercial that could probably get people's attention, and it played well for the public health audiences when they played it for their audiences, but. You put that same message in front of a legislator; the reaction is, “we're taking all of your funding” (June 15, 2011).

PIOs feel the pressure not only from elected officials but also from administrators and staff to control messages and information disseminated by news media. Darin Mann is a former radio news reporter and a veteran PIO of several state agencies in Louisiana. While working in the Department of Labor, Mann's administrator denied a journalist's request to participate in a radio interview, the reporter released a story about the agency that was unflattering. When talking to Mann about it, the administrator repeatedly asked why Mann, “could not control the f***** media,” because the administrator believed that Mann's job was to kill stories and control press coverage. Mann explained to his boss that his job was to inform the public about the agency's operations and to facilitate journalists' queries in an open and ethical manner, not to

purely seek good press. In many cases, agency staff and administrators are not always clear about the role of PIOs, the practices of journalists, the value of working openly with the media, and the potential threat that consistent manipulation of journalists poses for an agency over time.

PIOs who are most successful in media relations share a strong sense of mutual trust with and respect with their agency's staff and administrators. This is built on a strong understanding of the purpose for a PIO within a state agency. All PIOs discussed the importance of being included in the decision-making process and having a direct line to the decision-makers in their agencies. Meg Casper, of the Louisiana Board of Regents, characterized the relationship that she maintained with each director she's worked with since moving from journalism to PIO work as "A good marriage." She states that being in any other situation is one where you have to look for a job where you can feel that way (June 10, 2011).

PIOs also express the importance of staff members understanding the nature of journalism, and the importance of responding to media queries in a timely manner. PIOs explain that having the ability to walk into a colleague's office in the agency, and have the individual set aside the current task and respond to their needs helps them build better media relationships. A common frustration for PIOs is a lack of understanding of the difference in work rhythms between a state agency and a news organization.

To overcome agency ignorance and promote understanding of the work of PIOs and the importance of good media relationships, PIOs must fill an educator's role, helping agency administrators and staff to build a knowledge and appreciation of the practices and value of maintaining open and accountable working relationships with journalists. Consequently, filling this educator's role coincides with Relationship Management Theory's argument that public relations practitioners must fill a mediator's role to help build mutual understanding and facilitate mutually beneficial relationships (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

3.2 Centralization of Government Communication

An important characteristic that influences PIOs' ability to work with journalists is the degree of centralization within their state government's communication strategies. The choice to centralize communication within a state government is a strategic decision made within the Governor's office, and is a practice focused on unifying the communication that comes from the Governor and each of the subordinate agency offices in the executive branch of a state government. Each of the three states studied had different degrees of centralization within their state's communication strategies and differing relationships with journalists.

Louisiana is the most highly centralized of the three states studied. Since Governor Bobby Jindal's election in 2007, his press office coordinates communication with PIOs at the state agencies most pertinent to his policy agenda. When a major event occurs, the Governor's office takes point in releasing information and crosschecks the releases of the relevant agencies to insure that every agency is consistent in releasing the same

information. Former Governor Kathleen Blanco also employed a measure of centralization, as her communication office held a monthly communication council with the PIOs in all state agencies.

The key difference between Blanco's approach and Jindal's is the aggressiveness in eliminating leaks. Coordinated, centralized messages also now come with a closed gate policy with journalists, limiting the availability of expert sources within agencies, as well as the responsiveness of PIOs to media queries on critical policy issues. Individuals who break this policy and leak information or go off script from the Governor's office on message face severe penalties. Marie Centanni, former press secretary during the Blanco administration and currently a freelance communication specialist in state government, explained the benefit of highly centralized messaging. She explained that her time working with former Governor Blanco was plagued by leaks to journalists and media personalities around the state when there were internal disagreements between members of the administration. Meg Casper echoed these sentiments, explaining that there is a motive behind maintaining a tight lid on external communication grounded in pushing a consistent message and avoiding perceptions of external conflict.

Centanni concedes that there are potential problems that centralized communication creates with reporters. Centralization limits a PIO's ability to be responsive to journalists in an efficient manner, because he or she must have critical communication approved before responding to reporters. Accessibility to authoritative sources that journalists seek is also limited because higher centralization often means restricting public communication, rather than maintaining open communication policies for any agency staff member. The press releases that are disseminated by the Governor's office and each of the affiliated agencies are virtually identical, which offers no diversity in perspectives on an issue or event for journalists. All of this is a strong source of frustration for journalists, which damages working relationships with PIOs. This supports Ryan and Martinson's (1988) finding that public relations practitioners that deceive and obstruct journalists are sources of antagonism between journalists and practitioners.

Governor Jindal feels comfortable maintaining a restrictive, centralized communication strategy because of the political climate within Louisiana. Since taking office in 2007, Louisiana identifies strongly with conservative ideologies and the Republican Party in every election. During the 2011 gubernatorial election, Jindal was re-elected with 65% of the vote, and his nearest competitor on an open ballot had 17% of the vote. Without fear of losing a majority vote, Jindal felt no need to maintain an open, accountable communication strategy. The consequences of this approach are now more apparent as Jindal now holds a popularity level of 35%, roughly 10% lower than President Barack Obama in a conservative state.

Iowa, conversely, is proactively emphasizing open dialogue with the public, including improved media relations under their most recently re-elected governor, Terry Branstad. Branstad worked actively with the legislature in Iowa to pass legislation that required more open communication and accountability with Iowa's residents. The first reason is that Branstad is finishing a successful political career, rather than seeking the next

opportunity. This is his fifth term as Governor of Iowa, having come back to the position after 10 years out of public office. Several state employees expressed that this will be Branstad's last term in office.

The second reason for Branstad's decision to push open and accountable communication is derived from the previous approaches of the past two administrations toward public communication and media relations. Several PIOs and journalists in Iowa discussed that the current media relations practices under the Branstad administration are much more amenable than under previous administrations. During the Vilsack administration, the media relations strategy was to centralize all good news at the Governor's office, while deflecting negative news to the relevant, subordinate agencies. The goal was to keep a positive focus on his office, while minimizing bad news affiliated with Vilsack's administration.

Kevin Baskins was a political reporter in Iowa during the first Branstad administration. He recalled his experience during that period and noted the aggravation that this approach to "hiding the ball" created with reporters. The group of journalists interviewed in Iowa cited a much better experience working with PIOs since Branstad's administration took office. This supports research suggesting open access can help facilitate productive relationships (Howard, 2004; Sallot & Johnson, 2006).

Virginia falls between Iowa and Louisiana in terms of its communication centralization. The largest population of the three states studied and the proximity to Washington, D.C. both contribute to more complex and geographically spread government. Unlike Louisiana and Iowa, Virginia has agency branch offices in multiple regions throughout the commonwealth on the basis of population density or geographic relevance. This requires each office to have a PIO that works directly with journalists in their region while reporting to the central office in Richmond. This process of interfacing with other branch offices ultimately slows the pace of response and makes PIOs less responsive to media queries, amplifying journalists' frustration. The number of agency branch offices and the specificity of some media queries that focus on elements unique to each region, however, can render a centralized approach irrelevant.

Lauren Hansen of the Hampton Roads branch of the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) is the PIO for one of nine district offices in the state. She notes that the geographic spread of agency offices and number of media outlets result in situations when she has to consult with the central office or a pertinent regional office on stories that include them. More often, she will get a call from a reporter about a region-specific fact or official, which has no impact on the central agency administration or other regions. Hansen has the latitude to be responsive and flexible in meeting media demands within the scope of her regional office.

The proximity to Washington, D.C. also means that PIOs in Richmond must account for national media coverage for the District of Columbia. The large number of state residents that commute to the nation's capital means that capital-region media have reporters covering Virginia's government on behalf of their audience. In addition,

national media organizations like *The Washington Post* and *Politico* maintain active reporting presences in Richmond to cover the state legislature and Governor Bob McDonnell. The larger media presence and wider spectrum of media attention that PIOs in Virginia must account for require more strategic centralization of communication to manage inquiries and to maintain message consistency. The split between centralization and open communication creates a more mixed perspective on working relationships among Virginia journalists. As one might expect, the nature of the relationship can range from collaborative to antagonistic, depending on the day or story being covered.

3.3 Economic Pressures on Journalists' Norms and Routines

The impact of corporatization and recent economic downturns on journalism are putting pressure on journalists to produce more content at faster rates than ever before with fewer resources to do so. PIOs who understand these economic pressures that journalists are currently under have a better opportunity to build strong relationships because of the practical value they have for journalists working to fill content demands within deadlines. PIOs are able to most effectively help journalists manage economic pressures if they apply journalistic norms and routines in their approach to media relations. Howard's (2004) finding that attending to practical needs of journalists enhance working relationships in this context.

Responsiveness to media queries is a means for PIOs to help journalists address these demands. It is the most commonly referenced factor cited by PIOs that helps establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships. Responsiveness attends to a journalist's shrinking deadlines and gives a journalist time to receive the information provided, vet the information for accuracy, and then apply it to the story. Elaine Lidholm, the media representative for the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, commented on her media responsiveness:

If I don't take it when they call. If I'm sitting in my office, working on something else, and I look over and see a reporter's call on my caller ID, I drop what I'm doing and pick up. And then, I have a message on my phone that says, "I'm sorry I missed your call, leave me a message after the beep. If this is extremely urgent, press 0 any time before the beep, and someone else will help you." And that goes to Joyce, sitting out here first, and if she goes on break, it goes to the commissioner's secretaries, so there's someone that can say, "Oh, she is here today, she must just be in the bathroom, let me take a message." So, I can't tell you how many times a week I get responses from reporters, especially if it's via e-mail, "Thank you for responding so quickly." (August 5, 2011)

Responsiveness is something many PIOs convey as a practical way of demonstrating respect for journalists and the pressures that they are coping with. Going along with the principle of responsiveness is timeliness in responding to a journalist's call. Many of the PIOs interviewed made some reference to prefacing their phone conversations with journalists with some variation on the phrase, "What's your deadline? What do you need?"

PIOs can also facilitate newsgathering for journalists under current economic pressures by providing authoritative, credible sources and information. Journalists need authoritative sources to verify facts and lend credibility to their coverage. PIOs can more effectively build and maintain relationships by providing greater accessibility to expert sources and information. Journalist access to the director depends on the director's prerogative. Access to expert sources, likewise, is dependent upon their willingness to help, requiring agency staff's trust of their PIO.

Multiple PIOs stressed the point that the trust of the agency's decision-makers, or dominant coalition (Grunig, 1992), allows a PIO to be seen by journalists as a part of the decision-making group in an agency and therefore someone that could be a credible information source. Chris Frink calls it "knowing and having access to your principals in an organization" (June 17, 2011). A position in the administration grants one access to the information and decision-making process that journalists are trying to understand, providing additional support for Howard (2004), as well as Sallot & Johnson (2006).

As a former reporter, Kevin Baskins noted that having the ability to joke with reporters about their current challenges softens many of the conversations and lets them know he understands, and that he is there to help where he can (July 19, 2011). Awareness of journalism's practical realities provide PIOs a means of identifying with journalists and a bridge where they can convey the desire to engage in the mutually beneficial relationships with publics that scholars like Ledingham and Bruning (1998) were interested in, through the practices outlined by Howard (2004), Sallot and Johnson (2006), and Ledingham & Bruning (2007).

Part of aiding journalists in producing content is providing substantive news content when reporters need help filling demand. This means playing on narrative and news values that journalists seek. John Hagerty, a PIO for the Virginia Lottery, provided this example:

We rarely get any news coverage in the *Washington Post*, for example. But, there was one time in which we had a big Lottery winner in Springfield. She told us she couldn't get to her favorite 7-Eleven because she was cut off in traffic. She had to go to a different store a mile away. She bought a Lottery ticket and it turned out to be a huge winner. So I wrote a news release stating that, for once, there's someone thankful for Northern Virginia traffic. I sent it to the *Washington Post* and they loved it! When I got a call from the *Post* reporter, I thought, "You're kidding! You want to talk to me?" (August 19, 2011).

In a competitive news market, PIOs need to attend to the quality of their news pitches because they need to beat out other stories in the news cycle with overtaxed reporters. Darin Mann expressed this thought on substantive news content:

With everybody wanting a piece of the media pie, you have to come with some pretty good stuff--and when they come calling, you have to be a) receptive, and b) meet their deadline, you know, take care of what they need--and get back to 'em, because nothing pisses them off more than if you don't get back to them. Because they've got their deadline, and I think we all face our challenges. (June 30, 2011)

Mann's comments illustrate how to apply a journalist's thought process when pitching story ideas to journalists as a PIO. An inherent sensitivity to the work environment of journalists is crucial in strategically targeting news outlets for release. George Sells, a former anchor and reporter in New York, Philadelphia, Denver, and Baton Rouge had a career that has spanned 54 years. He illustrates this point when he reiterates that the vast majority of e-mails and hard copy from practitioners and PIOs go to his SPAM filter and trashcan (June 16, 2011).

These are points of emphasis for Marie Centanni in her current role as a consultant for organizations that work in and with the state government of Louisiana. She likes to call the practice "news brokering," and she shared a particularly instructive story: A client of mine called, it was actually a friend of mine. She said, "I want to get some coverage for my business. Do I just send out a press release?" I said, "No, because who cares? Who cares? Why would they cover it?" And so, I spent some time with her at her business, and learned what they do, and really it's something people would be interested to know about. It was a health service that provided art therapy for clients with severe mental disabilities like autism and Alzheimer's, all sorts of things. They actually operate a commercial art gallery featuring their patients' work. So, [I] called the news director at Channel 3 [KATC in Lafayette, Louisiana], came in with my friend, told her what she did, and said, "Look what she does. Wouldn't this be a great story?" And she said, "yeah, Oh my God! We would totally do that story!" And I said, "Wouldn't it be good to do part of your Live Festival International coverage?" And she said, "Yes! I didn't think about that! That would be perfect!" So, hopefully--I've kind of developed a reputation with reporters where if I'm calling, it's not for a ribbon-cutting. It's actually for a good story." (June 20, 2011)

Thus, Centanni and other PIOs are attending to transactional aspects of RMT (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000) when they attempt to consistently meet the demands of journalists covering state agencies. By more specifically meeting the needs of journalists, PIOs can cultivate a reputation for more effectively meeting the needs of each journalist, supporting principles of RMT (Ledingham & Bruning, 2007). The constant evolution of news models demands greater flexibility on the part of PIOs in responding to media queries in order to build trust.

A final tool that can help PIOs with reporters is adhering to format standards and practical considerations of journalists. Chris Frink, a speech writer for former Governor Kathleen Blanco, noted the importance of attending to practical considerations when responding to the media, making a media pitch, or planning an event where the PIO invites the media. Accounting for practical needs like live shots and on-camera interviews for television reporters, or speaking in sound bites for radio reporters in order

to better enable editing for broadcast in hourly news briefs is critical in building a position of reliability with reporters for PIOs. These considerations create productive working relationships between PIOs and journalists that enable them to co-create an enlightened citizenry.

However, the ability to utilize these tools also creates a potential ethical problem for PIOs that contradicts their professional role. Kevin Baskins offers a prime example of the practice that creates this dilemma:

From my own experience as a former reporter, I see some stuff out there that just absolutely horrifies me when I'm wearing my old media reporter hat, but it's really useful in my role as a PIO. An example of that is even when I kind of got out of newspapering in 1998, if you ran a press release, copy and paste, and if you even took a direct quote from a press release and didn't identify that as such, you were probably walking the next day. And now that is a common practice. I've even seen one daily, and it was a fairly substantial daily in Iowa, where their top story one day was a straight copy and paste from one of our press releases. It was word-for-word. In that way, there is a lot more opportunities for agencies like us. I think what you are seeing is a real crunch on resources within the media industry. At the same time that demands are getting higher because they have a website to feed. I think about these reporters. When I was a reporter, 11:30 at night was that hardcore deadline [for submission]. And that was all you had to worry about. And now, I see reporters having to worry about three deadlines a day because they are feeding the web, and they've got fewer resources. So if you have an agency like ours that enjoys a high degree of credibility, and we do, then our stuff is going to get used, and there is some real value to the stuff that we put out from the agency standpoint. (July 19, 2011)

Several economic factors contribute to the ability of PIOs to manipulate reporters into publishing news stories in situations like the two discussed above. News organizations are hiring inexperienced, uninitiated reporters at lower wages to cover state government in positions once occupied by journalists with higher levels of education and experience in covering the beat. This creates stronger reliance on PIOs for efficient information resources. News organizations are also downsizing their news staffs to cut operational costs. With the increasing demand to fill content demands at a faster pace among fewer reporters, the result is a group of overtaxed, inexperienced reporters that need to economize their time in meeting demands, supporting Singer's (2010) characterization of young journalists. If PIOs can help fill content demands and produce material that is in keeping with content format, then they can get their message through the media to the public with minimal resistance. The time demands on reporters mean there is less time to vet information for accuracy with multiple sources, so stories will at times make publication with no filtration from reporters. Ethically, PIOs can apply principles to help journalists in the newsgathering process. The potential to abuse the relationship for professional advantage, however, is present. Unfortunately, agency administrators and staff are effective in exerting pressures to control the message and media from administrators and staff on some PIOs. Eager to earn internal trust from administrators and staff, these PIOs intentionally abuse the working relationships with journalists to do

so, validating research on manipulation in media relations (Aronoff, 1975a; Foley, 2004; Franklin, 2004; Jeffers, 1977; Ryan & Martinson, 1988).

3.4 Application of Technology

PIOs are making use of multiple forms of technology to aid in effectively performing their jobs, and technologies are aiding them in improving working relationships with journalists. PIOs are also providing an interesting means of informing the public directly without having to deal with journalists or the filter they can create between the agency and the public. Mobile technology in the form of smart phones facilitates conversation, enables contact, and promotes responsiveness to reporters on the job. Meg Casper texts reporters using cell phone technology in legislative committee rooms to connect with journalists, to gauge what they were covering, and to discover what she might have to prepare for (June 6-10, 2011).

Email use by PIOs is proving to be the most efficient means of responsiveness when trying to contact reporters out in the field covering stories. Marie Centanni notes that she typically leans towards email over phone calls because of the propensity of reporters to be away from their desk during business hours, and the delay in reply that voice mail can create in comparison to the common practice of checking emails on cell phones (June 20, 2011).

Web sites provide an effective direct line to agency information when organized well and coordinated with the state government. Iowa and Virginia have recently completed a Web optimization program to streamline Web designs in an effort to promote a more open and transparent message dissemination to the public. The transition created a means of considering public demand over the egos of agency staff on having their material on the front page for Iowa's state agency Web sites. Agency Web sites are also proving to be a highly effective in connecting with reporters and providing an additional resource for reporters. The Iowa DOT is making effective use of posting media content couched in journalistic norms and routines on the Web site and social and digital media conduits in an effort to provide stations and papers around the state with resources that they would not otherwise have access to (Gray-Fisher, July 18, 2011).

The Iowa DNR and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) are both making effective use of Facebook and Twitter to engage citizens in two-way communication and to promote upcoming campaigns, as well as to provide a point of reference or contact with journalists. The Iowa DNR is using Flickr and YouTube as conduits for posting reference photos and instructional videos. By engaging in media relations through Web sites and social and digital media, PIOs are reinforcing the findings of Shin and Cameron (2003a; 2003b). They found that innovative technology use helps facilitate reporting, improving PIO credibility and reliability.

Conversely, social and digital media can be a source of competition between journalists and PIOs for the attention of citizens. Several PIOs began using social and digital media as a means of establishing a direct line with the public in an effort to avoid news media filters. Suzanne Hall characterized its use as a means of reaching as wide a public as

possible. Hall, however, simply sees it as a means of approaching publics who may not attend to traditional news, or may see social and digital media conduits as their primary source for news and information.

3.5 Ethical Professional Interaction

While there are avenues for PIOs to gain leverage over journalists in the current downturn in the practice of journalism, there is a widespread fear among PIOs of purposefully deceiving journalists. The professional networks of PIOs and journalist are tightly knit within Louisiana, Iowa, and Virginia. For most PIOs, there is a strong sense of ethical obligation to the mission of PIOs to provide information in an open and ethical manner. Sheila McCant, former PIO for the Louisiana House of Representatives, stated that her professional standard with her bosses was that she would never lie on their behalf to the media and that she would quit before doing so. PIOs consistently characterize trust as that “one chip” that a PIO builds up with reporters covering state government. In the event they do lie to reporters, PIOs fear the media uncovering that deception, forever ruining their reputation in the community and state government. A trustworthy reputation and updated media contacts are two resources a PIO must have, but intentional deception ruins their reputation with reporters.

Maintaining candor with journalists is a means of building trust and keeping it. Bob Johannessen described a situation where his agency’s administrators at the Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals (DHH) left him out of the loop on an administrative decision to implement lie detector tests for citizens receiving state and federal benefits. After receiving a phone call from Marsha Shuler of *The Advocate* in which she asked him to confirm something that seemed so preposterous on first blush, he asked her to wait while he confirmed or denied it with his superiors. After learning they had made the decision without consulting him, he leveled with Schuler and told her exactly what happened. When the story ran, Shuler simply printed the fact that the testing would happen, and she left the miscue between Johannessen and his administrators out, which Johannessen held as a sign of respect (Johannessen, June 16, 2011). Several current and former reporters in Louisiana acknowledge how much respect for and trust they have in Johannessen when he responds to one of their requests.

In addition to consistently maintaining ethical and honest practices, PIOs also recommend establishing some personal interface that allows for some humanization with reporters that will help reduce friction and antagonism over time. Marie Centanni suggested her practice for engaging press row in casual conversation while she was working for former Governor Kathleen Blanco called “cookie calls”:

When I worked for Governor Blanco, the Governor's mansion staff made the best chocolate chip cookies on a daily basis. It is staffed with inmates from Angola [State Penitentiary], and one inmate’s job is to make the cookies. He's like the, “Time to make the donuts” guy. Makes the cookies. Every day. And so, you have to consume them, or they'll go to waste. Chocolate chip cookies. They're for guests at the mansion, but if they're not eaten you have to consume them, or they'll go to waste. So every day, if I had occasion to go to the mansion and do something, I would take a big Zip-Loc bag,

and fill it with cookies, and when I got back to the building, to the capitol, I would go down to press row, and I would just hand out cookies. Just say, "Hey! Here's a cookie, Whatcha doin' today? Whatcha need? What's happening?" You know, feed them gossip, on a story I maybe wanted to suggest to them. But it gave me a reason to be down there, it kind of gave us a little bit of a personal relationship. (June 20, 2011)

4. CONCLUSION:

The ability of PIOs to build and maintain productive relationships with journalists and to better serve the public is influenced by several factors. Institutional pressures within state agencies to control messages and shape public opinion limit the ability of PIOs to be autonomous and responsive in an open and ethical manner. The level of centralization in communication within a state government limits information leaks and manages public opinion, but also limits PIO autonomy and engenders antagonism between journalists, PIOs, and state government. The economic decline of journalism is creating a dependency among some journalists upon PIOs to aid the newsgathering process. Social and digital media are opening the door for attentive PIOs to build a direct line to the public for agency messages and information that bypasses the media filter, while providing a newsgathering resource for some journalists in newsgathering. Finally, ethical practices grounded in candor are building trust and mutual respect among PIOs and journalists as they interact over time,

The data indicates that the work of scholars working on relationship management theory (RMT) and those studying journalist-practitioner relationships is still widely applicable here. Scholars that preach candor and ethical approaches are validated by the finding that both contribute to more positive reputations of PIOs (Ryan & Martinson, 1988). PIOs that work on personalizing with journalists also enjoy stronger relationships, supporting the work Cho (2006). Attention to journalistic norms and routines (Howard, 2004; Sallot & Johnson, 2006), and providing digital points of contact (Shin & Cameron, 2003a; 2003b) are both contributing to the ability of establishing greater PIO utility among journalists, supporting the work of public relations scholars stressing the value of RMT in the journalist-practitioner relationship (Ledingham & Bruning, 2007).

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CHRISTOPHER JON MCCOLLOUGH, PH.D. is an assistant professor of Public Relations, Political Communication, and Mass Communication at Columbus State University. **EMAIL:** [chris.mccollough\[at\]columbusstate.edu](mailto:chris.mccollough@columbusstate.edu)