The Academic Inquiry of Media Relations as both a Tactical and Strategic Function of Public Relations

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Abstract: *This article summarizes the current state of media relations research through a review of history, current topics, theory development and measurement issues. It suggests these five propositions for studying media relations designed to make this research more useful to those who practice public relations: media relations should be a strategic function of public relations, every organization has different media relations goals, relationships remain the key of effective media relations, media relations efforts are not a means to an end, and tools used in media relations do not define media relations.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article examines media relations as it has been studied by researchers in the academy, and offers five propositions for understanding media relations that could be employed by both researchers and practitioners in the field. The article traces media relations research through the lens of history, current trends, theory development and measurement and evaluation. It concludes that while there is much material available on "how" to practice media relations, what is needed in the academic literature is a more comprehensive examination of media relations as it relates to the overall strategy of a public relations program.

The early history of media relations in the modern age of public relations (post-1900) could be considered an era of growing pains, as early practitioners often had difficulty in defining their profession. The pre-World War II era saw the term 'publicity' used most often, though in the years following the war, 'public relations' (and later, media relations) was adopted by a majority of practitioners. This shift was predicated by a transition toward professionalism, and a return to the principles espoused by early leaders in public relations, such as Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays.

Modern scholars have primarily focused on the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists, and have continued to explore the apparent hostility between the

professions. Other areas of interest have included the tactics of media relations, such as news releases and factors of newsworthiness, the role of technology in media relations, and the role of media relations within other aspects of public relations such as environmental or crisis communication.

Scholars have, on the whole, failed to elaborate new theory that might assist practitioners. With some notable exceptions, there has been difficulty in the academic community to establish the parameters needed for a 'unifying' theory of media relations; however, media relations is not unique in this, as many aspects of public relations have a lack of theory as a distinguishing characteristic. This is understandable, as the dynamic nature of public relations, and media relations, makes the development of prescriptive theory difficult.

The final area this paper explores is the effort by scholars to establish a way to measure and evaluate media relations. While the literature has clearly denounced the use of advertising equivalence, there has not been a dominant trend in measurement to emerge as yet. However, there seems to be consensus among scholars that media relations does hold value to an organization, though the magnitude of that value is not clear, and may be dependent on the goals of the organization with regard to media relations and exposure.

The paper culminates with five propositions for media relations, which are equally important to both public relations practitioners and scholars, for a better understanding of this function of public relations. The propositions are not meant as 'rules' for practice, but rather guiding principles that are important to keep in mind when either practicing or doing research in media relations.

The first proposition indicates that media relations goes beyond simple press releases and pitches, that in fact it should be considered a strategic function of any public relations program. The second addresses that each organization has different goals with regard to media relations, including the idea that some organizations actively seek to not be featured. Proposition three states the relationship between the journalist and public relations practitioner is the key component of media relations. The fourth proposition speaks to media relations not being a means to an end, in other words, journalists should not be considered an intermediary audience. And finally, the fifth proposition states that the tools used by media relations practitioners do not define media relations, that a press release or a media kit is just that – and that media relations is defined by the actions taken, not the tools used.

In the end, this article finds that scholars should increasingly focus on the aspects of media relations that will be of greatest use to practitioners, including in particular, how to best integrate media relations as a strategic public relations function, and how to best measure and evaluate media relations for an organization.

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Introduction

Media relations has been and remains one of the most important areas of practice in public relations (Shaw & White, 2004). But the academic study of media relations was, for many years, subject to the stigma that it is primarily a tactical function of a public relations program (Grunig, 1990). And while measuring the impact of media relations has been a key area of interest for some time (Bollinger, 2001), research into the *process* of media relations has only recently sparked a large number of academic studies (Briones, et al, 2011; Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008; Gonzalez & Ruiz, 2006; Larsson, 2009; Supa & Zoch, 2009).

A recent definition of media relations speaks to both its tactical function and strategic importance. Supa and Zoch (2009) state that "media relations is the systematic, planned, purposeful and mutually beneficial relationship between a public relations practitioner and a mass media journalist." However, repositioning media relations research from a tactical focus to a strategic one requires a multi-tiered approach, including an understanding of the historical aspects of the field, a stronger understanding of past and current practices, and a move toward development of theory that will ultimately help researchers better understand the field, and to assist practitioners in their day-to-day practice. This article explores each of these areas, with a primary goal of combining all of these aspects in order to best inform media relations practice.

The second goal of this article is to establish propositions for the study of media relations. Based on the existing literature, the idea of these propositions will be not to necessarily establish a paradigm for media relations research, but rather to guide media relations researchers toward investigating and disseminating research that will be of most benefit to practitioners in the field.

Early Media Relations

It could be argued that the earliest forms of public relations as we understand it today were related to the media relations function. Pimlott (1951) stated that press agents existed as early as the 18th century in the United States, and likely even earlier in other countries. Since it is often noted that the modern era of public relations began with Ivy Lee's *Declaration of Principles* document distributed to the media in 1906 (Russell & Bishop, 2009), it is conceivable to argue that public relations (as we know it today) would not exist if not for media relations.

This is not to say there is no contention between media relations and the oft-maligned term, *publicity.* In fact, Hiebert (1966) noted that Ivy Lee's declaration was born out of contempt for the 19th century press agents. Hiebert wrote "Lee played a key role in its evolution [public relations], changing the direction from fraud, hoax, distortion, and stunts to factual information, understanding and sound policies" (p.9). But the debate between what to define the fledgling

field lasted for many years. The term "publicity" continued to be used for any attempt to gain the attention of the media. In his book, Baus (1942) defined publicity as the "dissemination of information for a motive" (p.7). He also stated that "all publicity is public relations, but not all public relations is publicity" (p.6). And for several years, those who practiced media relations became unsure of what to refer to themselves as. Pimlott (1951) writes "In 1935 there were only ten public relations counselors in the New York telephone directory as compared with 76 'publicity service bureaus'…in 1948 there were 336 entries for public relations and 232 under publicity" (p.9).

Clearly, there was a disconnect between those who were providing "public relations" services and those who continued to provide "publicity." But the differentiation is important, as the two terms helped to branch the profession in two separate directions (Supa & Zoch, 2013). Those who sought to practice public relations would branch out from only practicing media relations into what we would call today "full service public relations" inclusive of branding, business-to-business, government affairs, research, etc., while those who practiced publicity would focus more on entertainment and promotion, garnering as much printer's ink as possible, and leading to popular adages such as *there's no such thing as bad publicity* which may be popular in the entertainment industry, but the impact of negative news for any organization can be disastrous.

Over the years, public relations has become the predominant term used to describe the communication efforts of an organization to the media – and more specifically, media relations is used to describe this sometimes discrete function – though many practitioners today understand media relations is an integral part of the strategic plan of any public relations campaign. Still, the concept of media relations is not without its critics, which has for many years stunted the pursuit of media relations research. James Grunig, one of the best know academics in public relations, has been a critic of the practice for many years. He states that "the relationship between public relations and journalism continually produces conflict because many practitioners will do whatever it takes to gain exposure for their client organizations in the media…there is seldom good reason for an organization to communicate with a mass audience" (1990, p.19). He further writes that practitioners often practice a "manipulative" rather than "interactive" relationship with the media. This manipulative relationship is at the heart of the conflict between the professions, though many practitioners today recognize that it is ineffectual to work with journalists in this fashion.

However, as negative as these thoughts may be about media relations, Grunig was primarily referring to the idea of press agentry, one of his four models of public relations (Grunig, 1984), and not to strategic media relations practices. But this, coupled with a large amount of literature that have focused on varying aspects of publicity (including some from early public relations leaders) led many researchers to consider media relations more of a tactical rather than strategic function of public relations, an idea that only recently has begun to see widespread change.

State of Modern Media Relations Research

There is not a lack of media relations research that is available in either academic or professional literature (in fact, there is a substantial amount of professional literature, training seminars, websites, columns, blog posts, and so on); however, there is a lack of available information that identifies media relations through the lens of a strategic function of public relations. Furthermore, as it has been estimated that around 80% of practitioners practice media relations at least in part during their work week (Darnowski, et al, 2013), there has been little relative focus from academic researchers on media relations as compared to other aspects of public relations practice. Much of that published research has been concentrated on the relationship between practitioners and journalists, and the picture it paints is not an attractive one.

DeLorme and Fedler (2003) stated that the hostility between the professions was born at the end of World War I, when journalists feared that efforts by publicists would reduce the advertising revenue of newspapers. Voros and Alvarez (1981) compared the relationship to the game of baseball, and that most often earned its 'hardball' nature based on written and unwritten rules and traditions.

Many scholars have examined the relationship between practitioners and journalists (Aronoff, 1975; Brody, 1984; Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997; Feldman, 1961; Kopenhaver, Martinson, & Ryan, 1984; Jeffers, 1977; Sallot, 1990; Supa & Zoch, 2009), and have continuously come up with similar results, that the two professions share at best a tenuous working relationship, at worst, a distrustful non-communicative relationship. The literature tells us that journalists and practitioners who have a working relationship are more likely to trust each other and to continue the relationship. Much of the research has focused on credibility, professionalism and occupational status. On the whole, journalists tend to assign very low credibility and status to public relations practitioners, while practitioners tend to think more highly of journalists.

This disconnect hits at the heart of the problems associated with media relations. Supa and Zoch (2009) posited that the problem can, and has, been overcome on an individual level, but widespread distrust continues. They go on to state the challenge lies in the hands of the practitioners, that it is their responsibility to overcome negative perceptions held by journalists, knowing those efforts may be hindered by other practitioners who use tactics that are considerable undesirable (and unethical) by journalists.

And though the relationship between practitioners and journalists lies at the heart of media relations, it is not the only area that has been explored by researchers. One of the more popular areas of study currently is the impact of technology on public relations practice (Briones, et al, 2011; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008), of which media relations is a major part. However, few studies have specifically examined the impact of technology on the relationship between journalists and practitioners or the process of media relations. There are several notable exceptions.

Wilson and Supa (2013) examined whether public relations practitioners and journalists used Twitter to augment their relationship. They found that while journalists and public relations practitioners were using Twitter in their day-to-day personal lives, they were not using it to communicate with members of the other profession. Supa (2014) followed up this study with a qualitative examination of the adoption of social media in the media relations relationship, and found that while some journalists and practitioners saw social media as a way to augment an existing relationship, it still must adhere to the more traditional rules of media relations, including understanding deadlines, beats, and contact preferences. Other participants in the study stated they would not use social media to contact the members of the other profession. The study concluded that it still remains the job of the public relations professional to determine the best way to contact the journalist.

Another fairly recent area of focus with regard to technology and media relations is the concept of "media catching" (Tallapragada, Misaras, Burke & Waters, 2012; Waters, Tindall & Morton, 2010). This research focuses on a shift from traditional media relations where the practitioner reaches out to the journalist, to some instances where the journalists are able to "crowd source" sources via online platforms, such as HARO (Help a Reporter Out). Though it seems that these services are being used by practitioners more than journalists (Supa, Zoch & Scanlon, 2014), there is a great potential in the idea that journalists are beginning to seek out content experts as sources. If services such as HARO continue to build journalistic audiences, there could be a great opportunity for practitioners to truly build strategic media relations campaigns that utilize this technology.

Technology and media relations are a recurrent theme in much of the media relations literature, whether it be practicing media relations via corporate websites (Kent & Taylor, 2003), understanding how to use new communication technologies to communicate with journalists (Duke, 2001), or the use of new communication spheres made possible by emerging web technologies, ie, the online press room (Callison, 2003; Gonzalez & Ruiz, 2006). As communication technologies continue to change, we can expect to see an increased number of these articles that look to address those changes in the media relations function.

The tactical practice of media relations, that is, the actual construction of news releases, pitches and other media materials is also often explored by academics. Howard (2004) gives comprehensive steps needed in order to effectively practice media relations, while Cantelmo (1994) offers suggestions on targeting. Zoch and Supa (2014) offer ideas on making news releases more attractive to journalists, while Aronoff (1976) gives ways to predict whether or not media relations efforts will be successful. These studies seek to better inform the practice of media relations, but often do so on a small scale, and do not address the field in its entirety. However, taken as a whole, research into the effectiveness of media relations tactics is highly beneficial to practitioners, and these studies (with many others), combined with the multitude of tips, suggestions and checklists available on the web, in newsletters, or as handouts as seminars, help to guide practitioners to better their trade.

Clearly, the media relations function of public relations is not being ignored, and it is often the case that media relations is mentioned as part of a larger piece of campaign evaluation and social media (Briones, et al, 2011; Curtis, et al, 2009) or of its impact in another area of public relations, such as public affairs (Adams, 1995), environmental communication (Sachsman, 1976), or crisis communications (Trahan, 1993). And while it is important that media relations is being included as part of comprehensive public relations programs, it is also noteworthy that relatively few researchers are examining media relations on its own as a strategic function of public relations.

Theory Development

Throughout the public relations field, theory development is an area that is in need of work. While there are several popular public relations specific theories, such as Excellence Theory (Grunig, 1984), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 1995, Relationship Management Theory (Ledingham, 2003), the field is still lacking in its theory development. Such is definitively the case when it comes to media relations, as very few researchers have sought to develop theories in the area.

Instead, media relations researchers often rely on established theories that can be applied to the media relations context, such as gatekeeping (Lewin, 1947; White, 1950), agenda-setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and framing (Entman, 1993). It is not surprising that researchers would adopt more established theories in order to investigate media relations because, as Broom, Casey and Ritchie (1997) point out, it is difficult to establish relationship theory without first defining what the relationship is. Because media relations may mean different things to different people, and because the nature of the media relations relationship differs depending on the journalist, the practitioner, and the organization's media relations goals, even beginning to establish a theory of media relations is difficult. However, it is not impossible, and several researchers have sought to establish theoretical constructs for the practice of media relations.

Every scholar that has attempted to establish media relations theory, however, has accepted that media relations practitioners have the *ability* to influence the production of media. Common practice tells us this is the case, that the "gatekeeping" process includes a variety of factors, including some outside of journalism profession which would include media relations practitioners(Cameron, Sallot & Curtin, 1997; Curtin, 1999; Morton, 1986; Morton & Warren, 1992; Turk, 1985; Turk, 1986). Therefore, media relations theories tend to be more descriptive in nature. Zoch and Molleda (2006) were among the first to establish a purely media relations theory. Their model of media relations looked at the organizational process of creating a media relations program or campaign, and were less focused on the dissemination to external media. In other words, they did not examine the relationship between the professions. Pang (2010) took the work started by Zoch and Molleda and extended it to understanding how practitioners can best seek to communicate with journalists. Pang identified two sets of influencers that practitioners must seek to understand before being able to conduct effective media relations. The first is the internal practices of the journalist, including their mindset and newsroom practices. The second is "extra-media" influencers, including outside influences and ideologies. Pang

identified his model as being journalist-centered, which for media relations practitioners, is in line with best practices (Howard, 2004).

And while theory development specific to media relations has been lacking, it is not the only area of public relations that has encountered this difficulty, and the lack of predominant theory will allow scholars to explore the various facets of media relations and to test new theory within the field without a paradigmatic constraint.

Measurement & Evaluation

A final area of media relations practice of interest to academics and professionals is the idea of measurement and evaluation of media relations. For many years, the question of evaluation was concerned with the "value" of media attention, the oft-maligned AVE (advertising value equivalency). And though for many years this has been the derision of many, there is no doubt that it is still used by some (if not many) in the field of public relations. However, it has been continuously rebuked by academics and practitioners, and in fact, as Watson points out, it has not appeared "at all in the measurement and evaluation research that burgeoned from the late 1970's" (IPR, 2012).

Since examining the "value" of media relations efforts in these terms is an erroneous exercise at best, practitioners are left with more questions than answers in determining how best to measure media relations efforts. And often, the more researchers attempt to simplify the measurement of media relations, the more convoluted and complex it becomes.

But some researchers have been able to simplify the (potentially) complex process of measurement, though not always specifically designed for media relations. Stacks (2011) offers a simple breakdown of measurement for public relations, that of establishing three types of objects (informational, motivational and behavioral) and measuring success or failure against them. Bollinger (2001) more specifically examined the media relations process, and established a scoring method for press releases. Likely, Rockland and Weiner developed four models to evaluate the return on investment (ROI) of an organizations' media relations efforts (2006). Jeffrey, Michaelson and Stacks (2007) focused on overall share of media coverage and applied it to business outcomes (financial gain). One common thread throughout much of media relations measurement is the idea of showing value back to the organization, in other words, providing a financial gain based on the expenditures to conduct a media relations campaign.

However, research to date has been unable to come up with a definitive answer to the question of value of media relations efforts. The only agreement between all of the available research seems to be that there is some value to media relations efforts to an organization, though the magnitude of that value can differ greatly. Often, however, the media relations efforts become measured not necessarily because of the researchers' intent to study media relations, but because of the ease of measuring media coverage as an outcome measure. In other words, media coverage is often equated to public relations efforts – though some practitioners might agree that

a tangible benefit of media relations efforts is to *not* be covered, which is intrinsically much more difficult to measure.

Discussion

It is simply not possible to cover the scope of media relations research in a single paper; however, it is also not the goal of the present work to do so. However, this review of the field has attempted to provide a window into the current state of the field of research in media relations, and based on that state, to offer several propositions moving forward in investigating this very important function of public relations.

Based then on the relevant literature, and the direction media relations research has moved over the past decade, the following propositions are offered as possible guiding principles to future investigation of the media relations function.

Proposition 1: Media relations should be viewed as a strategic function of public relations.

While much research into media relations has moved in this direction, it is imperative that future research continue this momentum of not only considering media relations to be a tactic of public relations. Very few people would look at investor relations, consumer relations or government relations as tactics of public relations, and the same should be considered of media relations. The goal of media relations is not to "only" obtain media coverage, but to develop relationships with those people who are able to best communicate with audiences across the spectrum. And while new media technologies allow for public relations professionals to directly communicate with multiple stakeholder groups, third-party credibility remains an important aspect, which can often best be gained by developing relationships with journalists.

Proposition 2: Every organization has different media relations goals.

It is often assumed that if an organization is featured in the media, they must have done something "right" whereas the competitor organizations did something "wrong" or at the very least, missed an opportunity. This should not be an assumed truism. Many organizations, for whatever reason, choose not to engage in proactive placements of stories; however, this does not mean that they should not engage in media relations. Organizations that do not want the spotlight that media coverage often results in must also engage in media relations, and must work as equally hard in developing relationships. Therefore, researchers must take caution in understanding the goals of the organization before assigning that organization as either effective or ineffective at practicing media relations. Likewise, researchers looking to measure the impact of public relations or media relations for an organization should not assume that media coverage equates to success.

Proposition 3: In media relations, the relationship is key.

Research has shown that many journalists and public relations practitioners share a solid working relationship. However, the perception of the relationship is one of contention and antipathy. Researchers should continue to examine the relationships between practitioners and journalists, and recognize that not all media relations relationships are created equally. For example, an organization may want to spend much time fostering a relationship with its local media, but may only occasionally communicate with national media journalists. While both are examples of media relations, they are two very different types of relationships, which researchers need to recognize in any evaluation of media relations efforts. Also, when examining the relationship between the professions, researchers must examine it from both sides, the practitioner and the journalist. Doing research with only practitioners or journalists fails to give as complete a picture as needed to truly understand the relationship.

Proposition 4: Media relations efforts are not a means to an end.

Effective media relations practitioners do not view journalists as an intermediary, or as merely a gatekeeper, to be fed information and expected to disseminate it. Rather, effective media relations practitioners view journalists as a stakeholder group, to be treated with the same respect as any other stakeholder group. Researchers should also not look at the journalist in the media relations relationship as an intervening audience, but rather as a primary audience. This may require a rethinking of measurement in terms of treating the media relations process as a final one, and the resultant outcomes from consumers viewing the media as a separate process to be measured. In other words, researchers should look to measure the media relations process first, and the result of that process with other audiences second.

Proposition 5: Tools used in media relations do not define media relations.

Too often, the tools used by the media relations practitioner are confused as being the media relations effort. Press releases, pitches, social media and media tours are all part of what makes up media relations, but the true nature of media relations is defined by the use and impact of these tools on the relationship between practitioners and journalists. While most researchers are careful to recognize the difference between the tools (outputs) and results (outcomes), it is imperative in order to consider media relations a strategic function, researchers do not subjugate media relations as being a collection of tools and channels to communicate with journalists.

Conclusions

Media relations plays a vital role for many public relations practitioners. Researchers need to recognize this and ensure that the research being done is working toward helping those practitioners increase their effectiveness. As mentioned above, there is a substantial amount of material available for the 'nuts and bolts' practice of media relations, but what is lacking is a substantial body of literature that addresses the big picture issues that media relations

practitioners face. Those issues, including how to best integrate media relations as a strategic function in public relations programs, how to best measure and evaluate the discrete function of media relations, how to best incorporate new communication platforms as a tool of media relations with different media audiences, as well as larger field issues such as development of theory in media relations should be some of the areas that researchers look to as they continue to better understand the media relations function. The propositions for that research, as set forth here, are intended to help guide the researcher, and the young practitioner, as they begin the journey of discovery within media relations.

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