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Media relations in an evolving media landscape

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to test the viability of the media relations framework, Mediating the Media model (Pang, 2010), and ascertains its relevance to practitioners in a changing media landscape in Singapore where social media is emerging as an alternative source of information tool.

Design/methodology/approach – In-depth interviews with 20 media relations practitioners who were former journalists. Practitioners with journalism experience were chosen as they perform better at media relations (Sallot and Johnson, 2006a; Sinaga and Callison, 2008).

Findings – The model posits two sets of influences, i.e. internal (journalist mindset, journalist routines and newsroom routines) and external (extra-media forces and media ideology) in media relations. Internal influences were found to be more prevalent than external influences and journalist mindset was the most pervasive factor influencing media relations.

Research limitations/implications – Findings are based solely on interviews and some claims cannot be corroborated. As this is a qualitative study situated in one country, it is also not generalizable.

Practical implications – This study will serve useful insights for new practitioners to approach media relations in a holistic and systematic manner and for seasoned practitioners to re-evaluate their current media strategies.

Originality/value – This inaugural test found rigor in the model, and affords an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of journalist-practitioner relationships in a changing media landscape. It also presents an intriguing opportunity for the model to be applied to countries where the media industry operates under vastly different environments so as to ensure that the model stands up to scrutiny as it seeks to be positioned as a viable model for media relations.

Keywords Newspapers, Singapore, Mass media, Public relations, Communication management, Press relations

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Media relations has been a predominant function of public relations practitioners (Wilcox and Cameron, 2009; Spicer, 1997) and also the most visible (Supa and Zoch, 2009; White and Raman, 2000). Despite its important function, there is a lack of a systemic framework to study media relations, with most studies focusing on the tactical rather than strategic aspects (Supa and Zoch, 2009; Taylor, 2000) based mostly on practitioners' experiences (Bagin and Fulginiti, 2005; Supa and Zoch, 2009). There is a need for a systematic framework that enables practitioners to examine the environment in which the journalists, media organizations and practitioners operate in (Anderson and Lowrey, 2007; Cho, 2006). Pang's (2010) journalist-centric Mediating the Media model seeks to equip practitioners with a holistic and comprehensive framework to cultivate media relations. This model identifies two sets of influences, internal and external. Internal influences include journalist mindsets, journalist routines and newsroom routines. External influences include extra-media forces and

media ideology. The model seeks to “win journalists over by the knowledge of their work and their profession” (Pang, 2010, p. 193) beyond fulfilling the information subsidy function.

This study addresses Pang’s (2010) call to test the viability of the Mediating the Media model. The changing media landscape in Singapore presents an intriguing context to test the model. Even with the emergence of social media, the mainstream media remains dominant with high readership and viewership figures (Heng, 2012; Oon, 2009). Effective cultivation of journalists from mainstream media remains critical. This study seeks to test the model by examining how an understanding of internal and external influences helps practitioners to cultivate effective media relations. Which of these two sets of influences are more pervasive in Singapore? Are there other factors? How applicable and relevant is the Mediating the Media model to practitioners?

Data comes from interviews with media relations practitioners who were former journalists as they have been found to perform better at media relations (Sallot and Johnson, 2006a; Sinaga and Callison, 2008) than those without journalism experience. They are thus able to attest to the relevance and rigor of the model. The interviewees spent between 20 and 90 per cent of their time on media relations.

This study is significant on three fronts. First, it is the inaugural test of the Mediating the Media model. Its ability to stand up to the test of empirical scrutiny would enhance its aspiration to be a viable model for media relations. Second, this study provides useful insights to new practitioners so they can approach media relations in a strategic manner and for seasoned practitioners to re-evaluate their current media strategies. For new practitioners, it would help them understand the important factors in media relations. For seasoned practitioners, it would encourage them to re-evaluate their current strategies and improve their media practices. Third, it is hoped that insights gained from this study can be instructive for practitioners in other countries. Testing the model in Singapore, where social media and mainstream media intersect, affords practitioners a template to consider assessing the state of media relations and the various influences at work in other countries. Applying the model in other countries can provide a more in-depth understanding of media relations in varied socio-political settings.

Background: Singapore’s evolving media landscape

Singapore’s highly legislated media industry is anchored by two local media players, Singapore Press Holdings, which owns most of the print media and MediaCorp, which owns most of the broadcast media. The local media is complemented by international media, including *Asian Wall Street Journal*, *International Herald Tribune* and the *Economist*. Reuters, CNBC Asia and the Dow Jones Group have their regional HQs located in Singapore (Ministry of Communication and Information, 2012). With the advent of social media technologies, a significant shift in audiences’ news consumption habits is to be expected. From 1.2 million internet users in 2000 to more than 3.6 million in 2011, Singapore has one of the world’s highest internet penetrations at 77.2 per cent, comparable to the USA which had 78.6 per cent and Europe’s 61.3 per cent (IWS, 2012). Thus, besides traditional media, audiences here have easy access to online news portals, blogs and non-mainstream media channels (Oon, 2009). However, despite the emergence of new technologies and the use of social media, mainstream media remain dominant. US-based PR firm Edelman found the traditional media remain the most trusted source of information (Lee, 2009). Even though all the mainstream media now run parallel digital editions on top of their respective print/broadcast media, just 11.3

per cent read these versions compared to 68.4 per cent reading the hard-copy newspaper, according to Nielsen's Media Index Report 2012 (Heng, 2012). Between 2011 and 2012, television viewership only dipped slightly from 75 to 73.5 per cent (Heng, 2012). What this means for practitioners is that cultivating effective media relations with mainstream media remains a paramount task.

Indeed, media relations in Singapore have remained a staple and critical public relations function among practitioners (Low and Kwa, 2005; Tan, 2001; Wee *et al.*, 1996; Yeap, 1995; Yeo and Sriramesh, 2009). Consistently, it is a top source of revenue for most public relations agencies (Chay-Nemeth, 2009; Tan, 2001). Top management often used successful and positive media coverage as a key indicator to assess effectiveness (Pang and Yeo, 2009). The challenge for practitioners in the immediate future is to enhance their media relations efforts with mainstream media, while monitoring the gradual shift in news consumption patterns among audiences in an evolving media landscape.

Literature review

Media relations encompasses all types of initiatives – including maintaining and updating media contacts, disseminating news releases, organizing press conferences, offering content and responding to media queries (Dozier *et al.*, 1995; Waters *et al.*, 2010) – primarily to seek favourable publicity by “systematically distributing information subsidies” (Sallot and Johnson, 2006b, p. 83). Information subsidy describes the generation of news content and pre-packaged information for the media. By performing some or most of the work that journalists seek (Sallot *et al.*, 1998), practitioners aim to further organizational objectives and promote organizational agendas (Bland *et al.*, 2005; Davis, 2000; Zoch and Molleda, 2006) and build corporate reputation. Carroll and McCombs (2003) applied the agenda-setting theory to examine how first and second level agenda setting affected stakeholders' perception of the organization. They posited that more coverage would lead to more awareness of the organization; and the more coverage of particular attributes of the organization would lead to stakeholders' defining and perceiving the organization by these attributes. The more the organization communicates its agenda, the more there will be discussion and media coverage of the organization and its attributes, they argued. Stakeholders depend on the media to learn about the organization, argued Einwiller *et al.* (2010) particularly if they have no direct experience with the organization. Thus, practitioners' influence on news content has consistently been found to be significant (Curtin and Rhodenbaugh, 2001; Seletzky and Lehman-Wilzig, 2010).

Mediating the Media model: a journalistic-centric media relations model

Pang's (2010) Mediating the Media model, inspired by Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) theory of influence, is based on three assumptions. Practitioners must recognize the need to engage in proactive media relations, consider it their responsibility to cultivate good media relations (Sallot and Johnson, 2006a) and understand how journalists work and the environment they operate in. The Mediating the Media model identified two sets of influences, internal and external. Internal influences include journalist mindsets, journalist routines and newsroom routines. External influences include extra-media forces and media ideology.

Internal influences

Journalist mindset. Journalists are guided by traditional news values like immediacy, excitement and novelty that determine their choice of stories and angling

(Chibnall, 1977). Journalists' background and characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and education (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996) also influence what they perceive to be news and relevant content for their audiences. This determined how journalists select news (Sinaga and Wu, 2007).

Practitioners therefore need to understand what makes news and how journalists write as the knowledge can help practitioners get better media coverage (Sallot and Johnson, 2006a). This includes providing easy accessibility, exclusive stories and useful, timely and well-written information (Bagin and Fulginiti, 2005). Additionally, interpersonal relationships such as prior interactions, practitioners' professional work ethics and news sense would stand the practitioners in good stead with the journalists during subsequent interactions. This means practitioners should undergo extensive media training, engage in systematic monitoring of the various media platforms, and improve their writing skills (Sallot and Johnson, 2006a, b).

Journalist routines. Journalists adhere to work routines including deadlines, publishing balanced stories and fair and neutral reporting (Richards, 1998; Ruff and Aziz, 2003). To do this effectively, journalists need fast and immediate information (Richards, 1998; Yoon, 2005). Therefore, they appreciate qualities like timeliness, accessibility and transparency (Bagin and Fulginiti, 2005).

When practitioners fail to help journalists meet their deadlines, not only will they lose the opportunity to get fair media coverage for their organizations, they also stand to lose the journalists' trust (Ruff and Aziz, 2003). Practitioners should familiarize themselves with each news organizations' deadlines and production routines and plan media events that maximize chances of coverage (Richards, 1998).

Newsroom or organizational routines. Each newsroom has different groups of news workers who work through each story, such as editors, copy writers, sub-editors and even photographers (Pang, 2010). Practitioners may also be able to influence editorial decisions by liaising directly with the editors.

Practitioners thus need to understand where the power that ultimately decides news output lies. They should cultivate relations with other newsroom staff, like the administrators, camera crew and photographers who can influence story selection and salience (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Budget constraints and manpower limitations may also impact what news gets covered. During crunch periods, organizations are more likely to rely on practitioners for information (Sinaga and Wu, 2007). Practitioners who understand such constraints would deliver information, footages and story ideas to journalists "on a platter", to ensure maximum coverage.

External influences

Extra-media forces. These include the existing relationships between organizations and media establishments, the presence of market forces, restrictions posed by government regulations and legalities, the size and nature of the media industry and the intensity of the media competition (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Legal constraints such as defamation, sedition and internal security laws restrict what journalists could use as information in their reports.

The implications for practitioners are thus: understanding legal parameters, for instance, would help them know the limits in which they could position the organization in the media. For instance, one might be tempted to persuade the media to criticize a competitor in the media. This might be futile because the media might not report it if it infringes on defamation laws. This guides the types of information practitioners should use when engaging journalists. For instance, the use of credible sources like the

government to supplement news has been found to influence coverage (Kim and Bae, 2006; Len-Rios *et al.*, 2009; Powell and Self, 2003). Practitioners who are savvy to the kinds of sources that work well for journalists would stand a better chance of coverage.

Media ideology. Media ideology refers to media organizations' role in society and their reasons for existence (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). In the USA and UK, journalists consider themselves as the fourth estate (Hearns-Branaman, 2011; Pfetsch, 2001) and are protected by law while in China, a more submissive press system is in place (Merrill, 2000; Parsons, 1997). State-press ideology affects the relationship between organizations and the media and influences the way news gets disseminated (Pang, 2006; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). Carroll (2011) argued this as part of media systems, or what he described as "national media environments" (p. 432).

Practitioners thus need to understand the role each media plays in society. This will help them navigate the media landscape. In the UK, for instance, there are quality national broadsheets like *The Financial Times*, *The Times*, *Independent*, and mid-market tabloids like the *Daily Mail* and the down market tabloids like the *Sun* and *Daily Mirror* (Ruff and Aziz, 2003), followed by regional daily press and local newspapers. Each plays a specific role in society. A tabloid may be shunned by the elites, but they are proven channels that reach out to the less educated (Pang, 1996). Knowing where each media fits into the societal puzzle would help practitioners decide how to tailor messages to suit their specific audiences.

How the model works

Like Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) model, this model similarly comprises five layers of concentric circles, described as a "hierarchy of influence", each growing in importance and pervasiveness as it expands. At the heart or the bulls' eye of the concentric circle is journalist mindset, followed by journalist routines, newsroom or organizational routines, extra-media influences and media ideology (see Figure 1).

Though the model may often be regarded as a hierarchical flow of influences, Pang (2010) agrees with Shoemaker and Reese (1996) that what is of greater significance is first, to "better appreciate the different perspectives that are possible" because any single perspective does not present the "complete picture"; and second, "combining multiple levels of analysis" allows us to draw "connections" among them (p. 271).

Based on the arguments, this study seeks to examine:

- RQ1.* How does the understanding of internal influences help build effective media relations?
- RQ2.* How does the understanding of external influences help build effective media relations?
- RQ3.* What other factors influence and affect the building of effective media relations?
- RQ4.* How are the influences, both internal and external, ordered in terms of pervasiveness of influence?
- RQ5.* How relevant and applicable is the model?

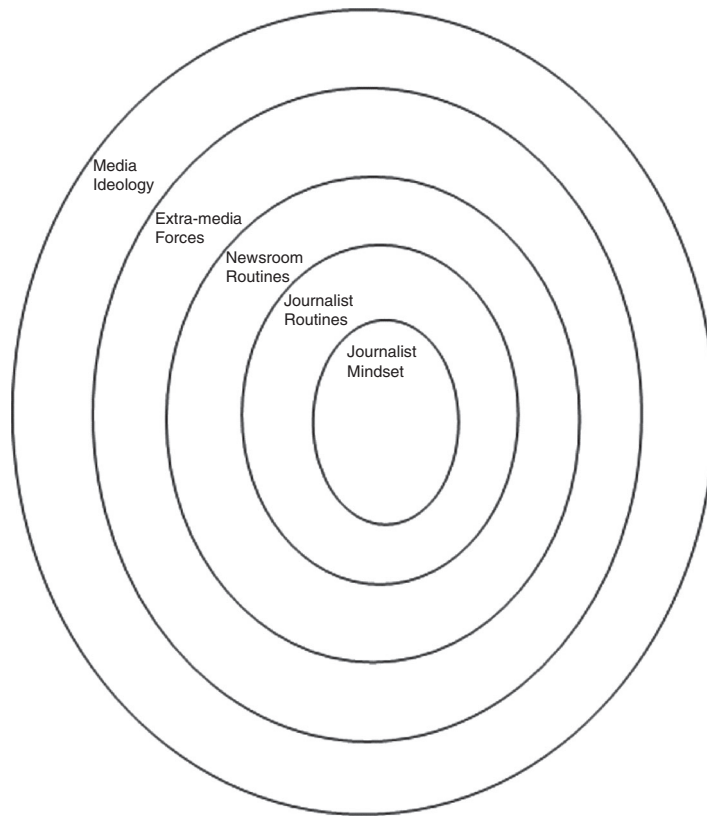


Figure 1.
Hierarchy of influence
of media relations in
Mediating the Media
model

Method

For this inaugural testing of the Mediating the Media model, face-to-face, in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 media relations practitioners who were ex-journalists with substantial newsroom experience. The in-depth interview method is suitable for an exploratory research (Hill and White, 2000; White and Raman, 2000). This method can also provide abundant data in the form of practitioners' experiences and anecdotes (DeSanto and Moss, 2005).

The approach taken here is adapted from McCracken's four-stage process of long-interview inquiry. The long interview provides the researcher "the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves" (McCracken, 1988, p. 9). The four-stage process includes first, review of analytic categories (i.e. literature review). Questions were developed for the interview based on the model. The review of analytic categories, although providing a framework for this study, was designed not to bias data. Rather, because the researchers were well versed with the literature, it aided in defining domains to be explored. Second, review of cultural categories. Since the interviews were conducted in Singapore, the researchers' cognizance of cultural nuances and innuendos were useful to explain possible bias that may have unintentionally resulted in the interpretation of data. The latter staged processes, the interview procedure and interview analysis, will be elaborated below.

Interview procedure: selecting the interviewees

Practitioners with journalism experience were interviewed as they have been found to perform better at media relations (Sallot and Johnson, 2006a; Sinaga and Callison, 2008) thus they are most able to attest to test the rigor of the model. The perspectives of these former journalists will add to the richness of the data as they can appreciate the dynamics of relations from both sides (DeLorme and Fedler, 2003; Tilley and Hollings, 2008).

These 20 former journalists-turned-PR practitioners interviewed were from 17 organizations across seven industries in Singapore, namely, banking and finance; education, government and public agencies; healthcare; property; transportation and PR consultancy. Half were from the public sector and the other half from the private sector. The interviewees' PR experience ranged from one to 18 years and their newsroom experience ranged from one to 20 years. The diverse mix of experience proved to be insightful: While those who had substantial PR experience provided deep insights into the dynamics of the relationship between practitioners and journalists, those who had fewer years of experience and had just left the newsrooms were more familiar with current newsroom routines (see Table I).

Data collection

Data were collected from March to May 2012. Given that practitioners who were ex-journalists form a group with specific background experience, purposive sampling was used to reach out to the participants (Berg, 2009). First, practitioners who have served in the local media industry before switching to PR were approached. Through chain referral sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Penrod *et al.*, 2003), participants recommended other practitioners with similar professional backgrounds. This snowballing sampling strategy was useful in locating the subjects with specific work experiences (Berg, 2009).

An interview guide was used to aid the data collection process (see Appendix). A semi-structured interview protocol was designed to examine the influences of both internal and external forces. Beyond that, questions were also asked to solicit other factors not posited in the model. Participants' responses were noted and transcribed. At the end of each interview, every practitioner was shown a figure of the conceptual

Indicators	Interviewee profile	No. of participants
Designation	Director level	7
	Executive – senior executive level	12
	CEO	1
	Total	20
% of time spent on media relations	0-20	2
	20-40	2
	40-60	5
	60-80	6
	80 and above	5
	Total	20
Access to dominant coalition	Part of dominant coalition	5
	Direct access to dominant coalition	13
	Indirect access to dominant coalition	2
	Total	20

Table I.
Table summarizing
interviewee profile

model and asked to rank the influences in order of pervasiveness and the impact exerted on media relations. Each interview lasted between one and two hours.

Interview analysis

The interview analysis was conducted according to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) constant comparative method for inductive data analysis of interview data. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the constant comparative method follows four distinct stages:

- (1) comparing incidents in each category;
- (2) integrating the categories;
- (3) delimiting the theory; and
- (4) writing the theory.

This method combines the categorization of the themes with a "simultaneous comparison of all social incidents observed", (Goetz and LeCompte, 1981, p. 58). As the data are recorded and classified into themes, they are also compared across all the categories (Dye *et al.*, 2000).

The data were analysed according to the following steps, based on Dye *et al.*' (2000) stages: first, a unitizing process was carried out by noting each statement, illustration and anecdote offered by the participants during the interviews; second, statements, illustrations and anecdotes supporting similar influencing factors were noted and grouped together; third, the data were constantly refined and integrated to identify consistent themes pertaining to each research question; and fourth, the process was repeated until no new patterns or themes were identified.

The findings were then presented according to the themes that emerged. As new themes emerged, data were constantly compared against the already established themes. The heart of this study lies in ascertaining practitioners' understanding and evaluation of the influencing factors that contribute towards the building of effective media relations. Similarly, the themes gleaned revolved around practitioners' interpretation and appraisal of each of the internal and external influences. For example, in analysing the impact of internal influences, three main themes were identified under the category, "understanding journalist mindset". They were: first, effective methods of establishing contact with journalists; second, understanding of journalists' news values and interests; and third, the importance of writing skills for practitioners.

As the data analysis progressed to subsequent categories and new themes emerged, data were constantly compared against the already established themes and the newly identified themes. For instance, when analysing practitioners' understanding of journalist routines, two new themes emerged: adhering to journalists' deadlines and accessibility of practitioners to journalists. However, during the explication of these factors, the interviewees kept on insisting that, as long as the information offered by practitioners was newsworthy enough, journalists would be flexible with their work schedules and be accommodating. These data were relevant to the theme that emerged in the earlier category, i.e. understanding of journalists' news values and interests under the category, journalist mindset. This suggested that the understanding of news values influenced media relations to a higher degree than merely adhering to journalists' routines. By comparing the data under newly emerging themes and already established themes, the influencing factors were constantly compared against each other to produce meaningful interpretation of the findings.

Findings and discussion

RQ1 examined how understanding of internal influences helped build effective media relations.

Journalist mindset

Three themes were identified. The first focused on how the practitioners established contact with the journalists who covered their industry, how they kept up with journalists' movements in the industry and how they approached journalists. The second theme focused on practitioners' understanding of journalists' news values, professional orientations and their general interests. The third theme discussed the importance of writing skills. First, findings revealed that practitioners were in constant contact with the journalists especially with those who frequently covered their industry and organizations. Most maintained their newsroom contacts through regular meetings in both formal and informal settings. Practitioners' understanding of journalists' professional interests and news values were very much dependent on the media organization that the reporters worked for and their specific beats. Engaging the journalists and finding out more about their beats and interests helped the practitioners to approach the reporters with suitable story pitches. An interviewee shared:

My first priority will be to ascertain what is newsworthy about the story and the relevant beats that might be interested in the story. I will also see what type of stories a particular paper will be interested in. *The Straits Times* covers mostly mainstream news while vernacular dailies like *Berita Harian* and *Tamil Murasu* tend to focus more on community stories and the achievements of their specific ethnic groups.

However, the participants noted other practitioners who lacked news sense could jeopardize the relationships of those who had more astute news sense. A senior practitioner said:

I have to rewrite all their press releases [of junior practitioners in the same organisation]. When it comes to nuancing, positioning and angling messages and shaping stories, very few actually do it well. They are very good at collating all the relevant facts but when it comes to presenting it in a manner that attracts the journalists and serves the interests of the organization, there is a clear lack of skills.

As for granting exclusives, these practitioners were ambivalent about the value of scoops as they did not want to be seen playing favourites as Singapore's media industry is small with only two major key players, i.e. SPH and MediaCorp. Second, understanding the journalists' mindset was described as the foremost aspect in establishing effective relationships. This meant knowing the journalists' media platforms and beats, news interests and professional orientations. Third, writing to appeal to their orientations and interests was deemed most essential and fundamental. Understanding journalists' news values was regarded as the most important.

Journalist routines

In studying the importance of journalist routines, two themes emerged. The first revolved around practitioners' knowledge of journalists' deadlines and their familiarity with the different beats, news sections and segments in the various media organizations. The second was based on how practitioners used this knowledge to leverage on journalists' deadline pressures to maximize positive coverage.

The findings showed that most participants were not entirely familiar with the journalists' deadlines and routines. A practitioner explained:

To be frank, we are not as familiar with TV and radio because it's a kind of commitment you need. For radio, if it's a one-hour talk show, your spokesperson needs to be available for 1 hour. It's usually quite unlikely. A lot of senior managers in Singapore are very traditional. To them seeing news published in papers is more valuable than a radio talk show. For print, it is much easier. You can do phone interviews or give quotes. I can draft the replies and get the CEO to approve even when he is travelling.

All said they were accessible to journalists through their office phones, mobiles and e-mails any time of the day. Despite that, responding to media queries would not be immediate as they had to work within organizational constraints, like generating data and collating information from other units. Although they tried to respond within a day, delay was possible and often beyond their control. However, many did not regard understanding newsroom deadlines as critical because of the 24/7 news cycle. Interviewees were asked if they tried to leverage on journalists' deadline pressures by releasing information late to avoid follow-up questions. Most said they would not as this would mean a missed opportunity to clarify their organizations' positions and they wanted to give journalists ample time to write a well-balanced story.

Newsroom and organizational routines

Here, two themes were found. The first was knowledge of media organizations' hierarchical structure and layers of control. The second revolved around practitioners' understanding of the individual newsroom's workflow. First, understanding the organizational structure of the newsrooms was deemed necessary and useful. Practitioners were fairly familiar with the hierarchical structure in the newsrooms. On occasions when they did not agree with a reporter, they consulted with the supervising editors, who often took a more conciliatory tone. One practitioner explained:

It is important to know the editors because sometimes when you are dealing with a difficult journalist it helps and you can approach the editor and explain. It is not so much to complain but sometimes journalists tend to get off track. The editors are usually more grounded and open to reasoning.

Newer practitioners, especially those who had recently left the newsrooms, acknowledged the importance of cultivating other contacts such as the editorial administrators and managers, photographers and camera crew because they could influence the story.

Photographers and camera men could help make or break a story through their visuals. Outstanding visuals may catapult the story to become the top story, while less compelling visuals could lead to less prominent placements, thus diminishing the impact of the story. Second, interviewees said that understanding news-production cycles, workflow and media organizations' resource limitations were useful but not critical. They avoided directly influencing the prominence of their stories as this often depended on other factors within the newsrooms like other competing stories.

Impact of internal influences on media relations

Findings showed that understanding the journalist mindset – their news values and professional interests – was most important. Seasoned practitioners attributed their success to the ability to appeal to the journalists' professional imperatives such as immediacy, novelty, personalization and dramatization (Chibnall, 1977). This included providing suitable, newsworthy content for the specific beats and contextualizing

information for journalists. This helped journalists save time and some practitioners said that they spent up to 50 per cent of their time working on information subsidies by collating data, teaming up with research groups, conceiving video and picture opportunities and providing relevant news angles. The interviewees also spoke at length about proactive media relations, establishing, seeking and getting acquainted with the journalists constantly. However, other internal factors such as knowing journalists' routines and deadlines and news production workflow as long as they had good news would be assured.

The current 24/7 news cycle that journalists could update information became available. For example, *STonline* and *CNA online* web sites which belong to *The Straits Times* and *Channel NewsAsia*, respectively regularly update their news portals as soon as new information is available.

What this means. It appears that journalists were drawn to information subsidies that helped to fulfil their professional roles and organizational objectives (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). They welcomed information subsidies that were properly verified, had impact, contained elements of novelty and had entertainment values (Johnstone *et al.*, 1972). Understanding what appealed to the journalist and providing newsworthy information subsidies would ensure practitioners the desired media coverage and serve to enhance practitioner-journalist relationships (DeLorme and Fedler, 2003; Sallot and Johnson, 2006a; Sallot *et al.*, 1998). Information subsidy should also be complemented by good writing skills as well-written pitches and press releases had better chances of media coverage (Bagin and Fulginiti, 2005; Foster, 2008; Lattimore *et al.*, 2004).

The second research question examined how understanding of external influences helped build effective media relations.

Extra-media forces

Two themes were identified. The first centred on environmental factors such as the competition within the media industry, the size and nature of Singapore's media industry and the impact of the increasing popularity of digital versions of traditional media outlets. The second theme focused on the impact of legal parameters such as limitations imposed by the Newspapers and Printing Presses Act and the Official Secrets Act. Through the printing license law, for instance, newspapers faced the prospect of losing their licenses when their editors or journalists criticize the government (Taylor and Kent, 1999). The Official Secrets Act determined what is classified as official secret. First, many practitioners felt there was no meaningful competition with only two major media players, i.e. SPH and MediaCorp. Even though there were ten dailies, each had a niche role, catering to specific audiences. Even as participants agreed competition was not dynamic, it could be intense: Journalists would always try to outdo one another. Thus, at the macro level, the lack of meaningful competition between the two media giants does not warrant much work when engaging the media at large, on the other hand, at the micro level, practitioners needed to work harder to engage each journalist as they try to outdo journalists from other media outlets. To balance the two, a nuanced approach where one did not antagonize other journalists was often taken.

At the media platform level, the proliferation of digital media and social media platforms did not seem to have reduced the significance and relevance of traditional

media to the PR practitioners. They said that even as they ramped up on their online presence, traditional media relations like emailing and calling remained *de rigueur*.

Second, legal considerations like the possibility of defamation suits, breaching confidentiality agreements (e.g. customer confidentiality) and business regulations were deemed more important as the practitioners said they had to be constantly mindful of limitations unique to their specific industries, especially those that served sectors like the financial services, healthcare, property and banking. Another practitioner shared:

We have to be mindful of what we say in our articles and quotes. We may have to go through our legal department regularly to check on our media releases. We cannot be seen as openly vying for customers and promoting our products when we write advisory columns, contribute articles or within news reports. We cannot be seen as giving out financial advice without talking about the inherent risks of a certain product. Yes it is a major consideration.

They had to act cautiously and avoid breaching certain confidentiality agreements. This did not impact media relations, they added, as journalists were familiar with and appreciate such constraints as well.

Media ideology

Practitioners' understanding of media ideology was based on the larger socio-political environment that journalists in Singapore operate in where the Singapore media plays a pro-establishment role to support the government (Turnbull, 1995). As such, certain topics were taboo in order to preserve a harmonious society. One practitioner said:

For companies, what we need to know is that there are certain OB markers that we need to be aware of so that we don't get into trouble with the public and the regulators. In general we are sensible business people. We don't want to say things that will upset the regulators unnecessarily.

The parameters in which the media needed to work within were euphemistically called OB markers or "out-of-bounds". The OB markers included sensitive topics such as language, race, religion, foreign politics and unsubstantiated criticisms of public institutions (Cheong, 2013). Practitioners acknowledged that the onus was on them to understand these sensitivities. Failure to do so would backfire on the organization even if there was no intention to breach any unwritten rules.

Impact of external influences on media relations

It appears that external influences did not exert as much impact as internal influences in building media relations. Understanding extra-media forces and media ideology on journalists had an indirect impact on how practitioners worked with journalists but these were subdued compared to the internal influences. Even though extra-media forces such as the nature of the media industry, the level of media competition, legalities and governmental regulations influenced how media content was shaped, practitioners considered them as part of the eco-system with little direct impact on day-to-day media relations. Additionally, the legal parameters including the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, Internal Security Act, Official Secrets Act and other legalities such as defamation and sedition laws had already demarcated the boundaries.

The sedition law criminalizes any speech that might bring hatred, contempt against the government, and ill-will and hostility among the ethnic groups; the Internal Security law empowers the government to detain without trial any suspect who act against the interests of the state; and in the defamation law, the burden of proof rests on

the plaintiff, not the defendant (Pang, 2006). Practitioners and journalists alike were familiar with such limitations and perhaps “desensitized”. Media ideology was deemed as having the least impact on media relations by the participants. OB markers were considered “common-sense” and accepted as the norm. First, most seemed to view media relations from an insider’s perspective as they placed themselves in the shoes of a media worker rather than as an outsider. Hence, they saw themselves as both sides of the same media coin, trying their best to enhance and enlarge the media scene. Second, if understanding external influences had less impact compared to understanding internal influences, they did not see a need to innovate and come up with new ideas to connect with journalists and seed story ideas, like devising virtual newsrooms (Pettigrew and Reber, 2010). Direct, face-to-face access to journalists seemed to work better.

The third research question examined what other factors affected the building of effective media relations.

Insights strengthened influences

Most felt that the influences posited in the Mediating the Media model encompassed most factors that affected media relations. However, there were some interesting insights. First, practitioners felt that media relations was based on human interactions so developing strong interpersonal relationships was key. Next, the need to understand the pulse of the country. They referred to the 2011 general elections and the dissatisfaction over issues like Singapore’s immigration policies, transport glitches and skyrocketing property prices as some factors that could impact media relations. One practitioner shared:

It’s the social, political context at a certain time. It evolves. After GE (2011 general elections), the rule was different, how people reacted to certain things was different. That affects the way you might want to pitch a story. You might not want to highlight foreign talent at this point in time. You have to be sensitive to the environment and that is not something that you can learn. It comes with experience and maturity.

This sensing of the pulse of the nation, together with interpersonal relations, could be categorized as journalist mindset because this involved understanding journalists’ prevailing news values. Second, the impact of social media technology and influence of social media platforms were not discussed extensively by the participants, even when probed. They did, however, acknowledge that the impact of social media on media relations needed to be considered. One practitioner revealed:

We haven’t reached a stage where we invite bloggers, prominent people who have large followings on Twitter and Facebook for news conferences yet. Eventually that decision will be made for us but for now we have not included them yet because the audience that we are currently targeting still lean towards traditional media for news and perspectives.

Many said that they were taking a wait-and-see approach. While participants acknowledged the increasing influence of bloggers or what Freberg *et al.* (2011) termed “social media influencers”, they downplayed their roles. Thus, even though social media tools are changing the face of media relations practice (DiStaso *et al.*, 2011), many remained wary of it. Traditional platforms had expanded into the online sphere with their digital versions. This transition has proved to be an overwhelming change for practitioners used to the traditional deadlines. This is consistent with literature on organizations’ fear of use of social media tools. Studies showed that even though online communication tools are changing the face of public relations practice

(DiStaso *et al.*, 2011), organizations remain wary. The common concerns expressed included the difficulty in controlling the message in cyberspace (DiStaso *et al.*, 2011; Seo *et al.*, 2009); the lack of knowledge about how social media tools could help organizations connect with stakeholders effectively (DiStaso *et al.*, 2011; Lovejoy *et al.*, 2012); and how to optimize outcomes for the organization by utilizing the most effective mix of tools, including traditional media (DiStaso *et al.*, 2011).

As media organizations with an active online presence now get journalists to release or publish their articles online first, journalists require relevant and timely information for these online updates. The transition from mainstream media to social media represents a change in how information is packaged, but the nature of the information subsidy and news content remains unchanged. This evolving change in workflow and routines can be subsumed under newsroom routines (see Table II).

RQ4 examined how the influences, both internal and external, were ordered in terms of pervasiveness of influence.

Ranking of influences

Findings showed that the internal influences were ranked as more pervasive than external influences. In the original model, the journalist mindset occupied the heart of the concentric circle, followed by journalist routines, organizational routines, extra-media forces and media ideology. The modified model has this reversed: Media ideology is at the heart of the concentric circles followed by extra-media forces, journalist routines, organizational routines and finally, journalist mindset (see Figure 2).

The internal forces appeared to have a more pervasive influence on media relations than the external forces. In Singapore, George (2012), however, alluded that the influences were more complex when it comes to news with national impact, particularly political news. Embedded into the journalist's psyche are "boundaries of political acceptability that do not appear in formal regulations" (p. 48). This could pertain to the pro-Singapore role held by journalists and news organizations or topics which are deemed to be out of boundaries for discussion, or what is commonly known as OB markers. Thus, even though journalist mindset had the most pervasive influence, media ideology dictated the kind of relationship fostered. For instance, if the practitioner needs to communicate a government policy, the journalist would find a compelling news angle even if the practitioner was not news savvy as the news had a broader national objective. While it is beyond the purview of this study to analyse the influences of state-press media relations in Singapore, what this has demonstrated is the subtlety of the influences of the external forces like media ideology on journalist mindset. The shaping of media relations may thus be influenced simultaneously by

Influencing factors	Journalist mindset	Internal influences		External influences	
		Organizational routines	Journalist routines	Extramedia forces	Media ideology
Indicators	Establishing contact with journalists Understanding news values Mastering writing Skills	Organizational structure Newsroom workflow	Deadlines and routines Accessibility	Media environment Legalities	Socio-political environment

Table II.
Table summarizing the themes and indicators of effective media relations

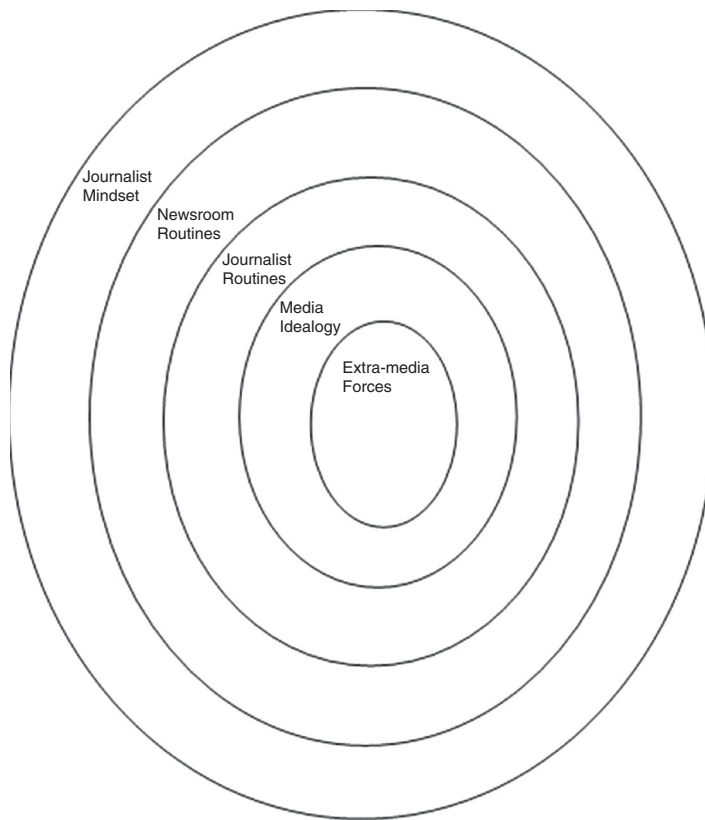


Figure 2.
Hierarchy of influence
of media relations
in Singapore

both external and internal forces. For instance, Gans (1979) found that journalists selected news based on four key external factors which had been internally routinized in newsrooms, for instance, stories that involved the government and governmental actors; and stories that had high impact on the nation and national interest. Such routinization, argued Shoemaker and Reese (1996), could be formally instituted through a command-and-control hierarchy, where rank and roles were delineated, and this ensured that decisions made by management were adhered. Despite the pervasive influence of the journalist in media relations, those holding the reins in the organization, such as news directors, could have more influence as they could use their management prerogatives as justifications for how they selected and portrayed news, argued Tuggle and Huffman (1999). Therefore, whilst a linear, hierarchical influence might provide a useful template, the concurrent impact of the other influences on media relations needs further research. Carroll (2011) called for deeper examination into issues like media control, media reach, media bias and tone.

Relevance of the Mediating the Media model

What this study has found is that the interviewees welcomed the model as a useful guide as it helps new practitioners work with journalists. Some senior practitioners, however, were sceptical about pigeon-holing media relations to a normative model as it involved personalities and human behaviour. However, many agreed that having a

model offered a systemic framework to approach media relations effectively. A simplistic measurement of media relations efforts was by counting the number and length of news articles and the amount of airtime on television and radio news bulletins and programmes (Leinemann and Baikaltseva, 2004). A more useful approach would be to assess the quality of coverage including the reach of the publication, the article's tone, headline slant and its prominence (Faulstich, 2000). Either way, the fairly "instantaneous" measurement of "success" or "failure" of media strategies makes media relations a key area where practitioners demonstrate their expertise, skills and value to their organizations (Leinemann and Baikaltseva, 2004).

Conclusion

This study has examined the rigor of the Mediating the Media model, in Singapore's evolving media landscape where traditional media still dominates against the emergence of social media. By conducting in-depth interviews with public relations practitioners who were ex-journalists, the findings provided an intimate understanding of how media relations was practised and how the model held. Indeed, empirical studies grounded in the corporate world can add rich context to understanding how theory and practice can integrate (Pang *et al.*, 2006). Findings showed that internal influences played a more dominant role than external influences. Among the influences, journalist mindset ranked ahead of newsroom routines and journalist routines, followed by the two external influences, extra-media forces and media ideology. The model was also found to be rigorous and relevant by practitioners.

One limitation is that the findings here are based solely on interviews and some claims cannot be corroborated. As this is a qualitative study situated in one country, it is also not generalizable. Future research can apply the model to countries where the media industry operates under vastly different environments. Bland *et al.*'s (2005) words ring true: "Used correctly, media is an invaluable tool for public relations practitioners" (p. 139).

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Appendix. Interview guide

Background information and Interviewee profile

Years in journalism:

Years in PR:

Education:

PR/mass communication training:

Current position:

Organization:

Nature of Business:

Size of PR dept:

Size of Media Relations team:

Percentage of time spent on media relations:

Engage external PR consultants for publicity efforts:

Type of media:

Type of media activities:

Access to dominant coalition on media relations issues:

Part of dominant coalition:

Does the organization plan events, lunch, networking, etc., for journalists beyond publicity activities?

Any interaction with journalist outside working hours:

Beyond the call of duty, do journalists have personal favours to ask of you? (e.g. Product discounts, etc.) Do you oblige? Why or why not?

RQ1. To what extent does the understanding of internal influences (i.e. journalist mindset, journalist routines and newsroom routines) help build strong media relations?

Journalist mindset

General

- How do you get to know journalist who cover your industry/organization?
- How do you keep up with the movement of journalists?

-
- How do you assess which journalist to approach when you need coverage?
 - How do you normally pitch stories to journalists (press release, email pitch, phone calls, etc.)?

News values/interests

- How do you seek to understand what interests the journalists? How do you seek to understand what the journalist has to cover or would like to cover in his/her beat?
- How does your understanding of newsworthiness, concur or differ from the journalist? Do you share the same ideas of what is newsworthy with the journalist? How did you come to the same understanding?
- How do you try to shape a story in a way that the journalist finds it newsworthy to report? Do you shape your stories differently for different media outlets (CNA, ST, TM, etc.)? Is this important? Why? How?
- Do you offer exclusive stories about your organization for journalist from different media? Why do you think exclusive stories are important to journalists?

Writing

- How do you seek to understand how journalists write so that you can frame information, news releases, pitches, etc., in a way that attracts the journalists' attention?
- How do you frame information so that the journalist makes your key message their news point? How does understanding how journalists write help you with this?
- When you send out a press announcement, what sort of information do you provide? (For instance, do you give information that you think the journalist will find newsworthy or do you give information that mainly portray your organization in a good light?)
- How often do you contextualize information for journalists? Why is contextualizing information important?

Journalist routines

Accessibility/help

- Are journalists able to reach you anytime of the day? How accessible are you to journalists?
- How quickly do you respond to their calls? How quickly do you respond to their queries?
- How familiar are you with deadlines of the various media platforms? (TV, radio, newspaper, wire, web). Why is this important?
- How often do you try to meet their queries on deadline? Why do you think it's important to respond to them promptly?
- How familiar are you with the different beats, news sections and segments in the various media organizations?
- How do you find out about the routines of the different journalists who cover your organization? (e.g. the best time to call them, pitch stories, their off days/leave)
- How do you leverage on the deadline pressures that journalists face to maximize coverage for your organization?

Newsroom or organizational routines

Organizational structure

- What is your knowledge on the organizational structure in each newsroom and the various media organizations?
- How do you monitor the staff movements in the newsroom and/or media organizations? How does this knowledge aid your publicity efforts?
- Besides journalists, do you try to cultivate other contacts in the newsroom? (e.g. editorial manager, department assistants, operations desk staff, photographers, etc.) if so, how do you get to know them and cultivate a relationship with them? Why is that important?

Assignment of stories

- Do you have certain preferred journalists? How do you try to get your preferred journalist assigned to your story?
- How do you manage new journalists covering your organization?

Editorial coverage

- How does your understanding of the newsroom work flow help you to get good coverage?
- How do you try to influence the prominence of your story? How do you plan your story so as to maximize your chances of being well placed in the day's news?
- If you have a late story that you need covered, how do you ensure the media has space for your story?

RQ2. How does the understanding of external influences (i.e. extra-media forces and media ideology) help build strong media relations?

Environmental

- How do you think media competition affects media coverage of your organisation? What do you do to make it work positively for your organization?
- How does Singapore's small and multilingual media industry influence your publicity efforts? How easy or difficult is it to build strong media relations within a small media industry?
- Traditional media are now leveraging on the power of online and social media platforms to strengthen their readership/viewership numbers. How does this influence your efforts in engaging journalists and the various media platforms? Do you use social mediatoools like Facebook, Twitter to seed story ideas?
- How much do you leverage on social media to build strong media relations with journalists? Are you "friends" with them on facebook, follow them on Twitter?

Legal

- How do you find out about the legal parameter in each of the contexts that you work in (e.g. patient confidentiality in medical field, case confidentiality during police investigation)? How does that understanding aid in your planning of media publicity? What are the risks in not knowing the legal parameters?

Ideological

- How does Singapore's pro-establishment-centered-media affect your organisation's publicity efforts?
- How does your organization leverage on this ideology to maximize coverage and publicity for your organization?
- How do you plan your publicity efforts around Singapore's multi-racial, multi-cultural environment? How do you shape your stories for the individual language media platforms?

Governmental

- How important is it to understand the government's OB markers in the markets that you operate in?
- How do you find out about these government OB markers and keep track of changes?
- To what extent do government interventions affect your media publicity plans?

RQ3. What other factors influence and affect the building of strong media relations between practitioners and journalists?

- What other factors should be considered in building strong media relations?

RQ4. How are the influences, both internal and external, ordered in terms of pervasiveness of influence?

- Among the various influences that were discussed earlier (internal and external) are more evident in helping you build strong media relations? How do you order these influences and why?
 - (1) journalist mindset
 - (2) journalist routines
 - (3) newsroom/organizational routines
 - (4) extra-media forces
 - (5) media ideology

RQ5. How relevant and applicable is the “Mediating the media” model in Singapore?

- In your opinion, do you think that the “mediating the media” model is applicable in Singapore? If you would like to change the model, how would you improve upon it?
- In your opinion, how do you think public relations practitioners can approach media relations in a systematic and more effective manner?
- In your view, what do you think is currently lacking among practitioners (skills, experience, resources, etc.) when trying to cultivate strong media relations? How can this be improved?

About the authors

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