Confronting Media Nihilism: How Transparency Builds Meaning During Crises

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The traditional roles of the media in a democratic society including informing the public and facilitating social unity are changing rapidly. Factors such as media conglomeration, a "business" view of news, more sources and greater customization of those sources results in news morphing into entertainment and opinion, greater selectivity in our news sources and more conformity in our exposure to ideas.

On top of the changing role of media in a democratic society is a condition we call Media Nihilism, the rhetoric of crisis and failure or the tendency to exaggerate and "spectacularize" an event. This occurs when the media take the crisis out of its original context, give it an importance or impact it doesn't have and actually help create a crisis where none exists. Media Nihilism robs society of the context needed to make intelligent decisions, creates a common culture of the expectation of failure and fails to inform the public completely of all aspects of the crisis.

We argue that transparency is the public relations strategy that confronts this phenomenon during crisis. Realizing that being transparent demands trust and courage from leadership, we submit that public relations has the functional responsibility for gaining that trust and inculcating in leadership the courage to be transparent.

INTRODUCTION

The traditional role of media in democratic societies

James Curran, in his manuscript Mass Media and Democracy Revisited, outlined four traditional roles ideally fulfilled by the media in democratic societies (Curran, 1997). First, the media must represent the people within a society. Freedom of the press is an essential part of this equation. Since only a select few can be part of the media, the media must represent the rest of us. This representation is typically achieved by speaking for groups or communities. The media should give a voice to those who want to be heard in order to fulfill this role.

Second, the media must act as a public watchdog. With the privilege of the power of communication comes responsibility to protect the people it represents. People look to

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and support the media as a system for keeping power structures in society in check. The media must represent the people's interest and notify them of any issues on which they might want to act.

Third, the media must inform the public. In a democracy, citizens are responsible for making decisions to benefit the whole. In order to flourish, members must share the knowledge they gain. This insures intelligent and informed decision-making. In our society, knowledge is shared by both education and through the media. Schools provide long-term knowledge while the media provide knowledge of contemporary issues. The media tell us what's happening in the world, schools give us the skills to deal with these issues.

Fourth, media must facilitate social unity. To remain united, there must be a common culture. The media help distribute culture by providing a shared experience. The more we feel connected, the greater our bond to each other and the more likely we are to truly make decisions for the common good.

Some scholars also add agenda setting as a role of the media. The theory holds that the mass-news media have a large influence on audiences by their choice of what stories they consider newsworthy and how much prominence and space they give them. Agenda-setting theory's central axiom is salience transfer, or the ability of the mass media to transfer the importance of items on their mass agendas to the public's agendas. We would add that in trying to tell us what's important, they interpret facts and provide context for issues, which also defines how the agenda is defined

The changing model
The mass media model to which we have become accustomed has rapidly changed, thanks in no small part to globalization, consolidation and the Internet. Mass media are consolidating into large conglomerations, driven by economies of scale, global competition and a desire for synergy. Fewer people control more outlets and these broad-based organizations are more concerned with profit-making ventures than any other outcomes. If people aren't watching/reading, the conglomeration ceases to make a profit and thus withers among an increasing throng of competition.

While mass media is consolidating from the end-user's standpoint, more options exist now for gathering information than ever before. Thousands upon thousands of messages a day assault us, most of which serve ever-narrowing publics. One only has to look at the number of niche publications in the magazine industry to understand this trend has been building for decades. With a burgeoning Internet populous and an ability to opt in for specific messages and exclude others, these niches will continue to subdivide and media outlets will continue to fill them. This, too, has been building for many years, with Negroponte (1995) first noting that the Internet will allow users to create a "daily me" in which news will be custom-tailored to each user.

Why this matters…and why the model is changing so rapidly

We have become a society of voyeurs, intent not on gathering information critical to decision-making, but in watching what is happening to others. Think about all the "reality" shows on television and the number of times the networks have given us "breaking news" about the latest miss-adventures of some celebrity. For example, in early March 2008, four of the five top-rated shows were reality shows according to ratings compiled by Nielsen Media Research. Fox's lie detector show "The Moment of Truth" won the ratings race for Wednesday night TV on March 12 with 10.4 million viewers and a 4.1 rating in the 18- to 49-year-old demographic. The other three reality shows snagged between 3.6 and 6.3 million viewers (Brian Stelter, New York Times, March 13, 2008).

Our voyeurism is not only driving breaking news stories, but driving millions in profits for the industry that trades in such commodities. With regard to the breaking news piece of this equation, when a custody dispute turned into a three-hour standoff at Britney Spears' home January 3, 2008 television stations immediately got their helicopters overhead the Spears' estate and cable news anchors reported the unfolding drama in real time. The Associated Press had two reporters working the story, with editors on both coasts updating it seven times throughout the night (CNN.com, January 29, 2008).

On the profit side of the equation, our society's interest in celebrity missteps drives a multi-billion dollar celebrity news industry. Sarah Ivens, U.S. editor of upstart magazine OK!, said Spears by herself drove their newsstand sales and helped the magazine's ad revenue more than double to $51 million in 2007. The magazine has a 10-person team in Los Angeles devoted to Spears coverage, with its staff on constant "Britney alert" (CNN.com, January 29, 2008).

Indeed, this voyeuristic tendency drives the "business decisions" of the mass media conglomerates, giving us more of the same and less information critical to making informed decisions. Croteau & Hoynes (2006), in their book *The business of media: Corporate media and the public interest, 2ed.,* understand that the first goal of the basic business strategies executed by today's "media giants" is to maximize profits. This premium on profit means, "once-distinct media companies have been transformed into collaborative divisions of single corporate conglomerates." (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006, p. 118) The most profitable medium in the conglomeration now becomes the standard against which all profit margins are compared. Failing to measure up can mean the quick death of the medium. These pressures result in fewer mass media outlets, fierce competition among those who remain to be more "realistic" (read "voyeuristic"), and less diversity of ideas.

At the same time, the internet provide more options for finding information. But more options means a cacophony of voices, many of which are the voices of people just like you and me (for example, see the Edelman Trust Barometer for 2006). Information morphs into opinion. Feeling overwhelmed, we tune out and don't listen to ANY messages.

Individual customization means greater selectivity in our exposure to ideas. Cognitive dissonance plays a role in this selectivity. We tend to pay attention to those ideas that already align with our own. The media's important watchdog and agenda-setting function is significantly reduced. Non-traditional sources matter too in the search for information. How many people get their "news" from blogs today? Bloggers are becoming opinion leaders in the dissemination of news. But, we tend to read the blogs of those with similar views to ours. So, is it news…or opinion?

As Shaw, et al. (2000) also noted, while the Internet provides us with global connections and the opportunity for unequaled diversity of ideas, the formation of online communities often tends to have the opposite effect and actually isolates people as they form relationships and hold conversations only with others like themselves. If people are going to make the right kinds of decisions in governing themselves, they need a wider array of information, not more information that confirms their predispositions.

Media Nihilism

On top of the changing role of media in a democratic society is a condition of news we call Media Nihilism. Hogan (1989) defined Media Nihilism as the rhetoric of crisis and failure. Extending this view, we see Media Nihilism as the media's tendency to exaggerate and "spectacularize" an event. A significant aspect of Media Nihilism as we define it is "reification," a concept initially proposed by Karl Marx and advanced by Guy DeBord in his 1968 work "The Society of the Spectacle" (Debord, 1968). This "reification" involves: 1.) Separating out parts or the whole of the crisis from the original context in which it occurs; 2.) Placing it in another context, in which it lacks some or all of its original connections; and 3.) Conferring powers or attributes, which in truth the crisis does not have.

In other words, Media Nihilism creates a distortion of both reality and society's awareness of the critical issues relevant to a crisis. A single, spectacular element of the crisis is separated out or focused on. This focus usually recasts the element as something sinister, often as a conspiracy, and strips it of context. The crisis becomes greater and more rooted in the concept of failure for which there appears no recovery. Indeed, seldom are suggestions for solving the problem promoted at all unless they increase the tension or conflict within the crisis.

What this phenomenon means to society during a crisis

Neil Postman suggested in his seminal 1985 book *Amusing ourselves to death* that television confounds serious issues with entertainment, demeaning and undermining political discourse by making it less about ideas and more about image (Postman 1985). Here we're extending Postman's concern over the decline of the media to suggest that Media Nihilism robs society of the context needed to make intelligent decisions, creates a common culture of the expectation of failure and fails to inform the public completely of all aspects of the crisis.

Media Nihilism also breeds irrationality and forces us to make decisions on the basis of negative emotions as opposed to facts and logic. These "knee-jerk" reactions

often generate restrictions that harm, or at least impede, a society's quality of life. Decisions made on the basis of emotion often lead to more poor decisions. These poor decisions become an avalanche, which is nearly impossible to halt. Making poor decisions also becomes a vicious circle. For example, Hastie & Dawes (2001), renowned for their research in judgment and decision making, note the "pernicious modes of thought" that negatively affect our decision-making, especially those decisions that involve a high level of risk and uncertainty (Hastie & Dawes, 2001, p. 2). While they note that ordinary skills can be modified to allow us to make better decisions, they also note that the impact of biases and emotions is significant.

This continual stream of crisis and failure rhetoric can lead to a common culture of "the expectation of failure," which leads to a broader societal malaise from which it is difficult to recover. For example, this expectation of failure can lead to a type of social alienation, an antagonism between individuals who are otherwise in harmony or estranging one from traditional community and others in general. This social alienation results in individuals having less-substantial relations with other people than they would normally and leads to difficulties in understanding and adapting to each other's uniqueness (DeBord 1968; Althusser 1965).

A culture of failure can result in increased power distance (Hofstede 2001). Less powerful members of society lose confidence in "the system" and expect and accept that power will continue to be distributed unequally. As people "give up," unable to effect change, economic disparities deepen. Societal values change for the worse and no one expects anything to get better.

Public relations shares the blame for these outcomes. Practitioners often fail to anticipate crises and plan accordingly. They don't use all available communication channels to engage in conversations and gather feedback. PR organizations are also guilty of "paralysis through analysis," spending too long gathering information before engaging or planning in such excruciating detail that they lock themselves into their plan and lose their flexibility.

Transparency and the role of public relations in confronting Media Nihilism

One of the public relations tools that confront Media Nihilism is transparency. Transparency, as used here, means openness, communication and accountability. In this context, transparency is deliberately making available all legally releasable information—whether positive or negative in nature—in a manner which is accurate, timely, balanced, and unequivocal, and which enhances the reasoning ability of publics (Rawlins & Stoker, 2006).

When approaching an issue that has reached a critical mass, public relations practitioners are among the few individuals who can prevent a "non-event" from becoming victim to Media Nihilism. By pushing for open meetings and the release of key documents, practitioners can assuage the public's fear that the group, organization or company they work for is hiding something. In addition, when rules and decisions are

open for discussion, those in leadership are less likely and able to subvert the system for their own benefit.

But transparency also requires two-way communication. Provided with information, there will be questions, protests and suggestions. People interested in the topic will try and influence the decision. Modern democracy has as its foundation this interchange.

Truly transparent communication confronts Media Nihilism by presenting sufficient information for the public to make an informed decision. It fills the information void created when the media focuses on the most spectacular. It authentically represents the people within a society by assuming that people are rationale, that people are intelligent and that, while they may be fooled from time to time, they ultimately make the right decision.

Transparency facilitates social unity by providing context and perspective from which common meaning or a common culture is found. This, in turn, creates the greater bond needed to successfully whether problems and challenges, which in turn increases the chances we are all able to make better decisions for the common good.

This approach also builds trust. Rawlins found that transparency and trust are highly correlated. "Organizations that are participative, share substantial information, are willing to be accountable, and are open will be more trusted" (Rawlins, 2007). While his study was conducted with employees, the results suggest that this correlation between trust and transparency will hold for other stakeholder groups as well.

Rawlins and others (cf. Fort, 1996, and Koehn, 1996) have also suggested that trust is a two-way street. A transparent organization trusts its stakeholders to mean well and "respond generously to our trust in them" (Koehn, 1996, p. 201). This trust is often repaid with active and fervent loyalty including stakeholders stepping up to publicly defend the organization in the midst of crisis.

A great example of transparency at its finest, facilitated in large measure by the public relations experts, can be seen in the serious crisis that resulted from Don Imus' comments about the Rutgers University women's basketball team. At no point in the Rutgers University communications team's planning for the media onslaught did they prepare the players or coaching staff with tightly worded key messages before the press conferences. In this highly sensitive time, they never asked their players to do interviews, nor did they prohibit the players from doing so. Rutgers simply trusted the "news makers" to use their own words to "say the right things" according to Greg Trevor, senior director, media relations at Rutgers (Trevor, 2007). The result was as if you'd drawn it on the chalkboard as the perfect play. As pundit and blogger Roland Martin put it "although the National Association of Black Journalists led the fight to oust Imus, there is no doubt that it was that moving news conference by the Rutgers University women's basketball team that cemented the demise of Imus. Vivian Stringer was poised and

strong in demanding that America look at the 10 women and see them as the real face of Imus' slurs" (Martin April 13, 2007).

It isn't easy to be transparent, however. When we drill down into the more nuanced details of transparency, we can see why leadership is often unable or unwilling to be transparent. For example, Balkin (1999) opines that transparency is composed of three important elements: availability of information on matters of public concern, the ability of citizens to participate in political decisions and the accountability of government to public opinion and legal processes. But as Rawlins (2009) and others (cf. Balkin, 1999, Strathern, 2000, and Wall, 1996) point out, release of information doesn't constitute transparency and may actually defeat the purpose of enhancing understanding.

Rawlins (2009) takes this concept of transparency further by defining transparency as composed of "information that is truthful, substantial, and useful; participation of stakeholders in identifying the information they need; and objective, balanced reporting of an organization's activities and policies that holds the organization accountable" (Rawlins 2009, p. 74). In addition to the problems in releasing information noted above, there is the natural reluctance of organizations to provide "substantial" information. Further, involving stakeholders in the decision-making process is difficult for an organization for many reasons such as the sheer complexity of the logistics required to do so, the need for trust in those stakeholders, the fear of disclosure that could lead to lawsuits and the like.

Cotterrell (2000) adds that transparency involve "'accountability'; the willingness and responsibility to try and give a meaningful and accurate account of oneself, or of circumstances in which one is involved, or of which one is aware; and, beyond that, a responsibility to try honestly to define the relation of one's account to the variety of other accounts given in connection with the relevant matter" (Cotterrell 2000, p. 419). In other words, organizations must have the willingness to engage in deep and meaningful dialogue that enhances understanding and provides perspective.

Transparency, then, takes courage and expertise, and public relations must lead the way, through our preparation and deeds, to gain trust and make it easy for our leadership to have the courage to do the right thing before it's needed in time of crisis. We must also be expert in knowing what information to release, in providing perspective without being seen to "spin" information and in facilitating meaningful dialogue.

But, let's not forget that, much like the traditional role of the media in a democratic society, public relations must represent both the organization and the people within a society, protect the people it represents, both internally and externally, inform the public so that intelligent and informed decisions can be made, and facilitate social unity. Public relations practitioners are often referred to as "the conscience of the organization." It is our job to translate what our publics are saying and have the courage to suggest and help make changes within an organization. Indeed, all of these principles are embodied and codified in the PRSA Code of Ethics (PRSA 2000).

Call to action

This then is our call to action. Public relations must lead the way, through our preparation and deeds, to gain leadership's trust. By so doing, we make it easy for our leadership to have the courage to do the right thing before it's needed in time of crisis. For the good of society, we must make every effort to confront Media Nihilism at every turn. And we must do so with transparent, skilled and authentic communication.

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