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Maximizing Media Relations Through a Better Understanding of the Public Relations-Journalist Relationship: A Quantitative Analysis of Changes Over the Past 23 years

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Understanding the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists is of paramount importance to practicing effective media relations. Using a similar study conducted by Kopenhaver, Martinson, & Ryan (1984) as a basis, this study explores that relationship using depth interviews (n=8) and a mail survey (n=221, 33% response rate) to gauge perceptions of the relationship for both journalists and public relations practitioners in the state of Florida. It concludes that there has been little change in the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists over the past 17 years, and offers suggestions as to why that is the case. The study also found that managing expectations is a very important concept for public relations practitioners, both when dealing with clients and also when communicating with journalists and that effective relationships between the two professions can be achieved if there are reasonable expectations put into place. It further addresses current potential problems with the practice of media relations, including the "hitchhiker" concept (sending out blanket releases via email or other methods with the hope that it will be picked up by a media outlet), a lack of targeted media pitching and the future of the press release in public relations. It includes both implications for academics for future study, and also for practitioners of media relations to hopefully better their practice.

INTRODUCTION

In his 1906 "Declaration of Principles," Ivy Lee stated:

In brief, our plan is, frankly and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to supply the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about. (as cited in Guth & Marsh, 2003, p. 66)

While this was not the first time that the power of the media was harnessed to effect change, it may have been the first instance of proactive, truthful and accurate

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information dissemination, which today has become our gold standard in media relations.

Media relations can be defined as the systematic (Kendall, 1996), planned (Lesly, 1991), purposeful (Miller, 1984) and mutually beneficially relationship (Guth & Marsh, 2003) between journalists in the mass media and public relations practitioners. Its goal is to establish trust, understanding and respect between the two groups (Lattimore, et. al., 2004). James Fetig (2004), a media relations practitioner, sums up the relationship,

It all comes down to relationships. I trust reporters I know and I don't trust the reporters I don't know. Most of us have long-standing relationships with journalists that are based on mutual trust. My advice to PR professionals is to know the journalists who cover their industry well and develop mutual credibility. (*as cited in* Lattimore, et al., p. 183)

However, though terms like mutually beneficial and *relationship* are often used in defining both public relations and media relations, the effort in both cases generally is initiated from the public relations side, and not that of the journalists. This may be the result of a “solid prejudice against public relations people” (Nolte, 1979, p.442) by journalists, which has been examined by academics for many years (Carter, 1958; Howard & Mathews, 2000; Sachsman, 1976; Sampler, 2000; Singletary, 1976).

Whether we examine media relations in a historical context, or look at the modern-day practices, one thing is certain: effective media relations involve good working relationships (Duke, 2001). As Howard (2004) states about public relations: “in the end... this is a people-to-people business. A media relations person deals with writers, editors, producers and photographers – not with newspapers, television stations, radio microphones and Web sites” (p. 70).

The purpose of this study is to better understand the current state of the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners. Though this has been studied in the past, the topic is important, particularly as confidence in the credibility of the mass media is on the decline, we must revisit how public relations practitioners and journalists view each other.

Most importantly, this study will seek to identify whether public relations practitioners are in fact practicing the relationship-building element that is prevalent in the academic literature as being the most important aspect of public relations. Using a triangulated approach in its methodology, this study will be beneficial to both practitioners and academics in public relations and journalism in understanding the current state of the relationship. Its ultimate goal is to better understand the practice of media relations from both the journalistic and public relations viewpoints, and to promote not only an updated, but also a deeper understanding of how media *relationships* can be developed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A significant amount of research has been conducted in the media relations field, and while much of it has been academic in its nature, there is a significant body of literature that addresses practitioner concerns as well. Much of this has been from a tactical standpoint, utilizing the “how-to” approach rather than studying the “reason behind.” Areas of interest for this type of tactical research have included increasing media attention for products or services (Brooks, 1999; Cantelmo, 1994), use of media relations with respect to the Internet (Duke, 2001; Howard, 2000; Kent & Taylor, 2003; Fitzgerald-Sparks & Spagnolia, 1999) and how to utilize media relations during a crisis situation (Adams, 1993, 2000; Trahan, 1993).

This is not to say there has not also been a large number of studies dedicated towards the strategy of media relations, with topics such as creating strategic communication plans, responding to changes in the media environment (Bucy, 2004; Brody, 1989; Colby, 2005; Goldstein, 2004; Howard, 2000), building long-term relationships with the media (Howard, 2004) and also media relations planning and evaluation as part of the overall public relations process (Adams, 1995; Bollinger, 2001; Dyer, 1996; Kelleher, 2001; Tilson, 2005). But whether academics have taken a strategic or tactical viewpoint to media relations research, it is clear that there is a serious interest in how media relations is practiced.

So what exactly is media relations? It is the practice, performed by public relations practitioners, of providing information subsidies to the media to systematically distribute information on behalf of their client (Turk, 1985). *Information subsidy* is a term used to describe the generation by practitioners of prepackaged information to promote their organizations' viewpoints on issues, with little cost (in terms of time or money) or effort to the person receiving the information (Zoch and Molleda, 2006). In other words, the media relations practitioner acts as a sort of “pre-reporter” for the journalist, providing them with information that they need to do their jobs. Sallot, Steinfatt and Salwen (1998) explain the process as an effort by practitioners “to gain ink and air time” by “continually offer[ing] journalists unsolicited assistance in the performance of their jobs. With good reason, journalists perceive that practitioners have self-serving motives for offering this ‘service’” (p. 374).

There are varying estimates of how much news in the media originates from media relations efforts. The success of media relations is most often dependent on the media relations practitioner's understanding of the media audience. This will be explored later. It has been estimated that as much as 50% or more of daily newspaper content originates from media relations efforts (Curtin, 1999). This, however, is most likely very generous, particularly considering that media relations practitioners and journalists have had a “rocky” past (which is also explored later in this section).

It is also a generous estimate considering that much research has shown that journalists desire to act independently (Pincus, Rimmer, Rayfield & Cropp, 1993; Turk, 1985, 1986a, 1986b). Perhaps more likely than the up to 50% estimate, Elfenbein

(1986) and Martin and Singletary (1981) indicate that up to 90% of the information that media relations practitioners provide is never used. Whether information that is provided by media relations practitioners is used by journalists is most likely dependent on a variety of factors, including the practitioner's view about what is considered newsworthy, as well as the relationship between the practitioner and the journalist. However, while these may be the two most important factors, a variety of other factors must also be considered.

Much literature has focused on helping public relations practitioners better practice media relations. Howard and Mathews' (2000) book *On Deadline: Managing Media Relations* is one of the most comprehensive works in the area of media relations. It offers media relations practitioners a helpful guide in dealing with journalists. Howard (2004) offers a succinct list of tips that media relations practitioners must keep in mind. She addresses the importance of the *relationship*, stating that "the emphasis in a media relations program should be on the *relations* aspect – working to build long-term relations with the people who cover your organization" (p. 36).

What results from this examination is that there is no definitive way of practicing media relations, in fact, it would be easier to say that there is only a list of what should *not* be done in practicing media relations. So where does this leave the media relations practitioner? First and foremost, it means that the practitioner must keep in mind the changing roles of the media. As is the case in all public relations, but in particular for the media relations practitioner, the public interest must be kept in mind at all times. Brooks' (1999) discussion of the "media supply chain" offers the solution for media relations practitioners by clearly delineating the job of both the media relations practitioner and the journalist. A media relations practitioner's job is to provide information devoid of "impurities," and the journalist's job is to transform that material, along with his or her own information, sources and ideas into a finished product, though Barger and Barney (2004) indicate that there is a greater moral obligation that lies on the media as trustees of the public trust – even if that trust is waning (Geary, 2005).

This is not to say that the media relations practitioner is without responsibility, in fact, it may be necessary for the media relations practitioner to take on even greater responsibility because of the changing role of the media. Practitioners should recognize that they are part of the information supply chain, and that in order to ultimately serve their organizations, they must serve their audiences as well.

No matter the role of media relations in society, or the ultimate purpose behind *why* media relations is practiced, of utmost concern to research in media relations is the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists. This relationship has generally been examined from two perspectives.

What makes something worthy of being called news?

The first perspective is what factors are important to each, particularly with regard to newsworthiness – or what makes something of interest to journalists and therefore may influence their willingness to disseminate that information through their

medium (Abbott & Brassfeld, 1989; Aronoff, 1976; Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997; Elfenbein, 1986; Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harmon & White, 2001; Kopenhaver, 1985; McCombs & Winter, 1981; Morton, 1986; Morton & Warren, 1992a, 1992b; Peterson, 1981; Snider, 1967; White, 1950; Zaharopoulos, 1990).

The discussion of what makes something worthy of being identified as news has been a long-standing debate, not only from the public relations perspective, but from the journalistic side as well. The axiom that news is what an editor says it is, may no longer be applicable in a changing media environment. Decisions on what is or is not news still lies, to some extent, with editors, but also with journalists, photographers, bloggers, freelancers, publishers and in some media, the members of the public themselves. While the editor may be the final decision-maker in print news, this may not always be the target of the media relations practitioner.

In a study presented to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Zoch and Supa (2005) did an exhaustive search of literature in journalism, and broke down their findings to include eight factors of newsworthiness that, according to the literature, should identify what makes news. Those factors identified were: immediacy, timeliness, localness, human interest, cultural proximity, unexpectedness, prominence and significance.

Kopenhaver, Martinson and Ryan (1984) found in their study journalists and public relations practitioners agreed “remarkably” on which elements of news are most important. But the authors of this study do point out that the practitioners were asked to answer questions on elements of news in an abstract way, and that in practice they might behave differently. In addition the news elements used in the 1984 study were far different than those based on the literature reviewed in the Zoch and Supa (2005) study. Kopenhaver, Martinson and Ryan used accuracy, interest to reader, usefulness to reader, completeness, prompt publication, depicts subject in favorable light, mechanical/ grammatical correctness and news story style; which replicated Aronoff’s (1975) study.

Baus (1954) states that “news is something that interests *many people today*” (p.451), and that this generally means “many people” according to the publication. Baus continues, “*Every medium has a news standard of its own, and this is the criterion the publicist goes by in attempting to address publicity to the public through that medium.*” In other words “news is something that interests *many of our readers today*” (p.451, italics in original).

So, then, perhaps news is dependent on the publication (as monthly magazines would necessarily be concerned with different news than would daily newspapers), medium (print versus broadcast), and perhaps even publisher opinion. This is obviously of concern to the media relations practitioner, and has been addressed repeatedly in public relations texts (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994; Lattimore, et al., 2004; Seitel, 2007; Wilcox, et. al., 2003) and, specifically, media relations literature (Cantelmo, 1994; Howard & Mathews, 2000; Howard, 2004).

What is clear is that media relations practitioners must take into account the needs of individual media vehicles in disseminating news, and understand that each vehicle may in fact have individual needs or individual values of what constitutes news. This is an axiom of media relations that is a recurring theme in both academic and practitioner literature, that the media relations practitioner must know the media they are targeting, both in style and in newsworthiness values.

The public relations – journalist relationship

The second area where research has examined the relationship between public relations and journalists focuses on the relationship itself (Adams, 2002; Aronoff, 1975; Bishop, 1988; Carter, 1958; Dansker, Wilcox & Van Tubergen, 1980; DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Feldman, 1961a, 1961b; Gieber & Johnson, 1961; Janowitz, 1975; Jo, 2003; Kopenhaver, Martinson & Ryan, 1984; Lynch, 1993; Paletz & LaFiura, 1977; Park & Berger, 2004; Pincus, Rimmer, Rayfield & Cropp, 1993; Ryan & Martinson, 1988; Sachsman, 1976; Singletary, 1976; Spicer, 1993; Turk, 1985, 1986a, 1986b; Womack, 1986). Voros and Alvarez (1981) wrote the following regarding the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists:

News media relations is something like baseball. On the field of play, there's an adversary relationship that must be understood. The 'hardball' nature of both endeavors is evident from time to time, and both are governed by rules – written and unwritten – and tradition. There are many positions to be covered and varying degrees of skill among players. Calls of 'foul' and 'fair' are subjective, and knowing how to win and lose gracefully means a lot to the reputation of the 'team.' The performances of public relations managers and those in the dugouts affect whether or not they are eventually labeled 'major league.' And in both cases, consistency and evenhandedness win respect and pennants. (p. 41)

DeLorme and Fedler (2003) indicate that the hostility between journalists and public relations practitioners began at the end of World War I. "Journalists feared that publicists' efforts to obtain free publicity would reduce newspapers' advertising revenue" (p. 102). This history has today turned into more of a tradition than anything else. But whether the adversarial relationship is in fact only tradition, or whether it is actually a relationship that has been irrevocably marred because of historical and modern-day happenings is uncertain. Certainly, there is no doubt that public relations practitioners have (in the past?) used unscrupulous means of garnering media attention.

Cameron, Sallot, and Curtin (1997) determined that media personnel are reluctant to use public relations information subsidies because of this adversarial relationship. In their analysis of studies that examine the public relations practitioner as a news source, they conclude from the literature that there is much room for improvement in media relations practices. They suggest that more research, employing diverse methods, would greatly enrich both the practice of media relations and also the body of knowledge surrounding public relations.

Kopenhaver, Martinson and Ryan (1984) found that while public relations practitioners and journalists generally agreed on which elements of news were most important, journalists were unable to gauge that public relations practitioners would agree with them regarding those news elements. In other words, public relations practitioners know what journalists think is important in news, they are just not practicing their source relationship according to those elements. Kopenhaver, Martinson and Ryan's (1984) study also disagreed with Brody's (1984) findings that the adversarial relationship was less serious than had been previously thought. Cameron, Sallot and Curtin (1997) attribute this to journalists perceiving a self-interest aspect on the part of the public relations practitioner.

Kopenhaver, (1985) using the data from the 1984 study, reported that news values from both the public relations practitioners and journalists were similar, but that journalists saw public relations practitioners as obstructionists, and seeking to gain publicity. Kopenhaver concludes that public relations practitioners should practice the dissemination of information keeping in mind the elements of news they claim to know.

Sallot (1990) conducted a study that sought to replicate Kopenhaver, et. al's (1984). Using two regional audiences, Sallot conducted a survey of both public relations practitioners and journalists. Sallot argues that because journalists do not value public relations practitioners' perceptions of what can be considered news, they do not in turn assign the practitioners much credibility.

Research Questions

Based on the literature that addresses both news value and public relations practitioners as sources, and the fact that the last major study to examine both public relations practitioners and journalists occurred in 1990; the following research questions are posed for this study.

RQ1a: What changes have occurred in the past 24 years regarding public relations and journalists views of each other with regard to information dissemination?

RQ1b: Have changes in the media landscape led to changes in how newspaper journalists view public relations practitioners?

RQ1c: Have changes in the media landscape affected the credibility assigned to public relations practitioners by journalists?

RQ2a: Are public relations practitioners producing information subsidies that are of greater value to journalists than they were in the past?

RQ2b: How do journalists decide what information subsidies to keep, and what to throw out?

RQ3a: Are the news values that Zoch and Supa (2005) found in the journalism literature actually being used as classifications of news by journalists and public relations practitioners?

RQ3b: What constructs of news are most important for journalists and public relations practitioners?

RQ3c: What constitutes the production of an information subsidy for the public relations practitioner?

RQ4a: What do journalists feel could be strengthened in the relationship between themselves and public relations practitioners?

RQ4b: In what ways could public relations practitioners make their information subsidies more useful to journalists?

RQ4c: What are the agreed upon standards between newspaper journalists and public relations practitioners for what makes information newsworthy?

METHODOLOGY

The research for this study was conducted using a survey administered to public relations practitioners and journalists in the state of Florida. The study used a stratified sample of both media relations practitioners and journalists from the seven major regions in the state (Tallahassee and northwest Florida, Jacksonville and northeast Florida, Tampa / St. Petersburg and the Treasure Coast region, Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Palm Beach area, and Orlando and central Florida). The hope was to draw a representative sample from the entire state. The survey consisted of one mailing, a return pre-paid envelope so respondents did not have to incur any financial cost themselves. No follow-up mailings were used.

The survey instrument used a 7-point Likert scale throughout, ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*) in order to replicate the Kopenhaver, et al. (1984) study. The only modification made to the 1984 instrument was with regard to values of newsworthiness, which is similar to the modifications that Kopenhaver, et al. (1984) made to Aronoff's (1975) instrument. These statements assessed newsworthiness factor values based on the respondent's personal views. The purpose of these questions was to test Zoch and Supa's (2005) list of eight factors of newsworthiness. The Zoch and Supa values were used here because they best addressed the conceptual aspect of preparing information subsidies.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed from both phases of the research project. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher, and were coded following similar steps to those that Curtin (1999) used in her analysis – that of open, axial and selective coding. The unit of analysis for this process was the sentence.

Data from the survey were entered into SPSS 11 for Mac OS X. Data were examined for statistically significant differences between responses from journalists and practitioners through the use of a *t* test, which is consistent with the analysis used by Kopenhaver, et al. (1984). This allowed a direct comparison between the two studies, which was important since very similar populations were used. This also allowed comparisons to be drawn to the Aronoff (1975) study, completing a 30-year cycle of data that can be compared against each other.

The questions on newsworthiness factors were also entered into SPSS 11 for Mac OS X, though these were compared only against the counterpart response (practitioner – journalist) found in this study, as these news values have not previously been studied.

Data were analyzed and compared against the previous studies that used this instrument, particularly the Kopenhaver, et al. (1984) study as very similar populations were being sampled. Cameron, Sallot and Curtin (1997) point out that no survey using this instrument has ever garnered 200 responses from either practitioners or journalists, so that was an additional goal of this study. The benchmark of success was to have comparative numbers with the Kopenhaver, et al. (1984) study which collected 47 responses from editors and 57 responses from practitioners; however, the current study exceeded expectations, and garnered 221 responses (95 public relations practitioners, 122 journalists, and 4 undetermined).

RESULTS

Because the research questions for this examination necessitate a comparison between the Kopenhaver et. al. (1984) study and the current study, the research questions will be addressed in the final section of this paper. Only those findings unique to the current study are addressed in this section.

Study Demographics

A total of 669 surveys were mailed to journalists and public relations practitioners in the state of Florida. Of those, 41 envelopes were returned as undeliverable, leaving a total of 628 surveys successfully delivered, and thus serving as the final population of the study. Of those successfully delivered surveys, 221 were completed, for a return rate of 35% of the modified population, or 33% of the original population. Of those 221 surveys completed, 95 (43%) of the respondents self-identified as public relations practitioners, 122 (55.2%) identified themselves as journalists, and 4 (1.8%) of the respondents either did not indicate a profession or selected “other” as an option.

One goal of this study was to identify the current nature of how journalists and public relations practitioners in the state of Florida view each other. In order to effectively discover this, it was necessary to identify public relations practitioners and journalists who would have a working knowledge of the other’s profession. This was gauged by asking how long each respondent had been practicing their profession, with

the assumption that the more time they had been practicing, the more likely they were to have formed a generalized opinion about the other's profession.

For the current study, the mean number of year's experience a respondent who self-identified as a public relations practitioner had was 12.5. For those who identified themselves as journalists, the mean was 16.3 years.

Additionally, 130 of the 221 respondents (58.8%) self-identified as holding a managerial role. This was positively correlated with years of experience at the $p < .000$ level. Eighty-nine respondents (40.3%) indicated they did not hold management positions, while two respondents (.9%) did not respond.

One question inquired as to whether or not the respondent, who had indicated a profession (either public relations or journalism), had ever practiced the other profession during their career. Seventy-two respondents (32.6%) indicated they had practiced the other profession at some point in their careers, while 121 (54.8%) indicated they had not. Twenty-eight (12.7%) did not respond to the question.

A total of 86 of the 221 respondents (38.9%) indicated they were male, while 129 (58.4%) indicated they were female. Six respondents (2.7%) did not indicate a sex. Of those who indicated their primary profession as public relations, 27 (28%) were male, and 66 (69%) were female. Two respondents who indicated public relations as their primary profession did not indicate sex. Of those respondents who indicated journalism as their primary profession, 59 (48%) identified as male, while 61 (50%) identified as female. Two respondents who self-identified that journalism was their primary profession did not indicate sex.

Study Findings

A main focus of this study was identifying whether both public relations practitioners and journalists recognized common elements of newsworthiness identified through the communication literature. Thus, respondents were asked their opinions about the importance of public relations items sent to the media containing these news elements. The newsworthiness factors were breaking news, timely information, local news, "should know" material, information about prominent people, human interest elements, news that if it is not local is written to pertain to a local audience (cultural proximity) and unexpected information. Respondents were asked to rate each of the elements on a 1 to 5 scale with 1 being very important and 5 being not important at all. Figure 1 indicates the mean scores given to each of the items based on the respondents' profession.

Fig. 1 : Comparison of Means for newsworthy items in public relations materials

Public Relations material should contain	Mean Scores	
	Public Relations Practitioners	Journalists
Breaking News	2.59	2.5
Timely News	1.43	1.57
Local News	1.96	1.67
“Should Know” Information	1.72	1.88
Prominent News	2.55	2.75
Human Interest	1.9*	2.21*
Cultural Proximity	1.54	1.66
Unexpected Information	2.6	2.6

* ANOVA indicates significance at $p < .007$

Comparison to Kopenhaver et al. 1984

Survey participants were also asked to rate their level of agreement with statements that had been used in the Kopenhaver et al. (1984) study. Respondents were asked to read the statement, and then indicate their level of agreement based on a seven-point scale (1 being “strongly agree” and 7 representing “strongly disagree.”) Figure 2 represents the mean scores of those responses broken down by profession, and indicates the ANOVA score for each of the statements.

A discussion based on the comparison to the Kopenhaver et al. (1984) study appears in the following section, however, based on the ANOVA scores, we can be confident that the basis for answers in the current study are dependent on the profession of the respondent. Individuals who did not indicate a profession or indicated other (N=4) are excluded from this analysis. Study participants who did not indicate their level of agreement with specific statements are also excluded from the analysis of that particular statement. All study respondents answered at least 20 of the 25 statements; therefore, no surveys were discarded as being incomplete.

Fig. 2 Mean Scores

	Mean scores		ANOVA Sig. (p<)
	PR practitioners	Journalists	
PR and the press are partners in the dissemination of information.	2.29	3.73	.000
PR practitioners are basically competitors with the advertising departments of newspapers rather than collaborators with the news staff.	5.53	4.69	.000
PR practitioners too frequently insist on promoting products, services and other activities which do not legitimately deserve promotion.	4.68	2.75	.000
PR is a profession equal in status to journalism.	2.84	5.07	.000
PR practitioners often act as obstructionists, keeping reporters from the people they really should be seeing.	5.53	3.17	.000
PR practitioners have cluttered our channels of communication with pseudo events and phony phrases that confuse public issues.	5.18	3.02	.000
The abundance of free and easily obtainable information provided by PR practitioners has caused an increase in the quality of reporting.	3.37	4.41	.000
PR material is usually publicity described as news.	4.43	2.57	.000
The PR practitioner does work for the newspaper that would otherwise go undone.	3.13	4.41	.000
PR practitioners too often try to deceive the press by attaching too much importance to a trivial, uneventful happening.	5.23	3.15	.000
The PR practitioner serves as an extension of the newspaper staff, covering the organization for which he is responsible.	3.63	5.41	.000
PR practitioners are just "gophers" for whomever hires them.	5.85	3.57	.000
PR practitioners are people of good sense, good will, and good moral character.	2.58	3.66	.000
It is a shame that because of inadequate staff, the press must depend on information provided by PR practitioners.	5.22	3.92	.000
PR practitioners understand such journalistic problems as meeting deadlines, attracting reader interest, and making the best use of space.	1.94	3.30	.000
You can't trust PR practitioners.	6.20	4.07	.000
Journalists and PR practitioners carry on a running battle.	4.70	4.03	.005
PR practitioners are typically honest.	2.41	3.45	.000
The massiveness of the impact of PR makes it harder for the average citizen to know when he is being sold a bill of goods.	4.75	3.17	.000
PR practitioners help reporters obtain accurate, complete and timely news.	2.12	3.47	.000
PR practitioners frequently use a shield of words for practices which are not in the public interest.	5.27	3.12	.000
PR practitioners are necessary for the production of news as we know it.	2.77	4.34	.000
PR is a parasite to the press.	6.27	4.74	.000
PR practitioners typically issue news releases or statements on matters of genuine news value.	2.54	3.98	.000
The primary function of PR is to get free advertising space for the organizations they represent.	4.82	2.87	.000

DISCUSSION

The following section addresses both the research questions and offers overall insights into the findings of this study.

Research Questions

Research Question 1a: What changes, if any, have occurred in the last 17 years regarding public relations practitioners' and journalists' views of each other with regard to information dissemination?

Figures 3 and 4 show the differences in means between the 1984 study and the current study. By using a comparison of the mean scores between the two studies, we

can identify what differences have occurred in the last 17 years. For the purposes of the first 25 statements on the survey, 1 indicates “strongly agree” while 7 indicates “strongly disagree.”

Based on the comparison of means between the two studies, we can see there is very little difference between the answers given by respondents in the Kopenhaver et al. (1984) study and the current study. Because the subset population numbers are different, it is inappropriate to run a t-test to determine significance values, however, a face inspection of the numbers indicate they are, in fact, very similar. Therefore, we may deduce that, solely based on attitudes regarding information dissemination (and not attempting to explain differences in the *process* of information dissemination) there has been very little change over the past 23 years in the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists.

This may indicate one of two things. It is possible that public relations practitioners *have* become more valuable and are on an equal level with journalists with regard to information dissemination, but that journalists have an innate distrust of public relations practitioners, and that the statement (the first item) has an inherently negative connotation that journalists find offensive. Or, it may be that public relations practitioners *have not* become more valuable to the media as disseminators of information in the past 23 years.

One possible explanation for this is that public relations practitioners continue to distribute their information in the same way that they have always done, but journalists do not value the contributions because of the manner in which the information is presented, that is, journalists do not feel as though there is actual news value in the information being disseminated. While the use of information subsidies is addressed further in a later research question, it is important to begin that discussion here, as it may lead to an understanding of why journalists do not value public relations information contributions.

Fig. 4 Comparison of means for public relations practitioners between 1984 and 2007

	1984	2007
1. PR and the press are partners in the dissemination of information.	2.4	2.29
2. PR practitioners are basically competitors with the advertising departments of newspapers rather than collaborators with the news staff.	6.1	5.53
3. PR practitioners too frequently insist on promoting products, services and other activities which do not legitimately deserve promotion.	4.0	4.68
4. PR is a profession equal in status to journalism.	2.2	2.84
5. PR practitioners often act as obstructionists, keeping reporters from the people they really should be seeing.	5.3	5.53
6. PR practitioners have cluttered our channels of communication with pseudo events and phony phrases that confuse public issues.	5.1	5.18
7. The abundance of free and easily obtainable information provided by PR practitioners has caused an increase in the quality of reporting.	3.0	3.37
8. PR material is usually publicity described as news.	4.8	4.43
9. The PR practitioner does work for the newspaper that would otherwise go undone.	2.9	3.13
10. PR practitioners too often try to deceive the press by attaching too much importance to a trivial, uneventful happening.	5.0	5.23
11. The PR practitioner serves as an extension of the newspaper staff, covering the organization for which he is responsible.	3.2	3.63
12. PR practitioners are just "gophers" for whom ever hires them.	6.4	5.85
13. PR practitioners are people of good sense, good will, and good moral character.	2.7	2.58
14. It is a shame that because of inadequate staff, the press must depend on information provided by PR practitioners.	5.9	5.22
15. PR practitioners understand such journalistic problems as meeting deadlines, attracting reader interest, and making the best use of space.	2.0	1.94
16. You can't trust PR practitioners.	6.4	6.20
17. Journalists and PR practitioners carry on a running battle.	5.0	4.70
18. PR practitioners are typically honest.	3.3	2.41
19. The messiness of the impact of PR makes it harder for the average citizen to know when he is being sold a bill of goods.	4.8	4.75
20. PR practitioners help reporters obtain accurate, complete and timely news.	2.0	2.12
21. PR practitioners frequently use a shield of words for practices which are not in the public interest.	5.2	5.27
22. PR practitioners are necessary for the production of news as we know it.	3.0	2.77
23. PR is a parasite to the press.	6.5	6.27
24. PR practitioners typically issue news releases or statements on matters of genuine news value.	2.4	2.54
25. The primary function of PR is to get free advertising space for the organizations they represent.	6.0	4.82

Fig. 3 Comparison of means for journalists between 1984 and 2007

	1984	2007
1. PR and the press are partners in the dissemination of information.	3.9	3.73
2. PR practitioners are basically competitors with the advertising departments of newspapers rather than collaborators with the news staff.	4.3	4.69
3. PR practitioners too frequently insist on promoting products, services and other activities which do not legitimately deserve promotion.	2.6	2.75
4. PR is a profession equal in status to journalism.	4.8	5.07
5. PR practitioners often act as obstructionists, keeping reporters from the people they really should be seeing.	3.1	3.17
6. PR practitioners have cluttered our channels of communication with pseudo events and phony phrases that confuse public issues.	3.5	3.02
7. The abundance of free and easily obtainable information provided by PR practitioners has caused an increase in the quality of reporting.	4.2	4.41
8. PR material is usually publicity described as news.	2.8	2.57
9. The PR practitioner does work for the newspaper that would otherwise go undone.	3.8	4.41
10. PR practitioners too often try to deceive the press by attaching too much importance to a trivial, uneventful happening.	3.2	3.15
11. The PR practitioner serves as an extension of the newspaper staff, covering the organization for which he is responsible.	4.9	5.41
12. PR practitioners are just "gophers" for whom ever hires them.	4.1	3.57
13. PR practitioners are people of good sense, good will, and good moral character.	3.4	3.66
14. It is a shame that because of inadequate staff, the press must depend on information provided by PR practitioners.	4.4	3.92
15. PR practitioners understand such journalistic problems as meeting deadlines, attracting reader interest, and making the best use of space.	3.8	3.30
16. You can't trust PR practitioners.	4.5	4.07
17. Journalists and PR practitioners carry on a running battle.	4.6	4.03
18. PR practitioners are typically honest.	4.7	3.45
19. The messiness of the impact of PR makes it harder for the average citizen to know when he is being sold a bill of goods.	3.4	3.17
20. PR practitioners help reporters obtain accurate, complete and timely news.	3.9	3.47
21. PR practitioners frequently use a shield of words for practices which are not in the public interest.	3.5	3.12
22. PR practitioners are necessary for the production of news as we know it.	4.4	4.34
23. PR is a parasite to the press.	5.0	4.74
24. PR practitioners typically issue news releases or statements on matters of genuine news value.	4.2	3.98
25. The primary function of PR is to get free advertising space for the organizations they represent.	3.6	2.87

Research Question 1b: Have changes in the media landscape led to changes in how newspaper journalists view public relations practitioners?

Of particular interest is survey item number 25: “the primary function of public relations is to get free advertising space for the people they represent.” This particular statement reflects a stigma that public relations as a profession has had to contend with

for a long time. Journalists, however, for the most part agreed with the statement, to a higher (though not significantly) level than they did in 1984. This indicates that public relations practitioners have not done a good job changing the perceptions of journalists over the past 23 years. It would appear, according to the survey results that public relations practitioners have not gained much respect from journalists in the past 23 years.

Several reasons for this lack of change are possible. The first is an inherent distrust of public relations practitioners by journalists, which most likely stems from the early (and some modern) practitioners who used unscrupulous tactics to gain the attention of the media. While most public relations practitioners today understand the importance of developing relationships, telling the truth and being open, these “bad apples” of public relations continue to cause journalists to mistrust practitioners, and to feel that practitioners do not understand their needs. This is one possible explanation for why journalists’ answers in both the Kopenhaver et al. study and the current study remained the same. Of course, the problem for public relations practitioners may be larger than simply inherent distrust by journalists.

A second possible reason may not be related to any preexisting suppositions by journalists. While journalists may have an innate wariness of public relations practitioners, it does not explain away why they felt as though practitioners do not understand journalistic problems. What is more likely is that public relations practitioners are not doing an effective job of addressing journalistic needs. This is especially disturbing in the modern media era, when journalists are expecting information on a 24-7 basis.

Research Question 1c: Have changes in the media landscape affected the credibility assigned to public relations practitioners by journalists?

An analysis of the answers by journalists is most valuable in gauging credibility of public relations practitioners in the eyes of journalists, but the answers provided by practitioners are also helpful in examining how practitioners view themselves. Items 13, 16 and 18 are especially relevant as they ask respondents their level of agreement on factors such as trust, morals and honesty. Items 5 and 10 are also important, as they ask about practices in media relations that may lead to decreased credibility in the public relations – journalist relationship. Since we have already concluded that the relationship is paramount in the practice of media relations, any factors that seek to undermine that relationship should be of concern to both public relations practitioners and to journalists.

However, there has been no change in the mean scores for either journalists or public relations practitioners between the Kopenhaver et al. (1984) study and the current study for item 5. Journalists in both studies “slightly agree” with the statement, while public relations practitioners “slightly disagree” with it. What is perhaps even more disturbing for public relations is not that the journalists’ attitudes haven’t changed, but that practitioners only indicated that they “slightly disagree” with the statement. It does

not bode well for public relations practitioners as far as credibility is concerned if they are unsure of their own strategies and tactics.

If public relations practitioners cannot engage in effective and ethical tactics when communicating with journalists, then the level of credibility assigned to practitioners will remain at the same level that it currently does which, coincidentally, seems to be at the same level it was in 1984. However, before change can be affected with journalists, public relations practitioners must affect change within themselves. *Research question 2a: Are public relations practitioners producing information subsidies that are of greater value to journalists than they were in the past?*

Based on the survey, the simple answer to the current research question is no, public relations practitioners are not producing information subsidies that are of greater value to journalists than they were in the past. According to the journalists who responded to the survey there has, in fact, been little change in public relations materials, at least its usefulness for journalists, in the past 23 years. This should be of great concern to public relations practitioners. Since information subsidies are oftentimes the crux of media relations, they should be considered very important to public relations practitioners. Particularly, it should be important to public relations practitioners to make those subsidies useful to the media. It is appropriate here, then, to examine some of the comments of journalists with regard to information subsidies gleaned from the interviews. Although some of the journalists' statements regarding public relations materials were used in answering previous research questions, they still should be considered important in addressing the current question. The topic of materials produced by public relations practitioners was a topic of great interest to journalists, and they were eager to discuss the topic from multiple perspectives.

Journalists, according to the survey, do not feel as though public relations practitioners are providing them with materials that are necessarily useful. There are several possible reasons that this may be the case. The first is a lack of formal public relations education by the senior public relations managers of organizations that practice public relations. Because many of these senior-level practitioners are generally older, their formal education experience may not lie in public relations, which has burgeoned relatively recently in higher education, compared with journalism or business. Thus, the expertise of these senior practitioners comes from on-the-job experience, and while the practitioners may be successful in their field, that success does not necessarily equate to success in media relations, or at the very least, success in establishing good relationships with journalists.

A second possible reason behind the lack of progress for public relations practitioners in the production of information subsidies is, as previously mentioned, the possible innate distrust by journalists of public relations as a field. Again, this may be plausible as a generalization, however, there are obviously examples where, at least on an individual basis, public relations practitioners are able to overcome this intrinsic bias with journalists. It stands to reason, therefore, that public relations as a field could also overcome this bias.

While information subsidies produced by public relations practitioners have not, at least according to the scope of this study, become more valuable to journalists, we see that it is possible to change this perception. Therefore, public relations practitioners need to make a concerted effort to improve their information subsidies in order to make them more useful to journalists.

Research Question 2b: How do journalists decide what information to keep, and what to throw out?

In order to best answer the current research question, to not duplicate discussion, and also to maintain clarity, it is best to combine the current research question with research question 3b: *What constructs of news are most important for journalists and public relations practitioners?*

However, before addressing either of these questions, it would flow more logically to determine first whether the factors of newsworthiness used in the current study are appropriate. Therefore, it is necessary to answer research question 3a: *Are the news values that Zoch and Supa (2005) found in journalism literature actually being used as classifications of news by journalists and public relations practitioners?* It is then possible to address research questions 2b and 3b, and also allow for a more direct comparison of the mean scores of both journalists and public relations practitioners. That is, if both groups agree that the factors set forth are indeed standards for newsworthiness, then it is possible to compare each group's answers to the other.

This is only possible, though, if the list of factors is universally understood across the two groups. From the surveys it would seem that this is indeed the case, indicating that the answer to research question 3a is affirmative, that both groups understand the factors of newsworthiness set forth by Zoch and Supa (2005), though neither of the groups may use the specific terminology. While the study cannot determine with certainty that journalists or public relations practitioners actually define or classify their news materials using the eight factors, we can at least be confident that both groups recognize the factors as being indicators of newsworthiness.

Figure 4.1 indicates the mean scores of both journalists and public relations practitioners when asked whether or not each factor of newsworthiness was important in public relations materials. The scale (1= *very important*, 5= *not important at all*) shows that public relations practitioners and journalists generally agree on which factors of news are most important, as they did in the 1984 Kopenhagen et al. study. According to the respondents of the survey, timely news was ranked highest (journalist mean= 1.57, public relations practitioners mean= 1.43), followed by news that is culturally proximate (journalist mean= 1.66, practitioner mean= 1.96) and local news (journalist mean= 1.67, practitioner mean= 1.96). At the other end of the continuum, the least important factors according to the respondents were prominent news (journalist mean= 2.75, practitioner mean= 2.55), breaking news (journalist mean= 2.5, practitioner mean= 2.59) and unexpected information (journalist mean= 2.6, practitioner mean= 2.6).

In answering research question 4c, then, we can say that journalists and public relations practitioners agree that all eight factors of newsworthiness have some value in public relations materials, and both agree that timeliness, cultural proximity and localness are the most important factors in public relations materials. This also provides the answer to research question 3b, that is, that both public relations practitioners and journalists find that timeliness, cultural proximity and localness are agreed upon as being the three most important factors of newsworthiness. Furthermore, the answer to research question 4c also helps us answer question 2b. While we cannot say with certainty that if an information subsidy contains certain elements of news, it will be retained and used by the journalist, we can posit that there is a greater *likelihood* of a journalist using an information subsidy that fits into their criteria of news. So while we cannot determine with certainty what specific factors will cause a journalist to use an information subsidy, we can determine that certain news elements contained within the subsidy will increase its value to journalists. It appears, however, that journalists often make judgments about the value of an information subsidy based on the information it contains. Therefore, although the current study was unable to indicate what causes a journalist to keep and use an information subsidy, it was able to show which elements of news are most important to journalists.

However, this does not explain why journalists do not feel as though public relations material is useful to them. It would stand to reason that if both groups agree on what is important as far as news is concerned, that public relations practitioners should be considered a valuable source of information to the media, so long as the news they are providing is of interest to the journalist. Since it is probable that neither group is purposefully lying in their responses to the question about what is important in news materials as far as the elements of news are concerned, there must be an alternative explanation.

We know that simply because people think in a certain way, they do not necessarily act in accordance with those thoughts. This is likely the case with public relations practitioners and the concept of newsworthiness. Public relations practitioners, at least according to the results of the survey, understand news and know which factors contribute to material being considered newsworthy. However, journalists do not feel as though public relations material is valuable to them (the journalists) in doing their job.

CONCLUSIONS

The current study revealed several interesting findings beyond the scope of the research questions. Though these were not anticipated, they may prove valuable in examining, and hopefully improving, the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists.

Maximizing media relations

It appears there has been very little change in the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists over the past 23 years. This is perhaps the most

surprising conclusion of this study, given advances in education and technology. In an era when people are more closely connected through technological innovation, it seems as though the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists has remained static. This is, and will remain, a problem for both groups until they each make the effort to better understand the other's role.

As mentioned earlier, inherent distrust of public relations as a profession by journalists may only play a small role in the relationship between the two groups. Because findings in this study have shown that members of each group have overcome this obstacle to some degree and established good relationships with members of the other profession, any such feelings must play only a marginal role, if any at all. What is more likely is that negative perceptions of practitioners and journalists by the other are born out of experience, rather than inherited from professional to professional.

Since contact between public relations practitioners and journalists is often initiated by practitioners, it is likely that feelings of distrust and skepticism are caused because of the actions (or sometimes inactions) of the practitioner. In order to practice effective media relations, it is imperative that public relations practitioners commit themselves to providing information that is valuable to journalists. This includes utilizing the newsworthiness factors explicated by Zoch and Supa (2005), being open and honest with journalists, and taking it upon themselves to manage the expectations of their clients. Once public relations practitioners adopt these principles for communicating with the media, the relationship will improve. However, it is clear that this is not currently the case.

Journalists, for their part, can be more open with public relations practitioners with regard to how the practitioners' information could be made more useful to them. Rather than ignoring public relations information, the journalist should attempt to work with the practitioner to improve the usefulness of their information subsidies, or at least respond to the information presented with reasons why the information is not useful or appropriate. If journalists do nothing, then practitioners will only continue to send them information that is not useful.

One potential solution to discrepancies in the relationship is education. This would need to start in higher education, where students from both public relations and journalism should be required to learn about and experience the other field. However, education should continue into the professional ranks as well. Professional seminars and informational sessions would be able to educate each of the groups on the others' profession. Beyond these educational opportunities, journalists and public relations practitioners must also attempt to get to know each other on a personal basis. This does not mean that the groups necessarily need social interaction, but efforts toward actually knowing each other would go a long way toward improving the relationship. This is especially the case where the practitioner and the journalist will be working together repeatedly.

While pitching stories has always been a part of media relations (Nolte, 1979) it is becoming increasingly important today. Journalists expect to be targeted by public relations practitioners, and so long as the practitioner understands the needs of the journalist, is open and honest with them, and provides them with valuable information, the practitioner will not “fail” with regard to the relationship. However, practitioners need to keep in mind the aforementioned management of expectations, not only for their clients, but for themselves as well. This means that practitioners should not oversell their ability to put their clients’ names on the front page of major newspapers, or to get mentioned on a major television show. Public relations practitioners instead need to adopt the strategy, both personally and with their clients, of practicing effective, targeted media relations that will result in *meaningful* publicity. The axiom of quality over quantity would serve many public relations programs well.

Much can be done to improve the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners; however, in order for any changes to occur, they must be undertaken by professionals from both sides. Positive and effective relationships are indeed possible, but work from both sides must be performed. In order to effectively change stereotypes, it would be necessary for these changes to take effect through the work of large numbers of people. However, until this occurs, the individual practitioner has an opportunity to make him- or herself stand out as a responsible and qualified partner in the dissemination of information in the eyes of journalists.

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