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# The proliferating high-tech trade press and the growth of public relations

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**The Proliferating High-tech Trade Press  
and  
the Growth of Public Relations**

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications  
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Science

by  
Jeffrey A. Scott  
December 1998

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THE PROLIFERATING HIGH-TECH TRADE PRESS  
AND  
THE GROWTH OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

ABSTRACT

by Jeffrey A. Scott

This thesis examines the relationship between journalists and public relations professionals in the high-tech industry to determine whether the two professions have been responsible for each other's significant growth in recent years. The results indicate that, although there is a strong and mutually beneficial relationship, the most likely cause of growth in both professions has been the overall growth of the technology industry.

However, the research does reveal unanticipated facets of the relationship with serious implications about the objectivity of high-tech trade journalism. Journalists indicate an increased reliance on corporate Web sites and newswire services as significant information sources. According to public relations professionals, content found on corporate Web sites and wire services, such as Business Wire, is typically created by public relations professionals. These findings, along with telling data about the way the two professions view one another, imply that trade journalists are more reliant on public relations than they admit.

The larger implication is that technology companies are using the trade press as a seemingly objective, third-party source through which to communicate tailored messages to target customers.



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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The relationship between journalists and public relations professionals has been examined and analyzed repeatedly over the years. Are they dependent on one another? What role do they play relative to one another? Can either thrive in the absence of the other? Although it is difficult to find any definitive answers to these questions, one measurable trend is clear -- both professions are growing. The literature review will show that these two professions are growing much faster than the rest of the economy in both financial and human investment. Is this purely coincidental, or is there a fundamental link between journalism and public relations that allows them to feed off one another and fuel their mutual growth? The search for such a link is the primary focus of this thesis.

On the surface, it seems obvious that the two professions are opposing forces. Former *New York Times* reporter Stephen Conn (1997) explains it quite simply, “Journalists distrust PR people because they feel that public relations professionals are generally trying to cover up or put spins on things. Years ago I vowed that no matter how bad things got, I would never go to the other side of the wall separating journalists and PR practitioners” (p. 38).

The traditional mission of the news media has been to educate, inform and occasionally provide commentary. In the U.S., the media have enjoyed a long history of freedom -- freedom to pursue nearly any story and explore any subject that editors, producers or publishers believe will interest their audiences.

Public relations professionals, on the other hand, have frequently been portrayed as spin doctors or barriers to truth. The media have often viewed public relations somewhat cynically as an advocacy-based vehicle used to combat the media's unbiased representation of the facts. As Morley Safer noted, "My biggest problem with public relations is its determination to get between us and what really happened" (Wiesendanger, 1994, p. 6).

However, as the 20th century winds down, dramatic changes in the way Americans seek and consume information may challenge these long-held beliefs about the relationship between the news media and public relations. Americans now receive more information and more timely information than ever before, a fact that is reflected by a growth in the number of American print and electronic news outlets (Lachenbruch, 1995; "Statistical Abstract," 1994). In fact, it often seems as though no amount of news is ever enough. Trends such as this serve to intensify competition within the media for access to all-too-scarce information sources (Gandy, 1982).

### Statement of Purpose

With this changing news climate in mind, can one find a link between the proliferation of media outlets and the growth of public relations? After all, public relations can be one of the most important and prolific information sources for a journalist, and one of the few sources with the journalistic savvy to package its content in a media-friendly manner.

To answer this question, there are more basic issues that must first be addressed. Perhaps the most pertinent is the effect of media demassification. Has the increasing number of media outlets forced producers and publishers to seek smaller, niche markets, limiting potential advertising and subscription revenues? If so, have these financial considerations led the media to operate with smaller staffs and limited production resources, possibly opening the door to an increased reliance on public-relations-generated material that is provided to the media at no cost? Has there been an increased demand by the media leading to the growth of public relations?

What about the opposite? Has the public relations industry been proactive in ratcheting up its supply of content knowing that it is almost certain to be consumed? Has this possibly been an enabler of new media outlets that see an opportunity to package and re-sell content that costs them almost nothing? In short, have both professions, long considered antagonists, actually helped spark each other's growth?

By narrowing the study of the press/public relations link slightly, this thesis could take on a very strong Silicon Valley flavor. High-tech trade publications have been key to the growth of the print media in recent years and high-tech firms employ a large number of public relations people in the Valley. In addition, there is a higher concentration of hi-tech newsmakers and news consumers in Silicon Valley than in many other parts of the country.

For the ever-growing army of Silicon Valley public relations and marketing communication professionals, editorial contacts change everyday as new publications and online magazines, often referred to as "e-zines," pop up. And, many publishers of high-

tech trade magazines are now giving away subscriptions to their target audiences in order to maintain acceptable circulation levels for advertisers.

So, many people find themselves wondering how high-tech trade journalism can continue to grow so rapidly when it already seems so hyper-competitive. Is it possible that a growing **media demand** and growing **public relations supply** are feeding off each other to satisfy the public's desire for more information?

### Significance of this Research

Based on a review of the existing literature, it appears that nobody has yet investigated the possibility of a growth-enabling link between the media and public relations. A thesis yielding strong conclusions would be well positioned to serve as the foundation for a more comprehensive study in the future -- a study that could investigate the specific issue of journalistic independence in the trade press.

For instance, the study would examine if technology companies are benefiting from a seemingly independent trade press that is actually being used by companies as a credible information source through which they can communicate tailored messages to their target customers. Regardless of whether the trade press is a willing accomplice, the issue is very pertinent to the millions of readers who look to these publications everyday for information on which they may base purchase decisions for their personal or professional computing needs.

### Overview of Procedures

This thesis is an exploratory study. As Earl Babbie (1995) explained, this approach not only provides a better understanding of a new area of research, it tests the feasibility of undertaking a more careful, far-reaching study.

The research is qualitative. The primary research vehicle was in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of subjects, as described by Patton (1990). The sample of twenty five U.S. media and public relations professionals was a handpicked combination equally weighted among both groups. The interviewees are all employed in the high-tech industry. The semi-focused interviews were conducted during a ninety-day period.

The subjects each have at least nine years experience, allowing them to speak from firsthand observations about the evolution of the media/public relations dynamic from the later part of the 1980s through the 1990s.

### Research Limitations

Because this is a qualitative work, focusing only on the U.S. high-tech industry, using a purposive sample of interviewees, the results do not have the statistical validity necessary for generalization. Rather, the research provides a body of detailed, firsthand observations and evidence that can help answer the questions laid out above in the Statement of Purpose.

Helping make the study as feasible as possible is the proximity of high-tech trade publications and companies to Silicon Valley. This made the interview process much simpler by providing a large pool from which to draw the purposive sample.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

This literature review covers four topics, each one helping to build the foundation for the exploratory study that follows. The four topics are: trends in the news media since 1980; trends in public relations since 1980; the relationship between the news media and public relations; and a theoretical framework for the exploratory study.

Some significant **trends in the news media** since 1980 include: the expansion of niche markets in print media; the proliferation of many narrowcast television stations; the evolution of the Internet into a mainstream source of information; and the increasingly competitive environment for broadcast television as it battles cable and satellite networks for national audiences.

The most important **trend in public relations** since 1980 has been its growth. There has been a dramatic increase in both the number of public relations practitioners and the amount of money being spent on public relations -- and similar growth is expected to continue for many years. As might be expected, this infusion of human and financial capital has lead to increased sophistication and specialization in the industry.

The **relationship between the news media and public relations** is really the essential element of the literature review. Much has been written about the perceived adversarial relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners, particularly the contempt in which many journalists hold public relations. The literature review looks

at the accuracy of this commonly held belief as well as the undeniably strong relationship between the two professions.

The **theoretical framework** sets the stage for the rest of the thesis. Finding a single theory to guide the research proved to be very difficult. In this thesis, several theories are examined. Ultimately, two theories -- information subsidy by Oscar Gandy and the situational theory of public relations by James Grunig and Todd Hunt -- stand out as the most appropriate.

### Trends in the News Media Since 1980

The expansion of the media in recent years is easily quantifiable. The number of television stations has grown since 1980 from 1,011 to 1,532, an increase of 52 percent (Lachenbruch, 1995). Between 1982 and 1987, the number of U.S. periodicals increased from 3,328 to 4,020, a 21 percent jump in only five years ("Statistical Abstract," 1994). This compares to the overall American population that has grown by less than 1 percent per year since 1980 ("Statistical Abstract," 1994).

Although counter-intuitive to the implication of these numbers, the media is not becoming more massive. Producers and publishers have moved toward a "highly personalized" news media (Stewart & Ward, 1994). Economic necessity is forcing media outlets to target new, different and very specific audiences (Turow, 1992; Van Zuilen, 1977). While this is not a recent phenomenon, it is one which escalated during the 1980s (Smith, 1990).



Mass market, or general, periodicals are in the present age almost nonexistent. Except for a relative few, what one finds today are large numbers of magazines that ... appeal to a specific audience or interest instead of being all things to large populations (Nourie & Nourie, 1990, p. vii).

Even the last bastion of a truly mass media, the three major television networks, has seen its stranglehold on prime time viewing erode. The networks' audience share dropped more than 20 percent between the early 1980s and the early 1990s. Cable TV and independent stations caused the lion's share of that erosion (Turow, 1992). By 1996, the four major networks held roughly 63 percent of prime-time viewers (Breznick, 1996).

On one hand, this tighter focus allows the media to target well-defined demographics instead of broadcasting to many publics, each with a varying level of interest (McKenna, 1993). Not coincidentally, this is very attractive to advertisers who do not want to pay to reach a large, unfocused audience. On the other hand, demassification has created audiences so much smaller than in the past that exploiting and holding onto strong niche markets has become a matter of survival (Turow, 1992).

High-tech publications are an excellent example. There are some 2,600 magazines worldwide for the computer and computer-science fields (Bell, 1994). That number is up from about 1,000 in 1986. Granted, these are global and not national figures, but with a 160 percent increase in only eight years, it is easy to imagine how difficult it must be for periodicals to vie for readership.

Perhaps the most obvious example of demassification has occurred through the growth of cable TV. Since 1980, the number of U.S. households with cable TV has climbed from 15 million to 57 million -- roughly 61 percent of all American homes

(“Statistical Abstract,” 1994). But as is the case with the print media, this medium is not becoming more massive.

Among many available cable options, viewers can watch channels devoted entirely to: Asian programming, Black entertainment, business and finance, cartoons, comedy, country music, documentaries, entertainment news, food, headline news, game shows, golf, government proceedings, health and fitness, Hispanic programming, history, law, movies, music, outdoor activities, religion, science fiction, shopping, sports, talk shows, weather and wildlife.

Evidence of the competitive nature of cable TV lies in the fact that many stations struggle for profitability even as the proliferation of new stations continues (Smith, 1990). As the result of narrowly identified audiences, stations face the same financial obstacles experienced by the print media. Total advertising revenue for the entire U.S. cable industry was \$2.5 billion in 1993, compared to \$10.2 billion for the now **four** main broadcast networks (Lachenbruch, 1995).

Cable stations have been forced to fill their seemingly endless hours of programming on much tighter budgets than network television (Hilliard, 1989). According to Denis McQuail (1994), this has caused concern about an overall “lowered informational quality.”

Despite higher revenues than many of their cable counterparts, broadcast television outlets have also been impacted by demassification. Broadcast revenues continue to grow, but not nearly to the degree they once did. Revenues for local stations flattened out in the 1980s, even for major network affiliates (Hilliard, 1989).

The networks themselves have seen their revenues virtually stall. In 1983, the three major networks had combined advertising revenues of \$6.9 billion, an average of \$2.3 billion each. The 1993 advertising revenues of \$10.2 billion breaks down to an average of \$2.6 billion each -- with the inclusion of Fox. This means that annualized advertising revenue rose only about \$300,000 per network from 1983 to 1993 (Lachenbruch, 1995).

According to a second source, national TV advertising had an annual growth rate of less than one percent by the end of 1990 (Flint, 1991). Meanwhile, production costs traditionally continue to rise, roughly in step with the economy (Hilliard, 1989).

One cannot discuss trends in the media without a mention of the **Internet**. The Internet is a computer network that allows millions of people around the world to retrieve information on virtually any subject, whenever they please. It also lets users talk with one another and entertain themselves (Cronin, 1994). As the Internet has matured, individuals can now tailor their computer desktops to retrieve local, national and world news, financial news and stock quotes, press releases and many other types of information automatically. This degree of access to data can make news consumption highly personalized and very timely.

With the rise of the Internet's World Wide Web, most traditional media outlets now have online "home pages." These pages provide graphically intuitive, and increasingly interactive, screens to make it easier for the average person to get information that until recently was unimaginable (Cronin, 1994).

There are now online versions of every significant newspaper and high-tech trade publication as well as online counterparts to most local television stations and national networks. This online content is forcing editors to deliver news twenty-four hours per day, not just once a day -- or even once a week.

The *American Editor* captured this idea very simply when it observed, "Online newspapers are a necessary development to capture an audience that likes the flexibility and range of the Internet" (Ritt, 1995, p. 4). And, the online publications threaten to further erode the circulation of the traditional hard-copy magazines.

All of the effects of demassification are combining to make it extremely difficult for players in the crowded media marketplace to find differentiating "news," or even newsworthy information (Blyskal & Blyskal, 1985). And the smaller audiences, with their obvious effect on financial resources, exacerbate the situation by limiting the media's ability to pursue news (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Van Zuilen, 1977).

Relating this back to the plight of high-tech trade publications, one can simply compare the technology industry's most widely read magazines to the few general news magazines that continue to flourish. *Time* has a weekly circulation of 4.1 million, *Newsweek* is 3.2 million and *U.S. News and World Report* is 2.3 million. Conversely, *InformationWeek*, *PC Week* and *InfoWorld* have circulations of 325,000, 238,000 and 225,000 respectively (McFarland, 1997). And, many trade publications have resorted to offering free subscriptions to boost circulation among their target audiences.

## Trends in Public Relations Since 1980

The growth of public relations has been tremendous. In 1950, the U.S. had about 20,000 public relations professionals. By 1960, the total was 35,000. In 1970, the number reached 80,000. In 1980, it was 160,000. And by 1994, public relations professionals numbered 400,000 (Wilcox, Ault & Agee, 1995a). That is a 2,000 percent increase in 44 years, and a 150 percent increase in the 14 years from 1980 through 1994.

In financial terms, the U.S. public relations industry is a \$10 billion dollar per year industry. The top ten firms alone bill nearly \$1 billion annually, up 700 percent since 1980. Furthermore, a 1993 national survey revealed that college graduates working in public relations had the highest median salary of all journalism and mass communications disciplines -- a sign that demand for public relations remains strong (Wilcox et al, 1995a).

The Census Bureau expects public relations management positions to grow anywhere from 27 to 43 percent by the year 2005 ("Statistical Abstract," 1994). According to James Grunig and Larissa Grunig (1992), the growth of the management function in public relations indicates that a more significant role for public relations is finding its way into the corporate environment.

Besides growth, there are other important trends in public relations. One of the most significant has been the increasing specialization of its practitioners. While not an exhaustive list, public relations professionals can specialize in one of the following: community relations, corporate communications, employee relations, event planning, fund raising, government affairs, industrial relations, investor relations, marketing communications, media relations, public affairs, publicity and trade show coordination.

In addition, a recent *U.S. News and World Report* cover story cited crisis communication as one of the twenty hottest careers in the country, and noted that it expects the broader public relations industry to grow by 55 percent by 2006 -- even more optimistic than the Census Bureau (Brindley, 1997).

Similar to specialization among individual practitioners, there is also a growing tendency for entire public relations firms to specialize in specific industries. And today, “the technology arena is by far the fastest-growing sector -- fueled in large part by startups, whose biggest expenditure is often for PR” (Mieszkowski, 1998, p. 186).

This move toward specialization is due in large part to the need for public relations professionals to build relationships with an ever-expanding universe of editors, reporters and analysts. This is a time-consuming process that is difficult to maintain without regular contact (Howard & Mathews, 1985). When firms divide their resources into too many areas, it can be difficult to develop strong professional ties with key influencers (Blyskal & Blyskal, 1985).

A third way in which public relations is becoming more specialized is the way in which firms provide services. Some firms have fine-tuned their expertise into specific deliverables. The best example of this is the video news release (VNR). In 1992, VNR production was an \$18 million “industry” (Boucher, 1993).

Today, many production houses do little else beside produce VNRs. Their services include scripting, filming, editing and distributing the VNRs on behalf of clients (Simon, 1997; Wilcox et al, 1995a). Although their product is a classic public relations vehicle, these firms bear little resemblance to traditional public relations agencies.

This whole theme of specialization is reflective of the increasing sophistication needed to “facilitate the flow of information” throughout a very complex media system (Capsi, 1989). It is also indicative of the high demand for public relations, a demand that brings in enough money to support such specialization.

As organizations become more aware of how important public relations efforts are, they also appreciate the fact that it takes an experienced practitioner to fully exploit the vast and growing opportunities. Perhaps that is why so many companies “are putting increasing resources into [public relations], and they do an increasingly good job” (Zotti, 1987, p. 15).

This acceptance of the increased role of public relations has even made many product vendors think twice about their advertising efforts. The high cost of advertising has led many companies to shift some of their resources into product publicity (Wilcox & Nolte, 1995b). Tightly focused magazines, strapped for editorial resources and very willing to accept public relations material, are perfect targets for product public relations.

While small magazines may not “sell” editorial space, when vendors find magazines that need both advertising revenue and contributed content, it makes a very effective communications combination for that vendor (Blyskal & Blyskal, 1985).

#### Relationship Between News Media and Public Relations

Once again, the numbers tell quite a story. The link between public relations and the news media is clear. An editor at *The Miami Herald* said that her newspaper received

50 to 60 local press releases each day and used about half of them (Kopenhaver, 1985). The numbers are even higher for “soft” news (Walker, 1991; Blyskal & Blyskal, 1985).

When one takes into consideration all of the news supplied by all forms of public relations, many experts estimate that as much as half of the print and broadcast news nationwide comes from public relations activities (Wilcox et al, 1995a).

A 1988 study found that 2.4 million press releases were being distributed regionally or nationally every week (Morton & Ramsey, 1994). Based on the documented utilization rate of PR Newswire material, about 17 percent of press releases are carried by at least one media outlet. This translates into more than 400,000 releases that become “news” stories each week (Morton & Ramsey, 1994). And, multiple media outlets may use each release.

In this context, the popularity of video news releases noted earlier should not be surprising. In fact, the A.C. Nielsen Company reports that 75 percent of all television stations use VNRs (“Perri Pharris VNRs,” 1992).

However, these numbers do not necessarily indicate a unilateral dependency of the media on public relations. Instead, it can be argued that they illustrate the **supply/demand** phenomenon mentioned earlier. While these statistics show how significant the contribution of public relations is to the news media, it also highlights the fact that the growing media industry is providing an outlet for the growing amount of public relations material being generated.

In fact, during these times of downsizing and streamlined business operations, it has become increasingly important for public relations personnel -- both internal



employees and outside agencies -- to justify their existence and the resources they consume (Fiur, 1988). This makes the quantity and quality of media coverage achieved vital to the careers of public relations professionals. It is this bottom-line pressure that provides so much of the incentive to continually generate more public relations deliverables for the media to consume.

Needs of the news media. Leon V. Sigal said, "the reporter cannot depend on legwork alone to satisfy his paper's insatiable demand for news" (Walters & Walters, 1992, p. 33). This has led to the use of "information subsidies" (Gandy, 1982). Subsidies will be covered in more detail later in the literature review but here is the basic explanation of why a public relations subsidy has utility to the media.

PR is now one of the major sources of news because the profession helps journalists get far more information quickly and in a readily usable form than they obtain either on their own or from any other source (Ramer, 1992, p. 64).

As discussed previously, there are very real economic constraints faced by the media (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). Consequently, the news media, particularly small operations, cannot help but be attracted to the free labor offered by public relations professionals. This has been a significant factor in helping public relations become a major source of news (Capsi, 1989; Morton & Ramsey, 1994).

Rayfield and Ohl (1992) have an optimistic take on this trend. They say, "High quality news releases are valued by gatekeepers" (p. 27). Ramer (1992) agreed, "PR serves a vital role by helping journalists get as much truth as there is to be had at deadline" (p. 64).

The reality of public relations as an important news supplement is also supported by the actions of the major news organizations. Hundreds of newsrooms subscribe to the PR Newswire, including the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post*. And, the Associated Press sells time on its own satellite for the distribution of press releases (Blyskal & Blyskal, 1985).

Seymour Topping, former managing editor of the *New York Times*, explained, “We get hundreds of press releases everyday in each of our news departments ... and often there are legitimate news stories.” He continued, “Often the first hint of a newsworthy event is heard of by us from a press release” (Blyskal & Blyskal, 1985, p. 46).

Herbert Gans adds, “The relationship between sources and journalists resembles a dance ... it takes two to tango, either sources or journalists can lead, but more often than not, sources do the leading” (Gandy, 1982, p. 11).

Needs of public relations. The fight for the attention and mindshare of audiences is more intense than ever. Getting editorial or broadcast coverage is one of the most powerful ways to reach those audiences (Blyskal & Blyskal, 1985). It has much more credibility with the reader or viewer than a paid advertisement (Wilcox & Nolte, 1995b). This is precisely what makes public relations so important to companies and organizations.

Similarly, negative editorial coverage can be much more injurious to an organization than paid negative ads by competing organizations. Therefore, strong media relationships are a crucial aspect of public relations (Theus, 1988). Studies show that the

more open an organization is with its key media, the more likely the organization is to receive positive coverage (Theus, 1988).

The competition for media coverage has led to what Andrew Wernick (1991) calls a “promotional culture.” Public relations is continually looking to the media for “opportunities for publicity,” and not simply to supply them with information (Corner & Schlesinger, 1993).

In a pessimistic representation of the public relations/media relationship, Shoemaker (1989) said that public relations practitioners try to manipulate the media “in order to structure reality according to their own vested interests” (p. 214).

Others go so far as to say that public relations practitioners are somehow able to decide what the news media does or does not publish (Capsi, 1989). This belief was given statistical support in a recent study that found more than 220 articles based on roughly 80 press releases sent out by two companies. Interestingly, the more advocacy-based press releases resulted in more advocacy-based articles (Harrison, Ohl, Pincus and Rimmer, 1995).

Where does this leave the relationship? To be sure, there can be quite a bit of animosity between public relations professionals and the media. This is particularly true of veteran reporters. Morley Safer, quoted earlier in this thesis, criticized the tendency for public relations professionals to go after “small, hungry” TV stations that have such a difficult time refusing ready-to-use material (Wiesendanger, 1994). Ironically, this same

tactic is referenced as an effective method for achieving broadcast placement in The Video News Release Handbook (1990).

As for the print media, many smaller publications are having to fight harder than ever to sell advertising space as well as fill their pages with editorial content. Companies that can help in both areas are at a premium. As mentioned earlier, this has enabled many companies to effectively combine their public relations and advertising efforts (Blyskal & Blyskal, 1985).

Taking a more positive outlook, Shoemaker (1989) explained that public relations does call “the attention of media employees to ideas and activities outside their traditional and quite institutional news beats” (p. 214). A Midwestern editor added, “if releases stopped coming, we would miss a lot of stories” (Baxter, 1988, p. 222).

This sentiment was echoed by the former Assistant Managing Editor at the *Wall Street Journal*, Charles Staebler. He commented, “We look at press releases positively as a source of tips ... For some stories, the press release has the entire story” (Blyskal & Blyskal, 1985, p. 47).

Despite all of this, it is still the media organizations that ultimately have control over what is presented to the public (Turk, 1988). Like most people, editors and producers do not want their independence nor their authority undermined. In making judgments about the news value of a press release, for example, journalists are more likely to accept it for publication if the piece reflects “journalistic values” rather than overt bias (Rayfield & Ohl, 1992).

The degree to which public relations professionals can effectively get their messages placed is largely determined by how well they tailor those messages to the needs of the media (Stegall & Sanders, 1986).

It is also worth noting that the relationship between journalism and public relations seems to be improving. A University of Memphis study revealed that the level of interdisciplinary respect is greater than assumed based on isolated media comments (Brody, 1984). However, the accuracy of this claim will be examined much more closely later in the thesis.

### Theoretical Framework

While much has been written about the growth and demassification of the media and, to a lesser extent, the growth of public relations, very little research has been done to investigate any link between the two. Because of this, it is difficult to find a single, existing theory to adequately support such research. There are, however, several interesting theories that can be combined to form the basis of a study.

Media system dependency theory. The media system dependency theory offered by Sandra Ball-Rokeach has been used to examine the role of the media in society. It is not specifically concerned with media demassification nor with public relations. But, there is an aspect of the theory that is applicable. It states, “the power of the media is a function of the dependencies of individuals, groups, organizations, and systems on the scarce information resources controlled by the media” (Ball-Rokeach, 1989, p. 299).

Media system dependency theory explains that the media and various social systems, such as the political and economic systems, are interdependent on one another for survival. Specifically, the media is dependent on other social systems for both advertising revenue and “formal and informal information resources required to cover the news” (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989, p. 130). On the other hand, DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach explain that participants in the major social systems are dependent on the media to become informed citizens, make sound decisions and learn about new developments in the world around them.

In the context of the high-tech trade press, the press needs compelling content in order to keep circulation numbers high and advertising revenue at acceptable levels. For assistance in this endeavor, the press could conceivably look to public relations. Likewise, public relations professionals, working on behalf of the corporate/economic system, need the press to help “establish and maintain linkages between producer and consumer” and reinforce free-enterprise values (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989, p. 131).

For purposes of this thesis, it would be a stretch to take this theory the next step -- using it to explain the relationship between the growth of public relations and the news media. DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach were examining the media from the point of view of its place in a larger societal context. Their work really did not focus on public relations and how public relations could play a role in supplying media content. However, this theory does logically flow into information subsidy theory.

Information subsidy theory. This theory builds on the idea of scarce information resources. In a nutshell, an information subsidy is information that a source makes “available at something less than the cost a user would face in the absence of a subsidy” (Gandy, 1982, p. 61). Wilcox and Nolte (1995b) put it more bluntly by saying that subsidies, “save media outlets the time, money, and effort of gathering their own news” (p. 228).

Journalists have to meet deadlines, editors have to fill space, producers must fill the time between the commercials. In order to reduce their uncertainty about meeting these fairly standard organizational requirements, journalists enter into relationships of exchange with their sources that have many of the qualities of traditional economic markets ... Journalists decide whether to invest time in the pursuit of one source rather than another based on their estimation of the probable returns such investments will produce (Gandy, 1982, p. 11).

It is important to note that the theory goes far beyond a news organization’s simple desire to save money. For a subsidy to be effective, it is crucial that it is easy for the media to use. This is a major determinant in the effectiveness of public relations efforts. Fortunately for most practitioners, they are trained in preparing information in accepted journalistic formats (Patterson, 1983).

In addition, because practitioners typically work on behalf of governmental, corporate or institutional clients -- as opposed to working for themselves -- their representations, particularly quotes, are often accepted as factual, limiting the need for fact checking (Gandy, 1982). This makes a journalist’s job much easier, especially when facing tight deadlines.

Gandy’s theory is also particularly strong in another area mentioned earlier in the literature review -- practitioners introducing journalists to issues outside their usual beats

(Shoemaker, 1989). When the media are unfamiliar with an issue or event, public relations professionals can go beyond subsidies. They can actually give, or withhold, whatever background they choose, thereby framing the issue for the media (Gandy, 1982).

Gandy (1982) claims that just over a quarter of most “important” newspaper stories are the product of “investigative or enterprise” reporting. And if one subtracts from that number the stories facilitated by pre-arranged interviews -- traditionally scheduled by public relations practitioners who are also responsible for preparing the interviewee -- there is “very little” news generated by investigative reporting.

Harrison et al (1995) and Turk (1988) went so far as to say that this helps public relations practitioners become influential in media agenda setting. Blyskal and Blyskal (1985) go even further. They say, “it is PR that often sets the agenda for the media” (p. 32).

Whatever one’s belief about media agenda setting, the application of Gandy’s theory strengthens the argument that public relations can be valuable to the media. By significantly reducing the acquisition cost of information, public relations can effectively provide content for the media.

Relating this back to the supply/demand theme, Gandy’s theory specifically supports the demand side of the equation, i.e., media demand is helping fuel the growth of public relations through the increasing need for information subsidies.

Uses and gratifications theory. In addition to information subsidies, there is a second theoretical pillar for this thesis -- the situational theory of public relations, which



has gained widespread acceptance in recent years. To put situational theory in context, one can first discuss a more fundamental mass communication theory -- uses and gratifications.

Uses and gratifications theory essentially looks at what people do with the media (Katz, 1959). Over the past 40 years, many social scientists have adapted and advanced uses and gratifications theory. Through this continuing work, several widely accepted notions of media usage have evolved. Among these, Katz, Gurevitch and Haas (1973) include cognitive needs, affective or emotional needs, and tension-release needs.

For this thesis, this theory is relevant to the extent that it helps explain how the public relations industry can prepare content for the media in such a way that the media is able to use the content to meet the needs of the audience. By doing this, public relations professionals could significantly increase the likelihood that their material will be used.

In high-tech public relations, a classic example of this is the use of quotes in press releases attributed to "industry experts." Such quotes offer independent validation of a company's claim thereby giving the reader a more credible message about the product or technology being discussed.

However, the theory has two major limitations with respect to this thesis. First, it has proven to be more significant as a data-collecting strategy than as an explanatory theory (Elliott, 1974; Swanson, 1977, 1979). And second, its primary theoretical application is as a tool for studying the individual, not macro-level systems (McLeod & Becker, 1981). For that, one can look to situational theory.

Situational theory of public relations. Situational theory explains how public relations professionals can define, identify and communicate with their publics. It is more directly applicable to the public relations function than uses and gratifications theory and it can be used to explain a very broad relationship, such as the press/public relations link.

By treating the media as a public, situational theory can explain what conditions might cause the media to seek out public relations-generated information. This is a kind of reverse approach to uses and gratifications theory -- in other words, how the **media** uses something for its own gratification.

According to the situational theory, three independent variables contribute to a given public's likelihood of seeking and processing information (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The first variable is problem recognition. People are unlikely to search for information unless they perceive that a problem exists and it must be resolved.

The second independent variable is constraint recognition. This is the idea that people are more likely to seek out information if they believe they can dictate their own behavior. Conversely, if they believe they cannot dictate their own behavior, people are less likely to seek and process potentially helpful information. This may sound confusing, but it is actually quite simple. If one cannot control what happens, why gather the information in the first place?

The third variable is level of involvement. The higher one's level of involvement in an activity, cause, issue or subject, the greater the chance that a person will seek out information relevant to it.

To bring this back to the study of media proliferation and the growth of public relations, assume that journalists have been identified as a target audience for public relations practitioners. Journalists will almost universally recognize a deadline, or a lack of content for an article, as variable number one -- a problem. These situations are important and must be dealt with appropriately and quickly.

Similarly, the journalist's level of involvement -- variable number three -- is typically very high. If the public relations professional is approaching the journalist with material germane to that journalist's beat, the reporter is likely to at least listen to the public relations person.

According to Grunig and Hunt's (1984) theory, if the public relations practitioner is able to address constraint recognition -- variable number two -- there is a high likelihood that a journalist will be receptive to the information offered by the practitioner.

As public relations has grown more sophisticated, with news releases written as inverted pyramids in standard Associated Press style and video news releases produced in easy-to-broadcast formats, practitioners have helped alleviate constraint recognition. They are wiping away the long-held perception that public relations materials are not usable by the press or that the materials fail to meet journalistic requirements.

Based on the scenario played out above, the public relations practitioner has now addressed all three of Grunig and Hunt's independent variables. The practitioner would now be able to offer the journalist a valuable news product.

As resources become scarcer in the news media, the problem recognition element referred to by Grunig and Hunt will only grow larger. As long as public relations

professionals keep current in the way in which they package information for the press, keeping constraint recognition low, and offer material that can grab the interest of the media's audience, keeping level of involvement high, the situational theory of public relations can continue to explain much of the interaction between the two groups.

What does this mean for the supply/demand dynamic? It means that by knowing what to supply and how to supply it, public relations professionals can help support the growing media by providing more usable content than would be available in the absence of public relations. A by-product of a growing media would be the creation of more publicity opportunities, which could have a powerful spiraling effect on both professions.

The theories of Gandy and Grunig and Hunt are a very formidable combination for the study of media proliferation and the growth of public relations. Gandy's theory helps explain, from the media-demand perspective, how public relations can benefit from the growing news media's usage of information subsidies. Grunig and Hunt, on the other hand, explain from the supply perspective how public relations practitioners can help the media grow by understanding how the media work and proactively providing the media with useful material.

### Conclusion of Literature Review

The literature clearly shows that there has been a sizable growth in the number of media outlets in recent years. Equally as important, it shows the increasingly specialized focus of those outlets. The major broadcast networks and general-interest periodicals have been hit hard by new players targeting specific demographic, professional and

special interest groups. Add to this the new media entering the mix and diluting the audience even further, and it is clear that finding a truly “mass” audience is not an easy task -- especially in the rapidly evolving technology industry.

Meanwhile, public relations has grown dramatically since 1980. The number of public relations practitioners has grown by 150 percent and public-relations-firm billings are rising astronomically. Within the industry, specialization seems to be taking over -- specialization by clientele, in services offered and by public relations discipline. This growth is expected to continue into the 21st century.

Of greater significance to this thesis, the literature indicates that there is a particularly strong relationship between the news media and public relations. Mass communication scholar Scott Cutlip, put it this way:

*The New York Times* is just as dependent on PR personnel as the *Madison Capital Times*. The bottom line is that newspapers and broadcasters couldn't operate without PR. The news media just do not have the manpower or expertise to cover today's broad spectrum of news (Blyskal and Blyskal, 1985, p. 51).

Now that the literature has been used to demonstrate a clear and strong relationship between public relations and the media, the goal for the remainder of the thesis is to study that relationship at a higher level. Do the two industries simply work together, like so many other industries do, or has their mutual dependence been instrumental in their mutual growth?

## Research Questions

(1) The evidence uncovered in the literature review indicates that media proliferation and demassification have created financial constraints that limit the ability of individual media outlets to find information and investigate events. At the same time, competitive pressure and technological innovation have made things even more difficult for the news media by making timely delivery of information vital for success.

One could argue that these factors have significantly enhanced the potential value of public relations material -- assuming that the material can quickly be turned into suitable media content. Such a scenario would be consistent with Gandy's discussion of the media's use of information subsidies.

With this in mind, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, has there been an increased demand by the high-tech trade media for public relations material enabling the growth of the public relations profession?

(2) Based on the literature review, it appears that companies and organizations have become increasingly aware of the media's willingness to use public relations material to help meet editorial demands. To exploit this, companies have become more prolific in their public relations efforts; learning to package information in ways that are best suited for use by the media. This has created an ever-growing supply of media-ready information -- information that an opportunistic publisher could re-package to fill the pages of new trade publications.

This type of press/public relations dynamic could fit the situational theory of Grunig and Hunt. Public relations could lower the media's constraint recognition

(through sufficient content to help meet editorial requirements for a new publication) and offer a solution to problem recognition (by appropriate content packaging). The media's level of involvement would likely be determined by other factors, such as market demand for the potential publication.

The question then, is the high-tech trade press able to use this growing supply of public relations content to fill the pages of new publications that may not be possible in the absence of so much free material?

(3) These two questions lead to the primary research question. Based on the answers to the first two questions, can one deduce that the traditional economic forces of supply and demand have created a strong enough bond between high-tech public relations and the trade press to enable each industry to fuel the growth of the other?

## Chapter 3

### Method

As mentioned previously, this thesis is an exploratory study. The fundamental goal of this research has been to identify patterns that, while not generalizable, give solid and defensible answers to the thesis' research questions.

Exploratory research offers strong benefits that make it particularly appropriate for this thesis. Exploratory work starts from the assumption that the phenomena of the world are knowable and explainable, making it ideal for the study of previously unstudied subjects (Patton, 1990). This enables researchers to worry less about how their work will be compared to others while focusing more on investigating a significant personal or professional interest (Patton, 1990).

#### Collection of Data

Semi-focused, open-ended interviews were the primary data-collection vehicle. Because of the logistics involved with these interviews, they were conducted from December 1997 through February 1998.

Each interview followed the same general interview outline, but these outlines were used only as guideposts, providing a reasonable safeguard to ensure that the same topics were addressed with each interviewee. To ask identical questions of every interviewee was not feasible, nor desirable, with this particular purposive sample. Because of professional bias, it is unlikely that public relations professionals and



journalists would engage in lively conversation unless questions were phrased slightly differently to each audience to reflect their differing professional values.

None-the-less, the outlines helped keep the conversations somewhat focused and made it easier to review and compare the data from each interview (Babbie, 1995; Patton, 1990). Of course, the fact that each interview did not flow identically is precisely what helps interview-based research yield rich, insightful data.

According to Yin (1994), this type of research is ideal for the study of contemporary issues in which the researcher does not have any scientific or academic need to control the behavior or events being studied. Yin also states that survey or interview research tends to provide stronger answers to *what* questions (e.g., What is the relationship between the media and public relations?) than other forms of qualitative research, such as case studies and historical research.

In addition, Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that focused interviews are best utilized for research in which the interviewer knows ahead of time what kind of information he or she is interested in. That way, the interviewer does not need a completely free-form discussion to elicit useful or relevant data.

The interviews covered on the following topics, in an attempt to construct defensible answers to the research questions:

- How has the trade press' use of, or reliance on, public relations changed during the 1980s and 1990s?
- How has the relationship between public relations professionals and journalists changed during this time?

- What theories do the interviewees have about the trade press' strong, sustained growth over this period?
- What enabling forces have been behind the recent public relations boom?
- What are the factors, besides mutual dependency, that could have helped both professions grow so substantially?

The financial burden of this research was minimal. Silicon Valley is home to many high-tech companies and high-tech trade publications. Therefore, the interviews could mainly be done face-to-face. For interviews that could not be done in Silicon Valley, telephone interviews were conducted. This was the case for interviews with several journalists. Although most trade publications have offices in the Bay Area, many of the journalists interviewed for this thesis are based on the East Coast.

The total out-of-pocket cost of conducting the interviews was less than \$200. That figure includes a few stops at the gas station as a result of driving around the Bay Area, and Pacific Bell bills that included long-distance charges for phone interviews. The figure would have been slightly higher; however, a few of the interviewees initiated the phone calls because their busy schedules required that they do so. Most of the interviews lasted a little under an hour and generally required multiple voice mails to schedule.

### Sources of Data

The interviewees included thirteen public relations professionals and twelve reporters, each with at least nine years of experience.

The interview findings were then applied to the research questions to see if compelling answers could be reached -- and to see if valid conclusions could be drawn in reference to the U.S. high-tech industry. The discussion of validity is coming up shortly, but suffice to say for now that interview-based research can yield valid findings as long as the findings are narrowly and appropriately applied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this instance, claims of validity for the U.S. high-tech industry are possible due to the face validity, or credibility, of the answers one expects to receive from professionals discussing firsthand experiences in their fields of expertise (Patton, 1990).

Despite the possibility of valid results, the data is not generalizable. As Fielding and Fielding (1986) state, the mere fact that the subjects are an opportunistic, rather than representative or random, sampling makes it virtually impossible to generalize the results. "The condition of representativeness is absolutely basic to the axiom of generalizability" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 297).

While this may be seen as a point of weakness by some, the trade off is the chance to study high-tech public relations and trade publications in great detail -- a world in which many Silicon Valley professionals work everyday. Such depth and detail of research would not be as effectively accomplished through quantitative research (Patton, 1990). Furthermore, if a qualitative study is properly and narrowly defined, it allows for a far greater level of understanding than a quantitative study (Patton, 1990).

To address the contention that this thesis may have only limited academic value because of concerns over validity and generalizability, if it is able to persuasively answer

the research questions, it could be a sound foundation for a more comprehensive, follow-up quantitative study.

### Analysis of Data

Regarding reliability, intuitively one would expect that carefully worded questions would produce very reliable results (Babbie, 1995). Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to this as **dependability** for purposes of qualitative research. However, an open-ended interview gives subjects quite a bit of room to interpret questions and provide elaborate answers, potentially calling into question the dependability of the data. And, the length of the interview makes it unreasonable to employ a survey method such as test-retest to protect against threats to dependability.

A survey technique such as the split-half method may help strengthen the case for dependability. That is, ask half the respondents one question and half a different question -- both designed to get at information about the same topic -- in an effort to offset any possible bias in question phrasing (Babbie, 1995). Unfortunately, the small sample size would still make any claim of dependability a dubious one.

Both Patton (1990) and Yin (1994) discuss the value of data triangulation as yet another way to ensure dependability of qualitative research. Typically, this is more prevalent in case study analysis when a researcher has multiple types of data sources that can corroborate one another. However, data triangulation is still possible in interview-based research. By searching for patterns in the answers from multiple interviewees and

by analyzing the data for consistency with multiple theoretical frameworks, one can begin to build a strong case for dependability (Fielding & Fielding, 1986).

Much like dependability, the interview process also can pose threats to validity (Yin, 1994). Lincoln and Guba (1985) cite this as a two-fold issue, **credibility**, or internal validity, and **transferability**, or external validity.

Bias by the researcher or interviewee can threaten credibility as can reflexivity -- the phenomenon of interviewees giving the answers they believe the researcher wants to hear (Yin, 1994). Therefore, carefully worded and carefully conducted interviews are invaluable and, even then, the credibility of interview-based research remains susceptible to the concerns of skeptics. In this thesis, credibility is fairly strong. By talking with experts, most observers would concede that their responses represent credible data on which to build a thesis.

To defend the credibility of the thesis more scientifically, credibility is determined by the extent to which an outcome can be attributed to the controlled variation in the independent variable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this case, there is almost no question that output data is completely determined by the independent variable, i.e., the interviewees. And considering the interviewees' expertise, there was a very small likelihood that interviewer bias could have impacted their responses.

Transferability, on the other hand, certainly fell short in this research. Transferability is similar to generalizability, "the approximate validity with which we infer that the presumed causal relationship can be generalized to and across ... different types of persons, settings and times" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 291). Based on the

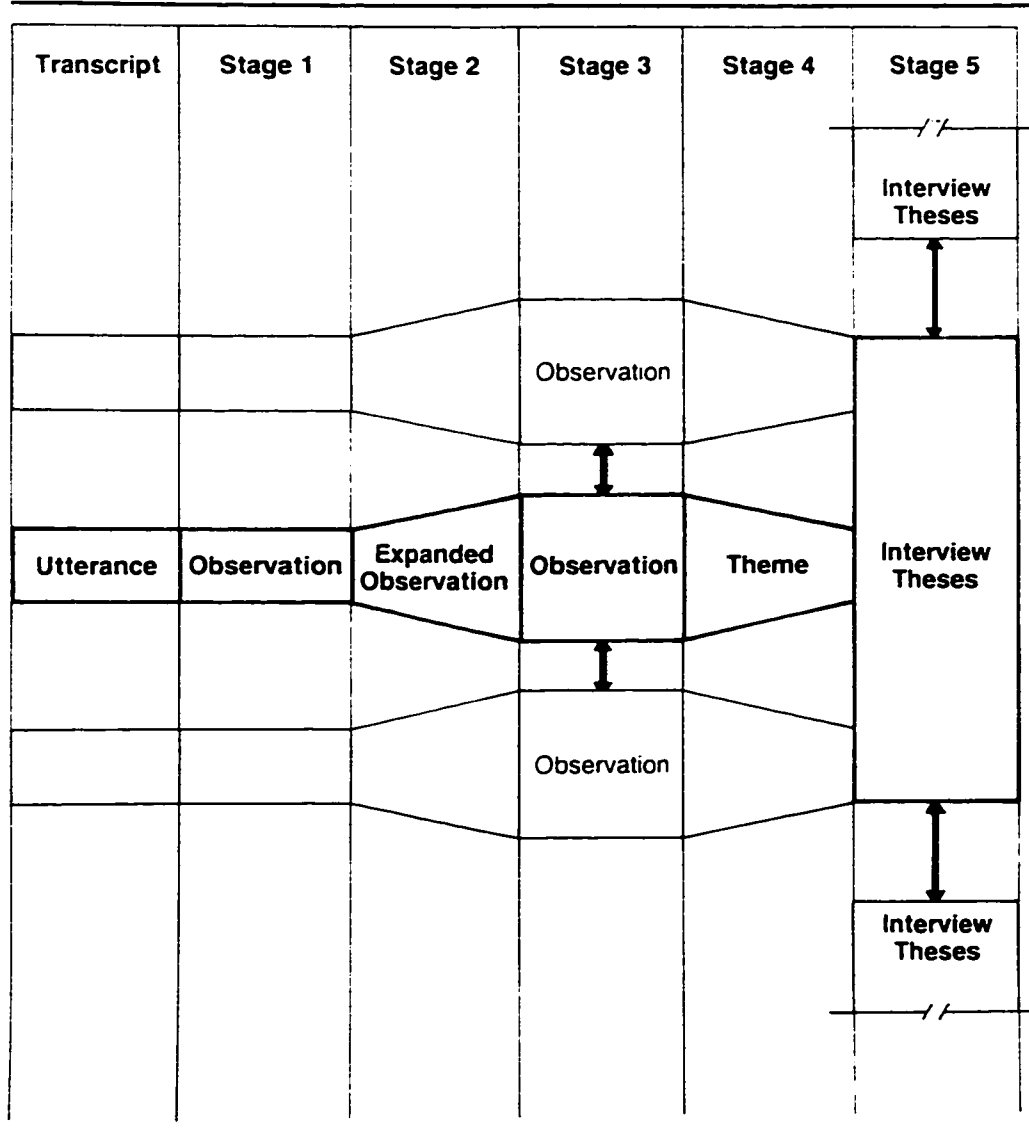
earlier discussion of generalizability, it is clear that this research would fail to achieve acceptable confidence limits for transferability.

In the end, the actual analysis of the data used McCracken's (1988) five-stage analytical technique. McCracken's technique is an effective variation on the various triangulation methods discussed earlier.

McCracken (1988) specifically designed his technique for analysis of long, qualitative interviews. The first stage is a simple observation of the data. The second stage expands the individual observations and relates them to one another. The third stage is the process of refining observations into patterns and themes. The fourth stage is a time of judgment when themes are crystallized. The final stage is the formation of data-supported theses that can be applied to the research questions and reviewed for consistency with accepted mass communication theories.

For this thesis, McCracken's technique proved to be an ideal fit, making the analysis a very structured and logical process. Additionally, by drawing distinctions between observations, patterns and overriding themes, McCracken's method helped ensure that the conclusions were based on a preponderance of the data, not simply stray answers that could have skewed the researcher's perception of the results.

**Figure 1. McCracken's Five-stage Analytical Technique**



Stages of Analysis for a Long, Qualitative Interview

Source: The Long Interview, copyright 1988, Sage Publications

**Figure 2. Interview Participants**

**Public Relations Practitioners**

<u>Name</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Employer</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Type</u>
Cunningham, Andy	President	Cunningham Communication	12/5/97	Personal
Edelson, Trudy	Director	Cunningham Communication	12/16/97	Personal
Hense, Susan	Marcom Manager	Stockpoint	1/9/98	Personal
Kryway, Kristin	Director	Avalanche Worldwide Consulting	1/16/98	Personal
Maxwell, Dennis	Director	Cunningham Communication	1/23/98	Personal
McCarthy, Andrew	Public Relations Manager	PeopleSoft	1/30/98	Phone
Moustakas, Kristina	Account Manager	Cunningham Communication	2/12/98	Personal
Pedraja, Kevin	Managing Director	Sterling Communications	1/14/98	Personal
Stone, Joan	Director	Cunningham Communication	12/8/97	Personal
Vanagunas, Andy	Marcom Manager	Hewlett-Packard	1/20/98	Personal
Watkins, Candie	Account Manager	Zoom Marketing	2/20/98	Personal
Westlake, Marti	Director	Lois Paul & Partners	2/13/98	Personal
requested name not be used	Public Relations Manager	Microsoft	2/27/98	Phone

**Journalists**

<u>Name</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Employer</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Type</u>
Duffy, Jim	Senior Editor	<i>Network World</i>	2/1/98	Phone
Fitzloff, Emily	Reporter	<i>InfoWorld</i>	1/21/98	Personal
Gillen, Paul	Editor-in-Chief	<i>Computerworld</i>	1/30/98	Phone
Gillooly, Caryn	Senior Writer	<i>InformationWeek</i>	1/30/98	Phone
Heskett, Ben	Reporter	<i>c net</i>	2/9/98	Personal
Jander, Mary	Senior Editor	<i>Data Communications</i>	2/4/98	Phone
Larsen, Amy	Senior Writer	<i>InternetWeek</i>	2/5/98	Phone
O'Leary, Meghan	Senior Writer	<i>CIO</i>	1/19/98	Personal
Snell, Monica	Senior Writer	<i>LAN Times</i>	1/23/98	Personal
Sturdevant, Cameron	Lab Editor	<i>PC Week</i>	2/20/98	Personal
Wilson, Tim	Editor at Large	<i>InternetWeek</i>	2/24/98	Phone
requested name not be used	Senior Editor	<i>Computerworld</i>	1/13/98	Phone



### Summary of the Study's Strengths and Weaknesses

As Earl Babbie (1995) explained, qualitative interview-based research not only provides a solid understanding of the research questions at hand, it tests the feasibility of undertaking a more far-reaching, follow-up study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) add that interviews are one of the few types of research using human sources that can examine the “here-and-now” as well as enable the research to project future action. For this thesis, such a combination of strengths is important because the research is examining the current state of the public relations/press relationship as well as exploring the implications of that relationship for the future.

McCracken (1988) expands on the strength on interview research by explaining its value in contextualizing quantitative, social scientific data. He says, “Without a qualitative understanding ... we can know only what the numbers tell us” (p. 9). Quantitative data does not typically explain the ‘why’ or ‘how’ behind statistical results.

For example, statistical research could reveal that 90 percent of reporters dislike public relations professionals, and the primary reason for this sentiment is that reporters believe public relations people are dishonest. The statistical data does not explain all the possible explanations for the reporters’ belief that public relations people are dishonest. In fact, it would be extremely difficult for statistical research to explore all possible causes for such a feeling. McCracken (1988) goes so far as to say that it is “almost obligatory” to use qualitative research in instances such as this, especially for the study of human relationships.

On the other side, it is logical to predict that public relations practitioners and journalists would not see their relationship the same way. Therefore, it would be very helpful if one were able to control for this possibility by limiting the impact that the interviewees' preconceived opinions may have on their responses.

However, in a qualitative study, if the researcher were to strictly define terms across both sets of interviewees, the resulting data may become meaningless. It would be extremely difficult to phrase interview questions identically to each group. For instance, no self-respecting journalist is likely to say that he or she is dependent or reliant on public relations. Because of this, conversations with public relations people and journalists must be managed differently to elicit the most meaningful data possible.

In this open-ended interview format, the research is more focused on the perceptions and opinions of the interview subjects -- and in comparing macro-patterns from each group. Unfortunately, this subjectivity may erode the study's reliability or validity. A quantitative study is likely to be much more effective in defining terms, asking closed-ended questions and generating statistically valid results.

## Chapter 4

### Results

The purpose of this research has been to explore a possible link between the proliferation and demassification of the news media and the growth of public relations. Specifically focusing on the U.S. technology industry, has the growing supply of public relations material and the growing demand by trade publications for editorial content fed off one another, enabling both professions to grow as rapidly as they have throughout the 1980s and 1990s?

In the end, analysis of the data was not able to confirm such a relationship, although one should keep in mind that the research for this thesis has been largely qualitative, and therefore not statistically dependable. In addition, two very strong themes do appear that may leave the door open to such a relationship. One theme is the increasing reliance by the press on World Wide Web content and newswire material. The second theme is the vast differences in attitude that journalists and public relations professionals have about one another.

Here is a quick example of one of these trends before diving into the results. Public relations professionals typically consider most corporate Web-site content to be public relations material. Because of a widespread reliance on this content by the press, if such material were defined as “public relations material,” it would give strong support for a press/public relations link.

However, journalists do not agree with their public relations counterparts on this broader definition of the term “public relations material.” Journalists generally label this content as simply one additional data source, and feel that collecting information off the Internet is nothing more than good journalistic technique.

*Research Question One:*

*In the 1980s and 1990s, has there been an increased demand by the high-tech trade media for public relations material enabling the growth of the public relations?*

To explore the possible press/public relations link, the first research question addressed the issue from the **demand** side. Has there been a significant enough increase in demand for public relations by the high-tech trade media to help grow the profession? With few exceptions, the journalists interviewed consistently indicated that their demand for public relations material has not increased over time.

Jim Duffy, a twelve-year veteran journalist and senior editor at *Network World*, explained, “We don’t just sit around all day waiting for the phone to ring. Most of the stories we run are originated by our own legwork.”

Duffy added, “Because I have more responsibility [than earlier in my career], my contact with PR people has increased. However, my reliance on them has decreased over time. They mainly help me now by scheduling interviews and confirming facts.”

Public relations professionals, on the other hand, felt that media demands for their material had increased. Although the responses from the public relations interviewees

were not unanimous -- they ranged from uncertainty to absolute certainty -- none of the practitioners interviewed for the thesis shared the press' sentiment that demand in the media for public relations material was not increasing.

Andy Cunningham, president of Silicon Valley public relations firm Cunningham Communication, said, "There's no doubt that reporters seek out PR material more today than in the past, and reporters are more receptive to PR-pitched ideas." Based on her more than twenty years in the business, Cunningham later added, "Privately, I think many journalists would admit that PR has become a necessary evil at the very least."

#### McCracken's First-stage Analysis

Applying Grant McCracken's (1988) analytical technique to Research Question One, the first step is simply to observe the data. While this may sound like a non-step, it does have real value for this type of research. By conducting the interviews over a 90-day period, the researcher had time to review the results of each interview prior to the next.

This repeated observation of the data gives a sense of momentum about the project, a sense that each interview is building on the last toward an intuitive conclusion. It also enables the researcher to see where interview subjects are consistently having trouble giving the type of detailed answers that make a long interview so useful. The researcher was then aware of these potential pitfalls and is able to be persistent when appropriate to get all the necessary data.

## Second-stage Analysis

Second-stage analysis calls for the researcher to begin relating the interview results to one another. To make these relationships as meaningful as possible, each set of data was related to other data sets collected from similar subjects, i.e., responses from all the journalists were looked at together.

Among each group, it was easy to find similarities running through the responses. Similar language and phrasing was often used, and similar feelings were expressed regarding the relationship between the two professions and their relative importance and social status. And most importantly, it quickly became clear that while similarities were showing up within each group, there were equally strong differences of opinion between the two groups.

Specifically, journalists do not hold their public relations counterparts in nearly the same regard that public relations practitioners view journalists. This has serious implications about the likelihood of a journalist giving credit to public relations people for their role in the growth of the media, as well as the likelihood of a journalist recognizing corporate Web content as a public relations vehicle.

“It seems like I have to prove myself as if it were my first day on the job whenever I start working with a new reporter,” said Marti Westlake, a director at Lois Paul and Partners. She added, “It’s like we’re always trying to overcome negative assumptions about our value.”

Perhaps a leading reason for this view of public relations is the fact that many journalists feel the competency level of public relations practitioners varies widely. Conversely, public relations professionals rarely spoke of the press as individuals.

Former *CIO Magazine* senior writer Meghan O’Leary stated, “PR people tend to be of limited usefulness. The PR people I call proactively tend to be extremely helpful, which is why I call them. The reactive calls I receive are usually from people who are simply calling down a list of reporters and have no idea what I write about.”

Monica Snell, a senior writer with *LAN Times*, agreed, “The competency of PR people varies so much that the usefulness of PR materials tends to be very hit-and-miss.”

### Third-stage Analysis

In this stage, observations and data are refined into patterns. The patterns resulting from the data supplied by the journalists were clear. When asked, “Do you find PR professionals valuable in your day-to-day job?” the overwhelming response was, “It depends.” Journalists indicated that some public relations people are better than others, typically indicating that corporate public relations practitioners are more capable than agency people. Journalists also did not like the term “valuable.” Instead, they preferred words like useful and helpful to describe public relations professionals.

To the question, “Do you believe the press has become more accepting of PR materials over the past decade?” journalists were generally ambivalent. A few said yes, several said no, and most felt that there had been no change. Many journalists also elaborated to say that they are always willing to accept public relations materials that are

useful and appropriate. Unfortunately, they said, most of the material is either irrelevant to their respective beats or too one-sided to provide news value.

“I’d guess that about 80 percent of the material they send my way is unusable. It tends to be too propaganda-like to offer any real news value,” said a fourteen-year veteran journalist, now a senior editor at *Computerworld*.

This is consistent with former *New York Times* reporter Stephen Conn (1997) who believes that public relations material that accurately represents facts in an unbiased fashion is likely to receive much more play in the press than sugar-coated news releases.

To more pointed questions, along the lines of “Do you feel that the growing media industry has helped spur the growth of PR?” most journalists were unsure. However, no journalist felt that his or her individual demands had increased. Also, to a person, every journalist felt that the ease of accessibility to data on the Internet is reducing the importance of public relations. The Internet now provides a free and instant way to get nearly all necessary product, company and market information.

Ben Heskett, a reporter for *c|net*, one of the industry’s largest e-zines, explained, “The Internet has been a very big factor [in the growth of the media]. It has really lowered barriers to entry for a lot of news services.”

Said Paul Gillen, *Computerworld*’s editor-in-chief, “The Internet has really changed the landscape for us. We have full-time people that just do online research. We get almost all of our company and product background information off the Web. I think our stories are becoming richer because of our Internet ‘database’ of information.”



Overall, journalists do not believe that they use public relations material that much, and do not feel that their actions are responsible for the growth of public relations. Amy Larsen, senior writer for *InternetWeek*, said, “We may have helped [grow public relations] in some small way, but the growth of the high-tech industry as a whole has been the main driver.”

Public relations practitioners, on the other hand, came to very different conclusions. When asked, “Do you believe the press has become more accepting of PR materials over the past decade?” nearly all of the practitioners said yes. Often citing the advent of online versions of most high-tech publications, practitioners noted the greatly accelerated deadlines facing reporters as a big reason for the change. Whereas a reporter may have had a Thursday-evening deadline for Monday’s weekly edition in the past, reporters are now frequently expected to meet as many as four deadlines each week, with three of them being for the online edition of the magazine.

Dennis Maxwell, a director at Cunningham Communication and a former corporate communications executive with SRI and General Electric, explained, “A journalist has to fill a hole everyday. He can’t possibly cover everything, he can’t discover everything.” Maxwell added, “Today’s smaller publications live off of PR. They’re always looking for news and contributed articles and people to interview.”

When asked, “Do you feel journalists have become reliant on PR, or is that too strong a statement?” most public relations professionals stopped short of giving an unequivocal yes. They acknowledged that journalists could find information and write

stories without public relations material. However, they do feel that journalists are becoming increasingly reliant on public relations.

Two common reasons given by interviewees were the proliferation of high-tech trade publications and tighter deadlines. The general feeling is that it has become more difficult for reporters to find the type of news needed to meet the demands placed on them by their editors. Public relations people feel that they help the reporters in this regard by tuning them into stories and news angles that reporters would not likely have the time to find on their own.

Said Candie Watkins, an account manager at Zoom Marketing, “When news is slow, a lot of lower-tier publications are sure to use press releases, contributed articles and other PR material to fill their space requirements.”

Cunningham Communication account manager and former Bay Networks public relations manager Kristina Moustakas explained, “Time pressures often make these [smaller] publications dependent on a press release and a couple phone calls.”

And to the question, “Do you feel the growing media industry has created a demand that has fueled the growth of PR?” opinion was split. The general reaction was yes. More editorial space, more journalists, shorter deadlines have combined to increase demand for public relations. However, as each interview would continue, answers tended to change slightly.

Most of the practitioners noted that there are many more high-tech companies today than in the past. This has played a key role in creating a need for more public relations professionals regardless of media demands. Also, the high-tech industry has

been booming for several years. Given that marketing-type functions, including public relations, are subject to budget cuts just like every other part of the business when money gets tight, it is possible that when Silicon Valley's extended boom ends, companies will reduce their public relations budgets.

Cunningham director Joan Stone said, "Silicon Valley has been booming for a long time now. But if the economy goes into another recession, some of these companies could pull the plug on big PR budgets. If that happens, high-tech PR could take a big hit in the wallet."

#### Fourth-stage Analysis

In this stage, patterns are crystallized into themes. One theme is clear. Most journalists do not believe there has been an increased demand by the media for public relations materials. In fact, journalists are loath to say that there is any true demand for public relations.

Most journalists do not view public relations practitioners as being vital to newsgathering. Rather, they are seen as a layer of insulation between newsmakers and journalists. The extent to which public relations people add value to the news process depends on how timely they are in scheduling interviews, responding to fact-checking inquiries and their individual knowledge of their companies and industries.

This view of public relations seems somewhat contradictory and may be evidence of a value judgment about public relations by journalists. Journalists are saying that

public relations people help them do their jobs while simultaneously saying that public relations is not important.

Snell said, “PR people are like the middlemen in my job. They get me information when I can’t reach newsmakers directly.” She continued, “And PR people in reactive mode are sometimes not very helpful. They may drop the ball or may not be able to get me the information I need.”

If any critical dependency has increased for journalists, it has been with online access to information. Whether it be “push” technology services that send information via electronic mail, Web sites of companies and organizations in the news, or Internet-based news sources that update their content around the clock, journalists indicated these have become important sources of information.

Gillen commented, “I don’t think some publications really care about PR. They rely on other news sources, such as newswires and Web sites, to gather most of the information they need.”

And then there is the alternate theme for Research Question One. Public relations practitioners see things quite differently. **They see a clear increase in the demand for their services.** They readily admit that many factors account for the increase in the resources being poured into public relations. However, at the top of that list is a growing need in the editorial community for the timesaving, resource-saving efforts of public relations practitioners. The general belief is that there is simply too much space to fill and not enough time for journalists to fill it without the help of public relations.

Stone observed, “The whole system is like a giant beast that must be fed. The media is telling people they need more information, so the media then wants to provide that information, so PR must create more materials to keep pace with demand. Sometimes it seems like an endless spiral.”

### Fifth-stage Analysis

McCracken’s final analytical stage is applying the data-supported themes from Stage Four to the research question and to accepted mass communication theory. Although the themes do not offer consistent answers to Research Question One for journalists and public relations practitioners, they are consistent with the applicable mass communication theories, i.e., Gandy’s (1982) information subsidy theory, and Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) situational theory of public relations.

The data provided by public relations practitioners answers the research question in the affirmative. Public relations practitioners seem to be taking a page right out of Gandy’s (1982) book. Their responses indicate that they feel they enable the press to know more than it could in the absence of public relations. Public relations practitioners believe that journalists could not meet the demands of their jobs as effectively without public relations. And, those job demands continue to increase all the time, resulting in the continuing increase in media demands for public relations materials.

Pam Alexander, president of Alexander Communications, took this idea much further. She explained, “With the rise of the noise level (in high-tech), communications

people like us are more active than ever in setting the agenda. We influence what gets discussed in the industry we serve” (Mieszkowski, 1998, p. 192).

On the other hand, the data collected from journalists was consistent with Grunig and Hunt (1984). Two of Grunig and Hunt’s three variables affecting a person’s likelihood of seeking and using public relations material were repeatedly mentioned by journalists as reasons that their demand for public relations material had not increased.

The first variable is constraint recognition. Journalists feel that many public relations practitioners do not provide them with objective, professional and timely materials -- factors which **constrain** the journalists from using the materials.

Because of this, journalists say they do not have a great demand for public relations assistance. Journalists believe they are often better served by doing more of the legwork themselves.

The second variable is what Grunig and Hunt (1984) call level of involvement. A common complaint from the press is that public relations people come to them with information that is either not newsworthy or not relevant to their beats, in other words, material for which the journalist feels no sense of **involvement**. This type of unsuccessful proactive public relations can further the press’ perception that public relations practitioners vary greatly in their abilities and are often unhelpful and clumsy.

*Research Question Two:*

*Is the technology trade press able to use the increased supply of public relations content for new publications that may not otherwise be possible?*

To further explore the possible press/public relations link, the second research question addressed the issue from the **supply** side. As one might expect, the answers were fairly consistent with those to the first question. Journalists feel that the supply of public relations materials is not an enabling force for new publications. Journalists feel that the major driver of media expansion is essentially the continuing strong demand for high-tech news and information by readers.

Emily Fitzloff, a reporter with *InfoWorld*, stated, “There is enough demand, and it’s still growing, to allow more and more players to enter the game. PR helps us, but it’s not critical to our growth.”

And Caryn Gillooly, a senior writer at *InformationWeek*, pointed out, “If anything, there are so many more companies today that journalists are flooded with news. We usually have more potential stories than we can possibly use.”

Public relations practitioners did not completely agree. They feel that journalists have become more willing to use public relations material as deadline pressures, competitive threats and the growth of the Internet have combined to force journalists to fill more editorial space in less time. While tech trade journalism may be a booming business to publishers, public relations practitioners feel that all the new magazines are

making life more difficult on the journalists who must fill the additional pages – even if the industry’s overall growth is creating more “news.”

Practitioners also indicated that many new publications, particularly the smaller ones, would be in serious jeopardy if not for the free and easy-to-use content provided by public relations people. However, public relations practitioners did generally agree with journalists that the growth of the high-tech industry has created a strong demand for more publications. So, practitioners stopped short of saying the public relations is solely responsible for the media’s growth. Rather, they indicated it is one of the key enablers.

Cunningham said, “The burden is on the publication to make sure there is a demand for its material first, and then to leverage PR resources wisely to fill in the gaps created by a skeleton editorial staff.”

Kristin Kryway, a director with Avalanche Worldwide Consulting, explained, “As a whole, the press is definitely not completely reliant on PR. After all, if there were no PR people, newspapers and magazines would still exist. However, PR does make life much easier for journalists and some smaller media outlets may actually be reliant on PR.”

### First-stage Analysis

Once again, the first stage is simply to observe the data. This research question proved slightly more difficult to answer than the first. Many of the interview subjects initially saw this line of questioning as repetitive with Research Question One. Although it is related, there are important, subtle differences.



Research Question One examined whether the media had played a key role in the growth of public relations. Research Question Two explores whether public relations has played a key role in growing the media. Although one may expect to find similar results, it is not a given. Growth in each industry could be the result of completely independent forces, or only one of the industries may be causing the growth of the other.

### Second-stage Analysis

As with Research Question One, for second-stage analysis, data from each interview subject was related only to data collected from other interviewees in the same profession. In this preliminary stage, several interesting observations emerged.

Journalists tend to see their relationships with public relations people as one-way. Public relations people come to journalists with a pitch and the journalists then deem it either useful or not useful. It is a very hierarchical attitude and one that is consistent with the trade press' unwillingness to acknowledge the importance of public relations in the news-making process. Public relations professionals serve the press at its convenience.

Tim Wilson, an editor with *InternetWeek*, said, "Journalism will flourish with or without PR. Now, for a specific story, PR may be essential. But overall, it's not."

Public relations practitioners, however, see the relationship as mutually beneficial. They see the value in what they bring to the press as well as how the press is serving their needs as practitioners.

Cunningham Communication director Trudy Edelson, formerly a public relations manger with Farallon Computing, said, "The press isn't [completely] reliant on [PR], but

they may be more reliant than in years past. Even journalists who think they know everything about a company or product or issue need PR.”

After all, when a story hits the newsstand, public relations people often get **more** mileage from the article than the journalist who wrote it. This is a key point that is often lost on journalists. Susan Hense, marcom manager at Internet start-up Stockpoint, explained, “With the pressure on public relations people to deliver positive press coverage, a single positive press hit can be worth its weight in gold and may carry the PR person for weeks.”

On the other hand, as soon as a reporter writes an article, an editor will be demanding another one before the next deadline. Practitioners see this and understand that if they continue to give the press substantive material, the press is likely to help the public relations professional **without even realizing it**.

Another observation is how each profession views the new online e-zines. In terms of quality or importance, high-tech trade journalists do not typically differentiate between a printed magazine and an e-zine. Public relations practitioners do. They view the online media as less prestigious. Press hits in e-zines tend to be less marketable to clients and of less value to sales people who try to leverage the public relations process. Also, with less quantifiable measures of online readership, most companies seem to put more stock in seeing their news in print.

In general, public relations people look at the e-zines as a way to track trends and share opinions. But in terms of time spent, most practitioners still spend the lion’s share going after coverage in printed publications. Maxwell observed, “Online publications

may rely on traditional PR to an extent, but they really get a lot of their information from Internet sources. And that's just fine with us."

### Third-stage Analysis

This is the stage in which observations and data are refined into patterns. As with Research Question One, the patterns developed quickly. In response to a question like, "Do you believe that PR has helped support the growing news industry?" most journalists were willing to say yes. But due to the press' definition of "support," they didn't see this as a concession to the importance of public relations.

Rather, this is consistent with their sense of superiority mentioned in the second-stage analysis. In the media's eyes, public relations is not vital to the newsgathering process. It simply serves the press in much the same way that administrative assistants do helpful work for their bosses. In plain terms, the press views any help it receives from public relations as nice but not critical.

Larsen put it plainly, "Our jobs might not be as easy [without public relations], but I think we could certainly be as productive."

To questions like, "Do you believe the news media could grow as large, as quickly, without the PR industry?" the answers were virtually unanimously yes. The consensus is that as long as there is a demand by readers and sufficient advertising dollars from sponsors, high-tech trade journalism will continue grow. Most reporters admit that public relations can be helpful and supportive but they feel that it is not integral to the success of their publications.

To a question that gets right at the heart of this thesis, “Do you feel that smaller publications and online news services would struggle without the presence of PR?” the overwhelming answer was no. This is fundamental to the basic issue of whether or not resource-strapped media outlets are using public relations as a way to compensate for a lack of “feet on the street.” According to respondents in this non-scientific sample, the answer was clear. The press would do just fine without public relations.

Duffy explained, “I’d agree that some small publications might be in trouble without PR. But the vast majority would be just fine. For online pubs, it’s probably the same. I think they get maybe 40 percent of their material from PR people, 40 percent from wire services and 20 percent from online research.”

Jim Duffy’s comments with respect to small publications and e-zines were similar to feedback from many of the press interviewees. Specifically, these smaller news ventures get a large portion of their information from wire services, such as Business Wire, and from the Internet. The feeling is that unfettered access to so much information makes it easier for them to compensate for a lack of abundant resources.

And because many of these smaller publications see themselves as analytical and informational, and less news-focused, it is not always important for them to be first to report a story. The fight for scoops seems to be reserved for the big players.

All of this plays right back into the question about what constitutes public relations material. If the Internet and wire-service content that journalists feel has become important to their success is actually public relations material, journalists may be in denial about, or may be unaware of, their reliance on public relations.

When asked similar questions, public relations professionals offered substantially different answers than journalists.

To, “Do you believe that PR has helped support the growing news industry?” public relations practitioners nearly all said yes. This is similar to the responses from journalists with the major difference being the interpretation of the word “support.” Practitioners feel much less like servants to the press and more central to the news-making process. Support to these interviewees was interpreted as a critical role.

Moustakas said, “They may not be completely reliant, but the good journalists lean on PR for insight, angles and connections.”

When asked, “Do you believe the news media could grow as large, as quickly, without the PR industry?” answers really scattered. Several public relations practitioners agreed with the journalists. News is news and there will always be plenty of it. And if there’s not, journalists have shown in the past that they are not afraid to embellish news or exaggerate events to grab the public’s interest. One respondent went so far as to say that the press, even mainstream press like *Time* and *Newsweek*, has begun to lose credibility with the public because of sensationalism.

On the other hand, some practitioners believe the press needs public relations and would not be able to grow like it has without public relations. An interviewee explained that the two groups “feed off each other,” particularly in trade journalism where market segmentation is so narrow and circulation numbers are shrinking.

For the question, “Do you feel that smaller publications and online news services would be possible without the presence of PR?” answers were consistent, although distinctions were made between print and online publications.

Public relations people consistently commented that many smaller hard-copy publications would not be able to survive without public relations. This is a significant departure from the comments of journalists. The perception among public relations people is that these magazines are frequently in need of editorial content and openly encourage contributed articles from vendors. While some of these may survive on their own, the general sentiment is that there would be a significant shake out in this group if public relations were to disappear.

Kryway commented, “The big boys would do just fine. However, the smaller media outlets may be hard pressed to succeed in the absence of PR support.”

For e-zines, public relations people generally agree with journalists that these publications have a different relationship with the traditional public relations machinery. There is less face-to-face, or even telephone, contact between e-zines and public relations people. There are a variety of sources for e-zines to draw from and, quite frankly, public relations people do not spend much time or effort trying to work with them.

#### Fourth-stage Analysis

This is where themes are crystallized from the patterns identified in the third stage. The first theme is similar to that of journalistic demand for public relations

material. The press does not feel it is packaging public relations content into new publications that would have been impossible to publish otherwise.

Journalists take an opportunistic view of public relations. When it suits them, they'll use it. When online sources are easier, they use them. When they can speak directly to newsmakers, they take that route. And of those three alternatives, journalists almost always place public relations at the bottom of the list. Of course, this begs the question once again, what constitutes public relations? If public relations people are posting much of the content on corporate Web sites, and if they are facilitating the face-to-face interviews, it could be argued that regardless of which approach hi-tech trade journalists choose, much of their information is provided by public relations people

However, Gillen clarified the role of today's technology reporter, "To rely too heavily on PR is not wise. In the past, we could get away with publishing PR material almost verbatim. Now, we couldn't get away with that. Even if we get solid PR material, we need to add value, analysis, commentary to differentiate our articles."

The more intriguing patterns developed from the interviews with public relations practitioners. Analysis of this data leads to an opposing theme to the one mentioned above. Public relations people do believe that the trade media is using their material to fill the pages of new publications that likely could not be filled solely by traditional newsgathering. An interesting way to put these differing opinions to the test would be to do a content analysis of selected trade publications to determine how much content the public relations process originated.

Kevin Pedraja, managing director at Sterling Communications, defended the public relations position by explaining, “The trade press now looks to us for analyst contacts, customer references and quotes, white papers and who knows what else. The media is more thinly resourced, so anything we can do to help them is appreciated.”

However, practitioners stop short of saying that the media is completely dependent on public relations. It is advertising revenue that ultimately determines whether a trade publication can survive. The quality and quantity of content is certainly a major factor, but not the only factor, affecting circulation, which in turn affects advertising dollars. The belief among most public relations practitioners is that many publications could continue to flourish in the absence of public relations, but the introduction of new magazines would be at a considerably slower clip.

Andrew McCarthy, public relations manager at PeopleSoft, said, “No matter how much I’d like to say that we’re indispensable to the press, we’re not. We may be indispensable to some publications, and we can be very helpful to most, but we’re not going to make or break the majority of them.”

#### Fifth-stage Analysis

The final stage is to apply the data-supported themes from Stage Four to the research question and to applicable mass communication theory. Although the data once again does not offer a consistent answer to the research question across the two professions, application of the data to theory is clear and intuitive.



The theme that reporters believe public relations is not a key enabler of new publications fits nicely with Gandy's (1982) information subsidy theory. Journalists do not feel that the value of information they receive from public relations professionals in many cases is adequate to be deemed an information subsidy. Reporters generally feel that they are better off relying on their own journalistic savvy. In addition, the growth of the technology industry is continuing to provide the demand and the financing necessary to support new publications.

Furthermore, journalists were very clear in explaining that the only time they view public relations as useful is when the public relations person is able to give them something that reduces the time and effort of gathering their own news. These comments fit Gandy's (1982) information-subsidy theory perfectly. The press wants timely, informative, useable material from public relations practitioners or they would rather do the legwork themselves.

Conversely, the theme that public relations professionals view themselves as important but not indispensable to the media is consistent with Grunig and Hunt's (1984) situational theory of public relations.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) explain that the most fundamental variable in the press' likelihood to seek and process public relations material is problem recognition. If a journalist does not perceive a problem, he or she has very little incentive to seek out information.

Public relations professionals interviewed for this research acknowledged that journalists would not always have difficulty finding information. There are instances

where archived data in a newsroom, professional contacts, industry sources and direct access to newsmakers enables the press to completely bypass the public relations process. In these instances, problem recognition would be very low, explaining why public relations professionals accept the fact that the media apparatus may slow down in the absence of public relations, but it would not collapse.

Perhaps if the high-tech trade-publication market becomes over saturated, public relations will become more integral to the media's success as individual publications will have to fight even harder to control costs and maintain circulation rates.

*Primary Research Question:*

*Have the economic forces of supply and demand created a strong enough bond to enable high-tech public relations and the trade press to fuel the growth of one another?*

The primary research question built on the first two research questions and went right to the issue of a press/public relations link. Just how strong is the link between the two professions? As stated in the Research Questions section of Chapter Two, the answer to the primary research question was to flow logically from the answers to the first two research questions. And with such mixed data regarding the first two research questions, this thesis was not able to confirm such a link.

The conclusion most consistent with the data is that both professions have benefited from the overall strong growth of the technology industry. And, they have each

helped the other keep pace with increased demand -- increased demand by companies for media exposure and increased demand by readers for more information.

Moustakas observed, "With so many more players trying to get the word out, they've helped create a demand for more publications. It's kind of a supply-side model for the media. Cisco, HP, IBM, Microsoft, Netscape, Novell, Sun, Yahoo and other vendors all benefit from independent publications targeted directly at their respective installed bases of customers."

*CIO's* O'Leary said, "There are many more high-tech companies creating news, and technology advertising has grown many times over. That is evidenced by mainstream news and business publications covering technology news."

Based on these results, it appears that the intriguing opportunity for future research would not focus on the growth of the two professions, rather, it would focus on an idea mentioned at the outset of this thesis. How much influence do technology companies have over the content that appears in high-tech trade publications?

There were repeated observations by press and public relations interviewees that the press is relying heavily on Internet content. Furthermore, there were many comments about the increased use of wire services as important sources of information for the press. As mentioned earlier, these services, including Business Wire and PR Newswire, run unedited news releases. This means the press is essentially getting such information straight from vendors.

The Morton and Ramsey (1994) study that found hundreds of thousands of news articles appearing in magazines and newspapers each week based on the distribution of

PR Newswire content supports this trend. And, it is also consistent with the Harrison et al (1995) study that traced 84 press releases distributed nationally by two companies resulting in more than 220 news articles.

A quantitative study to measure the influence of technology companies on high-tech trade publications would require a strict operational definition of “public relations material.” A statistically valid and carefully worded survey of technology journalists could then examine the degree to which public relations is impacting press coverage.

This means that questions likely to result in biased responses (e.g., a question that implies a media reliance on public relations) would have to be avoided. Instead, the researcher could focus on determining what percentage of the media’s information is coming from communication vehicles defined as “public relations.” This may include corporate Web sites, Business Wire-type services, press conferences, pre-arranged interviews, company-screened customer advocates and company-supplied market and technology papers.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

The primary research question in this thesis has been answered. Can one deduce that the traditional economic forces of supply and demand have created a strong enough bond between high-tech public relations and the trade media to enable each profession to fuel the growth of the other? No -- although there were some differences of opinion among the people interviewed for this thesis. The data indicates that the most likely enabler of such growth has been the overall expansion of the technology industry.

*Computerworld* chief Gillen summed up his feelings, "With more companies and more publications, there is now a never-ending din. Companies need more and better PR people in order to be heard. From where I sit, PR's growth is a function of the high-tech industry's growth."

And from the public relations side, Kryway said, "There are now more people and more organizations generating more [PR] material." This sentiment was echoed in a recent *Forbes ASAP* article. The piece discussed the growth of the technology industry, and specifically Silicon Valley, and concluded that it has been instrumental in the rise of several professional services, including public relations (Baum, 1997).

#### Summary of Fifth-stage Analyses

Has the growth of high-tech trade journalism helped grow the need for public relations? According to journalists, no. Journalists cite the lack of consistently objective,

useable and timely materials from public relations practitioners as the main reason why their demand for public relations has not increased in recent years, and why they feel they are better served by actively seeking out information on their own.

Public relations people disagree. Because of increased competitive pressures, shorter deadlines and a fast-changing industry that seem overwhelming, public relations people believe that journalists are using public relations resources more than ever to stay on top of events in the technology industry. Every public relations person interviewed believes that they help journalists get more news and information to readers than the journalists could possibly deliver otherwise.

Has the expansion of high-tech public relations helped grow the number of technology-related trade publications? Probably not, according to both sets of interviewees. For journalists, there was no hesitation. For the same reasons mentioned above, journalists would answer this question in the negative. In addition, the press points to the fact that it is advertising revenue -- tied to circulation rates -- that ultimately determines how many publications can survive. As long as the demand is there, publishers will deliver products to readers.

For public relations practitioners, the issue is not quite so simple. Most practitioners acknowledge that the media's own resources would be sufficient to support many publications. And the growth of the entire technology industry continues to create more news and more demand for that news. Practitioners and journalists differ on the issue of degree. Most practitioners feel that some of the smaller trade magazines would

be unable to survive without a steady diet of vendor-supplied content, and the introduction of new publications would slow down considerably.

### Important Findings

In analyzing the data, two interesting trends emerged that are not directly related to the issue of the press/public relations link. The **first macro trend** is a difference of opinion between journalists and public relations people about what constitutes public relations material. Short of reading a press release or scheduling an interview through a public relations person, journalists generally do not acknowledge any significant role for public relations in the news-making process. The journalists interviewed for this thesis are all in basic agreement that it is through their own investigating, reporting and professional contacts that they meet their editorial requirements.

Any help public relations people are able to provide is typically appreciated and may save the journalist some time, but that is about the extent to which the press will give credit to public relations people.

On the other hand, public relations people see themselves as integral to the tech media's success, particularly since the trade press is frequently resource constrained. Public relations practitioners feel that they put reporters in touch with stories and story ideas that may otherwise go unreported. They put reporters in front of newsmakers whose first inclination may not be to talk with the press. They develop much of the content that reporters pull from wire services or off the Internet. And they generally help reporters navigate through the extremely fast-paced technology industry.

As Broom and Dozier (1990) explain, a primary function of public relations is to “understand what the public is thinking or feeling” (p. 9). Organizations can then develop meaningful messages and angles to communicate to their publics. This keen understanding of the technology public can be extremely beneficial to journalists who must continually deliver interesting and compelling content. Broom and Dozier add, the fact that public relations practitioners also “do press releases and such derives from the need for someone to do it, and who better than us?” (p. 9).

To address this dispute about what constitutes public relations and how integral it is to the news-making process, it is probably easiest to start with the growth of the Internet and the profound effect it is having on both journalism and public relations. The data implies that the Internet is changing the way high-tech trade journalists gather news. It is accelerating the deadline pressures for delivering news and it is changing the way news and information are distributed.

In the public relations community, people see the Internet as a tremendous opportunity. It is expanding the ability of companies to take their messages directly to the public, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers, and it is enabling public relations people to supply journalists with more information than ever before without requiring the press to work through the conventional public relations apparatus.

Andy Vanagunas, a marcom manager at Hewlett-Packard, said, “The expanding role of PR is really helping the profession take off. Web-content development is a rapidly growing area in which PR people are expected to participate.” He later added, “The need for Web content is actually the driving force behind a lot of the demand for PR.”



A public relations manager at Microsoft commented on the impact that daily Internet-created deadlines are having on his relationships with journalists. "The weekly deadline seems to be a thing of the past. This is making us rethink how we can most effectively share information with our top-tier press contacts."

In addition to the Internet, another part of the what-constitutes-public-relations issue is newswire content. Journalists freely recognize the value of wire services, such as Business Wire, in bringing information to their computer screens. Many of the journalists interviewed even identified these services as a way for smaller publications to substitute for a lack of bodies.

Snell, of *LAN Times*, said, "I don't think online publications really care about PR. Online publications rely on alternative news sources, such as newswires and Web sites, to gather most of the information they need."

However, a point that Snell and others did not mention is that the role of wire services in trade journalism differs significantly from the wire services used in traditional journalism. In high-tech trade journalism, there are no Associated Press and Reuters reporters in the field investigating stories that will be sent over the wire. Rather, press releases are typically sent verbatim over Business Wire and PR Newswire. These "stories" are then often run in the form of "news" by services such as Dow Jones and Computergram that may do nothing more than reformat the text and make a phone call to confirm dates and titles. At this point, the stories are two steps removed from the original source but they have been changed little, if at all. Does this mean that a journalist who runs one of these stories has been fed by a public relations person?

To close on the point about defining the term public relations, one must examine the traditional press interview itself. During the interviews for this thesis, the press frequently explained that if they could only have better access to newsmakers, the role of public relations professionals would be further diminished. What the journalists did not acknowledge, however, is how busy newsmakers (e.g., a corporate president or chief executive officer) tend to be. And, that it is typically the responsibility of public relations practitioners to emphasize the importance of the communications function to these people. This often weighs heavily in a newsmaker's willingness to commit time to public appearances and face-to-face interviews.

It is interesting to note that journalists do realize how frequently they work through a public relations person to schedule an interview or to follow up for additional information following the interview. This was reflected in the "middle man" comments by the press that were mentioned earlier in the thesis. However, the press does not view this as an added value by public relations. Rather, it is seen as an unnecessary step created by insulating the newsmakers from the press.

The **second macro trend** is the major difference in the way that journalists and public relations professionals view one another. This is certainly not a surprise. Such disparities in perception have existed for many years (Kopenhaver, Martinson and Ryan, 1984; Picinich, 1992; Conn, 1997).

However, it is interesting when one realizes that many people feel that the high-tech industry is an exception to the assumption that animosity exists between journalists and public relations professionals. Given the relative newness of the industry and the

youth of its public relations practitioners and journalists, the level of sophistication of many people in the industry, and the limited need for “spin doctors,” many people feel that the relationship between the press and public relations has been much more “equal” than in other industries.

Despite this, the data indicate that while public relations people may feel this way, journalists hold similar attitudes to their colleagues in other industries. Namely, public relations serves or supports journalists who see themselves as being higher up the professional ladder and who pride themselves on their objectivity and independence.

This thesis data reflects the data collected in a study done by Kopenhaver et al (1984), and such findings are supported by the observations of Stephen Conn (1997). Journalists generally perceive themselves as having a much higher social status than public relations professionals. Meanwhile, a San Jose State University mass communications thesis (Picinich, 1992), shows strong evidence that public relations practitioners view themselves on relatively equal footing with the press. And, all of these studies and observations were borne out in the interviews for this thesis.

*Computerworld's* Gillen said, “As journalists, we’ve learned how to use PR people better over the years. It (the relationship with the journalist) really comes down to the individual PR person -- how useful he or she is.”

“Unfortunately, journalists haven’t all begun treating PR people better. Many still feel a sense of superiority to PR professionals,” added Cameron Sturdevant, an editor with *PC Week*.

Perhaps because their definition of “public relations” differs so substantially from the media’s definition, or perhaps because of professional pride, public relations people have very different opinions.

Cunningham explained, “Journalists today are very interested in PR’s perspective. Reporting is becoming much more angle-based and less straight news than it used to be. Journalists have to ‘spin’ as much as PR people in order to market their stories and publications, and PR people can help them do that.”

Stone said, “Journalists are often so overwhelmed by information that they don’t even have time to do traditional reporting. PR people can be extremely helpful in wading through the mountains of information to point reporters towards the truly substantial ‘news’ they may otherwise miss.”

These strong preconceived opinions may explain why journalists are much less likely than public relations professionals to acknowledge any type of mutual dependence. Logic dictates that negative opinions about public relations would color the answers that journalists give when asked about the importance or usefulness of public relations. Likewise, a feeling of equality held by public relations practitioners is likely to make them feel more important to the news process.

### Application to Practice

Even if a study were to find a link between the ability of the media to publish more content and the capacity of the public relations industry, what would the implications be? At the outset of this thesis, the following question was posed, are

technology vendors benefiting from a seemingly professional, independent trade press that is actually providing vendors with a falsely credible source through which to communicate with their target customers? At this point, one could make a case that the technology industry has spawned a unique, vendor-controlled sub-industry.

The U.S. auto industry annually contributes billions of dollars to the American economy, as do the agriculture, alcohol, sports and travel industries. In fact, there are probably dozens of multi-billion dollar sectors in the economy. From a communications perspective, however, the high-tech industry is unique because those other industries have not produced hundreds of daily, weekly and monthly publications.

Despite the fact that technology publications are produced by major publishing houses, employ professional journalists and editors, and occasionally break major stories, are they really anything more than a less-expensive alternative to television advertising for technology companies? Have they grown out of a need by companies to reach a highly educated, high-income, narrow demographic? Are journalists simply unknowingly publishing what companies give them, while believing that they are giving their readers hard-hitting news?

The fact is, it can be persuasively argued that the current situation is ideal for technology companies. They have independent publishers bearing the expense and the effort associated with publishing and circulating high-quality magazines. They have direct access to a very specific audience, an audience that probably represents a small sliver of the overall population. And the technology companies can supplement their

advertising dollars in these publications through editorial content that is legitimized because it comes from a reporter rather than a company salesperson.

While this may not cause concern that the Fourth Estate is crumbling, it could make one wonder who is getting the better of whom. It is the journalists who radiate a sense of superiority over their public relations counterparts. But, it may very well be the public relations people -- working for technology companies -- who are having their way.

### Application to Theory

In the literature review, four theories were discussed, media system dependency, information subsidy, uses and gratifications, and the situational theory of public relations. Interestingly, the two theories that were applied to this research may be least impacted by the findings. Information subsidy and situational theory were used to examine the possibility that a press/public relations link helped the two professions fuel each other's growth. Although such a relationship cannot be ruled out, the data does not provide strong evidence to support it.

On the other hand, the implications for media system dependency and uses and gratifications may be significant. Both of these theories deal with the way in which people use or rely on the media. And, one of the most important results of this research has been to call into question the source of the high-tech trade media's content. If vendors do, in fact, heavily influence the media's content, it would open up many questions about the influence that technology vendors have on the readership.

According to media system dependency theory, individuals may look to the trade press for information about new technologies and new products because they lack the resources to fully examine these things on their own. Consequently, what people read in the trade press could play a large roll in how they spend their money on computer-related items, as well as how they may make important decisions about the sizeable computing investments of their companies.

According to uses and gratifications theory, people often use the media to help validate or rationalize their decisions. For example, seeing an endorsement for a product or service from a credible source can often make people more comfortable with their own decision to use that product. When people read a quote in *Computerworld* from a satisfied customer or respected industry expert, it may make readers more likely to use the product. What many people may not realize is that the satisfied customer and the respected industry expert are often handpicked by the product vendor, then pre-briefed about what to say, and then offered to journalists to “help” the strengthen their articles.

Perhaps these bedrock communication theories could be re-examined for their specific application to the trade press. With the mass media continuing to splinter into smaller niche audiences and with the impact of the Internet evolving into something unimaginable only a few years ago, these theories could become even more important to the study of the trade press in the next millenium.

### Future Research

To build on the points made above, an exciting piece of research would be a comprehensive quantitative study focusing on the source of trade-press content. The study should tightly define “public relations” and explore the source of news, feature stories and product reviews.

Another possibility for additional research would be to revisit the major finding of this thesis -- that the factor most important to the growth of high-tech public relations and trade journalism is the explosion of the technology industry. Is this true, or could additional research find stronger evidence of a press/public relations link?

If one were to undertake a follow-up study, the study would have to strictly control for the preconceived opinions that people may bring to an interview and the study should focus more heavily on the possibility that media demand is helping grow public relations. Based on comments from both groups of people interviewed for this thesis, it seems highly unlikely that public relations is helping grow the media.

### Final Thought

At the outset, it was stated that this project had academic significance because its results could form the basis of a more comprehensive study in the future, a study of important mass communications issues. At the conclusion of the thesis, this research has formed a solid foundation for a more comprehensive study, but not exactly in the way the researcher had originally intended.



Instead of proving that the press and public relations are feeding off each other, the more interesting issue raised in this thesis focuses on the relationship between vendor-supported public relations efforts and the trade press.

If nothing else, this document is likely to prepare a future researcher to effectively examine the complex relationship between public relations and the press by making the researcher aware of the many subtleties and variables that make the relationship so intriguing.

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**Appendix A**  
**Interview Outline for PR Professional**

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Company** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Title** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Years of experience** \_\_\_\_\_

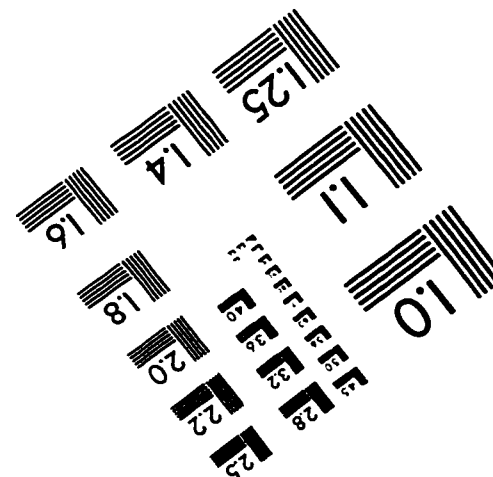
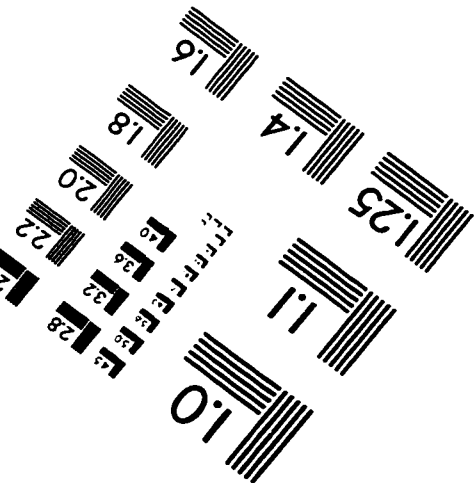
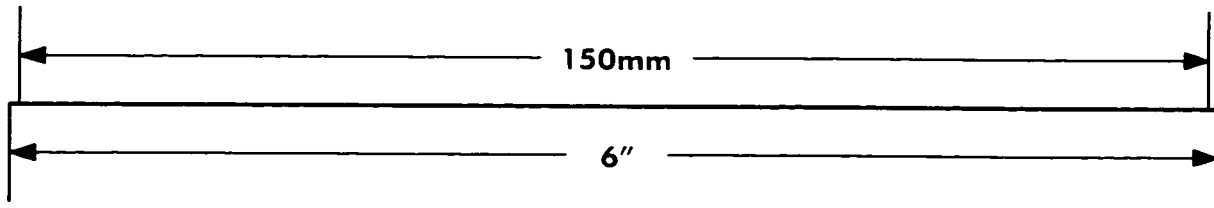
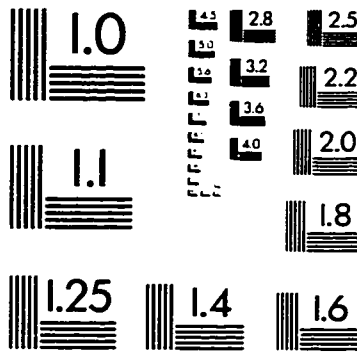
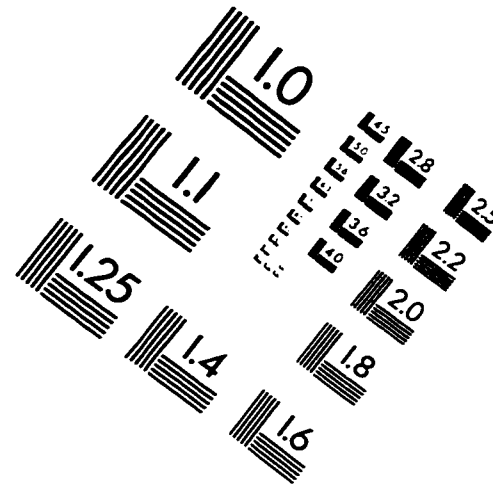
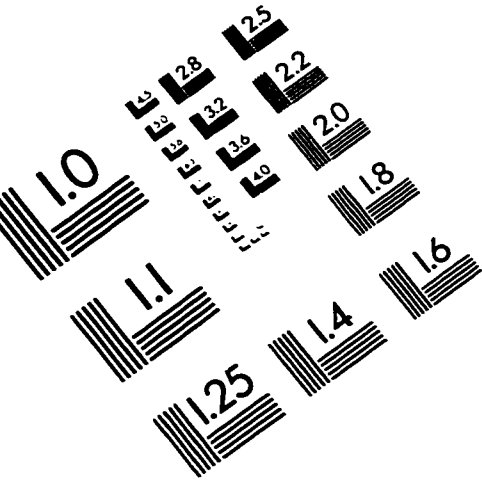
1. How would you describe your relationship with journalists (e.g., useful, productive, adversarial, mutually beneficial)?
2. Do you see organizations putting more resources into PR today than ten years ago?
3. Has PR become more prolific in the quantity of material it is generating?
4. Do you feel the role of the PR professional has changed? If so, how?
5. Over the past decade, do you feel that high-tech trade journalism has become more competitive? Can you quantify that change?
6. Do you believe the press has become more accepting of PR materials over the past decade? Are journalists more willing to work with PR?
7. Do you feel journalists have become reliant on PR, or is that too strong a statement?
8. Do you believe that PR has helped support the growing news industry?
9. Do you believe the news media could grow as large/as quickly without the PR industry?
10. Do you feel that the growing media industry has created a demand that has fueled the growth of PR?
11. Do you feel that smaller publications and online news services would be possible without the presence of PR support?

**Appendix B**  
**Interview Outline for Journalist**

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Company \_\_\_\_\_  
Title \_\_\_\_\_  
Years of experience \_\_\_\_\_

1. How would you describe your relationship with PR professionals (e.g., useful, productive, adversarial, mutually beneficial)?
2. Do you find PR professionals valuable in your day-to-day job?
3. Over the course of your career, has your contact with PR professionals increased, decreased or remained the same?
4. Has the utility of the information they provide changed? If so, positively or negatively?
5. Is it more difficult today than in years past to uncover “news”?
6. Could you be as productive as a journalist without your PR contacts?
7. Over the past decade, do you feel that high-tech trade journalism has become more competitive? Can you quantify that change?
8. Do you believe the press has become more accepting of PR materials over the past decade? Are journalists more willing to work with PR?
9. Professionally, what are your critical success factors? Do they include PR support?
10. Do you believe that PR has helped support the growing news industry?
11. Do you believe the news media could grow as large/as quickly without the PR industry?
12. Do you feel that the growing media industry has created a demand that has fueled the growth of PR?
13. Do you feel that smaller publications and online news services would be possible without the presence of PR support?

# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)




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