



## Understanding how health journalists judge public relations sources: A rules theory approach<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The research presented here offers public relations practitioners and scholars insight about how health journalists ( $N = 598$ ) view practitioners and evaluate the appropriateness of public relations materials by public relations source (e.g., nonprofit, government). Also assessed are differences in journalist perceptions according to medium (e.g., newspapers, magazines) and market (e.g., national, metropolitan). Rules theory guides the analysis, allowing practitioners to discern journalists' general and specific rules for accepting publicity materials. Findings show that health journalists are least accepting of material from businesses and federal government agencies. Newspaper and freelance health journalists are more reluctant to use public relations materials than are other journalists.

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Health journalists and public relations practitioners who work in the field of health have the important responsibility of providing accurate and timely information to the public. The gravity of this responsibility is reflected in the fact that health decisions can have a profound effect on the quality and length of a person's life. In writing about health, journalists must have access to health experts, many of whom communicate with journalists through the help of a public relations practitioner. Public relations practitioners are an indispensable part of the news process and can make the work of journalists much easier (Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997).

The purpose of this research is to determine how health journalists evaluate the appropriateness of using public relations materials based on the type of public relations source (e.g., business, nonprofit) providing the material. This information is useful to practitioners who work in the health field. Data are from a national telephone survey of 598 U.S. health journalists. Previous studies have examined how journalists use information from state universities (Morton, 1986, 1988; Morton & Warren, 1992a,b), medical schools (Stocking, 1985), and state government agencies (Walters & Walters, 1992; Walters, Walters, & Starr, 1994). These studies, however, look at news release use in isolation and do not seek to measure journalistic attitudes toward different types of public relations sources. A few researchers have distinguished journalistic perceptions, by

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news department (i.e., sports, business, and news), of public relations sources within a particular state (California) (Pincus, Rimmer, Rayfield, & Cropp, 1993). The present study, focused specifically within the context of health news, assesses how the perceptions of health journalists differ by the news media outlet that the journalist serves—newspapers, magazines, television, trade publications, or freelance health writers—as well as by the type of market served—national, metropolitan, or community. As Pincus et al. (1993, p. 44) point out, the public relations literature is in need of research that takes into account “multiple locations and different types of journalists and practitioners.” This study adds to the literature because it simultaneously studies differences among health journalists and their perceptions of public relations practitioners.

The analysis of journalist perceptions is guided by communication rules theory (Len-Ríos, 2008; Shimanoff, 1980), which suggests that in the media relations context there are culturally identified journalistic rules that prescribe how public relations materials should or should not be used. These rules would be expected to vary among journalists insofar as journalists who write for different media or news departments hold dissimilar cultural views about journalistic practices. Once identified, the rules can be examined in their complexity. As Cameron et al. (1997, p. 140) assert, “Rules research offers particular promise in source-reporter relational research.” The survey findings here serve to identify the communication rules that can then be tested in their cultural contexts, thus improving our understanding of media relations in the health news realm.

## 1. Literature review

### 1.1. Health information

The Pew Research Center for The People and the Press has gauged U.S. attitudes toward the news for more than a decade. Its research consistently shows that health news regularly ranks as one of the top five news topics sought by news readers (Pew, 2004). Data from its 2006 survey show that 24% of Americans say that they follow health news “very closely” (Pew, 2006). Attention to health news is only surpassed by attention to news about weather, crime, and community. Given the high demand for health news and the vast number of outlets for the material, one challenge for those in public relations is navigating the many options for health information dissemination.

Public relations practitioners who work in the field of health must consider where to get media placement. They strategically select news media outlets to receive their news releases and pitches by determining which media serve the audiences they want to reach. An examination of news media use (Pew, 2006) shows that local television news remains the place where a majority of Americans (54%) say they get their broadcast news, compared with fewer people watching cable television news (34%), network nightly news (28%), and morning network news (23%). In addition, 40% of Americans say they get their news from print or online newspapers, and 31% say they read “online news 3 or more days a week” (Pew, 2006, p. 1). These statistics suggest to public relations practitioners that local television, newspapers, and cable television news are the leading ways by which to reach large news audiences.

### 1.2. Journalist perceptions of PR professionals in providing news information

It has long been conventional wisdom that journalists perceive themselves in adversarial relationships with public relations practitioners. The stereotype of the public relations practitioner is someone who attempts to gain “free publicity” and as someone who “stonewalls” the press. A review of research by Cameron et al. (1997) on journalist perceptions of public relations professionals shows that journalists are inclined to view public relations practitioners as sources with vested interests who tend to be untrustworthy. Furthermore, the authors note “Distrust and low esteem for public relations practitioners are more profound in the abstract than in the specific experience of journalists” (Cameron et al., 1997, p. 118). This means that journalists feel more kindly towards public relations professionals they know and work with.

Research shows that journalist perceptions of public relations practitioners and the material they supply to journalists may vary by the area of journalism in which the journalist practices, by individual differences among journalists, and by news organization culture. Pincus et al. (1993) found that journalists’ perceptions of public relations professionals differed in a number of factors including journalists’ news specialties and their exposure to a public relations course in college. For instance, the authors’ survey of California news editors demonstrated that sports editors held more positive views of public relations professionals than did journalists who worked as news or business editors. Sallot and Johnson (2006b) studied a set of 413 interviews that students conducted with journalists and found that all journalists, regardless of affiliation or public relations experience, viewed their relationships with public relations practitioners somewhat positively.

Studies have not identified how health journalists perceive public relations professionals, but a content analysis by Bishop (1988) shows that when journalists write about publicity efforts, they tend to do so in a favorable manner, especially when the publicity is related to health. He found that about 89% of news articles about health publicity efforts mentioned them positively. As a whole, research suggests that health journalists may have favorable attitudes toward writing about certain health topics promoted by practitioners.

A group that may get more positive coverage is nonprofit organizations. Sallot and Johnson (2006a) analyzed in-depth interviews with 156 journalists conducted between 2002 and 2004 and found that the journalists were more apt to give nonprofit public relations practitioners more favorable treatment because “practitioners representing non-profit organizations were seen as less self-serving” (p. 84). Additionally, survey results from a study of practitioners in the health field show that practitioners for nonprofit organizations perceived themselves as more “expert” at media relations (Cho & Cameron, 2007).

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