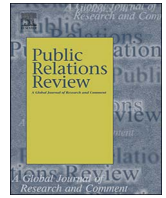




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Full Length Article

# Will you run it? A gatekeeping experiment examining credibility, branding, and affiliation within information subsidies<sup>☆,☆☆,★</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Information subsidies from military and civilian public relations practitioners receive varying degrees of acceptance by media gatekeepers. Using an experimental design, this study examined organizational affiliation within media gatekeeping. Television news decision-makers were randomly assigned one of five mock live news reports with only the reporter's clothing and on-air title manipulated. Results indicated affiliation did not affect gatekeeper use. Higher credibility was attributed to spokespersons with no organizational affiliation, and to military practitioners over civilians.

## 1. Introduction

When a train accident claimed the life of 50 people in October 1906, railroad publicist Ivy Lee did something most public relations practitioners today take for granted; Lee issued the very first press release. Lee used the newspapers to his advantage by telling the railroad's side of the story in his own words. The New York Times printed the press release word for word.

Ever since that day, public relations practitioners have used this strategy in an attempt to leverage the media to increase awareness and sway opinions. According to [McCombs \(2004\)](#), half of all news stories are “substantially based on news releases and other direct information subsidies” (p. 161). [Lewin's gatekeeping theory \(1947\)](#) provided an early framework for understanding the newspaper editorial decision-making process, and despite massive changes to the media landscape over the decades, this process remains much the same.

The tactics and tools used by PR practitioners have changed over the years, jumping from paper to videotape in the 1980s with the appearance of Video News Releases (VNRs). “Having started as oftentimes amateurish promotional video on three-quarter inch tape, the VNR has since evolved into a slick public relations tool” ([Pavlik, 2006, p. 17](#)). Also working to the benefit of practitioners, the late 1990s saw a decrease in newsroom staff size as the need for content only increased. [Lordan and Saint John \(2009\)](#) found that during this same time the number of VNRs increased as did their use by media outlets. VNRs today remain relevant, as [Broaddus, Harmon, and Mounts \(2011\)](#) noted TV news stations received dozens of such releases daily. Giving new life to VNRs, [Newell, Blevins, and](#)

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Bugeja (2009) asserted that as newsroom resources decrease the attractiveness of prepackaged content could create a dilemma for media struggling to fill a broadcast with fewer people to research, shoot, edit, and contribute to the storytelling. According to a survey conducted by the *Newsmarket* (2016), “offering multimedia content, especially video, for news distribution is now an expected and necessary offer online newsrooms to not only drive press to your site but to encourage them to tell your story” (pg. 2).

As such, multimedia (often video-heavy) packages are still supplied to journalists by public relations professionals as information subsidies, even as the industry and scholars tended to move away from the term VNR. For the heuristic purposes of connecting the current study to the rich scholarly work in VNR research, this study will still use the term even though the concept has obviously evolved due to technology and dissemination methods.

Today’s version of the VNR is conceptually very similar to its predecessor. That is, both contain multimedia content produced from a public relations perspective and are targeted to the journalist or media organization. To put it simply for comparison sake, both contain “video” and are “news releases.” That said, today’s media environment allows for a much richer dimension for these evolved information subsidies in that public relations professionals can better offer more tailored products, interactive products, and even live products less expensively than before. The importance of broadcast-quality information subsidies remains important today, as it did when VNRs first became a standard public relations tactic, but achieving that quality has become much more accessible for a wider variety of organizations due to the advances in technology. Furthermore, the dissemination changed as organizations moved to online newsrooms which are also accessible by the general public, thereby muddying the target audience of the information subsidy due to technology advancement.

Similar to organizations with corporate communication departments, the U.S. military has its own public information outreach mechanism known as public affairs. The military is required to release information on activities and programs without censorship or propaganda to the American public (Joint Publication 1-02, 2010). At times when locations are difficult or unsafe for civilian media to access, public affairs facilitate this mandate through the release of information in the form of a modern-day VNR. These video products are posted in an online newsroom by all four branches of the military on a single website for use by civilian media outlets. On a daily basis, more than 50 VNRs are uploaded to the site (K. Durand-Garlock, personal communication, January 26, 2016). Research suggested, however, that few modern-day VNRs were used in their original context and are often reedited and rewritten by civilian media before making the news (Cameron & Blount, 1996).

Even with the downsizing of news departments and increasing popularity of video content as a public relations tool, there are noted ethical concerns surrounding VNRs. Though public relations and journalism research alike substantiates the finding that a large percentage of news in independent news outlets come from public relations-produced information subsidies (Harmon & White, 2001), the VNR is accompanied with greater ethical and credibility concerns. In 2007 the Federal Communications Commission questioned Comcast Corporation’s use of VNRs and fined the news agency (Fees, 2008), citing the use of these public relations products as deceptive to audiences. Protected under free speech and legally secure in that news organizations are not paid for using VNR content, the threat of penalties for using VNRs have lessened. While some may contend the VNR is an antiquated technique, a Harmon and White (2001) study used tracking data coupled with self-report surveys of news directors and found VNRs are actually used at a much higher rate than the news industry admitted. The reliance on the modern-day VNR was reinforced in a survey published in 2016 of journalists that reported journalists visit public relations online newsrooms, some daily, looking for quality content to repurpose for their own work (Newsmarket, 2016).

Built on work of Harmon and colleagues (Harmon & White, 2001; Broaddus et al., 2011) which supports the more-than-you-would-think use of VNRs by news organizations, the purpose of this study is to determine if there is a negative bias against military-produced information subsidies by broadcast media outlets. Lewin’s gatekeeping theory (1947) and other literature on source credibility and branding will guide this research. Gatekeeping theory examines the decision-making process used by television news producers and assignment editors. Source credibility determines who newsroom decision-makers view as a credible source of information and branding determines how organizations maintain the qualities associated with its brand.

## 2. Literature review

This study is grounded in gatekeeping theory with emphasis on source credibility and branding. Previous research has not directly analyzed the decision-making process for broadcast media in their use or rejection of information subsidies containing any uniformed public relations spokesperson. However, gatekeeping and credibility literature can provide insight on how organizational affiliation through a uniformed spokesperson might be viewed and treated by the broadcast news media. The available literature offers a foundation for this first formal exploratory study that examines how media gatekeepers perceive military-produced VNRs and uniformed spokesperson.

### 2.1. Gatekeeping theory

Lewin (1947) first conceptualized the theory of gatekeeping within mediated communication and suggested that news items pass through a series of “gates,” on their pathway from initiation to transmission. Gates act as decision points where items can be discarded or passed along through sources, journalists, editors, and through the editing process itself (Lewin, 1947). White (1950) continued this line of thought and suggested that journalists and editors serve as the terminal “gate” for news, using their experiences, attitudes, and expectations as a basis for selecting or rejecting information (p. 390). Shoemaker, Eicholz, Kim, and Wrigley (2001) later defined gatekeeping as a decision-making process “by which the vast array of potential news messages are winnowed, shaped, and prodded into those few that are actually transmitted by the news media” (p. 233).

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