



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Public Relations Review



The dawn of a new golden age for media relations? How PR professionals interact with the mass media and use new collaboration practices

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 June 2015

Accepted 25 February 2016

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Media relations

Content strategy

Strategic communication

Mediatization

Strategic mediatization

Content management

ICT

Brand journalism

Native advertising

Content marketing

ABSTRACT

The article reviews the status of media relations in Europe while it reflects the upcoming media shift from mass mediated communication to own produced and delivered content by strategic communicators. The literature review echoes the changing media landscape from the PR practitioner's point of view: Whereas the 20th century gave birth to different kind of media relations, the highly networked and fluid ways of content re-production, dissemination and therefore the co-construction of meaning became much more important for all kinds of organizations and their public relations practitioners as well as marketers. Referring to these new forms of mediatized content, the final section of the literature review introduces the concept of *strategic mediatization* as a new practice supplementing and/or replacing old media relations. Based on the theoretical ground stressed out in the literature review, an empirical study was carried out based on a quantitative survey among 2253 communication practitioners across Europe. The survey results emphasize a strong shift from the prevalence of mass media to owned media especially in Western and Northern Europe. However, the rising importance of new content practices is considered important in all European regions alike. Nevertheless, the study identifies large gaps between the considered importance and the usage of these new media relations practices.

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1. Introduction

Public relations have been intertwined with the mass media since its rise in the early twentieth century (Hallahan, 2010). Communication departments use mass media to monitor news and public opinion, source content for internal news services, evaluate media coverage, and cooperate to produce quality content or create topical platforms on the Internet. Today organizations explore new practices going beyond traditional media relations. They are paying for published content aimed at consumers (content marketing) (Pulizzi, 2012, 2014; Rowley, 2008) or for content appearing in the form and function of its host platforms (native advertising or embedded marketing, e.g. Facebook posts). Organizations also produce newsworthy content that promotes brands by using journalistic skills (brand journalism) (Brito, 2013; Bull, 2013; Hallahan, 2014; Macnamara, 2014a). This blurs boundaries between journalism, public relations, and advertising (Hallahan, 2014). As

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Macnamara (2014b) observed: “PR is developing new tactics and techniques at the same time as journalism is struggling to adapt in a digital networked world and these developments and evolving interconnections need to be examined” (p. XIII).

This paper explores media relations and widely discussed new practices in this field (i.e. content strategy, content marketing, native advertising, and brand journalism) as a part of public relations. It starts with a literature review in which it presents traditional concepts of interacting with the mass media and outlines the new concepts mentioned above. These are followed by the results of an empirical survey among public relations practitioners working in communication departments and agencies across Europe. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research and it proposes a new concept: “strategic mediatization.”

2. Literature review

2.1. Media relations in the 20th century

Traditional mass media such as newspapers, television, etc. have dominated the 20th century. The media system with its large-scale organizational complex was established as a social institution that produced and disseminated symbolic content and information to entire populations (Hirsch, 1977; pp. 27–28). It typically involved one-to-many communication with anonymous receivers through communication channels with a clear distinction between producers and receivers (Croteau & Hoynes, 2014; p. 287). For corporate actors traditional mass media have been the main channels for reaching customers, publics, and all other kinds of stakeholders. As communicative channels, media constitute and convey meaning. Hence, each type of media is geared to the actions of others and contributes to information, discursive practices, understanding, and persuasion. Therefore, communication channels not only have technical characteristics, but also societal potential (Couldry & Hepp, 2013). Depending on the society and the historical context, media are embedded and have been developed differently in various countries in Europe (Djankov, McLiesh, Nenova, & Shleifer, 2001; Kelly, Mazzoleni, & McQuail, 2004; Trappel, Meier, D’Haenens, Steemers, & Thomas, 2011).

While large-scale media enterprises as well as news organizations with editorial departments and editorial staff (differentiated by Tunstall, 1971) dominated the media system and therefore created the media agenda, *media relations* became a crucial part of public relations like mass media advertising did for marketing. Moreover, media legitimacy and the evaluating audience have traditionally played a leading role in public relations in general and media relations in particular (Bansal & Clelland, 2004; Fredriksson, Pallas, & Wehmeier, 2013; Pollock & Rindova, 2003; Yoon, 2005). According to Habermas (1989 [1962]), for a long time, public spheres were governed by mass media through processes of gatekeeping (White, 1950), media agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), framing (Entman, 1993), priming (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982), and agenda building (Rogers & Dearing, 1988), as well as agenda cutting (Wober & Gunter, 1988; see also Wober, 2001) or agenda melding (Ragas & Roberts, 2009). Public relations practice was dominated and often even equated with media relations—building relationships with journalists as well as editors and offering content that suits their needs and that might result in media coverage (Supa, 2014).

Media relations is a complex process involving an organization’s media relations strategy, media relations professionals, journalists, editors, and media enterprises (Supa, 2014). Zoch and Molleda (2006) proposed a model of media relations focussing mainly on the organizational process of creating media relations programs or campaigns. They view media relations as a strategic function of public relations without taking into account the mass media system and its influence on strategic media relations. The intereffication model by Bentele and Nothhaft (2008), on the other hand, describes the relationship between the mass media system and public relations on three different levels of individual professionals, organizations, and complementary systems within. Both approaches can be combined to gain a broader understanding of the interactions between media relations and the mass media.

Zoch and Molleda (2006) proposed that media relations try to shape the media agenda using framing (Entman, 1993), information subsidies, and agenda building (Rogers & Dearing, 1988). Bentele and Nothhaft (2008) show how public relations adapt itself to expectations and routines of journalism in various dimensions. These involves object-related (e.g. selection, placement and presentation of news), temporal (timing of news), and psychosocial (psychic preconditions, organizational frameworks and routines) dimensions (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008; p. 36). Moreover, they demonstrate that journalists, news organizations, and the media system also adapt themselves to public relations practice.

With the advent of new technologies, e.g. social media and new forms of reaching stakeholders directly, traditional media relations are challenged to adapt to new concepts (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008). Only a few studies have specifically investigated how social media and new technologies shaped the relationship between journalists and media relations practitioners as well as the process of media relations (Macnamara, 2014b; Supa, 2014). Apart from the concepts mentioned in the introduction, the concept of “media catching” became popular through online platforms such as HARO (Help a Reporter Out), “a phenomenon that public relations practitioners must adapt to and become familiar with to engage journalists” (Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010, p. 258). HARO is an online platform that allows people with expertise or interests in any field to help journalists by adding valuable content to their research. This new concept built on crowd sourcing is a reference point for how new technologies change traditional media relations. Emerging technologies such as online press rooms (Callison, 2003; González-Herrero & Ruiz de Valbuena, 2006), social media newsrooms (Zerfass & Schramm, 2014), the Facebook initiative “Instant Articles” (Constine, 2015), specific apps for targeting journalists, etc. will continue shaping

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