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# The co-production of business news and its effects: The corporate framing mediated-moderation model

Piet Verhoeven

*The Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV Amsterdam, The Netherlands*

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### ABSTRACT

Corporations serve as an important news source for journalists. Media relations have long been considered a key facet of public relations (PR). This study presents scientific literature on businesses and news media published between 1963 and 2013 and models what corporations say to journalists, how they present what they say, the relationship between PR professionals and journalists and what journalists report about corporations and consequent effects on the public. A total of 217 empirical studies are categorized and synthesized into a corporate framing mediated-moderation model, which considers both the mediating factor of relationships between PR professionals and journalists and the moderating factors of culture, the sector and the PR profession.

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## 1. Introduction

Transmitting messages to the public through mass media, arranging positive news coverage and communicating with journalists on organizational issues have always been situated at the heart of public relations (PR). Ever since the works of [Bernays \(1923\)](#) and [Lee \(1929\)](#) on corporations, publicity and public opinion, press relations have become a key responsibility of PR professionals. Today, numerous handbooks on business communications include at least one chapter on corporations, publicity, media relations or the public sphere (e.g., [Heath, 2010](#); [Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015](#)), and this is true of other general introductory materials to the field (e.g., [Broom, 2012](#); [Cornelissen, 2014](#); [Tench & Yeomans, 2013](#)). These texts provide advice not only on 'using' mass media to a corporation's advantage but also on ways to behave professionally towards journalists and understanding the role of the press in democratic societies. Surveys of PR professionals consistently highlight the lasting influence of press and media relations, even in times of online communication and social media. Communication with journalists is considered a very important responsibility by approximately three quarters of European communications professionals ([Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven, & Moreno, 2014](#)), and North-American professionals rate addressing print newspapers and magazines as the fifth and seventh most important communication channels, respectively ([Swirling, 2014](#)).

In the normative tradition, the famous excellence studies of PR practice show that organizations more often use the propaganda or press agency model than the excellent two-way symmetrical model when communicating with the media ([Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002](#)), reflecting the classic historical and popular notion of public relations as a form of spin ([Ewen, 1996](#)) rather than as a means of open communication with journalists. In the mass communication theories tradition, [Carroll and McCombs \(2003\)](#) were the first to apply agenda-setting theory to business news and to its effect on corporate reputation and found mixed international results ([Carroll, 2011](#)). Journalists are often portrayed as gatekeepers who deter-

*E-mail address:* [P.Verhoeven@uva.nl](mailto:P.Verhoeven@uva.nl)

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mine whether a particular news report may pass the news medium gateway (Shoemaker, 1991) and who are supposed to be critical of information provided to them by corporations, which are occasionally considered a third force in news-making (Manheim, 1998). Framing studies traditionally focus primarily on the media and on the construction of reality through the media, whether in cooperation with news sources or not (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978). Cornelissen, Carrol and Elving (2009) developed a model of frame negotiation between PR professionals and journalists and Van Ruler (2005) proposed to conceptualize the relationship between corporations and the mass media as a ménage a trois between PR, the organizational logic and media logic. In Germany the relationship between PR and journalism has been summarized and conceptualized by Bentele et al. (1997) in the so-called *Intereffikationsmodell*, in which a reciprocal relationship between PR and journalism is modelled as two relatively autonomous systems that are mutually dependent on one another, working in the public sphere. Although these conceptualizations exist, there is no overall empirical framework available on how businesses and news media work together to produce frames on corporations and their activities, and on what types of frames emerge through this process. We need to develop a stronger understanding of how media frames develop, backed up by empirical evidence. Vliegthart and van Zoonen (2011) noted that it is especially important to determine how the agenda building capacities of news sources translate into media frames that are favorable to their interests. One 10-year analysis of framing literature also showed that frame production by news sources has remained considerably understudied (Borah, 2011). It is therefore important to examine how businesses interact with the media and the effects that this has on the public.

The overall aim of this paper is to organize the literature on businesses and news media and to model what corporations say to journalists, how they present what they say, the relationship between corporations and journalists, what journalist report about corporations and the effect that this has on the public. To answer these questions, a literature study was conducted of the international scientific literature published in ISI-ranked and English language peer-reviewed journals in the fields of organizational communication, public relations and corporate communication. Six ISI-ranked journals and five peer-reviewed journals were manually searched for papers on businesses/corporations and the news media, with the first issue published in 1963 and the last published in the summer of 2013. The following ISI-ranked journals were examined: *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *Journal of Business Communication*, and *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*. The following peer-reviewed journals were examined: *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *Corporate Reputation Review*, *Public Relations Inquiry*, *PRISM* and the *International Journal of Strategic Communication*. To identify papers published in other journals, database searches were conducted through *Web of Science*, *Academic Search Premier*, *Econlit*, *Business Source Premier* and *Communication and Mass Media Complete* using the following keywords: corporations, media, journalism, companies, radio, TV, newspapers and online news.<sup>1</sup> A total of 309 papers were found. Conceptual papers or studies on governmental or political organizations, NGOs, non-profit organizations, corporate social responsibility and crisis communications were omitted, leaving a total of 217 empirical studies published between 1963 and 2013 (see Appendix A). To organize the literature, the main purpose of this study, a simple structural model was used to group the studies (Chaffee & Lieberman, 2001) referring to Lasswell's basic verbal communication model: Who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect (Lasswell, 1948). Accordingly the studies were grouped in four categories: studies on what corporations do and say ( $n = 67$ ), on relationships between PR professionals and journalists ( $n = 46$ ), on media content ( $n = 60$ ), the channels and the actors, and on media effects ( $n = 44$ ). After synthesizing the results of the empirical studies, a research model was developed called the *Corporate Framing Mediated-Moderation Model* (CFMM), which focuses on the overall process of frame building by corporations and the media and its effect on the public. The model considers the mediating factor of the relationships between public relations professionals and journalists; moderating factors of organizational cultures in corporations and media organizations; business sector and broader societal contexts and the visibility and credibility of the PR profession.

## 2. Synthesizing 50 years of empirical research

### 2.1. What corporations do

PR professionals have traditionally considered engaging with the media to be an important task (Doug, Newsom, Ramsey, & Carrel, 1993) and have viewed *press releases* as an important instrument for communicating with journalists (Morton, 1996). The first study published on the effectiveness of press releases was published in 1976 and concluded that PR writers in the US are “partners with the press” and that news releases produced by local business sources are more likely to be published than nonlocal releases (Aronoff, 1976). Studies have shown that poorly written press releases are less likely to be published in newspapers (Walters, Masel-Walters, & Starr, 1994), that they use evaluative rather than informative adjectives (Hoeken & Westbroek, 1997) and that tendencies towards “promotionalization” in press releases have the same negative effect on publication (Pander Maat, 2007). Terms such as news preformulation and market journalism have been introduced to refer to the varied influence of press releases on media content (Strobbe & Jacobs, 2005; Kiouis, Popescu, & Mitrool, 2007) as an

<sup>1</sup> A literature study considering ISI-ranked and English language peer-reviewed journals and databases is of course a limitation. Even though more and more research is published in English and in ISI-ranked journals this sample lacks by definition research that is published in other languages like German, French or Spanish and all other languages. It would be interesting to, as a next step, complement this study with empirical research papers published in other languages to show the differences and similarities.

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