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Public Relations is More than Media Relations

There are possibly as many definitions of public relations as there are textbooks on the subject. The UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) as cited by Davis (2007, p. 6) emphasises one aspect: "Public relations is about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you". Grunig and Hunt (1984) describe public relations simply as "management of communication between an organization and its publics" (p. 6). The definition of public relations created at the World Assembly of Public Relations in Mexico City in 1978, cited by both Davis (2007, p. 5) and Swann (2014, p. 2), is one which casts public relations as both "art and social science" and claims analysis of trends, prediction of consequences, counsel of organisational leaders and program planning as within the public relations remit.

That 1978 definition and others are criticised by Morris and Goldsworthy (2012) as overly broad and aspirational. Morris and Goldsworthy (2012) go on to produce their own narrower definition: "Public relations is the planned persuasion of people to behave in ways which further its sponsor's objectives. It works primarily through the use of media relations and other forms of third-party endorsement." (p. 6). They believe the emphasis on media relations is appropriate because it is "the only persuasive technique which is the unchallenged preserve of PR." (Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012, p. 8). They state that "media relations remains the core skill of public relations" (Morris and Goldsworthy, 2012, p. 251) and that other communications disciplines tend to overlap with PR in the provision of services such as event management and promotions. They point out that the PR industry would not have come into being but for the growth of mass media and the resulting need for specialists in media relations, and they go on to detail common aspects of the media relations function such as calling journalists, writing a press release, arranging a press conference etc. They cite a UK survey which found that media relations work accounted for 37% of time spent by PR practitioners (which would in and of itself point to public relations being more than just media relations). Morris and Goldsworthy further claim that if PR was reduced to lobbying, public affairs and CSR the emphasis would still be on media relations prowess.

For the purposes of this discussion media relations is understood to concern 'earned' or 'free' media. It is worth outlining how media relations forms only one part of the modern media landscape. Dietrich (2013) provides a straightforward explanation of the four different kinds of media, commonly referred to as PESO for Paid (advertising), Earned (where media relations or publicity resides), Shared (social media such as Facebook and Twitter) and Owned (an organisation's website, blog, photos, videos or other content). Headrick (2013) expands PESO to POETS to allow for the notion of Traded media where companies yield "part of the discussion to another entity" in the hope that "trading part of the stage will return bigger results from a larger network" e.g. sharing of booth space at a trade show.

Edelman (2014) defines a media cloverleaf which distinguishes between traditional print or broadcast media, hybrid (dot.com versions of traditional or "media that is born digital"), social and owned (a company's own website and apps). Edelman states that the centre of the cloverleaf is search which is the "new on-ramp to all forms of media".

Dietrich believes that owned media is becoming more important than paid or earned media as organisations learn how to leverage what they have already created and provide valuable, interesting and informative content to their audiences either via the web or the shared world of social media. Edelman states that they "must work to stimulate storytelling that creates **motion** across **all** of the different types of media." (emphasis is theirs). These views contrast sharply with Morris and Goldsworthy's more limiting definition of public relations as being primarily about media relations.

Very often one finds public relations defined by practitioners in terms of what it isn't. "It is not about misrepresenting fact. PR is not a quick fix." (Nigel Heneghan, Heneghan PR, Business Plus, 2014). "It is not marketing or advertising." (Paul Allen, Paul Allen PR, Business Plus, 2014). The latter quote finds its echo in Davis who points out that public relations is not journalism, marketing, advertising, sales promotion or propaganda. In reviewing comments and posts from consultants and writers in the field of public relations it was difficult to extract a consensus and all-encompassing definition of public relations, its scope, and the relative importance of media relations. Indeed while media relations is explicitly referenced in many definitions it is absent from others. "PR is still focused largely on media relations, but refers to any way in which a person, company or organisation communicates with the general public and its key stakeholders." (Mick O'Keeffe, Pembroke Communications, Business Plus, 2014). "PR agencies, as opposed to advertising agencies, promote companies or individuals via editorial coverage." (Wynne, 2013).

“PR is about thoughtful and strategic management of reputation.” (Cathy Riordan, PR Wise, Business Plus, 2014).

Where media relations is included in a practitioner definition there is sometimes a note of caution added: “An unfocused pursuit of media coverage that fails to take account of some strategic objective is an unsound strategy.” (Emmet Barrett, Keating & Associates, Business Plus, 2014). This caution is expanded on by L'Etang (2008) who points out that there is frequently “an overdependence on media within PR strategies and campaigns and a lack of imagination in relation to other media, or to networking and interpersonal communication” (p. 119). Indeed interpersonal communications are defined as a distinct subset of communication tactics, outside of organisation and news media, by Smith (2013). Smith acknowledges that the audience reach for the interpersonal may be minimal in comparison to news media but argues that the persuasive impact is higher. Gregory (2010), in outlining the strategy and tactics using in public relations campaigns, includes a table of techniques which has a distinct media relations grouping – press conferences, press releases, one-to-one briefings, interviews and so on - but also sections on internal communication, direct mail, lobbying, community relations, crisis management etc. Indeed Gregory, in discussing how different campaigns need different tactics, lists examples of techniques employed outside of media relations and points out that a media campaign might not always be the best choice e.g. the disclosure of detailed financial information to key investors where it might be desirable that the message be closely controlled, not widely disseminated.

Media relations tactics (press release, one-to-one phone calls to journalists, opening night photo-call etc.) are prominent in the 'A Night At The Opera' case study (Gregory, 2010, p. 125) but they are not the only tactics in evidence. The programme of opera events was promoted through leaflets and posters displayed in the client restaurant and distributed in places frequented by the target OAP audience. Flyers were also posted both to customers on file at the restaurant and to the database of patrons of Scottish Opera. Indeed it could be argued that all the tactics employed were very much secondary to the planning since Scottish Opera was identified as a target early on by the PR consultancy who had read reports about their desire to take opera to the masses.

The PRCA award-winning 2007 campaign 'It Only Takes One Bite' certainly had a strong media relations campaign at its core (a launch photo-call with a TV celebrity and medical expert, press releases etc.) but there was also a case study undertaken, and campaign materials such as leaflets and posters were created as

was a dedicated website. The Irish Travel Agents' Association (ITAA) was brought on as a partner, thus allowing access to their e-newsletter, and leaflets and posters were mailed to ITAA members.

In contrast some campaigns can feel as if they are mostly about media coverage. The initial activity for the 'Beefing Up Trust' campaign for McDonald's Ireland, which won a PRCA award for corporate communication in 2013, consisted of a press release, a photo-call, print coverage and an RTE radio interview around the use of Irish beef. A subsequent Dawn Meats Group contract announcement triggered a press release and briefing where the attendance of a government minister ensured multiple journalists were present. An RTE TV piece was filmed in a McDonald's restaurant and there was an interview with the Dawn Meats CEO on RTE Radio. Numerous national and local radio bulletins and print pieces followed. The PR firm managed the media relations surrounding the later official opening of the Dawn plant in Waterford, and the presence of An Taoiseach along with a press briefing ensured blanket coverage in national and local media. Finally, to mark McDonald's Ireland 35th anniversary and a company announcement about restaurant expansion plans and jobs, a photo-call and press briefing were staged at a restaurant opening. A Minister of State was in attendance and the event gained extensive news coverage on national TV and national and local radio. There was brief mention of an anniversary stakeholder dinner but the principal measures of PR success as outlined in the online award publication concern the amount and type of media coverage garnered by the various parts of the campaign.

Grunig and Hunt defined four models of public relations from press agency/publicity through public information to two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric. L'Etang (2008), in cautioning against "assuming that the media is the ultimate audience", is critical of PR practitioners who appear to be "only concerned with publicity and not with reputation, communication, relationship-building or behavioural change". Media frequently appears on lists of target publics but L'Etang (2008) notes that some PR practitioners see the media simply as a "medium for the transmission of messages to audiences and not as a public in their own right" (p. 120) i.e. they see the media as passive. L'Etang (2008) believes the media should be seen as "active, interpretative and critical agents" (p. 120).

Media relations (of the 'earned' or 'free' variety) is undoubtedly an important part of public relations. This is because of the credibility still enjoyed by traditional media sources; they are regarded as independent in that they provide editorial rather than advertising coverage. News media remains a cost effective way of reaching a public

suspicious of advertising. The media message carries the weight of a journalist, and the media outlet, rather than of a PR consultant or corporate spokesperson. Wynne (2013) notes that while advertising is paid for, and should therefore be viewed with scepticism, articles in “respected publications have the advantage of third-party validation and are generally treated more favorably”. Perhaps as significant as the third party endorsement is the audience reach enjoyed by news media that, according to Smith, is second only to advertising and promotional media.

Swann also notes the trusted, third-party endorsement nature of news media placements and the significant ROI from a 'free' news story. Swann focuses on the development of strong, professional, working relationships with journalists and several practical suggestions are provided to aid the PR consultant including understanding the editorial content sought by particular news outlets, thinking and writing like a reporter, respecting deadlines etc.

Davis (2007) points out that the supposedly uneasy, asymmetrical, relationship between public relations and the media is largely a “charade” and that in “reality the relationship is much more symmetrical” (p. 180). PR practitioners, he notes, may now communicate to their various audiences via the internet without journalistic mediation, a “significant and increasingly substantial addition to their various unmediated tools”. (Davis, 2007, p. 180). He also points out that journalists are under greater pressure and “have a lot less time and opportunity to originate material themselves” (Davis, 2007, p. 180) and thus an interdependency exists. Davis adds that journalists have increased their use of secondary sources especially when those sources produce writing in a journalistic format.

Media relations is clearly but one choice on the menu of communication techniques available to the knowledgeable PR professional but as the case studies demonstrate it remains a core, and often the default, choice. However, in attempting to reach an organisation's publics, media relations should not be employed to the exclusion of other communication tactics, and good public relations practice, Morris and Goldsworthy notwithstanding, should always concern itself with more than just media relations. “Strive for good publicity, but don't expect it to work miracles” (Smith, 2013, p. 184).

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