AM263: Introduction to Public Relations Essay

Tutor: Lucretia Ackfield
Jessica Ferguson; n9190368

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Public relations (PR) can be defined as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics” (PRSA, 2012). This essay will explore PR through the three concepts of traditional media, social media and stakeholder engagement. For each concept, an overview of each area will be discussed and linked to the relevant Grunig and Hunt model(s). Furthermore, a recent real world example will be related to each concept and ethical considerations will be analysed. The limitations of this essay are due to the fact all the information gathered was sourced from secondary sources. Ideally, primary sources would be used to gain a greater understanding, especially when discussing the real world examples. All concepts discussed should be used in conjunction with one another when creating a successful PR campaign, as the overall message will be integrated and effective.

Traditional media includes the media outlets of television, radio, newspapers, magazines and newsletters (EFF, 2009). Traditional or mass media has dominated for the past 500 years and is characterised by primarily one-way communication platforms (Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, & Shin, 2013). Traditional media is costly to publish and is often controlled by professional gatekeepers. The news release, also known as a press release, is the most commonly used PR tactic, where PR sources distribute information to mass media outlets such as newspapers, broadcast stations and magazines (Wilcox et al., 2013). However, multimedia news releases are becoming more effective due to technological advances and audience attention span’s shortening. Furthermore, media outlets are starting to use social media to further communicate with various publics using the two-way asymmetrical approach. Newspapers such as the Australian and The Telegraph have joined the online community with their website and social media accounts being updated regularly. Magazines have followed the same path as newspapers in publishing online as well as continuing with traditional print media. Traditional media, such as newspapers, magazines and television, have adapted in the 21st century and can either follow a one-way communication or two-way communication technique.

The Grunig and Hunt models most relevant to traditional media are public information and two-way asymmetric. The public information model is described as one-way communicative but with the purpose of promoting truthful information about the particular organisation involved (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 268). The two-way asymmetric model involves two-way communication based on scientific persuasion which entails that the organisation will receive feedback from the public but does not necessarily take it on board (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 346). Traditional print newspapers and magazines still follow the public information approach in most circumstances, as it does not consider the audience as a vital part of the process and therefore does not incorporate public opinion or attitudes towards the construction of messages or releases (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2008, p. 425). The two-way asymmetric model uses the traditional media concept in a different way. Although this model is considered to be two-way communicative but imbalanced, its primary purpose is to help the organisation to use the feedback retrieved from publics and formulate more
persuasive communication of the original message (Westbrook, 1999). An effective campaign can either follow the one-way or two-way communication approach and still be regarded as effective.

A recent public information example of a PR campaign using traditional media was the Red Agency campaign for the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS). This campaign used the one-way public information approach in their communications with the RFDS’s supporters. The aim of this campaign was to create and launch the charity’s biggest and most innovative fundraising campaign to-date: ‘Buy the Sky’ (Red Agency, 2013). Supporters of the charity can choose to buy a patch of sky on the flight path of a RFDS planes with specific co-ordinates. Supports will be issued with a digital certificate showing their name in the sky and the patch co-ordinates (Brockington, 2013). The campaign was broadcasted through print and broadcast media that would maximise audience reach and raise funds (refer to appendix 1). Interviews with a spokesperson were conducted over various traditional media channels, following the one-way communication method. The campaign is ongoing and has reached an audience of more than 37 million to date, marking it a successful fundraising event.

The ethical considerations for the behaviour of the RFDS ‘Buy the Sky’ campaign was considered, as this decision was very important for the organisations future. Following the deontology framework, the campaign had a duty to the RFDS to fundraise funds for the organisation and the people the organisation supports. Also known as the duty-based ethical framework, deontological ethics teaches that some acts are right or wrong because of the sorts of things they are, and people have a duty to act accordingly, regardless of the good or bad consequences that may be produced (BBC, 2014). The RFDS campaign was a good act for the organisation in aiding funding, resulting in only good consequences. With the use of a recent real world example of the RFDS, it was determined that the public information and two-way asymmetric models were the most relevant Grunig and Hunt models to the traditional media concept.

While there has been a widespread adoption of social media platforms to promote products, services, brands, policies or campaigns, practitioners are missing out on the wealth of conversations that are occurring via social media, online media, community forums and blogs (Wong, 2010). Within PR, social media allows for interactivity between viewers/customers/publics and organisations (Wilcox et al., 2013). The media outlet of social media includes Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tumblr, online blogs, YouTube, Livestream and many more. Listening or monitoring social media can open up significant opportunities – whether you are a company, industry association, non-governmental organisation or political party (Wong, 2010). Today, PR needs to be focused on listening and engaging in a dialogue with consumers and citizens in a world where organisations must operate in a totally transparent manner (Wilcox et al., 2013). Social media has the ability to either
support or destroy a business's reputation, therefore, communication and transparency is crucial. Due to accessibility of social media, the media and other users can access information on a 24 hours, 7 days a week basis from anywhere as long as there is an Internet connection.

The key elements of social media include blogs, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Blogs are free-form sites published by individuals, which include comments from followers making it an interactive platform. PR practitioners need to recognise that blogs are extremely cost-effective in reaching large numbers of people (Wilcox et al., 2013). With 1.49 billion monthly active users, Facebook is the largest social media platform (Statista, 2015). Employer Facebook pages are great for building brand awareness, creating customer loyalty and communicating with customers. Twitter, the micro blogging site, allows users to post messages from computers and mobile phones to individuals who have signed up to ‘follow’ an individual or brand (Wilcox et al., 2013). PR practitioners can use Twitter for brand promotion, to provide late-breaking news, to refute a rumour or provide developments on a news story. With 500 million visitors a month, YouTube is the most popular video-sharing site. PR practitioners through an organisation’s YouTube channel can reach online communities about various topics. Ultimately, social media allows for organisations to communicate with their various publics and stakeholders and build on stakeholder engagement.

Due to social media being a relatively new phenomenon, it is difficult to distinguish one particular Grunig and Hunt model, relating specifically to the concept. However, the two-way symmetric model and the press agentry model can be associated with social media. The two-way symmetric model involves a balanced effect of two-way communication where public opinion is sought and viewed just as important as the organisation (Wilcox et al., 2013). Through social media, organisations can communicate through the platforms of social media with their publics. The press agentry model is the second one-way communication model of influence, however the messages conveyed may be exaggerated or distorted in order to create hype and talk about a particular organisation (Wilcox et al., 2013). Social media uses the press agentry approach heavily in creating hype and interaction around a particular event or campaign, which can then be ‘shared’ by social media users.

A recent two-way symmetrical example of a social media PR campaign was the Save Our Sons (SOS) campaign of ‘The Most Powerful Arm Ever Invented.’ SOS is a small charity for Duchenne muscular dystrophy, a rare and fatal muscle degenerative disease that affects 1 in 3,500 boys (Red Agency, 2013). The charity and disease had a limited public profile and was unable to attract government attention for further funding. In order to gain attention from the Australian Government, they first needed to gain support and awareness from the public through the signing of a petition. As the campaign had no budget for bought media, PR and social media were the only promotional tools driving awareness and action (Red Agency, 2013). To tap into highly engaged social media communities, celebrity ambassadors were asked to
encourage participation and sharing via their own social media pages (Red Agency, 2013). A YouTube video of a sufferer of the disease, named Jacob, was posted with the first ever petition-signing robot (refer to appendix 2). This video was then ‘shared’ on all the organisations social media accounts. Across social media, there were a total of 557 posts made about the campaign across blogs, Twitter and Facebook reaching an audience of over three million, marking the campaign a success (Red Agency, 2013).

The ethical considerations for the behaviour of the Save Our Sons organisation for ‘The Most Powerful Arm Ever Invented’ campaign was considered within the deontological ethical framework. In relation to this campaign, it can be argued that although it may not be fair to other organisations due to the hype around the campaign, it allowed people to be part of a social media petition and movement, making people believe that they were doing good. It puts into question whether people would be more inclined to sign the petition since their actions were posted onto their social media pages. However, according to the duty-based framework, the act of giving money to the organisation is still a good act, despite the ‘show-off’ nature social media breeds. With the use of a recent real world example of the SOS campaign, it was determined that the two-way symmetric and press agentry models were the most relevant Grunig and Hunt models to the social media concept.

Stakeholder engagement is the term that has historically been associated with how organisations deal with external parties who potentially could have reputational impacts on them (Lee & Kjaer, 2011). Fostering relationships with these stakeholders can assist companies with a range of objectives, be it part of business and strategic planning, innovation and new product development, or in lobbying and negotiation (McMillan, 2012). Any entity, role or person who has an impact on an organisation's performance is included as a stakeholder. Engagement can be defined as practices, processes and actions that an organisation (or project) must perform to involve stakeholders and to secure their involvement and commitment, or reduce their indifference or hostility (Bourne, 2015, p. 29). Therefore, stakeholder engagement is based on communication between the organisation and its stakeholders. As suggested by Grunig and Grunig (1992), stakeholder engagement operates with the communication form of ‘symmetrical dialogue,’ where communication between both parties is like a ‘conversation’ where information is exchanged and knowledge is acquired (Foster & Jonker, 2005, p. 52). Social media is a great way for communication to occur between organisations and stakeholders. Depending on what type of industry the organisation works and operates in, different stakeholders may apply.

Stakeholder engagement and community relations have changed in recent times as organisations are held to be more publicly accountable and social responsible (PRIA, 2011). In order to build a strong and healthy relationship with stakeholders, organisations need to be transparent in their actions. Recently, stakeholders and
community groups have demanded more information from organisations to be published and have been using social media platforms in order to voice this opinion. Moving forward with digital and social media can help organisations manage their reputation, and provide an in-depth understanding of their stakeholders and the public, potentially avoiding the incidence of community outrage and even modifying the community’s view of the company itself (PRIA, 2011). Communication with stakeholders and offering transparency is the responsibility of the PR team in any organisation.

Through stakeholder engagement, organisations can have a two-way symmetric or two-way asymmetric approach to communication with its stakeholders. By having a conversation, the relationship between them will strengthen if executed correctly. As previously discussed, the two-way symmetric model involves a balanced effect of two-way communication where public opinion is sought and viewed just as importantly as the organisations (Wilcox et al., 2013). The feedback received from the public may assist in shaping the organisation’s views, or alternatively can gain mutual understanding between them. However, organisations can send out information and receive feedback, but not necessarily directly go along with the feedback they receive (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This follows the two-way asymmetric approach to communication with stakeholders. This model uses persuasion and manipulation to influence audiences (including stakeholders) to behave as the organisation desires and does not research to find out how stakeholders feel about the organisation.

A recent two-way symmetrical example of stakeholder engagement within Australia was the actions performed by the National Australia Bank (NAB). NAB strives to maintain an open and constructive dialogue and continually engages with their stakeholders in order to reach organisational success (NAB, 2015). The company identifies their stakeholders as: customers; NAB employees and contractors; investors (shareholders, fund managers and superannuation funds); analysts; industry bodies, associations, regulators and government; suppliers; the broader community including non-government organisations (NGOs) and NAB’s community partners; and the media (NAB, 2015). Information is communicated to stakeholders on a regular basis through different platforms including forums, publications and online. These include: the Annual General Meeting, notices and explanatory memoranda of Annual General Meetings, and the Group’s website (providing access to announcements, media releases, financial reports, previous years’ financial results and investor presentations), just to name a few (NAB, 2015). NAB holds stakeholder engagement forums through the year to generate effective dialogue and to ensure that their understanding of material issues reflects current thinking (NAB, 2015). In their Dig Deeper paper delving into NAB’s Corporate Responsibility performance over the 2013-2014 financial year, stakeholders communicated with NAB that they wanted them to develop products that meet the changing needs and demographics of NAB’s community (NAB, 2014). NAB responded by developing social media accounts to engage quicker and more effectively to issues and complaints by customers and by
providing fair products such as the fee-free classic banking (NAB, 2014). Stakeholder engagement is conducted to ensure a prosperous future for the bank as well as to attract new customers to NAB.

The ethical considerations for the behaviour of NAB in relation to their stakeholder engagement, was considered within the teleological ethical framework. In relation to their active participation with stakeholders through social media, publications and forums, it can be argued that NAB have a duty to keep up appearances with stakeholders in order to achieve their desired end; organisational success. According to teleological moral theory, all rational human actions are teleological in the sense that we reason about the means of achieving certain ends (White, 2010). Moral behaviour, therefore, is goal-directed. Therefore, the actions of NAB in engaging stakeholders are goal-directed behaviour in achieving organisational success. With the use of a recent real world example of NAB, it was determined that the Grunig and Hunt models of two-way symmetric or two-way asymmetric were the most relevant to the stakeholder engagement concept.

To conclude, traditional media, social media, and stakeholder engagement are all connected in today’s practice of PR. Only recently, social media has aided organisations to effectively and efficiently communicate and engage with stakeholders. Traditional media is still relevant in reaching audiences that may not be connected online. In order to have a successful PR campaign, organisations need to communicate with stakeholders and publics on a personal level. Social media is a great tool in order to start a conversation in the technologically advanced society of 21st century. However, the integration of online (social) and traditional media needs to occur in order to maximise reach.
Reference List


Appendix

Appendix 1:
Royal Flying Doctor Service “Buy The Sky’s” campaign – Newspaper article (online)

Figure 1: Newspaper article (SBS News, 2013).

Appendix 2:
Save Our Sons ‘The Most Powerful Arm Ever Invented’ - campaign – YouTube video

Figure 2: Sunrise interview (Save Ours Sons, 2013).
Figure 3: The Project Interview (Save Our Sons, 2013)

Figure 4: Facebook petition site (Save Our Sons, 2013)

Figure 5: YouTube video campaign (Save Our Sons, 2013)