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Interactive Public Relations



❖ OVERVIEW

Technologies for online public relations are introduced. The function of public relations is connected with the concept of interactivity. Building on prior mass communication scholarship, a theme is developed for the text that approaching online public relations is more a matter of what people are doing with online media technologies than what these technologies are doing to people.

❖ WHERE TO START?

Perhaps a colorful vignette is a good place to start a book on online public relations.

She wakes up by the alarm on her PDA and checks e-mail and a couple of podcasts while slurping down a cup of coffee. Then she races off to her office, which is actually the spare bedroom in her apartment. After adjusting the Web cam

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and microphone on her desktop, she chimes into her first meeting of the day with fellow account executives in Europe and South America as well as some of her colleagues in the United States. An instant message from a reporter pops up on her monitor while she watches a real-time PowerPoint presentation on the best way to launch her client's new social networking site.

With the rate of change in media technology, we might as well start with:

He gets to the office at 9 A.M. His secretary hands him a facsimile from the New York office that rolled off the spool the night before. It's a news release on the launch of an affordable cellular telephone that fits easily in an average briefcase. While he waits for his high-performance 486 to boot up, he reads through a couple of newspapers and slurps down his coffee. (We can't have our busy powerbrokers just "sip" coffee.) His modem buzzes and beeps and screeches as it connects to the Internet at a blazing 14,400 bits per second. . . .

Although the first vignette shows some progress made since the second example, both are snapshots that will seem equally dated in a few short years (if they don't already).

Another approach might be to herald the dramatic changes the Internet has made to public relations and to society as a whole. This way, we can avoid getting caught up with the messy specifics of technology that change faster than the publishing cycle of books like this one.

The Internet revolution is here! Strap yourself in and hang on for a wild ride as our field and our world change at an accelerated pace never before experienced by mankind. Public relations will never be the same, and neither will you . . . Online media are everywhere you look.

The hype itself sounds dated. And, of course, in a field often criticized for hyperbole, we have to be especially careful not to overstate the implications of the new technologies we embrace.

❖ DE-HYPING HYPERMEDIA

Getting beneath the hype has been an issue for those studying communication since the early days of mass communication scholarship.

In October 1938, Orson Welles's and Howard Koch's radio adaptation of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* panicked some Americans.

People in New Jersey fled into the streets with wet rags on their faces to protect themselves from the Martians' noxious heat rays, doctors and nurses offered police their assistance to aid the victims, and hospitals treated real patients for shock and hysteria (Sourcebooks, 2001). Moreover, *War of the Worlds* helped hype the "mass-ness" of mass media. For most people who experienced or read about the Welles broadcast shortly thereafter, the *War of the Worlds* fiasco just underscored the powerful effects of media (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995).

But Hadley Cantril (1940) formed a different opinion, one that helped lay groundwork for generations of mass communication scholars. Cantril's research on the way audiences responded to the radio broadcast is considered a milestone in mass communication research today because it clearly undermined the so-called "magic bullet" theory of mass media. He found that different people responded differently to the broadcast, largely based on factors such as critical thinking (e.g., many listeners simply checked other news sources). As we will see, the research that informs much of our look at online public relations builds on the ideas that different people make different uses of media and that the study of mass media and public relations now usually overlaps with the study of interpersonal communication (Coombs, 2001).

Newer media sometimes panic publics too. In 1999, we were really concerned about the Y2K problem. In the United States, the CIA advised its employees to stockpile cash and pay bills early. As fears about the collapse of the nation's digital infrastructure mounted, businesses providing bulk foods, generators, and any other items a survivalist might find handy saw enormous increases in sales (McCullagh, 1999a, 1999b). Whereas media content was the primary culprit in the *War of the Worlds* episode, media technology is what people feared with the Y2K issue. What if the network of computers that comprise the Internet were to crash?

Fortunately, the Y2K missile was a dud. Writing for the University of Southern California, Annenberg's, *Online Journalism Review*, Scheer (2000) said:

The Y2K crisis should serve as a cautionary tale in evaluating all aspects of the much-ballyhooed Internet age that is upon us. The changes implied by a wired world are indeed profound, but they are not, as the Y2K alarmists insisted, of inevitable Earth-shattering proportions. We've lived with computers long enough to know that as with other technological revolutions, life goes on pretty much as it did before.

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Far from panic, the Internet also has been the subject of grand expectations by pundits from many corners of the global political map in the early 2000s. Progressives have hoped the Internet would act as a political participation machine, mobilizing the voiceless masses to get involved in political discourse. Conservatives have seen the Internet as a free-market competitor to traditional mass media, relaxing the need for tight government regulation on media ownership and content, but as Internet-and-society researchers Cooper and Cooper put it in 2003, "After two decades of presence in civil society, the Internet has not lived up to its hope or hype" (p. i).

Yet somewhere between hype and apathy, lasting lessons are waiting to be learned. Early mass communication researchers used the tools of psychology and public opinion research to understand the lasting implications of the changing media landscape of their time. This book discusses how public relations academics and professionals, borrowing from a wide variety of related disciplines, are working to discover the lasting implications of online media for their field.

❖ DEFINING ONLINE MEDIA

Web sites, e-mail, intranets, Internet forums, wikis, and blogs look and act a lot different than the media of early mass communication research such as newspapers, books, radio, and television. E-mail and blogs, for example, are usually more about interpersonal communication than mass communication. But as communication science pioneer Wilbur Schramm (1973) noted decades ago, and decades before the Internet, the distinction between mass communication and interpersonal communication is largely arbitrary:

Indeed, it could be argued that many qualities of an inflammatory face-to-face speech to a mob are less personal, more mass, than a singer crooning through a radio into the ear of a teen-ager alone in her room. (p. 114)

In this text, the term *online media* will be used to cover a broad range of communication systems, channels, and formats. Some, such as instant messaging, may be used for very interpersonal purposes, whereas others, such as high-traffic Web pages, are designed to reach masses. In a sense, the Internet is *the* medium for online communication, and technologies like instant messaging and the Web represent the systems, channels, formats, and messages that it contains. In this text,

the term *online media* will comprise all of these elements of Internet communication technology. Here is a set of definitions to get us started.

Internet. The Internet is a global network of publicly accessible networks. It's the worldwide system of computers, cables, and wired and wireless devices that connect to each other to help people and machines exchange information. For the purposes of this book, if communication is happening on the Internet, then it's happening online.

World Wide Web. The Web is a collection of resources available for us to retrieve with our Web browsers. These resources (e.g., Web pages) often are formatted with hypertext, which allows users to click on a word or image to retrieve another resource. Uniform resource locators (URLs) are the working Internet addresses for such Web resources. Of course, these resources can be audio files or 3-D animations or video, as well as text and pictures. We all know the Web when we see it, but it is important to realize that the Web is only part of the Internet.

FTP, or file transfer protocol. FTP allows users to put files on a computer server that other people can then retrieve from different locations. As with Web browsing and Web downloading, this transfer of files happens on the Internet. An FTP program can be used instead of a Web browser. Such file transfer sites have URLs that start with "ftp" instead of "http," which stands for "hypertext transfer protocol." Organizations can host an FTP site to make just about any type of computer file available for download. Millions of pages of documents, software programs, multimedia files, and databases that might have required a warehouse and several clerks to physically dig through stacks of information every time someone requested a document, film, or spreadsheet now can be stored and retrieved on a server machine stashed in a hall closet. Files to be transferred can be password protected or made accessible to any anonymous computer user who knows the FTP address.

E-mail. E-mail programs allow users to compose, send, and retrieve messages formatted for electronic delivery as well as attachments formatted for an array of uses such as text documents, photos, spreadsheets, and audio and video files. E-mail is generally thought of as an asynchronous mode of communication. That is, generally the senders and receivers need not be online at the same time for e-mail to work. If you send someone an e-mail, you normally don't assume that they will see the message and respond instantly when you hit "send." For text-based conversations that need to happen in real time (more like phone calls), online chats might be a better option.

Chats and instant messaging. Internet relay chats and instant messaging systems work like e-mail programs in that they can be used for one-to-one communication or for one-to-many communication. They

also can be used for many-to-many communication, depending on the number of people included as senders and receivers. The main difference is that the term *chat* in online contexts usually means instant, text-based communication. Since online chats and instant messages still are not quite as “instant” as phone calls or face-to-face conversations—they require at least the amount of time it takes to type a message and send it—many-to-many online chats can be frustrating when several users try to “talk” at once.

Internet forums. These are sometimes called discussion forums, bulletin board systems, newsgroups, or message boards. These systems provide virtual places where people can post comments or questions, which in turn start conversational threads. A thread may start with a single question that goes unanswered for a while until someone posts a single response, or it may almost immediately ignite a heated debate in which many interested users get involved. Forums are generally set up to host conversations dedicated to particular topics. Like e-mail, and unlike chats, forums are generally designed for asynchronous communication.

Intranets and extranets. Intranets are networked information systems that an organization hosts for its internal publics. A business might host an intranet for people who work there. This site might include a directory of employee contact information, sales databases, internal classified ads, announcements about workplace events, an internal messaging program, discussion groups for departmental issues, downloadable human resource documents such as health insurance forms, photo galleries of recent social events, how-to video clips, frequently asked questions, and so forth. What sets an intranet apart from a general-access Web page is simply that users must be registered and have a password to participate. Sometimes users can be logged on automatically if they’re working from a machine that is directly connected to the network. The idea of controlled-access communication is also the foundation for extranets. When two or more organizations link intranets, or when an organization extends intranet access to a group such as suppliers, vendors, customers, or other businesses to share data and open communication between members, an extranet is formed.

Content management systems and Wikis.

A content management system (CMS) is a computer software system for organizing and facilitating collaborative creation of documents and other content. A content management system is frequently a web application used for managing websites and web content. (Wikipedia contributors, 2005)

This definition comes from Wikipedia, which is itself a content management system. Wikipedia allows people from all over the world to register and edit its content. In 2005, The Wikipedia Foundation boasted that more than a half million “wikipedians” had contributed to the endeavor. Although Wikipedia represents one of the most massive attempts at a CMS, many public relations people are looking to more focused CMSs, commonly called “wikis,” to meet their goals of managing information online (as discussed in Chapter 9).

Here’s Wikipedia’s definition of a wiki:

A type of website that allows users to easily add, remove, or otherwise edit all content, very quickly and easily, sometimes without the need for registration. This ease of interaction and operation makes a wiki an effective tool for collaborative writing. The term wiki is a shortened form of *wiki wiki* which is from the native language of Hawaii (Hawaiian), where it is commonly used as an adjective to denote something “quick” or “fast.” (Wikipedia contributors, 2006)

Blogs. Merriam-Webster Online (n.d.) named *blog* (short for “Web log”) their word of the year in 2004, and defined it in their *Collegiate Dictionary Online* as “a website that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer.” Blogs also have been defined as “frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence” (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004, p. 1).

In late 2004, David Sifry of Technorati, a San Francisco company that tracks blogs, classified approximately 5,000 blogs as “corporate blogs.” *Corporate bloggers*, as defined by Sifry, are “people who blog in an official or semi-official capacity at a company, or are so affiliated with the company where they work that even though they are not officially spokespeople for the company, they are clearly affiliated.” Bloggers who worked for Microsoft made up the largest single group of corporate bloggers at the time. The other major groups of corporate bloggers were from media companies such as newspapers and magazines, as well as other major players in the computer industry such as Sun Microsystems.

Although this snapshot data doesn’t adequately portray the dynamic nature of evolving blog demographic trends, it does go to show how blogging emerged from the world of computer programmers and hobbyists and into the lexicon of everyday public relations.

Feeds and really simple syndication (RSS). Feeds carry messages such as text-based blog entries or audio files that are syndicated to subscribers online after they are posted. A key difference between

syndication in this context on the Internet and subscriptions in traditional mass media contexts is that almost all this information is transferred without fees (at least for now). Subscribers use programs called *aggregators* to automatically retrieve and display feeds. Aggregators can display feeds on personalized Web pages, on a user's desktop, or on a user's wireless handheld device. The computer protocol behind such aggregators is RSS, which is based on extensible markup language. Feeds downloaded to iPods and other portable digital media players (as well as laptops and desktops) are called *podcasts*.

Tracking and pings. This is a type of automatic linking used with online media formats such as blogs. When a blogger links to another blogger in her post, and both blogs are supported by Trackback technology or the like, the blog that is linked to can be "pinged." A ping is a notification to one blog that it has that been cited on another blog. Trackback software can automatically create a list of summaries of blog posts that refer to an original blog post. Each time the original blog post is pinged, Trackback adds a summary of the referrer post to the original post. This allows bloggers to track related blogs automatically and allows blog visitors to jump into a network of blogs that are related to each other. Tracking and pings have useful applications in the evaluation of public relations efforts.

❖ PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE "DE-MASSIFICATION" OF MEDIA

Funded by the U.S. government during the Cold War, the inventors of the Internet's first networks figured that one way to protect information critical to the United States' defense system was to spread that information around. If one location was destroyed in an attack or meltdown, other locations could continue to communicate. We learned in the 20th century that diversity is a great defense for the "masses" against magic bullets. Now in the 21st century, we are seeing the media themselves distributed in such a way that it is harder to find singular dominant sources of mass communication. For every conservative blogger online, there's a liberal. For every Florida Gator, there's a Georgia Bulldog. For every journalist, a corporate spokesperson.

So here we are, two or three generations of media scholarship since *War of the Worlds*, still trying to get beneath the hype. We know that on the receiver end of the communication process, individuals vary greatly in how media affect them. But now we are beginning to question

whether the “sender” end of the model is becoming so diverse that the term *mediated communication* may better cover the domains of fields such as public relations, advertising, and journalism.

The late Steven Chaffee, a communication scholar who contributed as much to our knowledge of mass communication as anyone, took the question head on in one of his last lectures and essays:

In the near future, the issue may be less about what media companies are doing *to* people and more about what people are doing *with* the media . . . as the mass-ness of the media declines and as new technologies continue to empower individuals, social control by elite groups in society may become more difficult. (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001, p. 370)

In terms of social equity, I take Chaffee’s measured foresight to be good news, but for the sake of the degrees on my wall, I am glad he didn’t pronounce mass communication completely dead. In any case, we need to be more wary than ever of one-size-fits-all thinking. Online public relations is about much more than people in large, powerful organizations using the most expensive new technologies to communicate at relatively powerless publics. In this book, we will explore the underlying concepts that help us understand what public relations practitioners of all sorts are doing with all sorts of online media.

Will the fundamental nature of public relations change as a result of online technologies?

Public relations, defined so well by Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2000) in their classic public relations text, *Effective Public Relations*, as “the management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various publics on whom its success or failure depends” has been around a lot longer than the Internet (p. 6). Relationship building is still about people, and the technologies are merely tools that people can use—ideally—to get along better. Nonetheless, these technologies do different things than the media that came before them.

One of the most often-discussed but least-understood characteristics of online media is *interactivity*. Although all good public relations is interactive at some level, online media offer practitioners the opportunity to enrich the interactive exchanges between organizations and publics in the absence of face-to-face communication. Yet with such technological offerings come conceptual challenges, especially if we are after lasting concepts.

Converging mobile technologies that combine the functions of messaging with calendaring, computing, phoning, browsing, purchasing, photography, and entertainment offer a more fluid environment for the practice of public relations. Keeping in touch with the online but wireless publics of “cyber public relations” as part of a relationship-building process means thinking of public relations as a communicative activity that entails “stimulating feelings such as connectedness, involvement, appreciation, and meaningfulness” (Galloway, 2005, p. 573). Such goals pose new challenges in communicating with more physically dispersed publics.

Our home-office worker practicing public relations in the vignette at the outset of this chapter must take into account not only her own unique technologies of connection but also the mobility of those with whom she communicates and the fleeting nature of her publics. Tools for “mobile-based interactivity” must increasingly be considered along with “static reception equipment” (Galloway, 2005, p. 572). And just as Galloway (2005) has called for more “dynamic touch” when communicating via mobile devices, researchers have found that with Web sites, there’s an “emotional advantage” to making online communication more interactive—reminiscent of “pressing-the-flesh” (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003, p. 31). The best of the new, then, is still driven by concepts as old as conversations and handshakes.

❖ INTERACTIVITY AND REAL PEOPLE

Communication researchers Walther, Gay, and Hancock (2005) put it well when they said that interactivity “is not new to new technology” (p. 640). But just what is interactivity? Sundar et al. (2003) reviewed the research and found two general ways to look at it: *functional interactivity* and *contingency interactivity*.

Functional interactivity. This concept focuses on the features of media such as response forms, e-mail links, discussion forums, RSS, and so forth. Some have assumed that more features mean more interactivity. However, “the degree to which these functions are used and the extent to which they actually serve the dialogue or discourse” is often left out when people think about online media without also thinking about how people actually use the media (Sundar et al., 2003, p. 33).

Contingency interactivity. Media effects researchers describe contingency interactivity as “a process involving users, media and

messages" in which "communication roles need to be interchangeable for full interactivity to occur" (Sundar et al., 2003, p. 35). Contingency in this line of research and theory means that messages in an interactive process of communication are contingent on previous messages. The sender now is a receiver later, and vice versa. Broad views of public relations reflect similar thinking.

Contingency public relations. In organization-public relationships, the organization in one case is a public in the next. Of course, if you work in public relations for an organization, as opposed to studying one from outside, you will almost always think of your employer as the "organization" and those you communicate with as publics. But interactive public relations will still mean basing your actions and communication on the actions and communication of those with whom you communicate. If your publics are out there on their BlackBerries and iPods, you'll have to meet them there.

Consider how trends in employee relations, for instance, have been articulated in light of emerging media: "New media have empowered employees to the point where they now can—and do—play a much more dominant role in the communication process . . . receivers are playing a more dominant role in the communication process" (Wright, 2005, p. 9). And how organizations build and maintain relationships with activists might well be the area in which the idea of balanced conversations has come the furthest. Consider the contingency theory of public relations. Public relations strategies and tactics range from aggressive advocacy to total accommodation in contingency theory:

Experienced professionals know that "it depends." We must always ask what is going to be the most effective method at a given time. True excellence in public relations may result from picking the appropriate point along the continuum that best fits the current need of the organization and its publics. (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997, p. 35)

It's no accident of semantics that the contingency view of interactivity and the contingency view of public relations dovetail so well. Good public relations, like good online communication, depends on the situation and the people involved. Emerging communication technologies may "de-massify" public communication, but public relations people should work to ensure technologies don't dehumanize communication. As Chaffee said, the issue is what people are doing with media, not the other way around.

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Hands-Online Activity

❖ DID YOU HEAR?

Would Orson Welles be able to pull off *War of the Worlds* with the same effect in today's media environment? Maybe not, but some things haven't changed. As media consumers, we still have our critical-thinking skills tested regularly online.

Subject: FW: Must Read!!!! Bill Gates (fwd)

Hello everybody, My name is Bill Gates. I have just written up an e-mail tracing program that traces everyone to whom this message is forwarded to. I am experimenting with this and I need your help. Forward this to everyone you know and if it reaches 1000 people everyone on the list will receive \$1000 at my expense. Enjoy.

Your friend,

Bill Gates

This message was one of the most infamous e-mail hoaxes of the late 1990s. David Emery, who writes about hoaxes and urban legends for About.com, discussed the "robust circulation" of this e-mail at <http://urbanlegends.about.com/library/blgates.htm>.

Have you ever fallen for an online hoax?

The following Web sites track and discuss Internet hoaxes. Look through these sites or similar online resources. Then answer the discussion questions.

- <http://www.breakthechain.org/>
- <http://www.snopes.com/>
- <http://urbanlegends.about.com/>
- <http://www.vmyths.com/>

1. Summarize one of the hoaxes that you might classify as a public relations issue. Based on the definition of public relations offered by Cutlip et al. (2000), what makes the hoax a public relations issue?

2. What would you do about that hoax if you worked for the organization involved? Does your response include online media? Why or why not?
