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Media relations training: the shifting focus

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Abstract Media relations, and training in this area, is now an integral aspect of the public relations practitioner's role in most organizations. This training, often provided by former journalists now operating as media consultants, can cost hundreds, up to thousands of dollars a day. There has been a shift in the focus of this education in the last few decades to include different strategies and to address changing technologies. This paper tracks the shifts in the main objectives of these programs and includes interviews with trainers regarding media training.

Introduction

It is a well-documented fact that the amount of news originating from public relations sources has been steadily increasing in the last few decades. These sources include the provision of media releases, functions such as media conferences and launches, interviews organised, and leads supplied, by public relations practitioners.

In explaining the burgeoning use of public relations sources to create news stories, both David Saltler and Martin Chulov in The Age and The Australian newspapers respectively, refer to research undertaken in 2001 for a PhD thesis by former Bond University educator Clara Zawawi entitled ‘Feeding the Watchdogs – An Analysis of Relationships between Australian Public Relations Practitioners and Journalists’. Her research established that the percentage of public relations and 'corporate communications' based content of '1,163 articles' (Macnamara, 2001, p5) published by The Age, The Sydney Morning Herald and The Courier-Mail was apparently as high as '60 per cent' (Chulov, August 22-28, 2002, Media, p4). The research also revealed that up to '80 per cent of the copy' in the 'business sections' of these newspapers could be attributed to public relations 'flacks’ (Chulov, August 22-28, 2002, Media, p4). However, as Jane Cadzow
points out in her article in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, ‘The hidden persuaders’, although these percentages seem excessive they are comparable to the ‘results of similar research in the US and Britain’ (May 26, 2001, p21). Zawawi’s thesis also revealed that although public relations practitioners indicated they had supplied a substantial amount of ‘coverage for material sent to the media’ journalists consulted as part of her research indicated that ‘the press releases they received were ill-conceived with little or no news value; poorly written and often addressed either to the wrong person or even with names misspelt’ (Zawawi, in Macnamara, 2001, p3).

**Why media content has changed**

The amount of news which is generated from PR sources has increased, it seems, primarily because of the changing structures of newsrooms – usually downsizing. As Sedorkin and McGregor point out, in a ‘number of areas, particularly politics, sport, big business and former government agencies that have been corporatised, such as health boards in New Zealand and Telstra in Australia, there is a growing imbalance in resources between newsrooms and the PR machine’ (2002, p54).

Richard Walsh (2000) in his article in *The Age* newspaper, ‘What the Media won’t tell you’, wrote ‘there’s more dependency on PR guff’ and the reason he states is that ‘press releases can provide a cheap source of copy, and companies can helpfully eliminate the time and cost of research’ (March 18, p2). In a similar vein, CEO of CARMA International (Asia Pacific) Pty Ltd Jim Macnamara (2001), also indicates that the reason the public relations industry has become so prolific is mainly due to the media and its own economic situation which has reduced the number of working reporters (Macnamara, 2001, p4).

Salter (2001) and Chulov (2002) have both noted the changes in news content with the increased use of public relations sources for news stories. According to Salter’s assessment, ‘nobody wants to get out there and do the hard yakka any more. They’d rather just graze the wires and take a cheap shot’ (October 6, 2001, p7). Salter argued that it is an economically-influenced situation impinging on the staff and resources now available in newsrooms that has redirected news generation away from the exclusive domain of journalists to the inclusion of the corporate and public relations sector (Salter, October 6, 2001, p7). Sydney-based media trainer, Barbara Alysen, also identified the reduction of resources in newsrooms in Australia. She points out that for community advocacy groups this represents an opportunity in some circumstances, in that they can produce their own video for news use, and media training can offer them the skills to do this (interview, January 2005).
Journalists who become public relations practitioners

In order to fully appreciate the changes in the field of public relations, particularly in terms of the nature of media training and the shifts in the focus of this education, it is worth investigating the historical origins of the public relations practitioner. A majority of the public relations practitioners around 1955 were former journalists. Because they were familiar with the role of the public relations practitioner through their constant interaction with them, and also adept at reporting societal issues, the transition to public relations adviser in the business sector was easily made (Zawawi, in Johnston and Zawawi, 2004, p32).

The ultimate advantage that an ex-journalist/public relations practitioner possessed was the knowledge of how to approach influential press outlets that were suited to disseminating Australian business news. This in-house knowledge essentially involved the identification of story ideas that they knew journalists would like, with the idea or official quotes for a story then crafted into a ‘company statement’ that was newsworthy (Zawawi, in Johnston and Zawawi, 2004, p32).

With the arrival of television in 1956, aside from deadlines for press stories, there was now also the need to coordinate with television networks’ camera crews. It was therefore necessary for the public relations practitioner to adopt new skills for staging interviews, events and launches (Zawawi, in Johnston and Zawawi 2004, p30). The development of video news clips by television networks followed in the 1970s as a result of the ‘growing importance of TV news services’ with some networks also providing studios and equipment for the production of video news releases (Zawawi, in Johnston and Zawawi 2004, p31):

> Television’s challenge to practitioners to produce visuals more attractive than a talking head proceeded to foster a climate of creativity not previously demanded by print and radio. Additionally, the importance of television spawned a need for media training of spokespeople (Zawawi, in Johnston and Zawawi, 2004, p31).

Media trainer for 10 years, John Mullen, agreed that ‘once upon a time media training was mostly dealing with the press, but now the focus has shifted to radio, television and online. Organisations must realise they can work in other mediums and to maximise these opportunities’. He said that they need to get their message across in the best and most efficient way (interview, February 2005).

Major shifts in media training

Media training originally focussed on educating the client on what journalists considered newsworthy and how to produce and publish media releases. While
still a major component of media training programs, shifts in the focus of this education have occurred over the decades to help organisations deal with new demands including increasingly adversarial broadcast interviews (in the 1980s and 1990s) and major technological changes and demands. Vic Gold highlights these changes in an article aptly named ‘If Mike Willesee Calls, Hang up’, where he dissects ‘that modern ex crescence called adversary journalism’ (1985, p63). He further argues that:

... Oh, you can talk to an adversary journalist, all right; but all you’ll do is fill in the gaps in his or her story. Out of your two-hour interview, a minute and a half will be used, juxtaposed with film clips of your ex-wife, to put you in the worst possible light. Or if you’re interviewed by an adversary print journalist, you’ll end up trying to explain to your friends, constituents, or stockholders how the damned fool statements attributed to you were either uttered off the record or taken out of context (Gold, 1985, p.64).

This style of interviewing was utilised extensively well into the 1990s, though is rarely used today. A former journalist and producer for SBS and Channel 7, Ms Alysen contends that most organisations today should not be overly concerned with the confrontational interview. ‘The reality is that unless you’re a politician or someone in the public eye trying to hide information, reporters will be quite nice to you. Combative interviews have really fallen out of favour with viewers now anyway’. She feels that a far greater concern for interviewees is losing focus and saying the wrong thing (interview, January 2005).

Ballarat-based journalist for ABC Radio and also a media officer for Rural Ambulance Victoria and Ballarat Health Services, Mr Mullen said that originally the trend was to guard against the confrontational interview by not answering the questions, but this has now turned around completely. ‘The dangers of “no comment” have really gone, but now you need to be prepared and know what your key messages are’. He said the journalist will have three or four main points or questions to ask, so spokespeople should have a theme and two or three main points to get across to be ready for this (interview, February 2005):

There are unwritten rules to the game. It’s far better to respond to the question and work in those main points. It’s not much use thinking what you should have said after the journalist and crew have packed up and left. If you’ve said it, there’s a 50 per cent chance it will be used (Mullen, Interview, February 2005).

Whether explaining complex subjects or a company emergency, the prerequisite for an effective company spokesperson is that they need to be well versed in the subject and it is also good insurance to gather all the facts of a given situation in preference to scaling the slippery slopes of speculation (Tymson, Lazar and Lazar, 2002, p403). In Cadzow’s article, ‘The hidden persuaders’, Dr Sharon Beder refers to the Exxon Valdez oil spill as a commonly cited example in public
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relations literature regarding the extent of damage incurred to a company’s reputation which can be caused by improper management of a crisis (Beder, in Cadzow, May 26, 2001, p23). In this case it was not a matter of establishing what the facts were first, prior to contacting the media. Beder further elaborates on her observation, saying that ‘in the world of PR, problems arise from the failure to communicate strategically, not from wrongful activity’ (Beder, in Cadzow, May 26, 2001, p23). As Tymson, Lazar and Lazar resoundingly and emphatically state on the issue of speculation:

‘Don’t speculate!’ Tell the media that the crisis is being managed, the cause examined, that all the facts are not yet to hand and that you will make a statement at a specified time perhaps two hours from now, when the company spokesperson, ...(insert name)........., will be available for comment (2002, p404).

Geelong-based media trainer for more than eight years, Mandy Oakham, agrees that participants in her workshops are always terrified about the adversarial interview. ‘But it’s highly unlikely it will happen. They are more likely to get caught out being too relaxed with someone and talking too much’ (personal interview, 3 February 2005). She stressed that they don’t seem to realise they will be quoted on everything they say:

They are often surprised that the journalist prints and quotes everything they say – but that is their job – and if that’s the case they are actually doing their job very well by getting all that information into the story. This is far more likely to undo them than an adversarial interview (Personal Interview, 3 February 2005).

Melbourne-based media officer for the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Michelle Low, believes there has been a shift in the media training programs she now organises as a result of the increased use of television interviews. ‘Five years ago the executive director was the only person with training to deal with the media, but now this is shared with senior management, researchers and staff’ (personal interview, 1 February 2005). She added that this training was not so much in dealing with aggressive interviewers, but more to give the spokesperson a greater understanding of how the media works and to give them confidence for television interviews. ‘A lot of the researchers hadn’t had direct contact with the media before and didn’t understand that the media might call and want information within the hour. The media trainers all have journalism backgrounds, enabling them to convey the urgency of these requests’ (personal interview, 1 February 2005). Ms Low also noted that the media training programs she organises have shifted to cover on-camera work, practising in the studio, because ‘being interviewed in front of cameras in a studio can be a bit daunting’:

I also provide one-on-one training for clients who may be called on for stories. For instance, the media might request to talk to someone from a disadvantaged family struggling to pay school expenses for a ‘back to
Ms Low said the Brotherhood of St Laurence was known to speak out in the media – promoting innovative solutions to social problems and, when required, being critical of government policy. ‘We speak out about policies that are failing Australians – the many ordinary, decent Australians who are missing out on our nation’s economic prosperity. We have to be cautious, though, that this does not then affect us in negative ways’ (personal interview, 1 February 2005). At the time of this interview Ms Low had planned for a media trainer to run a program on opinion piece writing covering the sort of material opinion editors look for and the right way to get messages across. ‘We think opinion pieces are critical in getting our issues across. Our latest piece focussed on the reality of high “hidden unemployment” rates despite government declarations that they are at an all-time low’ (personal interview, 1 February 2005).

Though there have been shifts in the media training she provides, Ms Oakham believes the fundamental messages haven’t changed. ‘There’s certainly more to media relations than just the traditional media release – and readers are more savvy now too. Organisations have to get to know the market, target the market, and become active media consumers’ (personal interview, 3 February 2005). She adds that it’s important to get to know the market rather than using the ‘scatter gun’ technique:

Some parts of the media aren’t going to work for you. I stress that you can get great coverage through the suburban media and that it’s important to find the local contacts. It’s best to target energies where you will do well. There has been an upsurge in the suburban community-based media which is often better for reading constituents – sometimes better than using the metros (Personal Interview, 3 February 2005).

### The Advent of New Media

The advent of new media is undoubtedly paving the way for adoption of new approaches to media training by consultants and public relations practitioners. The use of new media or new technologies is emerging as a formidable set of communication tools in the mass media and public relations arsenal, and as such dictates that client education keep pace with these advances.

New media mostly revolves around the world wide web communication channels such as chatrooms, webcasting, e-mail, e-videoconferencing and
online news media. Other commonly used channels are video news releases (VNR) and SMS messaging (Richardson, in Tymson, Lazar and Lazar, 2002, pp.460, 475). Historically, Ms Alysen points out, spokespeople were trained to give short sound bites and often to disregard the reporter's question and only think of their answer, however 'now the entire interview may be transcribed for or streamed on the web interviewees need to think beyond mere bites because the web audience will see or hear the answers in context' (interview, January 2005).

In her text, The Electronic Reporter, she notes that:

The video news release (VNR) is a relatively new feature of public relations work, but an increasingly common one. The radio equivalent is the news release on CD, with text and audio, or audiobites delivered over the 'net. Corporations and lobby groups have long supplied newsrooms with certain kinds of moving pictures, and their use has caused little debate (Alysen 2000, p.29).

PR firms began producing their own video news segments, often by former television reporters, frequently used as news with no editing. Jonathan Raymond, the director of one such company, Media Link, noted that increased use of video news releases produced by PR firms was a direct result of cost pressures in newsrooms. He points out that the:

Economics of free-to-air television these days are such that you don't have crews on hand to cover every story, and television stations are ready to receive and have for many years, background video information from corporations. A Video News Release from Media Link is taking it one step further (ABC Radio National, December 21, 1995, Media Report).

Ms Alysen ensures she includes video work, particularly when conducting media training with community groups. 'While they probably won't be supplying full video news releases, they will often have to shoot the video themselves to ensure coverage. They need to know how to shoot basic material and some of the conventions of videography' (interview, January 2005). Essentially, she adds, this means providing good vision and natural sound. Ms Alysen says she discusses videography in her media training programs, 'little things that people may not know, such as avoiding waving the camera around and endless zooming and panning, and inappropriate chatter' (interview, January 2005).

Dr Augustine Inhator states that 'the advent of the Internet and its other components may be changing the definition, meaning, understanding and practice of PR because cyberspace is not physical, geometric or geographic' (2001, p.15). The new media communications are no longer one-directional. Accepting increased responsibility for improving corporate reputations and 'trust-based' relationships is vital as the new media promotes 'transitional' relationships, widely accessible
material and a platform for censure, critical response and instantaneous
pronouncements on any ‘institution’. The practice of hiding nothing is preferred
because there is no where to hide’ (Ihator, 2001, p15).

Modern information technology is creating a new corporate
communication landscape. It is affecting communication channels,
corporate audience identification, mode and methods of communication,
message content and form, communication feedback and corporate
personae. It is impacting shared meaning of message, information
packaging, strategic information management and corporate identity.
There is also the need to carefully investigate how corporations can
now manage public issues, advocacy role and reaction to emerging and
sustained crises (Ihator, 2001, p15).

Ihator adds that ‘computer technology has altered the power structure
and the relationship between corporations and their publics, stakeholders and the
media’ (2001, p15). These changes to the balance of power and relationships
require an updating of ‘traditional PR and communication models’ in order to
construct relevant communications in the present ‘global marketplace’ (Ihator,
relations curriculum’, suggests university educators will need to concentrate on
the delivery of a curriculum that demonstrates the application of technology in
promoting the management of relationships within the public relations arena
(http://praxis.massey.ac.nz/issue_2.html). This will have a potential flow-on
effect with media trainers also having to address these technologies, as noted
by Alysen.

As a way of meeting the challenges ‘new media’ brings to the future of the
public relations field, Alexander (2004) also states that ‘new theories and
skills will need to be introduced into the public relations curriculum to ensure
future practitioners are capable of meeting the demands of their communities’
(http://praxis.massey.ac.nz/issue_2.html). These skills include knowledge of
‘online interviewing techniques’, performing ‘online research’ in order to
gauge responses from the public, ‘database management’, web-site creation that
promotes interactivity and dealing with ‘email surveys’ (http://praxis.massey.
ac.nz/issue_2.html).

**Kelly Communications over the last decade**

The Melbourne-based media consultants Kelly Communications (2005)
provides media training services for business and government representatives.
The workshops are ‘geared to the electronic side of the media because it’s here
that you will have most impact and reach’ and the form of training extends
beyond the interview itself (http://www.kelly.com.au/media.html). ‘We advise
clients on the use of video library packages, props and other techniques that
give you more power over the images of your organisation that the media will
use' (http://www.kelly.com.au/media.html). In their training program Kelly Communications also aim to address the particular needs of an organisation. ‘This can include specific policies and procedures or it might mean your public relations person actually sitting in on the training to act as observer/mediator’ (http://www.kelly.com.au/media.html).

A retrospective look at Kelly Communications in 1994 found they placed the emphasis in their workshops on the first interaction with the media, with specific reference to the commercial networks’ current affairs programs (Kelly Communications, April 1994, Media Matters, 10). Journalist, Quentin Fogarty rates this initial contact as being more vital in its treatment than the follow-up interview, primarily because once a spokesperson has said something publicly, reporters will not permit a revision of opinion (Fogarty in Kelly Communications, April 1994, Media Matters, 10). Spokespersons and those persons for example, politicians, initiating contact with the media, need to be aware that journalists will have a preconceived approach that they wish to take based on the initial phone call or fax (Fogarty in Kelly Communications, April 1994, Media Matters, 10). Therefore, the first phone call or fax needs to be structured with great care as these ‘comments may already be written into voice over or phrased as questions in the interview’ (Fogarty in Kelly Communications, April 1994, Media Matters, 10).

**Conclusion**

Within the confines of this paper we have seen the shift in media relations training over the last few decades – primarily as a result of technological advances and shrinking newsrooms. Initially the focus moved from producing newsworthy press releases that would be published (though this is still included in media training programs) to dealing with television interviews which became increasingly adversarial in the 1980s and 1990s. Now organisations are encouraged to provide their own video and some may also supply fully edited video news releases. Media trainers are steering away from educating spokespeople to provide short sound bites, since the new technology of streaming full interviews on the web makes these ‘grabs’ sound quite unnatural.

In recognition of the importance of media coverage, particularly for the ‘third sector’, a new organisation has been launched in Canberra Media Team Australia aims to provide media training workshops for not-for-profit organisations. According to their web site, Media Team Australia ‘has been set up to assist community organisations across Australia to raise their public profile and attract greater support by professionalising their public relations and communication activities’ (http://www.mediateam.com.au).
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With so much news coming from public relations sources, further research could continue to track shifts in this type of education. It could also explore other aspects of this education including the facilitation and provision of socially responsible information/training by media trainers and public relations practitioners.

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Personal interview with Mandy Oakham, Media Trainer – Geelong, 3 February 2005.

Personal interview with Michelle Low, Media Officer for the Brotherhood of St Laurence – Melbourne, 1 February 2005.


