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An exploratory study of relationships between local government media officers and journalists in regional Australia

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Abstract

This exploratory study examines the influence local government media officers have in disseminating their messages to the public through regional newspapers in Australia. The study follows Gandy's information subsidy theory and uses interviews with public relations officers across Australia to determine their perceptions of regional newspaper journalists and their level of satisfaction with newspapers as an effective medium for local government news and information. The study found media officers have a high level of satisfaction when it comes to their relationship with regional journalists and the use of their media releases largely because their work is often reproduced verbatim by the press. The researchers argue that local government media officers are gaining increasing influence over the messages being disseminated to the public through newspapers and their own communications mediums such as ratepayer funded newsletters/newspapers.

Introduction

Local government is the level of government closest to the people and is one of the greatest sources of information for rural and regional newspapers. The mayor of Warrnambool in south-western Victoria, Cr David Atkinson, says the press plays a vital role in keeping local councils accountable through accurate reporting and helps municipalities communicate effectively with the public.

"By reporting what we do and what we say, the paper makes sure council officers and councillors are held responsible for everything they do. This is a very important role that journalists play on behalf of the community"

(David Atkinson, Warrnambool City mayor, *The Standard*, Tuesday 15 July, 2008 p. 2)

Both government and the media act as voices for the communities they represent and they are heavily reliant on one another – journalists rely on local government as a news source and for advertising revenue while councils need the media to disseminate important information to ratepayers. For example, Australian local councils are required by law to publish a public notice in a local or daily newspaper which identifies a proposal and tells people that they have a right to make a written submission to the council. <<http://www.localgovernment.vic.gov.au/web22/dvclgg.nsf>>

Little research, however, has been undertaken to examine the relationship between the two. Many municipalities across Australia employ media relations officers to manage their communications through various channels including advertising and the local news media. Local government media relations officers' perspective is important to this research because they have first-hand knowledge of the newsgathering process (Maier, 2005) and because they shape public opinion as gatekeepers who choose what council activities are promoted to the local media as news.

This research examines the relationship between local government media officers and the newspaper journalists who report in local government municipalities in regional Australia and examines the influence local government media officers have when it comes to disseminating their messages to the public.

Literature review

The relationship between newspaper journalists and local government media officers in regional Australia has not been the specific subject of previous studies, but in their analysis of regional media, Oakham & Kirby (2006) found that public relations practitioners working in regional and rural areas act as primary definers in producing positive images of their local communities and that the "truly symbiotic relationship" (Oakham & Kirby, 2006, p15) between journalists and public relations practitioners in regional Victoria "provides a positive frisson" in these communities. They found two major reoccurring themes - road accidents and community events - dominated the news in the two regional newspapers they studied which is relevant here, as much of the material produced by council media officers promotes community events supported by local governments. While Oakham & Kirby (2006) examined the relationship between PR practitioners and regional newspaper journalists, their major focus was on how rural communities are portrayed through their relationship, rather than how effective newspapers are as a means for local government to communicate with the community.

They did not specifically investigate how PR practitioners view the local newspapers' coverage of council affairs or their level of influence in obtaining this coverage.

In interviews with a number of public relations operators, Oakham & Kirby (2006) reported that those who had worked in metropolitan settings previously said the main difference in a regional context was the need to be on good terms with local journalists and that personalities had a big part to play in those relationships. They also interviewed several practitioners who expressed frustration in their dealings with junior journalists at the local paper who they believed aimed to move on to metropolitan papers to further their careers and did not have "the same investment in building relationships with local organisations." (Oakham & Kirby, 2006, p.8)

In an exploratory study of how well regional journalists in Victoria check the source and the accuracy of information provided by local government media officers (Hess & Waller, 2008), it was found that regional newspapers were lacking in their role as a public watchdog. From a sample of 136 press releases distributed across 14 newspapers, the research found 35 per cent of newspapers failed to verify the source of a media release during the study and that in many instances media releases were reproduced verbatim or were only changed slightly.

One local government media officer in Victoria who was interviewed as part of that study said 100 per cent of his press releases promoting good news at the council during the study period were used verbatim in the newspapers operating within the municipality.

While it relied on interviews with 10 PR practitioners working in local government, the focus of this study was whether regional journalists were checking the validity and accuracy of their sources, rather than how the PR practitioners viewed local newspapers as a means of communicating with their target audiences.

It is well established that public relations material is a major source of news. Zawawi (1994) undertook a content analysis of 194 newspaper articles from three Australian metropolitan newspapers, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Gold Coast Bulletin and The Australian. The research showed that about 65 per cent of stories in the news section and up to 90 per cent of stories in the business news section came from public relations sources. McNamara (2001) in his unpublished MA thesis found from a content analysis of 150 media releases and subsequent news reports, that up to 70 per cent of the content of some small trade, specialist and suburban media in Australia was public relations-sourced. Neither researcher examined news content from the regional perspective or gauged PR practitioners' satisfaction with the coverage they received.

Newsrooms' heavy reliance on PR generated material is not limited to Australia. In the United Kingdom, Lewis et al (2008a, 2008b) undertook a major study of 'quality' British media and found that nearly 19 per cent of newspaper stories and 17 per cent of broadcast stories were "verifiably derived mainly or wholly from PR material or activity". A further 22 per cent were either a mix

of PR or other sources and the authors said another 13 per cent of their sample appeared to contain PR materials, but they were not able to identify where they had come from. The study found this heavy dependence on public relations and wire copy in which journalists become "processors, rather than generators of news" (Lewis et al 2008a, p. 28) has been created by relatively fewer journalists having to write more stories across multiple media platforms which keep expanding with new sections, and content being introduced in a bid to maintain profitability against a backdrop of declining circulations.

In Australia, journalists and commentators have been scathing of media companies which have declared cost-cutting measures as part of business reviews and restructures. In 2008, Fairfax announced it would slash 550 jobs in Australia and New Zealand, representing \$50 million in annualised cost savings. Fairfax's situation is particularly relevant to the regional newspaper environment. Since its recent merger with Rural Press in 2007, it is now the largest owner of regional media in Australia. Sissons (2006) argues that in times of cost cutting and economic rationalism, journalists on local and regional newspapers become increasingly and excessively reliant on news releases as staff numbers are reduced. Davis (2003) indicates that in times of editorial staff cuts, journalists feel compelled to react to what is made available free of charge rather than proactively finding and researching stories which takes time and valuable editorial resources.

Theoretical perspective

How news agendas are set has been the subject of academic inquiry since David Manning White's classic 1950 study on gatekeeping (White, 1950). Agenda setting theory makes a direct correlation between the placement of a news item or amount of coverage an issue receives and how it is perceived by media audiences (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). But Gandy (1982) says this limits our understanding to 'issue salience' and suggests looking beyond agenda setting theory "to determine who sets the media agenda, how and for what purposes it is set, and with what impact on the distribution of power and values in society". (Gandy, p.7) His theory of information subsidies has provided a useful starting point for understanding the relationship between media officers and journalists and how this has redefined the journalist's role. Gandy argues that PR practitioners offer a form of subsidy to news organisations through media releases, press conferences, briefings, lobbying, special reports and managed events which allow media outlets to reduce the cost of newsgathering by employing fewer journalists to gather news material and at the same time maintain profitability by sustaining or increasing news output by generating more copy. In return, PR practitioners have their key messages relayed through an important communications carrier, mostly to the benefit of their employer or organisation. Gandy says the role of the journalist has been transformed by this

phenomenon. Their core business is no longer going out in search of information but rather staying behind their desks and acting as gatekeepers of the news that is assembled by people outside the media organisation who have, in effect, had the newsgathering role "outsourced" to them.

The study investigated the following research questions through the use of semi-structured interviews:

- 1 What are the perceptions and opinions of local government public relations professionals who provide press releases to regional newspapers about the use of their media releases?
- 2 What factors do PR practitioners think assist their ability to influence newspaper coverage?

Methodology

A stratified, purposive sample of six media relations officers working in Local Government across Australia's states and territories was selected to participate in semi-structured telephone interviews with the researchers. Some prepared questions for the sample group included: How many newspapers operate within your municipality?; What is the population within your municipality?; How would you describe your relationship with journalists working within your municipality?; Do you think regional newspapers are an effective communications medium to deliver your message to the public? How many years or months of practical experience have you had as a media relations officer?; Have you ever worked as a journalist?; Have you had any formal training in media relations?; Please outline this training.

Results

Interviews gathered with the public relations consultants across Australia were examined and summarised to provide a descriptive analysis of the themes of data collected.

There were big differences in the education and career backgrounds of the local government media officers interviewed. Media officers who worked at smaller councils (serving populations of less than 15,000) had no formal training in media or public relations and their media responsibilities formed part of a wider management or administrative role. For example, one South Australian interviewee was Corporate Services Director and media advisor and one West Australian council worker was responsible for handling media enquiries as part of her role as Executive Assistant to the General Manager. At the larger councils (serving populations greater than 40,000) all the media officers interviewed had worked as journalists for between four and 25 years before moving to public relations and had between 12 and 35 years' experience as public relations practitioners.

The interviewees at smaller councils did not regard their lack of training in media relations as a drawback and described their council's "old fashioned" relationship with the press as excellent. One West Australian media officer who worked for a council servicing a population of 14,500 which had a bi-weekly and a weekly newspaper said she only issued media releases about 'once a month' because journalists were able to speak directly with key council staff at all times: "We supply journalists with all of the information they need. We always get positive stories when we want them, I think the key is to not just let journals know a story exists, but give them everything they need and they are more likely to run it." A South Australian media officer who works for a municipality with a population of 5000 and is home to a bi-weekly newspaper and a weekly newspaper said she rarely issued press releases as most contact was made directly via telephone with journalists or personally at council meetings. If a "big or controversial" issue arose, the council employed the services of a media relations consultant to assist with writing press releases. "This is so we can package the information clearer. We are used to writing reports for council in council language, not for newspapers," she said.

All the media officers from larger councils also said they had an excellent relationship with local newspapers and suggested that their previous experience as journalists helped in their role of relaying information to the media about local government and assisted them to achieve a high publication success rate. One Tasmanian council media officer said: "Before I started the council here had never had someone with journalism experience in this role and they didn't know how to deal with them (journalists) or package information the way the media wants it." All media relations officers interviewed at the larger councils said their media releases were often used verbatim by newspapers and indicated this was one of the main reasons they rated their relationship with the press so high. A Victorian media officer with 35 years' experience in public relations said all his media releases seeking positive news coverage that were sent via electronic mail were used verbatim by newspapers: "We provide high-class material, we don't provide crap and all of them (press releases) run word-for-word in the newspapers. I believe what I package up is better quality than what the newspaper journalists would [write]."

A number of the council media officers believed the age and number of years' experience of regional journalists were factors in how well local newspapers covered local government. The Tasmanian media officer said she felt many young journalists had a lazy approach to undertaking research for their stories: "I've spoken to one [newspaper] chief of staff who thinks it's just the way young reporters are these days. They might not be coming into the profession with the passion they once did. They might just want a job... maybe it's a generational thing". The Western Australian media officer indicated there was a high turnover rate of young journalists at the newspapers in her municipality which made establishing relationships difficult, but the positive

side to this was that new and inexperienced journalists were dependent on the council for news and information while they "found their feet" and adjusted to the job and the community: "I have dealt with three different journalists in the past five months. They come and go, so they are always wanting us to source stories." The Victorian PR practitioner said that in his 40 years in both journalism and media relations he had witnessed a decline in the quality of journalism with young reporters displaying less resourcefulness in finding stories than they used to: "There is more dependency on sources like me... Rather than going out and finding information, a journalist will come to work and have to pick from 100 emails. They are all story ideas on a platter and they don't have to dig around for information if they don't want to". A Queensland media officer said: "The quality and the amount of research they put into stories has definitely deteriorated."

The other factor having an impact on the quality of local government reporting, according to the interviewees, is the time pressure journalists work under. The Tasmanian media officer said: "They don't research things properly. They have the big headline but there is no substance. I can appreciate having been a journalist that they have time pressures and they are constantly under pressure to get stories up." She said media releases were often "cut and pasted into the paper which is good for us because we can control the message, but not so good for journalism".

Most media officers interviewed said they had also started producing their own newsletters or newspapers which were distributed free of charge to ratepayers, which helped counteract any negative publicity they received in the press. The West Australian media officer said her council was also negotiating free advertorial space in the daily newspaper each week to get "better value for money" for the statutory planning notices they were required to place in the newspaper. She said the municipality was hoping to package these into a weekly space which came with free positive news coverage. Another media relations officer who worked for a small council said it had been forced to set up its own newsletter to distribute to ratepayers each month because journalists at the newspaper were rarely running information supplied to them: "The newspapers are both located on the fringe of our municipality so often they don't think our stories are interesting, even though we advertise in them by law for some public notices. We created our own newsletter instead. Unlike the bigger cities which do this sort of thing because they've been unhappy with the way journalists treat their stories, we've done it because we've had to find some way of getting the message out there because they (newspapers) weren't covering it."

She said the council's own newsletter received positive feedback from the community: "The good thing about our newsletter is it's written by council staff, not from a media relations person, so it doesn't have the 'froth and bubble' and the pretty pictures. It is just the information people need to know and we get a good response overall".

Discussion/Conclusion

This research supports the notion of Gandy's information subsidy theory in the regional Australian news context, particularly when local government news is one of the main sources of information for regional media. The study found media officers have a high level of satisfaction when it comes to their relationship with regional journalists and the use of their media releases largely because their work is often reproduced verbatim by under-resourced newspapers. As a result, local government media officers are gaining increasing influence over the messages being disseminated to the public, particularly when they also introduce their own separate communications channels such as ratepayer-funded newsletters/newspapers. The researchers argue that local government media officers appear to have greatest control over press coverage of council affairs when:

The media relations consultant has experience in packaging material attractive to newspapers in that it is written in newspaper style and contains all the necessary facts, sources and information. PR officers interviewed for the research indicated their previous experience as journalists and ability to package a news story was a major factor when it came to newspapers using their press releases verbatim. This supports the work of Simmons and Spence (2005) and Lewis, Williams and Franklin (2008a, 2008b) who found PR professionals play a major agenda-setting role when they are expert at packaging material which is highly appealing to journalists.

- The media industry continues to operate in a cost-cutting climate, where newsrooms are under-resourced and reporters lack experience. This provides a climate where supplied information is highly likely to be used verbatim without further thought or research on the journalists' part. This supports a previous study by Hess & Waller (2008) which found media releases were constantly being used verbatim by regional Victorian newspapers. While this is a doom and gloom scenario for quality journalism, it presents great opportunities for PR practitioners to maximise positive coverage of their activities, especially local government as it is a major source of news.

Oakham & Kirby (2006) found that PR professionals in regional areas were frustrated with junior reporters who they believed aimed to move on to metropolitan papers and were not motivated to build relationships with local organisations. This research supports the notion that PR professionals are frustrated by inexperienced journalists, but indicates this can work to the media officer's advantage, particularly at regional newspapers which have a high staff turnover rate and where inexperienced reporters are dependent on the council for news and information while they "find their feet" and adjust to the

community. The study also found those councils which did not have qualified media relations officers relied heavily on 'old fashioned' contact with journalists via telephone or at council meetings rather than press releases, but they had equally positive relationships with journalists. This was because council staff indicated journalists would often publish positive council stories if sources and information were easily accessible and relevant to the readership. This further supports the work of Oakham & Kirby (2007) in that the personal relationship between the PR professional and the journalist is important in gaining media coverage.

About the authors

Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller are lecturers in journalism at Deakin University, Australia. They have a strong interest in the professional standards of rural and regional journalists.

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