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Applying the General Process Model of Content Homogenization to Public Relations and Public Information

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Abstract

The model of media content homogenization propounded by Payne integrates several extant theories of media processes and effects into a single model that predicts homogenous news content that reflects interests of elites. This article poses several arguments for the application of Payne's model to theories of public relations practices. This article suggests that Payne's rather linear model does not adequately address the emerging "shadow" model of news dissemination through digital and especially social media. The article concludes with normative and pragmatic arguments for the ethical practice of public relations.

Introduction

Payne (2009) presented a General Process Model of Content Homogenization that combined extant theories regarding gate-keeping, agenda-setting, and homogenization of news content. Taking a critical stance, Payne argued, "gatekeeping controls over the agenda setting process produce a homogenized news product that curtails opportunities for robust public discourse" (p. 199). Although not flagged specifically by that label, public relations is included as a mechanism used by the "relatively few who dominate news production operations, including the very rich, chief executives, the corporate rich..." (p. 204).

After Gandy (1982), public relations professionals provide information subsidies to the media. *Information subsidies* are efforts by public relations practitioners to reduce the cost to the

media of information favorable to the organization or issues important to the organization. This is accomplished by providing news releases to the media, arranging interviews with people inside the practitioner's organization, and giving access to other forms of newsworthy information that the organization controls. By reducing the cost of favorable information to the media, the relative cost (to the media) of information unfavorable to the practitioner's organization increases. As journalists seek to reduce uncertainty, they are more likely to utilize subsidized information rather than engage in expensive and uncertain enterprise reporting. As such, public relations practitioners operate in concert with primary-level gatekeepers in Payne's model to set the media's agenda by "controlling information available to the media" (p. 201).

The purpose of this article is to (1) extend Payne's model to include antecedent constructs of information subsidies and public relation strategies in a more detailed manner, (2) suggest ways in which activist public can use digital media to counteract the homogenization of media content by elites, and (3) suggest an ethical approach to public relations that ameliorates some aspects of the "insular and parochial news product, characterized by a mendacious topical, thematic, and ideological sterility" (Payne, 2009).

Indeed, public relations practitioners do provide information subsidies for certain types of information that is generally favorable to the organization. However, the strategic approach to public relations practices suggests that a smart public relations program includes an action strategy as well as a communication strategy. Whereas the communication strategy (combining message content and media distribution) involves information subsidies to the media, an *action strategy* is the deliberate attempt of the public relations practitioner to change behaviors of organization that produce conflicts with key publics on whom organizational success or failure depends (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006). According to the strategic management approach to public relations, conflicts between organizations and publics cannot be resolved by communication alone. Mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and publics cannot be established or maintained if the practitioner's organization is unwilling to alter behaviors that contribute to conflicts with publics. This is the first element of a larger ethical argument addressed later.

The General Process Model of Content Homogenization

The first step in Payne's (2009, p. 201) model occurs when gatekeepers control information available to the media (see Figure 1). In keeping with Gandy's original conceptualization of information subsidies, public relations practitioners—as players in the public media system—do not *control* the flow of information so much as they subsidize certain information to reduce its cost to the media. Indeed, practitioners sometimes do withhold information detrimental to their organizations. Often, however, such practices backfire on the organization when the public learns of organizational efforts to suppress the information. Rather than worries about the suppression of unfavorable information, Gandy's (1982) larger concern was the subsidizing of favorable information (e.g., product promotions disguised as news stories) that contributes to the sterility that Payne faults in homogenized media content.



Figure 1. Payne’s General Process Model of Content Homogenization (from Payne, 2009, p. 201)

However, that space occupied by the primary-level gatekeepers at the front end of the manufacture of news is contested. One of the enduring preoccupations of the public relations profession is activist publics. Alternatively described as pressure groups, social movements, or special interest groups, L. Grunig (1992) defined *activist groups* as “collections of individuals organized to exert pressure on an organization in behalf of cause” (p. 504).

The primary-level gatekeepers in Payne’s model include public relations practitioners and

activists, as well as reporters and editors. With regard to information subsidies, the clear advantage goes to elite organizations with the size and budgets to hire professional public relations practitioners. Karlberg (1996) suggested that even the good intentions of large corporations couldn't offset the resource advantages of the corporation.

However, according to the theory of collective action, activists are often driven by motivation and fervor (Olson, 1971). This intense dedication to the cause among activists sometimes trumps the larger PR budget and staff of the elite organizations that employ public relations practitioners. For example, Murphy and Dee (1992) conducted a case study of the ongoing conflict between Greenpeace (an environmental activist organization) and Dupont (a large chemical manufacturer). Murphy and Dee described Greenpeace's strategy with Dupont as a zero-sum game: any victory by Greenpeace was at the expense of Dupont. Greenpeace tactics included extreme action, unilateral demands, and intolerance for compromise. In 1989, for example, Greenpeace activists trespassed on Dupont property to climb a 180-foot water tower to drape a ribbon banner that declared (and denounced) Dupont as the worst offender in depleting the planet's ozone layer. As Dozier and Lauzen (2000) commented in an analysis of activist publics, one would be "hard pressed to find a Public Relations Society of America member willing to climb to such heights in pursuit of media placements!" (p. 14).

Conflicts between organizations and activists satisfy journalistic routines of news media. Stories involving organizations and activists contain the news value of *conflict*. As such, a small, dedicated activist organization can provide information subsidies of their own through special events that bring desired media attention to their cause. Rubin's (1970) *DO IT! Scenarios of the Revolution* provided suggestions for the creation of *pseudo-events* (Boorstin, 1971), events or activities conducted or staged by American activists opposing the Vietnam War to garner media attention.

Pseudo-events are not just tools of activists. Public relations practitioners routinely organize events that exist largely for the media coverage that they will generate: press conferences, ribbon-cutting ceremonies, politicians touring disaster areas, etc. None of these activities would occur if the news media didn't cover them. With extensive human and financial resources, public relations practitioners working for elite organizations have a distinct

resource advantage over activists in orchestrating pseudo-events. Activists may have an advantage in the areas of commitment and imagination.

Digital Media and Activism

As noted above, public relations practitioners working for elite organizations that can afford them have a distinct advantage with regard to providing information subsidies to media gatekeepers. The use of digital media by activists, however, reduces the resource advantages of elite organizations. New digital media can assist activists in their struggle for safe passage past the gatekeepers onto the media's agenda. Digital media include blogs, online bulletin boards, video file-sharing sites like YouTube, and social media like Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. The rapid diffusion of these technologies through both developed and developing nations serves as a counter-balance to the homogenized content generated by Payne's model.

The key difference between the older media and digital media is the proliferation of the number of channels of communication and the ability of most people to become information sources or providers. Whereas traditional, centralized corporate media favor information subsidies from professional public relations practitioners and the corporations and other organizations they represent, digital media in general, and social media in particular, favor activists. Social media enable anyone to identify a piece of information in the sea of information available via the Internet, pass it on to like-minded friends, who in turn forward it on to their like-minded friends.

This permits an organic, grassroots form of media content that has certain advantages over traditional homogenized media content. First, the message carries the implicit endorsement of an often trusted albeit digital "friend," boosting its credibility. Even a virtual Facebook "friend" can take on attributes of a real friend over time, as messages are exchanged and relationships between virtual friends are established and take root (Flanagin, Tiyaamornwong, O'Connor, & Seibold, 2002; Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, & De Groot, 2001). Second, because people seem to build social networks with like-minded people, mutual involvement with the same issues can lead to rapid formation of activist publics via the Internet.

According to Grunig's (1984) situational theory of publics, corporations and other

organizations do things that affect people's lives, which is the key conceptual link between organizations and publics. Organizational behavior *creates* publics. However, *latent* publics are not aware that an organization is affecting them. They become *aware* publics when they realize they are being affected by behaviors of organizations; they begin to communicate. *Active* publics represent the maturity of a public; in the extreme, active publics pose the greatest threat to organizations. Because they must maintain their internal cohesion and high involvement, activist publics tend to be very unyielding and uncompromising. Thus, the savvy practitioner seeks to develop mutually beneficial relationships with publics earlier in the process (e.g., at the latent or aware stage).

As a result, there is a passionate interest in digital media among public relations practitioners. At the least, social media serve as a distant early warning system, alerting practitioners that an issue involving the organization is being discussed in cyberspace. Because communicating with each other is the first step toward activism, sophisticated practitioners use social media to monitor organizational environments.

Two-way communication is the golden ring of best practices in public relations. The best practitioners serve as the eyes and ears of the organization, as well as its mouthpiece (Broom & Dozier, 1990). But genuine one-on-one communication between an individual and a multinational corporation is only a metaphor. Large organizations use research tools such as focus groups, surveys, caravan studies, and public opinion polling to provide the vital feedback loop from publics. Emails and Web posting of customer complaints is simply another tool for closing the feedback loop.

Social media, therefore, pose an enormous challenge to the practice of public relations. Although PR practitioners complain about journalists, media relations programs were much easier to manage when practitioners dealt with a few established professional gatekeepers in traditional corporate media. Beyond those gates were concentrated audiences, with reach and frequency documented by Nielsen ratings and the Audit Bureau of Circulation. Key contemporary questions facing the technical side of the practice are: 1) How much human resources should an organization invest in social media efforts? 2) How do you evaluate the value of those investments? In any case, the changing media landscape has implications for

best practices in public relations, as well as implications for Payne's model of content homogenization.

Specifically, the proliferation of new digital media and the concomitant demassification of mass audiences pose challenges to Payne's model. Parallel to Payne's relatively linear General Process Model of Content Homogenization is another shadow model of digital media content. Rather than an assembly-line structure to gather, package, and transmit information products, the digital media network looks more like social networks, a spider web of nodes and linkages, with large but diffuse numbers of individuals (nodes) connected to dozens or even hundreds of "friends" via digital media. While social media such as Facebook and MySpace are the most obvious exemplars of such digital networks, electronic mailing lists (listserv), electronic bulletin boards, and video file-sharing sites (YouTube) predate so-called social media and served similar functions. Prior to that, activists used phone trees to communicate information to large numbers of people in a short period of time.

Much information circulated via social media remains provincial and localized within a small circle of friends. Information that might alarm or concern some may not be of interest outside the small communication clique that shares it. However, some information runs the "risk" of "going viral." That is, information that strikes a resonant cord can be passed from one communication clique to another, using the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) across seemingly dissimilar cliques, and spreading rapidly through the blogosphere. Millions can share such information before the traditional media have an opportunity to collect, package, and transmit that information through traditional channels.

Often, the traditional media treat such "viral stories" as "events" on the Internet, covering the dissemination of information via the Internet as a story unto itself. On other occasions, traditional media will provide a follow-up story to information already widely distributed over the Internet. Increasingly, however, traditional media are seeking to corral the enthusiasm of bloggers by allowing commentary to traditional media coverage, especially on their websites. However, all such phenomena are in rapid flux. Perhaps the only thing that one can say for certain is that the media landscape will look quite different in the near and distant future.

Does the digital media revolution make Payne's model obsolete? Probably not. From the

audience's perspective, gatekeepers perform an important function. Of the millions of events that occur each day in the world, audiences relinquish responsibility to sift through all that information to professional gatekeepers. While Payne is correct to excoriate traditional media content as insular and parochial, characterized by a mendacious topical, thematic, and ideological sterility, social media content—on balance—is much worse. The quintessential question posed by social media to every participant is this: "What are you doing right now?" The quintessential and obvious answer is, of course, "who cares?" The capacity to generate messages and share them with others does not necessarily imply that every source, every node in a social media network, has something useful, interesting, and timely to say.

Thus, gatekeepers are gatekeepers not because they control the channels of communication but because they protect audiences from the banal, the trivial, the self-serving braying of millions of sources of information to provide reliable and credible information of use to audiences. Information subsidies reduce the quality of this important and valuable gatekeeping function. Digital media in general, and social media in particular, keep gatekeepers more or less honest by providing an undisciplined, narcissistic "shadow" media system that sporadically does something better than traditional media. But in the end, audiences need gatekeepers that are reliable and credible. The overarching concept, which subsumes reliability and credibility, is ethical gatekeeping. As elite organizations are provided opportunities to communicate directly to their constituent publics via digital media, public relations practitioners have roles to play as ethical gatekeepers.

Public Relations and Ethical Gatekeeping

In the practice of public relations, forward-thinking practitioners and scholars are beginning to realize the ascendance of public relations, relative to the other players in the public information system. As elite organizations utilize their considerable resources to communicate with their publics directly, bypassing gatekeepers in the traditional media, public relations practitioners must assume the role of gatekeeper and they should do so ethically. In doing so, the practice of public relations can evolve from its current status as a pejorative—that is, public relations as spin, as self-serving trivia, as misleading, as deceptive—to a true profession that, above all else, serves the public interest. To do so, the practice of public

relations needs to clean up its own house. Issues that must be addressed include...

Garbage In, Garbage Out

Broom and Dozier (see Dozier & Broom, 2006, for a full review) have studied the roles of practitioners in organizations. The public relations technician role focuses on message dissemination, implementing the strategic decisions made by others. Much of the work of public relations practitioners is tactical, emphasizing message dissemination. The more messages the better. This results in an avalanche of news releases, media advisories, news conferences, and a plethora of information subsidies. Much of this information is self-serving trivia of little or no news value—in a word, garbage. If public relations practitioners are going to bypass gatekeepers of traditional tradition media to communicate directly with publics, they need to develop the discernment and news judgment of gatekeepers.

Advocates of the Public Interest

The three-nation Excellence Study (J. Grunig, 1992; Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; J. Grunig, L. Grunig, & Dozier, 2006) provides normative arguments and empirical support for the proposition that the most efficacious and ethical approach to the practice of public relations is the two-way symmetrical model. According to this model (see J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984), the public relations department serves as the eyes and ears of the organization, as well its mouthpiece. That is, the public relations department uses various forms of research to close the loop, making communication between organizations and publics a two-way enterprise.

Regarding symmetry, best practices suggest that the public relations function seeks to find a middle ground that balances the interests of the organization with the interests of publics affected by the organization, what Dozier et al. (1995) described as the “win-win zone.” To do so, the public relations function as a go-between, advocating the organization’s interests when communicating with publics. More significantly, the two-way symmetrical model requires the public relations practitioner to be the public’s advocate when communicating with the dominant coalition (e.g., top management) of the organization that employs them. This means that public relations practitioners should advocate truth, trust, and transparency. Admiral T. McCreary, former Chief of Information for the United States Navy, popularized the Three T’s in

the public relations community; the Three T's serve as an appropriate set of principles for ethical gatekeeping. If "bad news" is generated by the behavior of an organization, the public relations function for that organization ought to be the first source of disclosure. That's transparency. The information disseminated should be truthful. Over time, such truthful disclosures builds trust in the organization. That is, an organization can become a reliable and credible source of information about itself.

Pragmatic Idealism

Lest the above suggestions be treated as ivory-tower idealism, consider the pragmatics of what has been proposed. When organizations waste valuable resources disseminating self-serving trivia about themselves, they clog the channels of communication with garbage. They place an unreasonable burden on audiences (publics) to sort through the trivia for information useful to the publics. One function of gatekeeping is to pre-sort garbage from useful information. As gatekeepers, strategic public relations practitioners that communicate directly with publics must learn the discipline and discernment of gatekeepers. In other words, it is simply pragmatic for practitioners to disseminate less information of a higher utility to the audience, in order to attract and retain an audience. Regarding advocacy of the public interest to management, ethical conduct is also pragmatic conduct. If an organization is opaque, if it lies to the public, if it engages in behavior that takes advantage of the public in pursuit of its own selfish interests, it is the public relations department that has to clean up the mess. Organizations must adapt to constantly changing organizational environments; the function of public relations is to facilitate that adaptation. A powerful tool in such facilitation is to provide reliable, credible information about the organization to publics, as well as provide the same about publics back to dominant coalitions within organizations.

Conclusion

This article seeks to apply Payne's General Process Model of Content Homogenization to the practice of public relations. As noted, public relations fits into the front end of Payne's model, providing information subsidies to traditional media gatekeepers. Whereas Payne's model provides a rather linear model for the collection, packaging, and dissemination of news products, activist publics can use digital media—and especially social media—to create a

shadow system for the dissemination of information.

However, the very decentralized character of social media that makes it so difficult for journalists and public relations practitioners to harness is also its core weakness. With everybody playing the role of information provider in social media, nobody is providing the essential service of gatekeeping: sifting through millions of pieces of disaggregated information to identify information that is useful and informative to audiences. Occasionally, useful and truthful information first “discovered” through social media “goes viral” and spreads to millions of users, serving as a check and balance on traditional media. However, information that goes viral in social media can be false or useless. The absence of competent gatekeeping in social media permits the viral dissemination of both good and bad information.

Thus, social media can be treated as an unreliable shadow system for disseminating information outside the traditional media system, as modeled by Payne. Further, traditional media are monitoring the Internet and social media as sources of information for traditional packaging and dissemination. The digital revolution and the popularity of social media can be incorporated into Payne’s model.

One aspect of the digital revolution is that organizations, through their public relations departments, can disseminate information directly to publics, bypassing gatekeepers in traditional media. With this new power comes a professional responsibility to act as ethical gatekeepers. This means that public relations practitioners must resist the temptation to disseminate trivia about the organizations they represent. Practitioners must be advocates of the public interest to management within their organizations. Practitioner conduct should be driven by the core principles of truth, trust, and transparency. This is not only an ethical imperative; it is also the most pragmatic strategy as well.

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