MAKING A DIFFERENCE AFTER ALL
– the relationship between media and strategic public relations

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Abstract
This paper presents a view of the relationship between media and organisations where media is conceptualised as a source of knowledge about legitimacy expectations of organisational activity. This view differs from the dominant presentation in public relations literature where media provide a channel of communication for organisational attempts at publicity and impression management (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000). In doing so, this paper attempts to provide theoretical foundations for claims about the influence of media on organisations in a public relations context (Johnston & Zawawi, 2003). It does this through the perspective of strategic public relations’ concerns about establishing and maintaining organisational legitimacy (Metzler, 2001), a core determinant of organisation success in organisational theory (Hannan & Freeman, 1989; Meyer & Scott, 1991, 1992a). Media is conceptualised in terms of impersonal influence effects (Mutz, 1998) on organisational understanding of legitimacy expectations of their social environment.
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Introduction

This paper presents a series of propositions that attempt to provide theoretical foundations for understanding a relationship between media and organisations within conceptualisations of strategic public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Through this perspective, public relations plays an integral role in assisting the organisation to monitor and interpret its social environment and in advising management on establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships for long term organisational success (Cutlip et al., 2000). Notions of two way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig & Grunig, 1992) demonstrate a reciprocal relationship between organisations and environments. This differs to asymmetrical views of public relations in which organisations attempt to influence the environment (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The notion of reciprocal relationship and influence can be considered ecological (Everett, 2001) in terms of the mutual adaptation of organisations and environments within which organisational success is determined.

In public relations literature, the relationship between organisations and media is explicit predominantly in terms of organisational attempts to use media as a channel of communication to stakeholders in the environment (Cutlip et al., 2000; Johnston & Zawawi, 2003; Newsom et al., 2000; Seitel, 2001). Public relations models adopted here are dominated by publicity and public information perspectives (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig & Grunig, 1992). However, while there are references within the public relations literature to the more strategic notion that media influences organisations (Baskin, Aronoff, & Lattimore, 1997; Cutlip et al., 2000; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Johnston & Zawawi, 2003; Newsom et al., 2000; Wilcox, Ault, & Agee, 1998), literature about the nature of this relationship of media influence on organisations is sparse. Theories of impersonal influence of media (Mutz, 1998) provide a way to consider the relationship. Through this perspective, media play a vital role in bridging gaps in communication and social influence not addressed through interpersonal relationships. Rather, media create an important, impersonal, social influence (Mutz, 1998) by presenting collective opinions about events and decisions outside an individual’s experience. This understanding of the environment provides foundations on which organisational decisions can be made. For public relations, such a role for media becomes important when organisational challenges are likely to arise in the complex, global and rapidly changing social environment that characterise a contemporary corporate life.

This paper consists of three major sections. First a brief history of media and public relations is provided. Then, relevant concepts from organisational theory are discussed as a framework for considering the role of public relations in organisational success. Last, a series of propositions are outlined and applied to the relationship between strategic public relations and media.
The relationship between organisations and the media

The role of public relations, like other social sciences, is linked to understanding and explaining the behaviour of people (Grunig & White, 1992), usually within an organisational context. The rapid growth of the discipline has occurred alongside the evolution of other phenomena such as the modern notion of ‘organisation’ which has become the dominant social organising device in contemporary society (Aldrich, 1999) and the rise of mass media. The influence of media on the social system was captured by Lippman (1927) in his discussion of mass media within the triangular relationship between the scene of the action, perceptions of action and response based on these perceptions. Advances in mass communication and global technology have expanded the impact of media on the social system, increasing access to a wider range of information and decreasing the lag time between action and opinion formation (Schoenbach & Becker, 1995).

The role of media relations remains dominant in the public relations text book tradition (Cutlip et al., 2000; Johnston & Zawawi, 2003; Newsom et al., 2000; Seitel, 2001; Wilson, 1997) at the same time as the emphasis on activities such as strategic management advice, issues, and crisis management has become more important within the domain of public relations. Mass media is conceptualised as a communication channel for organisational use in achieving goals of publicity, social action, impression management, and for influencing public opinion. These asymmetrical communication activities made possible through the use of mass media can be useful for attempts to influence the social environment but do not address the relationship between organisations and the media within adjustment and adaptation perspectives of strategic public relations (Cutlip et al., 2000; Grunig & Grunig, 1992).

Relationship between public relations and organisational theory

Open systems thinking (Katz & Kahn, 1966) that became dominant from the 1960s provided a significant new perspective on viewing organisations by considering the relationship between organisations and their environment. This era of contingency (Robbins & Barnwell, 2002) provided a significant shift in organisational thinking about the way that organisations and environments impact each other rather than on the rational efficiency of organisations (Robbins & Barnwell, 2002).

Theoretically, public relations embraced the notion of the organisational-environmental nexus as a foundation for the discipline. Seminal work by Cutlip, Centre, and Broom (1952) in positioning the theoretical foundations of public relations in an ecological perspective has produced a firm strand of inquiry for the discipline drawing on organisational theory (Grunig & White, 1992). Resource dependency and contingency theories have provided a foundation for important work by Grunig and his colleagues (Grunig, 1992; Grunig & White, 1992; Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992) in theorising the emerging face of public relations in a strategic context since the 1970s. Reflecting the growing need for organisations to understand, interpret, and strategise options for dealing with an increasingly demanding environment, the need for public relations professionals to be more than publicists and flak merchants also grew. This provided an important step for positioning the public relations function as a role concerned with environmental scanning and organisational adjustment and adaptation (Grunig, 1992), moving it away from conceptualisations as a persuasive, corporate journalistic role (Everett, 2001). However, while the public relations literature suggests that the management function of public relations assists
the organisation in adjusting and adapting to ensure fit with the social environment (Baskin et al., 1997; Cutlip et al., 2000; Grunig, 1992; Wilcox et al., 1998), the role of media in this process is not explicit. The link between media and organisational attempts to adjust the environment are prevalent in the asymmetrical models, but there is an absence of discussion of the influence of media on organisations in adjusting to the environment. This is problematic when media is considered an important environmental influence in organisational theory.

Ecological perspectives in organisational theory provide a framework for considering the impact of media on organisations. The common focus of these theories is in considering the impact of environments on organisations. They set out to explain the previously unaddressed issues arising from the spate of organisational theories that viewed organisations as tools for manager’s control (Hannan & Freeman, 1989). Despite the contingency era’s recognition of the relationship between organisation and environment, the focus remained on organisational determination over environment. Ecological perspectives move the focus of organisational studies away from short term adjustment and adaptation, to a paradigm of longer term selection and organisational survival (Hannan & Freeman, 1989; Meyer & Scott, 1992b). For public relations practitioners seeking to position the discipline as a strategic management function that would assist in long term organisational success, this provides a perspective for furthering conceptualisations of public relations activity. One way of incorporating these theories into views on public relations is through a central construct of ecological perspectives-legitimacy.

**Public relations & legitimacy**

One conceptualisation of public relations already established in the public relations literature is in establishing and maintaining organisational legitimacy to ensure the organisation’s right to exist and conduct operations (Metzler, 2001). Legitimacy gap theory has also been explored in the public relations literature in terms of issues management (Heath, 1997; Sethi, 1975, 1979). Legitimacy is one of the central tenets of ecological theories that suggests organisations compete for social as well as economic fit with the environment (Aldrich, 1979). Successful organisations are selected in an institutional world where survival relies on adopting socially and culturally legitimate ways of conducting business. Legitimacy is a perception (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) that the organisation’s actions are aligned with environmental expectations of organisational behaviour. Legitimacy is gained when organisations meet norms and expectations of the social system (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Meyer & Scott, 1992a). This shows their worthiness to garner resources needed for organisational survival.

However legitimacy, while deemed an objective state, comes from subjective matter (Meyer & Rowan, 1992). Legitimacy is not achieved by organisations meeting standards of rational technical efficiency. Rather, it is based in perceptions of whether the organisation meets expectations of appropriateness in terms of its operations and its relationships. These perceptions can include perceptions of appropriateness of organisational tasks; assessments of efficiency and effectiveness; and perceptions of equitable use of human resources and rational use of resources (Meyer and Scott, 1992a). Suchman (1995) offers the definition that ‘legitimacy is a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and
definitions’ (p. 572). Ecologists see external organisations constructing and interpenetrating the organisation in a variety of ways (Suchman, 1995), depending on the cultural and social demands determined by other influential organisations. Legitimacy is linked to established patterns of cultural authority supported by nationwide and worldwide environments (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) rather than more local levels of experience that are more likely to be the domain of competition (Lomi, 2000). For the role of public relations with the charter of environmental scanning and strategic advice on adjustment and adaptation, this means that organisations need to have access to information about expectations from outside their world of experience in order to understand legitimacy demands that can impact their activities and ultimately their success.

**The relationship between media and legitimacy**

One of the important functions mass media provides is its ability to provide information not available through group and interpersonal relationships (Cutlip et al., 2000). In the increasingly complex nature of the information society, interpersonal communication is less effective in informing individuals of the state of their world (Mutz, 1998). Rather, impersonal knowledge of the social environment, made available through sophisticated mass media systems, is argued as being a more important social influence (Mutz, 1998; Schoenbach & Becker, 1995) in contemporary western societies.

In this conceptualisation, media provide information about what the ‘collective other’ think about social issues in the environment. In determining collective action in a complex information society, perceptions of the collective other become the dominant source of information about what is important in the social world (Mutz, 1998; Schoenbach & Becker, 1995). For organisations concerned with legitimacy, impersonal influences of mass media provide a potentially fruitful area for studying the role of mass media in the organisational-environmental relationship that can be useful for determining organisational action.

As legitimacy is the perception of an organisation’s compliance with social norms (Meyer & Scott, 1992a), in the contemporary society just described, the perceptions of the collective opinion about an organisation would appear to be important. Organisations typically rely on experience and business associations and networks for information about their social environment (Aldrich, 1999). However media have also been shown to play an important role in complementing this type of information—information that would otherwise not be available to them because of the complexity of the social environment (Weiss, 1974).

This suggests that mass media can also provide a role in the organisational-environmental relationship by providing information about perceptions of collective opinion regarding organisational legitimacy. The perceptions of collective opinions derived from mass media coverage about issues are used by social-political elites to make decisions based on the perceived expectations of stakeholder demands (Schoenbach & Becker, 1995). This has a number of implications for strategic views of public relations where the role could use its skills in gleaning such information from the environment for organisational use in determining future strategy and to ensure the organisation meets environmental expectations. Based on this thesis, this
paper presents a series of propositions about the relationship between media, organisations and organisational decision making, and the role of public relations.

**Implications for the relationship between media and strategic public relations**
There are a number of implications of this discussion for strategic public relations. I discuss three propositions here.

**Proposition 1:**
*Strategic public relations uses media monitoring for understanding legitimacy in the social environment*

Research is considered an integral part of the public relations planning process, with writers including research as a foundation for programs and campaigns (Cutlip et al., 2000; Seitel, 2001; Watson, 2001). However, research is more likely to be talked about than conducted, with 94.3% of practitioners supporting this view (Lindenmann, 1990 cited in Watson, 2001). In addition, when it comes to the use of media research, the main focus is on evaluating media coverage about the organisation in order to justify expenditure or to gauge effectiveness of campaigns (Watson, 2001).

Cutlip et al (2000), show that the clear differentiator between technicians and managers in organisations was their use of research and ability to add to the organisational decision making process. If public relations is to play a strategic role in assisting management to understand the social environment and the influences on organisational success, the relationship between media and research needs to shift from justifying expenditure on media programs, to understanding the social environment.

Environmental scanning is an integral claim of views of public relations based in notions of adjustment and adaptation (Baskin et al., 1997; Cutlip et al., 2000; Grunig, 1992; Wilcox et al., 1998). In these views, one of the roles of public relations is to scan the environment and develop change programs that affect the organisation or its environment (Grunig & Grunig, 1991). If public relations is focused on legitimacy, understanding the perceptions of legitimacy held by influential stakeholders who can impact the organisation’s success becomes an important role for the function. Media has been attributed with having an impersonal influence in the social system, playing an important role in communicating what others think about events and decisions (Mutz, 1998). As such, their reporting of the views of organisational stakeholders provides a source of information about stakeholder perspectives on issues that can have an impact on organisations.

**Proposition 2:**
*Strategic public relations assists organisations to identify the perceptions of collective opinion about the legitimacy of organisational activity*

Media has been discussed in the legitimacy literature as a channel for diffusion of information about successful organisational forms and activity (Aldrich, 1999). Media is also a source of information about opinions that others hold of organisational activity (Mutz & Soss, 1997). Legitimacy is a perception (Meyer & Scott, 1992a) and
can be considered as the dominant view of the appropriate or ‘taken-for-granted’ ways for organisations to do business or deal with stakeholders. Social standards of legitimacy are constantly being negotiated by influential social actors who confer legitimacy (Meyer & Scott, 1992a). These groups use media in attempts to garner support for their activities and views. The media also record these influential social actors’ responses to events and decisions about other organisation’s activities. The type of reporting reflects a shift in mass media content away from an emphasis on event reporting to interpreting issues and trends for readers (Barnhurst & Mutz, 1997) often through the eyes of those influential on the topic. This is a more complex conceptualisation of media viewing it in terms of content and channel, rather than of channel alone (Mutz, 1998).

However the media also provides information about collective opinion in a social world where the opportunities for individuals and organisations to learn about the world through interpersonal experience and knowledge is reduced (Mutz, 1998). This complements understanding of the social environment based on experience and business associations and networks for information about their social environment (Aldrich, 1999). While the organisational challenge of competition can be both local and global, legitimacy is a phenomenon derived in a context with broader boundaries (Lomi, 2000). If impersonal effects of the media show collective opinions in the social system, therefore media provide a site for organisations to learn about influential social actors’ perceptions of legitimacy about organisational activity on which they can base decisions.

Understanding influential social actors’ perceptions of legitimacy can be important for organisations as these groups are influential in forcing change on organisations. This can be through coercive means such as regulatory requirements, or through normative action, where professionalisation of industries, trades, and professions translates to common skill sets across numbers of organisations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Significant impacts arise for organisations when this occurs, including the cost of compliance with regulatory standards and loss of competitive advantage. Strategic public relations can assist an organisation to anticipate and address these issues by ensuring their organisation meets social expectations of legitimacy.

**Proposition 3:**

*Strategic public relations assists organisations to gain competitive advantage when organisational decision making is based on collective opinion from the environment*

Lippman’s classic book *Public Opinion* (1927) presented the notion that media play a role in the triangular relationship between events, perceptions of events, and response based on these perceptions. This has provided a legacy for scholars who have explored the effects of mass media and the impact on social action since that time. For contemporary conceptualisations of the strategic public relations role, understanding the perceptions held by influential stakeholders as presented through the media means that public relations practitioners can contribute to organisational decision making in a way that anticipates environmental expectations.

Perceptions of collective opinion already underpin important decision making in contemporary organisation. Keynes (1964) states that the perceptions of the collective opinion underpinned the entire market system. It does this through organisations
setting prices depending on perceptions of what others would be prepared to pay. Mutz (1998) establishes that public policy is influenced by perceptions of the collective opinion of the decisions that are most suitable and politically viable. In the same way, through this conceptualisation, public relations provides a function that researches and identifies influential collective opinion in terms of legitimacy and social expectations of organisational activity. This viewpoint opens important opportunities for the role of public relations. In contemporary societies, information about social influences is likely to be mediated (Mutz, 1998). In organisations, as the dominant organising structure in contemporary society (Aldrich, 1999), public relations is optimally situated to use skills in understanding the media to provide strategic advice to organisations.

The decisions made as a result of this insight into environmental legitimacy demands can assist organisations to gain a competitive advantage. Legitimacy has been defined as the absence of action against an organisation (Metzler, 2001), posited as a core concern and outcome for strategic public relations activity in terms of organisations, social environments and strategic change. Legitimacy gaps (Heath, 1997; Sethi, 1975, 1979; Bridges, 2004) occur when organisations change in a way that is not compatible with social expectations, or when social expectations change and organisations remain inert. When organisations are not aligned with the social environment’s expectations of them, issues and crises can occur that impede organisational support and their ability to garner resources from the social environment. Public relations’ ability to anticipate incompatibilities between organisational activity and environmental perceptions of legitimacy and provide strategic advice to management can therefore give organisations a competitive advantage.

**Conclusion and challenges to future research**

While environmental scanning is an integral role in the issues management process (Cutlip et al., 2000; Heath, 2000; Johnston & Zawawi, 2003; Seitel, 2001; Wilcox et al., 1998), this paper suggests more explicit ways in which media can assist organisations to understand legitimacy expectations of the broader social environment. These propositions suggest theoretical underpinnings for a strategic public relations approach where the role can assist management to identify legitimacy-based environmental changes, and to gain competitive advantage by adopting structures and behaviours that reflect the evolving standards of legitimacy ahead of their competitors. This differs to the predominance of public relations literature that treats media as a communication channel for organisational use to reach stakeholders. Rather it conceptualises media as a site for information related to collective opinions about the legitimacy of organisational activity in a social system where standards of legitimacy are constantly being negotiated often outside the domain of direct organisational experience. Empirical research investigating these propositions can potentially provide theoretical support for a range of public relations activities, assumed, but not specified, within the public relations literature. In particular, such empirical research would investigate the relationship between media, environmental legitimacy demands, and organisational strategies to maintain legitimacy, and ultimately, long term organisational success.
Bibliography


