

Devolution of Traditional Media And What It Means To PR

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It is sad watching newspapers decline. Circulation reports show a relentless reduction in readers that no amount of promotion or ballyhoo has turned around. Newsrooms are shrinking through buyouts and layoffs. TV and radio news are no better off. Coverage of local, national and international news has diminished. Reports come from fewer sources – Associated Press, Reuters, Bloomberg, AFP.

While newswires are trustworthy, the fewer number of reporters presents the same challenge as blind men touching an elephant. They report slivers of experience rather than whole events because they can't be everywhere at once, and they don't have resources to do more. We have seen this especially in coverage of major stories, such as the war in Iraq. With less reporting, it is harder for news consumers to get a holistic feel for what is happening. They are left wanting more.

However, at the same time news reporting diminishes, an opposite trend is happening. With the internet, there is more data than ever about institutions and individuals – data not readily available before – much of it accurate, some of it false, some malicious and little of it verified by third party fact-checkers. We are in an era when bloggers, Twitterers and forum participants report, opionate and otherwise tell us what is going on with themselves, others and the world.

The Decline of Accuracy and Fact Checking

Most people use search engines. They use Google, Spock (<http://www.spock.com>), Zabasearch (<http://zabasearch.com>), Wink (<http://wink.com>), Peoplefinders (<http://www.peoplefinders.com>) and others to learn about organizations, individuals and events. These return old, new, accurate and inaccurate information. Search engines offer more than what we could know previously about individuals and organizations, but their transparency is often illusory.

Most internet publishers – i.e., blogs, forums, social media, information databases numbering in the millions – express opinion and unsubstantiated facts or rely on published news reports. They make little effort to fact-check, and they don't understand or possess institutional concerns for ethics or honesty. Even traditional media have become more liberal in allowing expression of personal opinion. Recall, for example, how media pundits decided the 2008 Democratic presidential campaign for Barack Obama before he won it. Note too frequent criticism of *The New York Times* for allowing opinion to seep into news columns.

Diminishment of fact checking is a loss to society. Certitude that information is accurate provides profound value to citizens in everything from consumer purchases to workings of government. The feeling that one cannot trust data leads to hours of gathering other information or a frustrated feeling that everyone is lying. Moreover, bad data breeds bad decisions and is at the heart of major mistakes – e.g., the Bush Administration’s decision to invade Iraq and destroy non-existent weapons of mass destruction.

The world needs credible gatekeepers who sort good data from bad, important data from irrelevant and present useful information. With the internet there is more information, but less credible information. PR needs to work harder to persuade audiences through its own fact-checking that is both credible and honest.

Back to the Future

American society has gone back to the future. In the early days of publishing – the 1700s and first half of the 1800s --, there was little concern for accuracy. One could use news columns to blast opponents, make allegations or report fictitious events. Citizens read newspapers because that was all the information they could get. It was only in the second half of the 19th Century and early 20th with the rise of Adolph Ochs, Carr Van Ande and *The New York Times* that journalists began to see themselves as reporters of fact. That role flourished throughout the 20th Century and produced power for newspapers that is now fading.

While some impartial media will arise because the public will pay for them either directly or through advertising, most new media are more opinionated than accurate. There are exceptions, such as Digital Photography Review (<http://www.dpreview.com>); exhaustive testing on cameras and lenses; Factcheck (<http://www.factcheck.org>) detailed looks at statements and promises from candidates and elected officials; Snopes (<http://www.snopes.com>), which debunks Urban Legends and, of course *The Smoking Gun*, (<http://www.thesmokinggun.com>) the cynosure of archival fact. Its reporters dig out records, images and data once buried in file cabinets or computers and post them for the world to see. *Smoking Gun*’s “Mug Shot Mania” of celebrities in trouble; “Backstage Riders” of rock stars; police reports and lawsuits approach invasion of privacy, even though its sources are public or semi-public documents. Old media may continue as well with the tradition of accuracy, if old media can figure out sustainable economic models. However, most media will be constrained by insufficient resources from doing voracious fact gathering and checking that newspapers used to do with dozens or hundreds of reporters on staff.

PR and Fact-Checking

PR is a mutual organism that relies on credible content publishers to help carry messages and on which content publishers rely to get information. As traditional media shrink, so do PR's traditional media opportunities. PR has transitioned increasingly to online and is evolving with the online environment. Since online media have regressed in accuracy, how should PR respond? Should it use the same tactics early PR agencies developed – i.e. paying for stories and faking information? The answer is no because transparency on the internet not only makes past tactics more risky, they also jeopardize the reputations of individuals and organizations that use them.

A better path is for PR to emphasize fact checking and credibility that traditional media can no longer do as well and that online media do poorly because they haven't time, resources and, often, interest. PR should become a credible and transparent source internally and externally that sends messages grounded solidly in fact.

Hasn't PR always done this? Yes and no. Responsible PR practitioners strive for accuracy. However, there are many practitioners who are untrained and/or irresponsible and/or cowed by clients who treat accuracy lightly. There are practitioners for whom any publicity is good publicity, no matter how it is generated. Unfortunately, this will not change because anyone can go into PR. There are no rules, regulations or laws preventing one from speaking or writing, except under clear or present danger. PR will remain a mixture of professionals and charlatans to the detriment of the industry.

Credibility and PR

PR practitioners will never be as credible as third parties because practitioners are paid by clients they represent. This means, as has been written before, that credibility in PR pertains to individuals and not to the role or business of PR. Most agency practitioners are captives of advertising/marketing combines, and their primary publicity task is marketing of products and services. They are under a constant burden as well to sell new business. Economic imperatives from parents and marketers' pressure to sell goods and services produce an environment in which accuracy and credibility have little chance to grow. This is unlikely to change.

What would it take to develop a PR agency focused on gathering and communicating facts in a credible and transparent manner? Here are some guidelines that show how hard it would be to grow organizational credibility:

- **Economic model.** The agency would have to be profit making with sustained growth. It would not emphasize growth over accuracy, credibility and client service.

- **Rules for client service and audience responsibility.** The agency leader would define basic rules and implement them consistently. They might be something like the following:
 - **Accuracy.** The agency only issues information that is accurate in fact and intent. The agency eschews common practices of hyping copy, overstating benefits and misleading media and consumers.
 - **Client Service.** The agency has two clients – the client that pays them and audiences to whom they speak whether in traditional or online environments. The agency maintains trust and credibility with both.
 - **Ethics:** The agency does not tolerate lying in any form and will dismiss those who engage in it.
- **Strong leadership:** The agency leader would be a proponent of serving clients ethically and transparently and would hold that conviction as he or she builds the business.
- **Salesmanship/counseling skills:** The agency leader would need the ability to sell his or her point of view internally and externally. This would require demonstrated success -- a consistent and growing body of work that shows accuracy and credibility pay dividends.
- **Recruitment and training.** The leader would recruit and train people of like mentality.
- **Culture:** The leader would need to establish a culture of doing PR accurately and credibly and maintain that culture. The leader would punish, or fire, practitioners who fail agency standards.
- **Succession:** The leader would need to groom successors who think and act like the leader.
- **Adjudication and control.** The leader would need to establish eventually an impartial group that monitors how the agency operates and adjudicates issues in which it is unclear whether a practice is proper or not. This group would have close relationships with the audiences to whom the agency communicates and would know the audience's expectations for credibility and transparency.
- **Media.** The agency would determine media worth approaching because of the media's dedication to accuracy and credibility.
- **The right clients:** The agency would find clients who want to do PR with an emphasis on accuracy and credibility and are willing to stay with the agency over the long term to see that it is done.

The chances of such an agency existing within an advertising/marketing combine are small. The chances of an independent agency growing this way are better but not large.

Practitioners, then, need to set personal standards and hew to them. Those standards are simple enough in concept but difficult in execution:

- **Subject matter expert:** The practitioner studies the client and understands the business, products and services and key players. The practitioner studies target audiences to whom messages are directed to understand their influencers, assumptions, knowledge level and perception of clients. The practitioner monitors media that reach target audiences -- traditional, blogs, forums, YouTube, etc. -- to determine whom it is important to approach, what is being said about clients and when to intervene to guard individual and organizational reputations. The job is never-ending because clients, audiences, influencers and media change constantly.
- **Accuracy:** The practitioner insists on accuracy in fact gathering, message development, content production and communicating.
- **Persuasion:** The practitioner persuades others based on facts and credible arguments without hype, half-truths or fine distinctions.
- **Courage:** The practitioner tells clients the facts and is prepared to step down, if clients resort to lying or sophistry that jeopardize credibility and reputation.
- **Respect:** The practitioner realizes that one returns to the same audiences time and again to gain understanding and cooperation. Hence, the practitioner respects individuals and avoids "win at all costs" tactics that create resentment and long-term lack of cooperation.

These standards are difficult to implement. Practitioners may find organizations in which they will not work because of low standards, and clients they will not serve. On the other hand, the value of practitioners who hew to personal standards will rise over time because responsible audiences, clients and media will trust them. Even responsible critics will accept the word of practitioners because the critics will learn over time that the facts are as they were presented. In an era of opinion and specious argument, the value of an honest person is incalculable. Finally, the respect that a practitioner shows to others will be returned most of the time. (There are exceptions.) The practitioner will learn that playing for long-term success works best in public relations and communications in general. The attitude that every campaign must be successful is as wrong as a sports team owner demanding that his players win every game. One communicates to produce a consistent winning percentage and recognizes there are times when others have better platforms and ideas. Winners adjust quickly to incorporate new facts, co-opt critics and respond to audience demands. Assuming one is right and others wrong breeds defeat. The PR practitioner remembers always that public relations is about relationships.

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