

Going Direct in an Era of Shrinking Media

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Nearly everyday there is evidence of the decline of mainstream media. Publishers fire staff and close magazines and newspapers. TV ratings sag and radio withers. While some PR practitioners see this as a threat to media relations, others see it as an opportunity for PR to bypass traditional media and communicate directly to audiences. The feeling is that PR no longer needs an editorial gateway. But, that view is simplistic. Disintermediation places a burden on PR and PR practitioners. To understand the constraints, it is important to review the reasons for mainstream media in the first place.

Mainstream media capitalize on individuals' desire to understand their world and other people in a timely fashion. Humans want to know what the environment around them means and to interpret satisfactorily things, events and others. This desire crosses all ages, ethnicities and income levels.

There are differences in defining "the world," however. A pygmy in the African bush defines the world differently than a Nobel laureate in physics. Each looks for information to illuminate his world and others in it, and each may have a sophisticated understanding of this self-defined environment. The Nobel laureate might starve in the African bush while the pygmy never goes hungry. Conversely, a pygmy would be bewildered by the Large Hadron Collider. In diverse societies, there are millions of definitions of "the world," nearly as many as there are people. In well educated societies there is a broader base of accepted fact than in poorly educated societies, but it is still up to individuals to define "the world" in which they live.

Mainstream media provide selected views of "the world" and of others in news reports and opinion. They define "the world" in their own ways and include and exclude data that meets their definition. Because one cannot know the intentions of another individual or an individual's mental state, mainstream media tend to report acts and words of individuals rather than motives. Mainstream media try through publishing or broadcasting selected views to reach a large number of individuals willing to pay for information either directly or indirectly through advertising. The mainstream media's selected views are more or less accurate and based on available facts with the understanding that only some facts are known at the time of publishing or broadcasting.

News is information readers, viewers, listeners want to know or that an information publisher feels they should know. It is an infinitely wide definition. A journalist's definition of news may or may not coincide with an external individual's or organization's view. While a company might be excited to have a new CEO, the journalist might find the information irrelevant.

There is a bias in the mainstream media about news. Political news tends to get more coverage than company news, for example, because mainstream reporters and editors believe politics influence more citizens across a broader spectrum. Large companies get more coverage than small ones because there are more employees, shareholders, communities, etc. affected by the large company. Events promising large impact get more coverage than others – e.g. a groundbreaking invention. Mainstream media do not always report new news but news that might be new to consumers. This is “evergreen” information, such as how to paint a room, build a deck, cook a steak, seed a lawn, but the information might be pertinent to an individual’s understanding of the world at a given time.

Mainstream media do more than report. They interpret facts through selections of what to publish and assumptions. Even with efforts to maintain balance, interpretations are biased. A cub reporter at an airline crash is limited by what he sees and data he can collect. What he reports may be accurate but only in part based on his position, deadlines, his knowledge of similar accidents and assumptions about airline safety. An accident investigator present at the same airline disaster might quarrel with the cub reporter’s story based on the investigator’s position, deadlines, knowledge of airline accidents and assumptions of airline safety. People trust or distrust mainstream media based on their knowledge of facts and the coincidence of their assumptions or biases with that of a medium. Hence, a conservative will trust “conservative media” and distrust “liberal media” and vice versa for a liberal.

News consumers want to know pertinent information at the right time with an expected frequency. Ideally, knowledge gained allows them to act with more certainty. But also, knowledge gained is an end in itself. The disaster in Haiti may not have directly affected a news consumer but the consumer still wanted to know about it. As a disaster unfolds, news consumers want as much information as quickly as possible in order to grasp dimensions and effects. Timeliness, of course, varies by medium.

Reporters and editors have news holes of fixed capacities or time lengths, and it is up to them to determine what is most important to fill the space. Gatekeeping serves news consumers in three ways. The gatekeeper checks information for accuracy so news consumers can trust it. The gatekeeper spares news consumers information they don’t care about. (The gatekeeper takes a point of view on behalf of news consumers and pre-sorts news for them.) Finally, the gatekeeper determines how news is presented to readers, viewers and listeners whether gray columns of text, stylized visual presentation, or complex audio. Gatekeepers make news consumption functional and pleasurable within the time allotted to prepare and distribute it.

Finally, traditional media have built and maintain a franchise with news consumers. Readers, viewers and listeners develop expectations about media they consume. They expect to find certain kinds of information presented in

certain ways with a certain timeliness. They choose a medium for that reason and make it a habit. They “listen to the voice” of the medium based on how the medium reports and the content the medium chooses to carry. Editors and reporters know and understand their roles as proxies for their audiences and strive to meet their expectations.

Disintermediation

In the disintermediated world where mainstream media are no longer between news consumers and news, the individual’s desire to understand in a timely manner things, events and people, has not changed. However, there is a difference in data availability with the internet’s vast information resources and ability to deliver information in real-time. Information is free from limits. However, the individual still chooses how to consume news based on his worldview. Thus, a baseball fan may be focused on www.mlb.com to the exclusion of everything else or be a general “news junkie” clicking through aggregators like Google (<http://news.google.com>). Disintermediated media can be as narrow in scope or as broad as an editor/publisher desires and is capable of reporting. There is no capacity or format limitation, whether print, graphic, audio or video.

There are other differences:

- Accuracy of information is not guaranteed in disintermediated media unless an editor/publisher focuses on verifiable facts and words. The disintermediated environment is awash in facts, rumors, half-truths and lies. It is more difficult for news consumers to know what is true and what isn’t. Hence, the credibility of disintermediated media is suspect unless the media are part of mainstream news organizations that keep fact-checking operations.
- There are more disintermediated sources of news with political and cultural leanings than in mainstream media. The news consumer has to factor in the mindset of a source more often than in mainstream media.
- Understanding of individuals is potentially facilitated in disintermediated media through forms of personal information publishing, such as Facebook, Linked-in or blogs,etc. On the other hand, it is equally possible for an individual to lie or cover up information about himself – to omit facts or to invent a persona. This is less possible when mainstream media are primary information disseminators because of their gatekeeper function.
- There are vast repositories of “evergreen” information available in disintermediated media that one can access at any time without going to mainstream media or a library.

- Information publishing is instantaneous and news consumers have come to expect immediate frequency. However, accuracy can be sacrificed for speed and often is.
- The definition of news has devolved on the individual using disintermediated media rather than on editors and reporters representing the individual. There is now a potential of infinite media providing an infinite menu of information. Fragmentation of information allows for infinite customization of information consumption.
- The individual's franchise relationship to media is breaking down. The individual can go at will to information sources with multiple voices and content and form new relationships. However, these relationships are tenuous and can be easily disrupted -- a click of a mouse.

One thing remains the same, however. There is still a need for gatekeepers to vet, sort and digest news for individuals who have only so much time during a day to become informed.

The PR practitioner and disintermediated media

When a PR practitioner approaches audiences directly, the practitioner carries the burden of making the medium work and cannot depend on news organizations for resources, experience and an audience gained over years of effort. The PR practitioner is the gatekeeper. The practitioner generates information and vouches for its accuracy, relevance and frequency. The practitioner is responsible for understanding the audience and building a franchise with it. The practitioner establishes and maintains the voice of the media, and the practitioner ensures target audiences know who is disseminating the news in order to maintain credibility

The PR practitioner is responsible for determining the worldview of target audiences. It is only through knowing what they are interested in and how they think that the practitioner can appeal to them directly. Do they want news about an individual, a company or organization, an industry, all three or something else? The medium can be as narrow in scope or as broad as the practitioner desires within limits imposed by the target audience. This is tricky because one can produce a news vehicle and miss the audience one wishes to reach.

Because relevant information might not be available to the practitioner, the practitioner might need to create it. This raises political and budgetary challenges. I.e., is the organization willing to spend money on research, news gathering, writing and editing as a continuous and frequent activity? And is the organization willing to change its medium if audiences fail to respond? Targeted news consumers will over time conclude whether they can trust self-published information based on credibility, relevance and frequency. This can be a stumbling block. Too frequently, marketing departments get hold of information

and turn it into sales copy rather than credible, relevant information. The PR practitioner is responsible for maintaining a medium's credibility. The practitioner should know the difference between long-term relationship building and short-term sell. Marketers responsible for yearly numbers can forget or overlook the difference.

Because the PR practitioner is responsible for audience identification and building, the practitioner needs to identify target individuals precisely and how to reach them – a time-consuming activity. The practitioner identifies as well the media vehicles, their timeliness and frequency that target individuals prefer from print through video to the various forms online, including Facebook, blogs, Twitter and other social media. Chances are the practitioner will use all forms -- print, graphic, audio, video and social – because of audience fragmentation and will need familiarity with each medium to know what works and what doesn't. There are ways to e-mail, to build web sites effectively, to blog cogently, to use Facebook properly and to Twitter and to make them work together. Hence, the practitioner needs to be a media generalist. The practitioner takes it upon himself to organize and present content, whether new or “evergreen” for easy digestion. The practitioner develops cost-effective media mixes to reach target individuals through integration of multiple media with consequent increase in administrative and publishing burdens and costs.

Self-publishing and direct contact with target audiences has challenges but PR practitioners may have little choice but to go directly to target audiences as mainstream media continue to shrink. There is no easy way to do it without performing homework into target audiences, their perceptions, the media they consume and their leanings. Disintermediated, direct media have extraordinary value when produced correctly. When produced incorrectly, such media can waste time and resources and dilute the focus of the communications practitioner. The task is doing it right and in doing it right, seizing opportunities direct media provide. If there is one principle a self-publisher should live by, it is to listen to one's audiences carefully and closely. The news consumer is still in charge and not the gatekeeper.

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