Chapter 2

Both Sides Now: Viewing Media through the Public Relations Prism

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, the reader will be able to:

- Understand and explain the codependent relationship between the media and public relations.
- Describe how the evolution of technology has affected the current media environment.
- Demonstrate how the dissemination of truth can be manipulated to serve the objectives of disparate parties.
- Understand the media opportunity during both a management crisis and a management success, and know how to leverage the media and public relations industry to maximize the opportunity to the organization's benefit.

Introduction

> *I've looked at life from both sides now,*
> *From win and lose, and still somehow*
> *It's life's illusions I recall.*
> *I really don't know life at all.*
>
> —Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now"

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As children, we're taught to tell the truth. Yet, the simple truths of childhood become stretched by the complexities of ideas and the realities of modern communications. Of course, no one tells the whole truth for fear of offending others or inviting retaliation. So while we cling to the ideal of truth in communications, we are, as Joni Mitchell ruefully observed in her 1969 song "Both Sides Now," forced to concede that "life's illusions" can outweigh the facts.

If we consider communications as a "Both Sides Now" kind of problem, we have the media arrayed at one end and public relations (PR) at the other—the former a fountain of "truth" and objective information, the latter characterized by a series of message points and arguments defending or advancing a client's point of view.

However, like the tarnished imperative to tell the truth, the reality of what media and PR professionals do and how they do it is largely misunderstood. The argument set forth here is that the media and PR use the same pieces of the information puzzle to arrive at different ends of the communications spectrum. Each effort may be valid, or neither may be, but there is a striking similarity in how a PR person develops a message and how a journalist writes a headline.

The reporter's story could be diametrically opposed to what a corporate spokesman writes, but the end purpose of both is to convince the reader that the last word on the page is in fact the final word on the subject. Without denigrating the efforts of either the media or PR practitioners, it's important to know how each side does its work and why, in spite of the differences, the end result is quite the same—if not in content then in approach.

For some 25 years of my professional career, I was on the media side of the bright yellow line that separates journalists from advocates and consultants. For the past decade, on the other hand, I have been a consultant on behalf of a number of prominent clients in the healthcare industry. Thus, I've seen the communications landscape from both sides, and while some of what I've seen is illusory, much of the experience has come clearly in focus.

There are those who see themselves on one side of the information divide or the other; it's important to see how each enterprise unfolds and why certain ideas and approaches become accepted practice.

For communications students and the public, it is critical to know how and why the two seemingly parallel lines of PR and the news media so frequently intersect. If truth is the general intent, why are both sides so frequently accused of making misrepresentations and distorting the facts? If truth is the first casualty in war, then it has been grievously wounded in efforts to grab the biggest headline or loft the client's banner.

This need not be the case, and frequently it is not. So where does good communications practice lie, and how can the depredations of language be healed?

As an approach to answering these questions, I would like to offer a series of examples, or case histories, that tell the story from both sides—how the media viewed the event and how PR professionals responded. My qualifications for this analysis are based on pursuing two intersecting careers and learning how to appreciate their strengths while not ignoring their weaknesses. Truth need not be a casualty, and meaningful communications can thrive in a climate of good will. Unfortunately, no one can dispute that those conditions don't currently prevail in our public discussion.

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The worlds of PR and the media do have much to say to each other, and the more understanding between the two, the better the public will be served. For purposes of discussion, we'll review some significant communications problems to see how they were successfully explained or if in fact it is only life's illusions that we recall.

Finding Opportunity in a Crisis

A crisis can be viewed as an extreme disruption of normal events whose ultimate consequences are unknown. As Tolstoy wrote in *Anna Karenina*, "Happy families are all alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." So it is with crises; each has a life of its own with moments both poignant and sublime.

A crisis involving a massive oil spill, the runaway acceleration of an automobile, or the discovery that a popular medication is linked to serious adverse events are all threatening circumstances requiring an urgent response. However, for those engaged in reporting such events or defending those accused of causing them, a crisis is an opportunity.

As reporters comb an organization's communications architecture looking for every crack and flaw lurking in exculpatory assertions, trusted advisors scurry to patch every information leak and rationalize any inconsistencies. This codependent relationship is a regular and predictable feature of virtually every crisis that rises to the level of public attention or regulatory intervention.

The salient aspects of a crisis are the growing awareness that a problem exists; the reaction, frequently outraged, to the negative change; and, ultimately, a resolution. The 1982 Tylenol case, which left seven people dead from cyanide poisoning, is often cited as a textbook example of crisis management.

Johnson & Johnson, Tylenol's maker, was praised for rapid and complete disclosure of the circumstances surrounding the crimes as well as revamping the product to make it tamper-resistant. Though the perpetrators were never found, the idea that a corporation would speak candidly about a major threat to public health and the corporate response was laudatory. If Tylenol is celebrated as an example of the system working, it is perhaps the most special of all special corporate communications cases.

This high-profile case matured before the 24/7 news cycle became the dominant communications model. Thus Johnson & Johnson was able to disseminate its messages of action and empathy through traditional channels, which turned the story around on fixed rather than constant deadlines. This is not to say the story was controlled, but rather the more measured pace of reporting moderated the story's impact. Although CNN was reporting every development in real time, it was still a fledgling network without many viewers. All-news radio was certainly a factor, but television was the primary source for most, infusing a story with powerful pictures and dramatic narration.

If a case of Tylenol's magnitude were to break today, the story would be viral in a matter of minutes, flashed to every corner of the globe via Twitter and other Internet portals. Thus, the

ability to assess a situation, develop a strategy, and present one's case to the media via a press conference has given way to an information cacophony.

As if harkening back to some golden era of corporate communications, experts asked to analyze how a company performed in a crisis situation inevitably cite the Tylenol case as a benchmark for effectiveness and transparency. No doubt, forthrightness saved the brand and created a set of expectations for future events. However, while Tylenol was a game changer, it was also a unique circumstance.

This was certainly one of the last times that news media and corporate spokespeople stood at opposite ends of the trenches engaged in a predictable exchange of messages and reportage with the public as a beneficiary. However, the era of the information dreadnaughts is over. Technology has changed the equation to the point that a single person sending out a single "tweet" can literally move the world. Anyone and everyone is a journalist. Reality shows proliferate at the expense of, well, reality.

While television news has been and will always be more television than news, major outlets like MSNBC and Fox represent opposite ends of emerging agenda journalism. In fact, they are frequently more like PR campaigns than journalistic entities. Yes, Tylenol communications is a truth writ large in the pantheon of information. Still, those who celebrate that success must know that it can never be repeated. Another Tylenol case won't play out simply as an important news story; rather it will be a defining moment for journalists and spin doctors to present different but complementary versions of an event, more reflective of their ends than the public's need to know.

Of course, there will always be point and counterpoint between journalists and PR people, but we have a new set of rules … or a lack of them. In place of an information marketplace where ideas can prevail, we are engaged in a kind of urban combat with verbal insurgents taking potshots from windows and darkened alleys. This is the communications equivalent of what Victorian poet Matthew Arnold described as "a darkling plain where ignorant armies clash by night."

Though this is a new world, it isn't necessarily a brave one. Still, those who ply their trade as communicators must find a way to survive. The rest of this chapter will chart a course.

Things Get Tense over the Present Tense

We swim in a sea of language, rarely noticing its power to arouse passions or transform the course of events. Scientific presentations, for example, offer a rational argument and, in the case of medical research, evidence to support claims of safety and efficacy. Communicators in their efforts to clarify and interest viewers and readers try to integrate emotion into academic information to make it more palatable. Typically, this involves introducing a patient anecdote to humanize the story.

This approach has become a standard that rarely draws attention—unless the patient is the president of the United States. In 1985, Ronald Reagan became arguably the world's most

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high-profile patient when he had surgery for a suspected malignancy. Journalists covering the story, including myself, were ill prepared for what was to become one of the most startling press conferences of that era.

After the operation, Dr. Stephen Rosenberg—the surgeon at the National Institutes of Health who performed the procedure—emerged to address the national media. No doubt most of the assembled news people expected a talk full of technical detail. What they got was something quite different.

"The president has cancer," declared Rosenberg with the kind of candor rarely heard in such high-stakes situations. Rosenberg went on to say that he had successfully removed a cancerous polyp from Reagan's intestines. However, Rosenberg's straightforward statement set off a communications confrontation between the White House press office and reporters on the scene.

The political fallout of a president with cancer—even though fully treatable—was really impossible to contain. Looking back to that era, having cancer seemed more threatening—with a darker prognosis and fewer available treatments. How would the chief executive cope with this new health problem, and what would it mean for the conduct of government?

Clearly, this was a communications challenge for the president's team that hoped to dampen Dr. Rosenberg's unequivocal assessment of Reagan's clinical situation. There were many journalists on the scene, besides me, that knew Rosenberg personally and had great respect for his research to develop a cancer vaccine. Thus his words would be difficult to impeach.

What followed was almost as surprising as Rosenberg's blunt remarks. Members of the White House team began lobbying reporters with the idea that Rosenberg had misspoken. What he meant to say, according to the White House staffers, is not that the President "has" cancer, but that he "had" cancer.

That of course was a more palatable political message, but it didn't jibe with the facts, as plainly spoken by Rosenberg. No matter how much the White House wanted to spin the results, Reagan's cancer was very much in the present tense … not the past. What may have been novel information, even to some of the press corps, is that the removal of the tumor doesn't mean the disease is cured. Cancer is a chronic condition requiring long-term medical management. It isn't like a bout with influenza.

What the White House team could have done was suggest that the good news was President Reagan could live well with cancer, which he proceeded to do. That message of hope would have been a far more powerful statement than trying to blunt the medical truth.

Thus Ronald Reagan's surgery was a teachable moment on many levels. It raised the visibility of colorectal cancer, then and now a stigmatized form of the disease. It also introduced candor and clarity into the discussion, which no doubt encouraged many Americans to think about their own potential vulnerability to the disease.

Journalists got a major story made even bigger by Rosenberg's now famous four-word description of the President's condition. In the end, the White House communications team received a strong dose of reality. Simple language delivered clearly and credibly becomes an unmistakable landmark. Reporters and the public fix their course on it, and those who tack away do so at their peril.

Finding Meaning in the Message

While cynicism is the coin of the communications realm for some, others are using a more valuable currency. If, as H. L. Mencken suggested, "Nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public," now practitioners are doing very well appealing to our higher nature with messages that have real meaning. In fact, so-called social marketing campaigns have turned bogus PR messages into instruments of positive change.

Few products have had such a physical and emotional grip on the public as tobacco. While advertising and PR campaigns celebrated smoking as passage into adulthood, tobacco companies were well aware that their products were both addictive and dangerous. Starting most notably with the US Surgeon General's 1964 report, evidence about the hazards of smoking was becoming incontrovertible.

To counter the science, the tobacco industry followed the advice of a PR firm and created The Tobacco Institute to discredit and contradict legitimate scientific findings. Although the idea that the tobacco industry could present meaningful public health information was something of an oxymoron or even Orwellian in its manipulation of the facts, The Tobacco Institute was widely quoted as a source on "the other side of the issue."

The public had become as addicted to the pro-tobacco message as it was to nicotine. Things turned dramatically in 1996 when then Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Commissioner David Kessler and the Clinton Administration introduced regulations to control tobacco products and advertising. Kessler, a pediatrician, had been waging his own campaign against tobacco declaring smoking "a pediatric disease" that will ultimately kill many of the thousands of children who take up the habit every day.

Suddenly, a public health message was gaining traction and momentum. Although the initial regulations were overturned, hundreds of millions of dollars from a tobacco damages suit brought by the states fueled the growing anti-tobacco enterprise. That provided an opportunity for communications and PR professionals to develop campaigns encouraging people to improve their health rather than compromise it. Using the same sophisticated tools as their tobacco opponents, these apostles of social marketing were "selling" positive choice instead of encouraging destructive behavior.

One of the most effective anti-tobacco PR initiatives was the "Truth" campaign of the late 1990s. It developed an effective message suggesting the tobacco industry was deceiving and manipulating kids—not telling them the truth. Not a health message per se, but one that focus groups showed resonated with this particular audience.

As a medical correspondent for CNN, and later as a PR professional during this period working on the "Truth" program, the transformation that I observed in the dialogue about tobacco was truly remarkable. The tobacco industry had long scoffed at science and public health, essentially stonewalling reporters and using The Tobacco Institute to defend products linked to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people annually in the United States.

This was little more than a Potemkin village. Now the real truth was plain to see, and ironically, many of the same PR techniques that had built the tobacco message platform were being used to dismantle it.

From the announcement of these historic regulations to their ultimate demise in the US Supreme Court under industry challenge, I felt privileged to watch the power of science, public policy, and communications engineer a sea change in public health. The Clinton Administration lost the initial battle, but Big Tobacco is losing the hearts and minds of consumers. The perception of smoking as socially desirable and benign has been forever tarnished, and tobacco consumption, generally, is down in the United States.

Following legislation passed in 2009, the FDA now has the authority to regulate tobacco and this time with the grudging acquiescence of the industry.

Looking back, I worked hard to write about the tobacco issue objectively as a journalist, but I felt it was more important to tell the truth.

Antibody Anybody? Everybody!

Every PR person who has pitched a new product knows how cold the voice on the other end of the phone line can be. It is becoming increasingly difficult to interest reporters in doing stories about drugs in development until they reach the phase 3 stage of large clinical trials. Even then, it is often “wait and see” until the FDA decides what it is going to do. Nor does approval necessarily guarantee top-tier coverage unless the treatment is a game changer.

However, there are moments when a new drug’s performance is so impressive that it matches, or even exceeds, its most ambitious message points. The story of Genentech’s Avastin treatment—or biologic to be more precise—culminates at the meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) in Chicago in 2003. That is when researchers presented data on the first monoclonal antibody proven effective against cancer—in this case colorectal cancer, the same kind of disease that afflicted President Reagan.

Avastin uses a targeted approach called antiangiogenesis to starve the tumor’s blood supply. The net result was that patients in the treatment’s key study lived about 30% longer than those on conventional therapy.

ASCO is the Super Bowl of medical meetings for companies in the oncology business, and Avastin was the star of the show in 2003. Coverage of Avastin’s findings grew to nearly a billion media impressions, extraordinary by any measure. However, while the science driving Avastin was impressive, the PR and communications effort matched that performance stride for stride.

Avastin’s development and my association with Genentech go back quite a ways. As a reporter for CNN in San Francisco shortly after the network went on the air in 1980, I received a somewhat unusual assignment. The piece would focus on Genentech, a new company that exemplified the emerging biotech industry in the Bay Area.

Stepping off Paul Berg’s groundbreaking work at Stanford that led to a Nobel Prize, the company hoped to build customized versions of human antibodies that would target a disease process or mechanism in a very specific way. In effect, using smart bombs instead of carpet bombs as a treatment approach.

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This was clearly an impressive concept, and I filed a story, which ran and then disappeared into CNN's 24/7 abyss. Genentech came back on my radar screen in the weeks leading up to the 2003 ASCO conference. Then a consultant for a PR firm, I was assigned as a media coordinator to promote Avastin for reporters covering the event. In this case, much of the "selling" had already been done by Genentech's forward-looking investor calls and briefings between reporters and high-level scientists involved in Avastin's research.

One of the reasons for the intense interest in Avastin from science journalists is that the treatment was the proof of principle for antiangiogenesis and in particular for its creator, Dr. Judah Folkman, who had stuck with the controversial idea for some four decades.

In a PR masterstroke, Genentech and its consultants hosted a dinner at a New York City hotel after ASCO that attracted some of the country's leading medical journalists. They came to hear Folkman and other scientists discuss Avastin as the leading edge of a new wave of cancer treatments.

The message was that cancer isn't necessarily an acute life-ending disease but increasingly a manageable chronic condition. Even though no new data points were presented since the event took place before FDA approval was granted, reporters took away important insights, and Genentech developed invaluable relationships with journalists that proved instrumental in the quest for coverage.

As it turned out, the problem wasn't getting coverage, but keeping up with the demand. From the *Today Show* to *USA Today*, every major news organization filed on the story in the run up to approval and well beyond.

Like the Tylenol case, Avastin is unique as a communications and PR enterprise. Tylenol made the best of a tragic situation, while Avastin successfully rode a wave of expectation in the battle against cancer.

While Johnson & Johnson's response to the Tylenol crisis was transparent and timely, and thus diffused the impact, Genentech aggressively courted media, offering information about a disease-modifying treatment that heightened anticipation. ASCO provided the high point for a drama that had started decades earlier.

It was a long trip from the lab bench to center stage at ASCO, but Genentech made the journey by realizing that good science is driven and supported by a strong communications strategy.

From Macro to Micro: Communicating in the Viral Environment

Much has been written about the declining state of major media and the ascendancy of blogs and other social media outlets. Without belaboring the obvious, the era in which a few key organizations hold information hegemony is over.

While the new communications universe is still inchoate, no serious professional can ignore the effect and significance of this transformation. Every major PR agency is busily developing social media expertise, although it is still very difficult to define metrics that assess the

effectiveness of placing clients in these venues. Nonetheless, the prevailing view is that not participating in social media is an opportunity missed.

Conversely, journalists are either getting information from blogs or becoming bloggers themselves. Writing in the "Neiman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard" in 2008, Paul Bradshaw observed, "From journalistic pariah to savior of the news industry, blogs have undergone an enormous transformation."

Specifically, many journalists now have more autonomy and depend less on traditional sources, including PR spokespeople. News, rather than being preedited, is becoming more of a community process, correcting and updating in real time. Thus, getting published in a blog can be easier than in traditional media.

While PR people have been concerned about the loss of some of their long-standing relationships, blogs and social media are creating new opportunities. In many cases, the PR person can pitch the blogger directly and the blogger can publish the story without having to go through any editorial review.

In health care, for instance, a number of disease-state bloggers are finding an independent voice. A major media outlet reporter, who has diabetes, started a diabetes blog that is highly regarded in that community. The audience for the blog may be small but is still important for clients hoping to influence diabetes patients.

Winning over this blogger may prove just as important as landing a hit in mainstream media, and the process may be easier. The challenge is to find blogs that have bona fide journalistic content that adds value for readers, and consequently clients, hoping to reach an audience in transformation. If a blog is seen only as a PR tool, its reach will be limited accordingly.

Whatever firewall there was between journalists and PR people is now being redefined in the blogosphere. Digital journalists are frequently more accessible and in need of more and more material to feed their stories than their traditional counterparts. PR communicators, meanwhile, are looking for new opportunities to deliver their clients' messages.

Now it is possible to speak directly to the publisher, editor, and lead reporter, all in the same person—then watch as the story is published worldwide on the Internet. Viewing the new reality, one wonders if Walter Cronkite would now conclude his nightly broadcast saying, "That's the way it was," instead of "That's the way it is."

Summary

Whatever the new trends or directions in communications may be, the relationship between the press and PR advocates will always be in flux. Like Tolstoy's unhappy family, these interactions are complex—unique but vitally important.

PR counselors have access to sources and information that reporters need. Meanwhile, reporters open the front door to audiences eagerly sought by PR clients. When these interactions work, and they often do, everyone's interest is served. It's a win–win situation.

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On the occasions when communication campaigns serve only to advance special interests, their motives and credibility will always be in doubt. Over time, the differences will become obvious, as in the case of The Tobacco Institute or, in Ronald Reagan's case, real doctors will ultimately prevail over spin doctors.

While journalists and advocates may look at each other through different ends of the telescope, they should also realize that they are engaged in the same process—with the former responding to the public interest and the latter advancing the client's agenda.

The divide may not be crossed by something as simple as Rodney King's plea, "People, can't we all just get along?" Still, there are things that can be done.

Writing in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* in 1999 about issues in risk communication, I observed, "Risk to the scientist is ultimately a tool to measure and compare data, a statement of probability. For journalists, risk is a measurement of news value. The greater the risk of anything, the bigger the story. Is there a way of reconciling these disparate approaches?"

Safe to say the same conundrum applies today, perhaps even to a greater degree as traditional journalistic standards are tested in the new media environment. How would the Tylenol tampering case have been reported by Fox News or MSNBC, not to mention the Drudge Report?

How Can PR People and Their Clients Stay in the Conversation?

In 1999, I suggested that journalists and scientists make greater efforts to work together, with the goal of getting the story right and in perspective. While this may be an obvious statement, it is hard to dispute. This guidance certainly applies to any kind of communications endeavor where accuracy and integrity should be the take-aways, not the type size of the headline.

It may not be possible to know the whole truth or even a fraction of reality. However, all those engaged in the process need to acknowledge that their efforts are flawed and in need of continual improvement.

Crossing back and forth along the bright yellow line as a communicator, I have seen more than my share of illusions shattered. Inevitably, though, the truth is vindicated. The workings of journalists and PR people may become increasingly strained but no less important. It is in everyone's interest to look beyond a narrow vision and, in realizing a broader purpose, see both sides now.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the salient features of a crisis? How can a crisis become a positive media opportunity for an organization?
2. How did the media environment during the 1982 Tylenol case affect the outcome? In what ways could a similar crisis in today's media environment result in a different outcome?

3. What was learned from the 1985 reporting of President Reagan's cancer treatment?
4. How did PR techniques change over the years to shift public perceptions about tobacco?
5. What was unique about the Genentech case mentioned in the text? Why was it deemed a success?
6. Describe the benefits for journalists in the new viral media environment. What are the challenges in this environment for a communication professional?

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