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1999

Fernandes, A. (1999). Managing information and media relations in the new media age. In AMIC Annual Conference, 8th, on Asia: Information Poor to Information Rich - Strategies for the 21st Century, Chennai-, Jul 1-3, 1999. Singapore: Asian Media Information and Communication Centre.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/92599>

Paper No. 38

Managing Information and Media Relations in the New Media Age

-- by Allwyn Fernandes*

The challenge for PR professionals has changed dramatically in the last five years.

The Gutenberg era is over. A new digital communications technology has emerged. An electronic superhighway is beginning to girdle the globe as voice, video and data converge, bringing in their wake a new basket of digital, multimedia and interactive communication technologies.

But it is not just the technologies that concern us. It is the social change that accompanies the technologies that must be our prime concern. The telephone meant you did not need to walk if you wanted to talk. The new technologies are doing much more. They are changing the way we live – the way we work, relax, manage our money, trade and communicate with each other. The new technologies are changing the way we perceive people, cultures, countries and companies and our expectations of them (people are much more demanding today when it comes to service) -- and also our expectations of ourselves.

It is not just a question of explosion of new media and “instant information” through “Live” and “Online” broadcasts that take viewers and listeners to the heart of the scene of activity never thought possible before.

From managing a relatively small, laid back environment that consisted mainly of print less than a decade ago, PR professionals in India have been catapulted into managing a whole new environment of Print, Radio, Cable & Satellite TV and the Internet. All this makes the '80s look like the Middle Ages.

Indian Media Scene

To take a closer look at the scene in India:

- The number of dailies has more than doubled over the past decade from 1900 to almost 4,500
- From two govt.-run TV channels at the time of the Gulf war in 1991, viewers now have a choice of 55 terrestrial, C&S channels. The Gulf war created an awareness of CNN and satellite TV and transformed the expectations of India's middle class. What followed was a mind-blowing experience of infotainment that has impacted India across all classes.
 - The government-run telephone corporation took a hundred years to provide one million connections in Mumbai; private cable operators took just three years to wire one million homes for cable TV and are now looking at providing Internet access via cable.
- Urban India has rediscovered radio thanks to FM

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But, more important, the Internet has spread faster than anyone would have thought possible. Six months ago, it was not possible to access the Net during the day. Then Private Service Providers came in and the number of users has been galloping -- the 300,000 connections today are expected to exceed one million (some say 1.5 million) by March 2000 and to double by 2002.

A recent survey showed that only 9 per cent of households owning PCs have access to the Internet in India, but 37 per cent of non users plan to seek access soon. Access among those who have it is not restricted to one member alone – usually it is the adult son, daughter and the male head of the household who use it. The study found that 97 per cent use it for communication and 63% for education.

With near universal presence of cable TV among Internet homes, and with cable operators working to provide Internet access, you can imagine the speed at which Internet use will grow. Already,

- Cyber kiosks charging a rupee per minute for Internet use have sprouted in small university towns with a sizeable student population.
- Secondary and Higher Secondary School Certificate examination results were last month posted on the Net.

World-wide, one guesstimate said that in 1998 117 million people in 171 countries out of 207 were using the Internet. Of these, 70 million were in North America, 23 million in Europe and 7.25 million in Australia and Japan. That leaves about 17 million in Asia, Africa and South America.

This explosion of traditional and new media has thrown up huge challenges for PR professionals in India. I am sure colleagues from the rest of Asia have similar stories.

Benefits of New Media

This new environment has its benefits .

On the new information highway, most roads bypass journalists to a great extent

The nature of the Internet medium ensures that it is no longer the journalist who selects what people read, but on-line users who decided what they want to read. This elimination of media “middlemen” allows companies to bypass reporters to a great extent on the Net.

But this is also happening in the print and electronic media where pressures for the advertising dollar and for editorial matter to fill up space or air time is increasingly making media more receptive to infomercials and advertorials.

This process has been facilitated by new entrants to the world of publishing/broadcasting with a strongly commercial and competitive, rather than an institutional approach. Many young journalists in India today have never been to journalism school. They work in an insecure hire-and-fire environment where only performance and the bottom line count. They are only too willing to go along with company policy, rather than the principles or demands of journalism.

Websites, with their increasingly blurred boundary between editorial and ad content, have further nudged traditional media along this road. Internet publications are increasingly offering more and more content-related advertising links on their Websites.

One of the questions that clients often ask PR persons is -- “Can you ensure this gets across to the reader exactly as we put it out?” Earlier, you could only do it through an ad. It is now possible to say “yes, if it is on the Net”, by ensuring links to your own Web pages on a Website like *Rediff on the Net*, *khaj.com*, *indiatimes.com* or *expressindia.com* apart, from putting it on your own company website. Such websites are expected to grow to 100,000 from the current base of 8,600.

All this should considerably reduce complaints that one often hears from traditional media about distortion, misquotation, misrepresentation and misunderstanding.

There is another less noticeable development that is taking place -- the trivialisation of news and the emphasis on the sensational that is disillusioning readers/viewers.

These readers/viewers -- and they are a small number today -- prefer to surf the Net and delve directly into the warehouses of information that the 6,000 search engines provide, or go to company websites.

Growing Role of Analysts

Yet another development of the last three years is the growing role of analysts from financial institutions. They are much sought after by the electronic media which rely on them, rather than their own reporters, for expert opinion and analysis. Print media have also now begun inviting them to write weekly columns. They are also to be found on the Net.

This means that in addition to communicating with the mainline media (which includes print, TV, Internet and radio), PR professionals have to also look at ensuring analysts get the kind of information they are looking for -- which is very different from what reporters want. Their perspective is crucial because they influence both investors and media persons.

The digital revolution, with its e-mail and other facilities, has also changed the perspective of many in the print media. Print journalists, for all their scorn of the electronic media, are increasingly relying on it for information and perceptions. So, no more can we talk of generating ink when refer to the media -- it is a question of generating electrons now, because electrons drive print, radio, TV and the Net.

On the other hand, the new media have also created new minefields.

"Live", "Online" broadcasts have their own risks. One of the most watched TV programmes in India is Prannoy Roy's Union Budget analysis and reaction. On one such programme, the interviewee in Bangalore launched into an attack on an international bank even though this had no relation whatsoever to the Budget. Even a seasoned anchor like Prannoy Roy had a hard time trying to cut him off and limit the damage caused to the bank.

But the new media go a step further -- they make it possible for ordinary readers to become reporters, publishers and broadcasters! Today, anyone can create or join a chat group, a listserver, or a Web site and reach thousands of people -- simply by clicking a mouse button.

Websites also allow you to have your own page on the Net and many websites allow you to post your own views on the net freely and without restrictions -- unlike newspapers which reject nine-tenths of Letters from Readers for lack of space. In other words, anyone with an idea that he thinks is big can share it with the world thanks to the Net.

Arena for Activists

The Net has also become an arena for all kinds of activists -- from genuine environmentalists and those fighting child labour and banning of land mines, to those with a vested interest in pushing a private agenda under the guise of public interest. The July 1998 issue of ComputerWorld reported that a search on Yahoo for the words "hate" and "sucks" among Website names yielded 628 hits!

On the one hand, the Internet is a powerful and ubiquitous tool in modern life, with a great capacity for connecting people and disseminating information. It has tremendous power to build awareness quickly among people thousands of miles apart.

On the other hand, this same power and speed is also being misused for offensive communications – spreading half-truths, outright falsehoods and disinformation that is not only defamatory, but also damaging and dangerous.

The problem with any negative accusation is that it creates doubt and the potential for that is eternal. Even if truth prevails in the end, as we all like to believe, the association with the negative always lingers – “Didn’t I hear something bad about that company recently?” There is always the chance that a negative will be passed along to thousands of people or remain in a search engine’s warehouse even though it has been proved to be false.

All Pervasive Medium

In the last couple of years, scores of corporates have been victimised by the spread of false and damaging rumours, hoaxes and scams via e-mail and on the Internet which has become a great rumour circuit. Many have been forced to spend millions of dollars grappling with the potential harm caused by this all-pervasive medium.

Earlier, activism demanded a lot of organisational effort on the part of an NGO before it could expect to make an impact. Now an NGO, with a handful of dedicated activists determined to target a product or a company, can do the same in a much shorter time with greater impact. The Web has become a hotbed of activity for all kinds of causes. Many international NGOs maintain well-designed Websites with regular Updates and Action Alerts on the activities of companies impacting their causes.

Some of you may have heard of the Association of Flaming Ford Owners, a site focusing on the alleged potential of Ford vehicles to burst into flame. Here is a sampling of other companies impacted by e-mail and Internet rumours in recent months. Let me caution you in advance – *every one of them is false.*

- Proctor & Gamble

Rumour: They manufacture toxic sponges

Truth: P&G does not even make sponges

- Tommy Hilfiger

Rumour: He appeared on the Oprah Winfrey TV talk show saying he didn't want his clothes worn by minorities (the same rumour plagued designer Liz Claiborne for years)

Truth: Hilfiger has never even been on Oprah -- Oprah said so herself, on the air (and the rumour about Liz Claiborne was not true, either)

- Gerber Products Co.

Rumour: It lost a class-action lawsuit, and was ordered to pay \$500 in savings bonds to every child born in America between 1985 and 1997

Truth: There was no such litigation, and Gerber is not giving away savings bonds

- American Cancer Society (ACS)

Rumour: If you forward a certain email, the ACS will donate 3 cents to a dying child's treatment

Truth: hoax -- the child does not exist

- Microsoft

Rumour: Forward an e-mail from Bill Gates and win \$1,000

Truth: Gates never sent any such e-mail

- Disney

Rumour: Forward an e-mail sent by Walt Disney, Jr. and win a \$5,000 trip to Disney World

Truth: hoax -- there is no Walt Disney, Jr.

- Nike

Rumour: Return your old shoes and get a new pair in return

Truth: Nike does have a shoe-recycling program, but they do not give you free shoes as a reward for donating your old ones

More recently, the British government, which at one time could stop publication simply by issuing a 'D' notice, found the names of over 100 British intelligence agents on a Internet website. The cause of the mischief was a disgruntled former MI6 agent who posted the information on an US-based website. The British tried hard to shut down the Website.

Gone are the days when governments, industrial and scientific institutions -- and even powerful corporate groups -- could successfully keep negative information about themselves under wraps. We now truly live in a global village where everyone knows everything about everybody and rumours, instead of being circulated by village gossips in hush-hush whispers, are posted on Global Bulletin Boards for all to read. The genie is truly out of the bottle and no one can coax it back in! All this is happening when the new medium is still in an embryonic stage -- one can imagine its power as it extends its reach!

Gone also are the days when a government or even a corporate house could use its clout to block the publication of information. When the mainline papers in America hesitated to tell their readers what they knew of the grand jury proceedings in the Clinton case, when even the tabloids hesitated to do so, it was an Internet journalist called Mathew Drudge who posted the story on the Web and forced Clinton into a position where he had to admit that he had lied to his family and the American people.

Instant Access via the Internet

And when the Starr report was presented, millions around the world could access its salacious details instantly on the Internet. No queuing up for a hard copy as the British did in the '60s when the Denning Report on the Profumo scandal was published!

In an era when Transparency and People's Participation are the buzz words, the new technologies are democratising information, making it available to all who want it. Even the Government of India, which has been holding on to an outdated Official Secrets Act, has been forced to move with the times. The Environment Ministry, under pressure from NGOs to declare the status of all clearances, recently announced that it would display them on a website -- www.nic.in/envfor

That is the reality of managing information in an electronic world. From worrying about generating the wrong kind of ink, we now have to worry about generating the wrong kind of electrons. Even cameras have gone digital and as someone said the other day, "Power no longer flows out of the barrel of gun -- it flows from the barrel of a camera."

All this means new information management strategies to protect a brand -- not just from activists, but also from unscrupulous rivals sometimes stoking Internet fires. Monitoring the

websites of organisations targeting you, keeping tabs on chat shows likely to discuss issues of concern to your organisation, mounting a counter-offensive by providing information on your own website and, more important, linking it to other websites to get the facts out to the open minds looking for the truth.

One company in the US that has been facing a barrage of insinuations about one of its edible products, answers them

- on its own website
- a telephone helpline
- a “helpdesk” to answer questions in print and from media
- through credible third parties like the FDA and the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation (MSF) which have posted refutations of the allegations on their own Web sites.
- In addition, there are six more third party sites and Medline, the online research resource provided by the National Library of Medicine, on which information about the particular product is available.

This might seem like overkill, but when you are facing foes determined to spread disinformation about your products at every possible opportunity -- and many of us in this audience have first-hand experiences or how vested interests, masquerading as guardians of the public interest, have mastered the art of disinformation combining the old and new technologies -- you have to have your sentries at every possible pass before the disinformation infiltrators get in. You cannot afford a Kargil!

On the positive side, the Net provides a powerful means of communicating with the public in a crisis along with TV and other media. When a gas company in Melbourne faced a major crisis last year, it used the Net effectively to guide its consumers on how to switch on the system in a step-by-step approach after the crisis had ended. This was in addition to print and TV.

Growing Power of e-mail

The challenge therefore today is to manage information with different audiences in an environment of saturation coverage with 24-hour news and information channels, e-mail and Internet, sharing it meaningfully and thoughtfully with different audiences in order to enable them to use that information. We have to devise creative ways to use active “pull” tools like e-mail, which people check first when they switch on their PCs, and through targeted, content-rich email announcements and reminders “push” people to company websites.

The real challenge today is not just getting the information out but, ensuring that in an information glut, some of the knowledge from the warehouses of information catches the eye of the targeted audience and sticks on the mind.

Journalists will only convey the “news” and move on. PR professionals will have to go beyond, culling different kinds of information and packaging it in a way that makes it relevant and useful to different audiences.

For that they will have to look at those who want to get away from the “news flash” to something that is more informative and compelling

But, above all, we shall have to face the challenge of the Internet, of working with, to use the words of the US Supreme Court, “a unique and wholly new medium of world-wide communication.” It is a medium that integrates existing media, providing access to newspapers,

several of which are available on the web, and some radio and TV programmes, but goes beyond, creating new, active, horizontal communications groups, exchanging ideas and views among themselves. No longer is communication a one-way street. It is a mish-mash of criss-crossing lines. Getting through that maze is our challenge.

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