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Online Article Marketing – Professional and Ethical Challenges to Public Relations

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Abstract

This paper examines articles marketing as an automated technique used for the placement of feature stories in e-newsletters, websites and blogs by digital marketers to drive traffic to websites and enhance search engine optimization. The process is reviewed, along with the roles of key players: articles directories sites, articles writing services, article editing/spinning software providers, and articles submission and software services. Recent efforts by Google to ferret out abuses by unscrupulous promoters and current best practices are also outlined. The paper argues that articles marketing deserves careful scrutiny by public relations practitioners and scholars because of the resulting denigration of the quality of public information online, ethical abuses, and encroachment on the traditional publicity function. Articles marketing also is a form of content marketing, which is posing new challenges to public relations as a form of integrated marketing communication.

Public relations research in recent years has devoted considerable attention to applications of new media to the field, particularly the role of websites, blogs and social media (Hallahan, 2010a). Yet various aspects of other Web 1.0 technologies and techniques have been largely ignored. Examples include the use of third-party websites and search engines to advance an organization's goals.

One activity that merits particular attention is the dubious practice known as *articles marketing* – a 21st century adaption of a technique that has been used in public relations for more than a century: the placement of articles in magazines and newspapers as a mean to promote products, services, personalities and causes.

Dating back to the 18th century, the earliest examples of obtaining such publicity exposure involved the circulation of letters and printed tracts on various topics to newspaper editors, who eagerly sought information from any source to fill their pages and reprinted them with or without the permission or encouragement of the source (Cutlip, 1994, 1995; Lamme & Russell, 2010). News releases containing announcements later became standard publicity tools, while the idea of offering specially written “exclusive” or “special” articles to magazines and newspapers emerged as an accepted technique in the early 20th century.

The rise of source-provided articles accompanied the decline of the partisan press and the rise of mass-circulation publications. Meanwhile, readers sought advice to solve everyday problems in their lives and found information about products and services both informative and entertaining. Special interest magazines and general-circulation women's magazines were among the first to rely heavily on such articles. In addition to first-hand accounts and opinion pieces, print media beginning in the late 19th century were replete with profiles of inventors and famous people, seasonal features, how-to-stories, tips and advice, and related “service material.” As newspapers expanded their editorial formats to include more “soft news,” sources became an important source of feature material on topics such as food, fashion, travel, automobiles, books, personal finance, entertainment, and today, technology.

With the advent of the Internet, it was not surprising that publicists sought placements in the same way in websites and in the blogs of quality news outlets. Yet, a wide range of secondary venues also emerged, including entrepreneurial news sites and blogs as well as so-called *content farms* that aimed to fulfill the needs of information-thirsty web users (Jarboe, 2012).

Today, obtaining exposure using article marketing techniques is a form of *content marketing* where the strategy is to attract attention based upon the informational, educational or entertainment value of the information provided, not the appeal of the product or service being promoted. Other examples of content marketing include educational and entertainment videos on YouTube. Articles act as a *freeium* – something of value given away at no charge with the hope of eventually paying for itself when the user becomes a paying client or customer (Anderson, 2009).

Automating Articles Placement

Similar to the automation of advertising placements by ad networks such as Google, Yahoo! and Microsoft, digital entrepreneurs have perfected ways to turn the placement of articles on websites into a high-volume activity through automation – an activity that went virtually unchecked until 2011.

Online *article marketing* is an apt term to describe how articles have been used for marketing purposes in today's digital world. Originally, online articles were conceived of primarily as thinly veiled puffery where links to client web pages could be subtly featured. Although many

clients were as much concerned about communicating important information about their products or services, many digital marketing specialists seized upon the utilitarian function that articles could play in driving traffic to client websites.

For digital marketers (and clients who embraced this approach), the primary purpose of an article became the generation of leads. Visitors could read an article, and then follow an embedded hyperlink to find out more about a solution to the problem or topic of concern to them addressed in the article. Inevitably, this involved ordering a product or service online or retaining the expert services of an article's author.

A secondary, but still important, goal was to generate a large volume of inbound web links to the client's website. Articles marketing thus became an accepted tool in search engine optimization (SEO), a set of techniques designed to increase the prominence of a website on the search engine results pages (SERPs) of Google, Yahoo!, Bing and other search engines whenever someone typed a term or phrase (keyword) into the search engine's search box. The existence of a large number of links from diverse sites that themselves were deemed of high quality improved the chances that Google's spider software would find a client's pages and rate them favorably. Multiple inbound links suggested that page was relevant and valuable to users. The number of links to a website, along with a variety of other factors (site structure, HTML tagging and prominence of keywords) were used in complex algorithms used by search engines to determine listing prominence.

During the first decade of the 21st century, a virtual cottage industry emerged around articles marketing. Players included article directories sites, article writing services, article editing and spinning software producers, and article submission software and services.

The trend was fueled, in part, by the rise of entrepreneurial blogs, e-newsletters, e-zines, and industry websites supported by online text and display advertising. Under pay-per-click models popularized by Google, sites made money only when users clicked on text or display ads. Because click-through rates were low, a large number of users were required in order for sites to generate sufficient revenue to offset operating costs. Publishers found articles rich in keywords provided a free and convenient way to generate traffic from search engines as well as providing fresh editorial content to online visitors.

Article Directories Sites

Online articles directories vary in terms of their purpose and operation.¹ But the articles directories important in articles marketing are those involved in *article syndication*, i.e. the exchange of articles between would-be promoters and publishers (blogs and websites). Scores of websites, sometimes referred to as *article banks*, serve as exchanges where authors can post articles and publishers can download and then repost them.

¹ Today, nearly a 1,000 articles directory sites operate on the web. An updated list of the Top 50 Articles Directories by Traffic and PageRank is maintained by Virtual Real Estate Toolbar (2013), a website data compiler. Among all articles directories, the two most trafficked sites are ehow.com and Squidoo.com. eHow was created as a community of online users who wanted to document their know-how on various topics and share their knowledge with others. eHow differs from most article directories because its aim is not to facilitate SEO and it actually blocks search engine spiders from following links by including a "do not follow" tag on its pages. Squidoo.com is an authoring platform intended to provide a venue where people can create web pages devoted to a single topic (thus appearing like articles). Squidoo is supported by advertising and allows successful pages to earn royalties for the writer or for a designated charity.

Although some sites charge for every posting, others accept articles for free or charge authors only after exceeding a specified number of submissions. These sites generate revenue primarily from contextually targeted text and display ads that appear whenever topic-related articles are displayed. Articles directories actively encourage online publishers to download and repost articles. Terms of use typically state that articles must be used as-is, without editing, and must include a resource box at the end of article that contains the author's affiliation and a hyperlink to the author's website or blog. Thus, the resource box serves much like a promotional advertisement. Publishers can keep apprised of new articles by receiving RSS feeds or e-mail alerts. Article directories with good PageRanks from Google can receive a lot of site visitors and are often considered authority sites.²

The largest article syndication site (and the third largest directory site overall) is EzineArticles.com (2013a), which was founded in 1999 and consistently ranks among the top 500 of all websites in traffic, with 120,000 sites linking in, according to Alexa.com (2013). As of 1Q 2013, the site lists 475,000 contributors and claimed to add tens of thousands of new articles every month. The site serves millions of unique visitors monthly and submits RSS feeds and mail alerts to 100,000 publishers. EzineArticles.com says each article is reviewed twice by human editors. Free membership allows authors to submit their first 10 articles free, after which they are assessed a modest fee. However, authors whose material consistently meets the site's quality standards can ascend to the site's Platinum membership level, and may submit unlimited articles and receive expedited article processing (E-ZineArticles.Com, 2013b).

Article Writing Services

Recognizing that many clients and marketers lack the journalistic skills necessary to high quality articles, and might not have the time or inclination, a variety of *article writing services* now operate to create custom articles at reasonable rates. Clients only need to provide basic content parameters (topic, length, deadline and keywords). Most services provide a first draft and will make a first set of revisions, if needed, at no charge. Writing services charge either by the article or by the word and offer discounts to volume customers. As works for hire, the finished product becomes the intellectual property of the client. Arrangements for obtaining the services of authors are handled entirely online, with a minimum of direct contact between the author and client. Several *content writing marketplaces* or *article outsourcing platforms* (such as Elance.com and odesk.com) serve as exchanges to match up clients and writers, who can advertise fixed rates or can negotiate prices based on the scope of a particular assignment.³

² A variation on article directory sites devoted to syndication are *article blog networks*, which republish and cross-promote articles from one another to build traffic and higher page rankings and to increase advertising revenue among network members --a form of *black hat* search engine optimization.

³ Alternatively clients can obtain *private label right articles*, which are pre-written articles where most or all of the intellectual property rights are available for sale. Clients or their agents can then edit or customize the piece by adding pertinent client-specific information or quotes. PLR articles are generally cheaper than custom articles but are sold multiple times. Thus clients can run the risk of offering an article of boilerplate material that might appear as if it might have taken from others even though the rights were legally purchased. Private label right article providers sometimes sell individual articles but more frequently provide access to a database of generic articles on fee basis. Experts suggest that PLR articles only be used as source material for originally written articles.

Article Editing/Spinning Software.

Article marketing involves maximizing exposure for a client by placing as many different versions of the same basic article on as many directory and publisher sites as possible. In each case, the articles can be exclusive (unique to a particular site and substantially revised to vary the content) or exactly the same article. This is no different than traditional publicity efforts where, for example, a publicist distributes the same article widely on a *non-exclusive* basis or might restrict distribution to only *non-competing* publications. In the latter case, a slug on story might read “Special to...” or “Special to You in Your Area” or “Special to You in Your Industry” thus suggesting only limited exclusivity. Many publication editors in the analog print world found this arrangement perfectly acceptable because the same article might appear in multiple publications, but their readers had little chance of seeing the same content.

In today’s digital, search-based world, efforts to restrict distribution by geography or industry aren’t practical because search engines enable users to search for keywords or exact phrase matches. Thus interested users can quickly detect when exactly the same article is posted on multiple venues. Search engine spiders (the software agents that crawl the web to catalog content) also can quickly identify duplicate postings. Instead of authors developing unique article content for every venue, many authors whose primary interest is search engine optimization have resorted to automated software that allows them to produce a seemingly unlimited number of versions of the same article, thus ensuring that a large percentage of words are different from the original article.

Article spinning involves altering headlines, substituting keywords, verbs and phrases, reordering paragraphs, and modifying the author information. Article spinning requires *spintax* (also known as *spin syntax*)

text file or database of 4-6 sets of alternate text for key sentences and paragraphs and several dozen synonyms for keywords from a thesaurus that can be embedded into an article to create variations that do not substantively alter the article’s main ideas. Thus a word such as *municipality* might be substituted with terms such as *city*, *local government* or *jurisdiction*. The aim is to create distinct variations of a basic article that do not substantially alter meanings but that will go undetected by users and search engines. (Google and other search engines impose penalties when they find direct duplications, including omission of duplicates from SERP lists, rating the website as being of poor quality, and tagging the article or websites as engaging in trickery.)

Although website owners can pay writers to “spin” articles manually by rewriting all or part of the content, more than a dozen downloadable software packages or web-based applications are openly promoted as tools to facilitate such wordsmithing chicanery. Although spinning software is used to concoct articles that pass as original content, the results often fall far short in terms of readability, coherence and grammar—problems that only can be fixed by manual editing.



Article Marketing Robot is a software package that combines article editing, spinning and distribution functions. For a description, see ArticlesMarketingRobot.com.

Article Submission Software and Services

Finally, marketers can rely on article directory submission software and services that automate the distribution and submission of articles to article directories—a function often included in more sophisticated (and expensive) article spinning software packages. Dealing with each of the numerous article directories can be a time-consuming process, so similar to website submission services used to gain listings on search engines, article submission services coordinate the various details for clients for a fee. Tasks include author registration, the actual submission of each article, and responding to e-mail confirmations and queries received from the directories (which can take up to a week to review submissions). At least six different site scripts are used by article directories; using proper formatting required by each directory site can expedite acceptance (The ultimate..., 2013). Submission services also are equipped to respond to anti-spam filters (such as CAPTCHA challenges) and can automate the scheduling of distribution so articles can be blasted out at one time or “dripped” over a staggered period.

Articles Marketing Today

As suggested by extensive list of online services devoted to various aspects of articles marketing (Fig. 1), articles marketing is thriving today despite efforts by Google, the world’s largest search engine, to throttle in egregious abuses during the last decade. Articles can continue to enhance the reputation of authors (and the organizations, products and services they represent) and, if properly used, can help client organizations in their search engine optimization efforts.

Figure 1. Key Players in Article Marketing

Article Directories	Instant Article Factory	
EzineArticles	White Smoke	
GoArticles		PLR (Private Label Right)
ArticlesBase	Article Writing Services	Article Providers
Buzzle	SeoArticleWritingPros	Easy PLR
AssociatedContent	Text Broker	Big Content Search
ArticlesSnatch	Odesk Article Writers	PLR Article Software
IdeaMarketers	Article Teller	Artisan PLR
SelfGrowth	Iwriter	PLR Assassin
iSnare	MyArticleExpress	Niche-Content Packages
ArticleTrade	Writer Access	Master Resale Rights
ArticleCity	Freelancer Article Writing	IDplr
ArticleAlley	99centarticles	All Private Label Content
ArticleDashboard	Media Piston	Article Underground
	Elance Article Writing	Simply PLR
Article Writing Software	Contractors	Plr Wholesaler
KontentMachine	Articlez	Constant-Content
Smart Article Generator	ContentSpoolingNetwork	Thrifty Content
Answer Analyst	SummitEdge Article Writing	Weekly Spin Ready Articles
Jiffy Articles	WL Marketing Article	PLR eBook Club
Article Scrape Chief	Writing	Starter Online Library PLR
Grammarly	Constant Content	Articles
Instant Article Wizard	Zers Content Markeptlace	
ArticleBuilder	Need An Article	Article Spining Software
		SpinRewriter

DupliTerminator	Word Ai	SubmitEdge Article
SpinChimp/Chimp Rewriter	Article Submission	Submission
Rewriter Demon	Software	WL Marketing Article
The Best Spinner	Unique Article Wizard	Submission
Article Rewriter Wizard	Instant Article Submitter	FastSubmitArticles
Super Spun Creation	Mass Article Submitter	SpinDistribute
Software	Brad Callens Article	Freelancer Article
Magic Article Writer	Submitter	Submission Contractors
SubmitSuite Article Spinner	Article Submt Auto	Odesk Article Submitters
Content Boss	SubmitYourArticle	Elance Article Submission
SEO DevGroup Spinner Pro	Magic Submitter	Contractors
Spin and Send	ArticleDripRobot	SumitInMe Article
Mass Article Cretor	JetSubmitter	Submission
RapidRewriter	ArticleKevo	Article Submission Service
SpinnerChief		iSellPR Article Submission
WickedArticleCreator	Article Submission	GetLinksPro Article
Content Professor	Services	Submission
Content Rewriter Pro	Blurpoint Article	Source: Website
Ultimate Article Spinner	Submission	Marketing Reviews
One Click Article Spinner	ArticlesFlicks Article	(2013)
WP Spin	Submission	

Panda and Penguin Algorithms

In February 2011, a major event occurred that altered early article marketing strategies was Google's release of a new algorithm for how it assessed rankings for low-quality websites (Hefferman, 2011).⁴ Google described the problem as "sites which are low-value to users, copy content from other websites or sites that are just not very useful." Google explained, "At the same time it will provide better rankings for high-quality sites—sites with original content and information such as research, in-depth reports, thoughtful analysis and so on" (Singhal & Cutts, 2011).

Although Google never stated its intent, press reports stated that that move was directed toward *content farms* of all kinds, including Demand Media's (2013) ehow.com site and Yahoo's Associated Content site (2012), which now operates as Yahoo Voices (Jarboe, 2012; Sullivan, 2011).⁵ However, the change also purged the search engine of duplicate content (which had not

⁴ Google officially termed his update "Panda" and has issued a variety of updates. At the time, this was also labeled by outsiders as the "Farmer update" in reference to its supposed attack on content farms. The company has had no regular system for naming algorithm changes and various references to these changes can be cited.

⁵ Most of the press attention at the time focused on content farms (versus article directories) and included attacks by traditional media on certain publishers of web-based "news" services that hired poorly qualified and poorly paid writers to produce large volumes of content on short deadlines. These sites often featured keywords in headlines tagged to current events and chose editorial topics based on what was trending in on search engine searches – all in an effort to divert traffic from other news sites to expose users to advertising. Content farms were criticized as dealing in *clickbait* and exploiting their workers. . However, others have defended use of contributions of unpaid writers by organizations such as Bleacher Report, Huffington Post and Buzz Feed as creating opportunities for writers to break into

been de-indexed previously; Google, 2012/2007; Lasnik, 2006). Panda also excluded content copied from an owner's sites by *scraper sites*, which acquired (*scraped*) content using legitimate means (such as RSS feeds with obtaining permission to republish excerpts) or illegitimate means (such as the automated appropriation of text, images, multimedia or whole web pages). Google reported that its pretests indicated the changes would impact 11.8% of queries – a dramatic change that Google's engineers described merely as “pretty big algorithmic improvement” (Singhal & Cutts, 2011).

Fourteen months later, in April 2012, Google took another step toward rewarding high-quality sites when it unveiled its new Penguin algorithm, which had an immediate impact on about 3.1% of search results in the United States (and was projected to affect 5% of searches in other languages when fully rolled out). Penguin specifically targeted *black hat webspam* where shortcuts or loopholes are used to attain PageRanks higher than otherwise deserved and was intended to decrease rankings for sites that violated Google's existing quality guidelines (Cutts, 2012). Among specific questionable practices that Penguin sought to correct were low quality links, over-optimized (over-used and over-exact) anchor texts, and excessive use of keywords (including *keyword stuffing*, or the insertion of needless, irrelevant or hidden keywords) that artificially increased the ostensible relevance of pages and did not enhance the experience of users. Penguin also placed a premium on web pages having links from a broad range of relevant sources – including blogs, social networking sites, and forums – thus not just articles directories.

Impact on Articles Marketing

The short-term impact of these advances in filtering techniques was to reduce the attractiveness of articles marketing for certain marginal players and those that were unable or unwilling to invest in producing high quality content. The unthinking strategy of submitting keyword targeted articles to multiple directories is no longer as effective for SEO purposes as it was previously. For example, the website WebsiteMarketingReview.com (2013) suggests “The key to effective article marketing today is producing quality and informative content and getting this content published where it will be read by targeted audiences.”

One SEO software and consulting firm, SEOMoz.org, goes so far as to argue that article marketing was mostly a scam and advises clients to avoid most old article marketing tactics because they are a waste of time (Wheeler, 2011). Moreover the consultant argues:

How about you try something, anything real? Real and useful. If you think that you can manipulate the search engines or that search engine optimization, that the practice of improving your rankings and gaining traffic is going to be done through this kind of stuff, you're living a decade ago man. This is not going to work. One of the worst parts about this is that when you do this, the impression you create on users, on visitors who do find you, even if you manage to win. ... [L]et's imagine that you got your content up to number one using article spinning and article robots and article marketing. Good for you. Imagine what's going to happen when I come to your site, I visit, and I am, like, "God, this is totally junky." Then I see a bunch of nofollow comment spam that you've left on the Web, and I see the articles of low quality that you've submitted everywhere. What am I going to think about your brand? How is your conversion rate possibly going to match up to the high rankings that you've achieved? If it doesn't, why are you even bothering?

journalism and to broaden the number of voices heard in the media (Content Farm, 2013; Ingram, 2012; Martinez, 2011).

Isn't it so much easier to get 100 visitors and convert 10 of them than to get 10,000 visitors and convert 1 out of 1,000? It always is (Wheeler, 2011).

Other SEO consultants continue to embrace article marketing but take more sophisticated approaches. Brick Marketing, for example, specializes in *link building* (versus *site content* SEO strategies) and contends article marketing can still form the backbone of long-term SEO campaigns:

As a strictly white hat SEO firm, Brick Marketing believes in the power of online article marketing but does not practice article spinning. We will not take one of your articles and submit it to a dozen different low-quality article submission sites just to get another link. We believe that article marketing should be about brand building and establishing your site as an industry authority for potential clients. We will research the best possible distribution sites for your content, including niche industry sites, while following all search engine guidelines (Brick Marketing, 2013).

Peter Nisbet, who describes himself as an experienced ghostwriter, similarly believes that article marketing will continue to thrive. He contends that Google's intention was not to target article writing nor article marketing services, but to nip the plethora of badly written information being used produced prior to 2011. He summarizes the culprits as: articles spun from a master article, bad rewrites of PLR articles, poor article writing offering little benefit to the reader, articles offering little information and designed only to get clicks to sales pages, very short articles with fewer than 400 words, articles with significant spelling errors, articles written with very poor grammar, and software-generated articles taken from scraped web content (Nisbet, 2011). Nisbet contends that article writing is now actually a *more* potent marketing tool than ever before. He explains that the article directories responded to Google's actions by tightening up their editorial guidelines, reviewing their conditions of use, imposing higher minimum word counts, and more closely inspecting the quality of content and grammar. He argues it might actually be easier to use articles to achieve high Google results rankings because the vast majority of substandard articles and web pages have been removed from search engine results pages (Nisbet, 2011)

In a similar vein, Yaron Galai of Outbrain.com contends that the effect is to purge "any notion of fooling anyone out of the equation." He termed such trickery "the Old SEO" and wrote in an *AdAge Digital* guest column:

With New SEO, the pendulum is finally swinging back to favoring humans over crawlers. The New SEO rules point directly back to what was valued in the traditional print-dominated days -- content will not be a mechanism to convert clicks but a tool to boost awareness, increase overall engagement and offer opportunities to connect with a quality audience. And the "customer" that content is tailored for will no longer be SEO bots (the software apps that work the web automatically), as the New SEO favors the true end-user: the reader (Galai, 2012).

Current Best Practices

Despite pressures from Google to eradicate abuses, there is no reason to expect the demise of article marketing. In light of the considerable infrastructure that has been created to support this cottage industry, and the considerable opportunity that still exists to promote

organizations through articles, attraction-based marketing schemes will continue to be used extensively. However, there are might be some consolidation in the field as marginal players drop out. Similarly, survivors will ingeniously and artfully adapt to the changing environment. Indeed, articles marketing continues to be promoted through workshops and short courses (Fore, 2012); trade books (Fox, 2010; O'Donnell, 2011); articles and web posts (Griffin, 2013; Gruber, 2013) and dozens of videos and tutorials on YouTube.

A review of advice from various experts suggests that online articles used for marketing purposes in the future must:

- Provide valuable, quality information in an interesting way that engages the reader.
- Avoid blatant commercialism (let the website's landing page do the selling)
- Be longer – a minimum of 500-700 words and as high as 800-1,200 words (versus the less than 400 words that were previously acceptable).
- Focus on all original content, with a minimum of spinning (and certainly without the mechanistic spinning that prompted the swift response by Google).
- Focus on a limited number of targeted keywords that are relevant to both the article and website to which they are linked, not to extraneous or secondary topics.
- Avoid duplication of content entirely, eliminating suspicion or easy confirmation of plagiarism.
- Feature a keyword density of only 1-2% (versus the 3-5% previously recommended). Critical locations for placing keywords continue to be in the title and the first and last paragraph, with other references only within about every 200 words. (Only 1% is recommended in the author guidelines of EzineArticles.com, 2013b.)
- Be carefully edited (by humans) – to assure impeccable spelling, grammar and punctuation
- Be augmented with other sources of traffic-building backlinks, such as social bookmarking sites, authoring sites such as Squidoo.com and Scribd.com, websites, the owner's own blog, guest commentaries on other blog sites, social networking sites such as Facebook, forums, and wikis.
- Serve as a tool that can be posted on websites themselves (not just article directories and external sites) and thus provide a trigger for search engines spiders to refresh website listings.
- Avoid content that substantially duplicates the website or landing page where visitors are directed. These targeted venues need to provide information and value beyond the article.
- Direct users to an array of different landing pages (not just a single website landing page for dozens of different articles) or just to doorway pages or splash pages that provide no value to the user.
- Lead readers to a *call to action* (usually found in the conclusion) and then naturally flow into a statement of the author's credentials (with a supporting hyperlink to obtain assistance).
- Feature natural writing so that articles (and their supported websites) are written for *users*, not search engines spiders (Fore, 2013; Griffith, 2013; Levanto, 2013; Nisbet 2012, 2013a, b; Rainbolt 2013).

Implications for Public Relations

Although articles marketing mushroomed as a promotional activity during the past decade, this sub-rosa cottage industry generated little, if any, attention from public relations practitioners and went virtually unrecognized by public relations scholars.

In part, inattention by scholars can be explained by the focus within the academy on studying public relations as the work of those people who label themselves as doing public relations (versus the broader perspective of studying all public relations-like activities by organizations). This neglect can also be attributed to a bias that favors more elegant, theoretical approaches to the field such as relationship management, issues management and crisis responses versus more everyday communications strategies and tactics.

Yet articles marketing is a dubious and potentially threatening development that should be a concern to practitioners and scholars alike. In particular, articles marketing denigrates the quality of public information found online, involves questionable ethical practices, represents a new form of encroachment on public relations, and -- as a form of content marketing -- exemplifies one of the biggest new challenges to public relations as a discipline.

Denigration of Public Information

Clearly one of the biggest concerns for public relations involves how articles marketing, as recently practiced, can cheapen the quality of online information available to the public. Although ready access, ease of use, low cost, and the rise of user-generated content have been lauded by Internet boosters for expanding public discussion and debates, this also has led to a rising tide of inaccurate, biased or inaccurate public information. Indeed, an unintended consequence of this “democratization” of online communication has been a decline in access to expert and quality information provided by professional communicators.

Articles marketing is an egregious case of *churnalism*, perhaps the lowest level of journalism where pre-packaged material is used for stories by the news media without further research, fact-checking or scrutiny (Harcup, 2009). The premise behind articles marketing is that online publications accept articles *as written* and forego the ability to edit--a practice expected by sources when submitting traditional publicity releases.

As a field committed to the responsible advocacy and maintaining the integrity of public communication processes (PRSA Code of Ethics, 2000), the public relations profession should be concerned about the impact of practices such as article spinning. From a critical theory perspective, article marketing reflects the ever-expanding commercialization of news where mere information is substituted for legitimately important facts people should know (McManus, 2009). It also illustrates how well-intended clients are unwittingly providing unmerited *information subsidies* (Gandy, 1992) to third-rate website operators.

Articles marketing is a 21st century example of that members of the Frankfurt School of social thought condemned as the mass manufacture or *commodification* of media content by cultural industries. And while public relations organizations might distance themselves from the practice by claiming marketers are to blame, article marketing clearly is a case where commodification is exhibited in a work product closely aligned to the field.

In their critique of how mass media engage in production processes no different from industrial manufacturing, Horkheimer and Adorno (1972/1944; Adorno, 1995) argued that cultural industries boast of providing enlightenment but actually engaged in mass deception. In a commentary that resonates with what’s being practiced today by articles marketers, the authors argued that advertising in the 1940s (even in influential magazines of the day such as *Life* and *Fortune*) was scarcely distinguishable from editorial matter. They opined:

The assembly-line character of the culture industry, the synthetic, planned method of turning out products (factory-like not only in the [movie] studio, but more or less in the compilation of cheap biographies, pseudodocumentary novels and its songs) is very suited to advertising: the important individual points, by becoming detachable, interchangeable, and even technically alienated from any connected meaning, lend themselves to ends external to the work. The effect, the trick, the isolated repeatable device, have always been used to exhibit goods for advertising purposes Advertising and the culture industry merge technically as well as economically. In both cases the same thing can be seen in innumerable places, and the mechanical repetition of the same culture product has come to be the same as that of the propaganda slogan. In both cases the insistent demand for effectiveness makes technology into psychotechnology, into a procedure for manipulating men (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972, p. 165).

Horkheimer and Adorno expressed a sharp disdain for advertising, but were only slightly more favorable toward publicity. They contended that “universal publicity” was unnecessary to make people aware of goods available for sale and helped sales only indirectly. Indeed, the only justification for a technique such as articles marketing would be to subsidize ideological media that reinforce the cultural values important to a marketer.

Importantly, they stressed the importance of precise and specific language and would question the often sloppy disregard found in articles marketing. According to the authors, “The more completely language is lost in the announcement, the more words are debased as substantial vehicles of meaning and become signs devoid of quality; the more purely and transparently words communicate what is intended, the more impenetrable [subject to scrutiny] they become” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972, p. 166).

Ethical Considerations

Articles marketing also is wrought with ethical problems, which can be summed up as a lack of *transparency* about the process. Drawing on classic ethicists such as Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill, ethicist Patrick Lee Plaisance (2007, 2009) argues that transparency or openness about media practices assures all the players in the communication process speak the same language and provides understanding about what we say, why we say it, and how we talk. Transparency thus addresses the motives behind a message and encompasses concerns such as trust, secrecy, authenticity, respect and accountability.

Accuracy of content and *deception* are two of eight ethical concerns in responsible online communications identified previously by this author. Hallahan (2006, p. 121) argued that online content needs to be accurate, complete and current to maintain the confidence and trust of online users—as matters of both duty and users’ rights. Otherwise accurate information can be deceptive if presented in a way that misleads (p. 122).

The accuracy of the content in articles marketing *de facto* must be questioned based on the inherent use of synonyms drawn from online thesauruses and databases, which invariably introduces imprecision and can compromise meaning (see quote from Horkheimer and Adorno above). Although substitution of a single word for another might not have a material impact, the cumulative effect of multiple manipulations in the same article inherently raises questions of accuracy, authenticity and expertness. It is unclear whether such deception is sufficient to merit

regulatory scrutiny or intervention (such as by the Federal Trade Commission in the United States). However no action is likely absent complaints by duped readers.

Deception is clearly at work in articles marketing strategies. Articles marketed using the techniques described here are not advertorials, which are paid advertisements published to appear like editorial matter and labeled as such. Instead, they are yet a new variety of *hybrid message* (Balasubramanian, 1994) that combines elements of different classes of media content – in this case, editorial matter and a resource (author) box that promotes the author and contains a hyperlink to a target website landing page or blog. Similar to other hybrid messages, articles marketed in the way represent a form of *stealth marketing* (Goodman, 2006-2007) where the motive or purpose of the message is not readily evident to audiences based on their (often limited) understanding of persuasion processes (Friestad and Wright, 1994).

Beyond the deceiving the audience about the origins and unique of a particular article, authors and articles directories are potentially deceiving the operators of websites, blogs and e-zines by not fully disclosing the extent to which strikingly similar material is being distributed to others. They also fail to note that site operators might be penalized by search engines by posting duplicate materials. Obviously re-publishers ought to be responsible for investigating their sources. But many do not – just as traditional media forego due diligence because of time, budget and other operational constraints (Harcup, 2006; McManus, 2009)

Public relations practitioners and researchers have been conspicuously silent in condemning such deceptive and exploitative behavior. Interesting, Google -- an organization whose corporate mantra is “Don’t be evil” -- is the only organization that has attempted to address abuses. Yet, the changes instituted through Google’s Penguin and Panda fixes are as much about enhancing search effectiveness and user satisfaction with their services as about the underlying ethical concerns.

Encroachment into the Publicity Function

Articles marketing represents a new, digital form of *encroachment* on public relations. Two decades ago, authors in the field voiced concern about the possible emasculation of public relations by marketers. *Marketing imperialism* was identified as a threat to public relations because senior marketers (primarily advertising agency executives) sought to gain control over not only traditional advertising but the then-escalating expenditures being directed into sales promotion, direct response, cause-related marketing and special events. What was first labeled the “new advertising” was soon re-christened *integrated marketing communication* (Schultz, Tannenbaum & Lauterborn, 1993).

Lauzen (1991) explained that the one of the manifestations of marketing imperialism was *encroachment*, or the assignment of non-public relations professionals to manage the public relations function. Meanwhile advocates of the normative Excellence model of public relations and communications management staunchly argued for maintaining marketing and public relations as separate functions and separate units within organizations (Ehling, White & Grunig, 1992; for a critique, see Hallahan, 2007).

Today, articles marketing represents a new form of encroachment on public relations that is not grounded in any philosophical or opportunistic power play. Instead it results from a tactical effort to achieve a specific marketing goal – website traffic. Indeed, the actual content of many articles is only secondary. This encroachment is coming from the bottom ranks -- rather than the top echelon – of the marketing practitioners and is another manifestation of online guerilla marketing (Levinson, Meyerson & Scarborough, 2008). Many digital marketers freely admit they do not

possess the editorial skills required to directly assume tasks such as article writing. But their efforts are being abetted by ready, willing and able pay-for-hire writers during a period when branded journalism is gaining acceptance (Bull, 2013). The net effect is to wrestle control of or to usurp a function (the placement of bylined and other articles) traditionally within the province of public relations.

Without a doubt, publicists will continue to recommend the placement of exclusive and special articles as part of communications programs on behalf of clients, both online and offline. Consistent with the denigration of information argument suggested above, the real threat to public relations might be to devalue publication of all articles, at least in an online environment. This is especially true if clients unwittingly become convinced that what is said in articles is secondary to driving traffic to a website (where persuasive advertiser-written copy purportedly can be used to prompt the immediate direct responses clients covet--ordering, requesting information, scheduling an appointment, etc.)

Content marketing as a challenge to the public relations.

While articles marketing potentially represents an encroachment on the *specific* publicity activity of placing articles, it exemplifies a rapidly growing trend where marketers today seek to provide informative, educational and/or entertainment information audiences to audiences and thus endear themselves to audiences. Under this new content marketing regimen, direct, hard-hitting persuasive messages are abandoned in favor of an indirect, more subtle “soft sell” or “no sell” approach. In so doing the aim is to create a conducive environment that still has promotion as its purpose.

Today’s content marketing is essentially no different from the fundamental strategy used for the past century in various arenas of public relations. The premise is simple: advertising *sells*, publicity *tells*. Publicity has been shown to be consumers’ preferred source of product information compared to advertising and has consistently been demonstrated to be more credible (Hallahan, 1996, 1999a, b). Indeed, digital marketers have seized upon strategies and techniques quite familiar to most people in public relations. Consider the description proffered by the Content Marketing Institute, a consulting-turned-educational and publishing organization:

Basically content marketing is the art of communicating with your customers and prospects without selling. It is non-interruption marketing. Instead of pitching your products or services, you are delivering information that makes your buyer more intelligent. The essence of this content strategy is the belief that if we, as businesses, deliver consistent, ongoing valuable information to buyers, they ultimately reward us with their business and loyalty (Content Marketing Institute, 2013a).

The CMI (2013b) goes on to explain the purpose is to “attract, acquire, and engage a clearly defined and understood target audience—with the objective of driving profitable customer action.” Although public relations scholars prefer to define the field as fostering positive relationships, few practitioners or clients would deny that the ultimate goal such relationship building is to “drive profitable action” -- whether by customers or investors, donors, volunteers, workers or voters (Hallahan, 2014, forthcoming).

Content marketers trace the origins of the new field to the late 1800s and cite pre-Internet examples such as sponsored customer magazines, buyers’ guides, recipe booklets and

educational comic books (Gordon, 2011; Lewton, 2012). Yet these are some of the very same tools cited as innovations in early public relations (Lamme & Russell, 2010).

Ken Dowell of PR Newswire (2013) explained that content marketing reflects several changes in the communications business: the ability of anyone to be a publisher, the shrinkage of traditional media, the questionable effectiveness of online advertising, and changes in online search. “But ultimately it is about producing content that is exactly what your audience wants to read. Exactly what they are looking for. The answer to their search for information,” Dowell wrote. The PRN executive suggests good content can come from either a marketing or PR department and can equal the quality of material produced by a journalist. “Good writers aren’t that hard to find, and neither the number of the opportunities nor the salaries paid by the media are going to make them inaccessible. Photos, videos and other types of images are easier to produce than ever.”

Experts disagree whether content marketing and PR are more similar (Lucey, 2013) or different (Kim, 2013). But the trade publication *PR Daily* contends that PR cannot ignore content marketing and cites five reasons: 1) major PR firms are embracing it, 2) major media companies are relying in it for new sources of revenue, 3) Fortune 500 companies are launching content marketing sites, 4) at least one well-funded start-up firm [Contently] is specializing in content marketing, and 5) reporters are leaving journalism for content marketing jobs (Sebastian, 2013; see also Bruell, 2013; McDermott, 2013). Content marketing includes the *creation* of original material of interest to audiences as well as the *curation* of materials from a variety of sources wherein the organization is recognized as the compiler or as a source of informative, educational or entertaining material (Holtz, 2012; Rosenbaum, 2011).

Evidence of the viability of content marketing can be seen in the publication of books (Lieb, 2012a; Odden, 2012) and magazines (*Content Marketing Today*) devoted to the topic, as well as workshops sponsored by suppliers and by local PR and communications groups. Both IABC and PRSA plan sessions on the topic at their 2013 national conferences. Content marketing is also the subject of numerous recent articles in trade publications and blog posts (Atkins & Matson, 2012; Bruell, 2013; Creamer, 2012; Duncan, 2013; Green, 2012; Lieb, 2012b; Marketers, don’t be afraid..., 2013; McDermott, 2013; Nicholson & Aiello, 2009; Pulizzi, 2009, 2012a, b; Webber, 2013; Zmuda, 2013a, b).

Robert Rose, a lead strategist at the Content Marketing Institute, described public relations as

A core practice that undergoing fundamental disruption. I’m a HUGE passionate fan of public relations. But I think the practice of public relations has lost its way a bit – especially as it pertains to being the corporate “storyteller.” If there’s one group that should be embracing the ideas of content marketing—it’s PR. And, sadly, because in many cases it has lost its strategic seat at the table (save for crisis management) PR is one of the last departments to actually get to embrace content marketing (Content marketing & PR, 2013).

In today’s increasing digital world, content marketing – including articles marketing – is an important new dimension of integrated marketing communication. Clearly content marketing and public relations communications are complementary and overlap considerably. The marketplace ultimately will determine their relationship through way these tools are used and who produces them.

During the next several years, practitioners and clients will engage in discussions to define and clarify content marketing and its relationship to marketing, advertising, sales promotion, direct response, and public relations and publicity. Public relations scholars need to be part of that conversation. The existing public relations paradigm is under challenge once again as part of the natural evolution of the field, and public relations scholars need to re-think critically the definition and focus of the practice. Content marketing can be viewed as a form of publicity when the latter is broadly defined as an entity “being public” (Hallahan, 2010b). Or, publicity (when defined narrowly as the dissemination of news and information) can be conceptualized as a special form of content marketing that involves the dissemination of news and information through third-party intermediates (such as journalists and bloggers) versus being disseminated direct to audiences.

Clearly the advent of content marketing is far more than simple encroachment or an attempt to take over the public relations function per se. But the consequence might be that marketers, whether intentionally or unintentionally, are co-opting the role of public relations in organizational storytelling and providing valuable information to customers and other important constituents. Practitioners who ignore this important new trend run the risk of allowing public relations to become marginalized as an organizational communication function. Meanwhile public relations scholars need to focus on current topics of relevant to the field. Trends such as content marketing and articles marketing underscore why public relations scholars need to renew their focus on real-world communication issues. Elsewhere, this author has argued that the two constitutive activities of public relations are *information seeking* and *information sharing* (Hallahan, 2013). Articles marketing and content marketing clearly involve both.

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