Publicity

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Publicity is both the process and result of efforts to create public exposure, awareness, or attention for an organization, product, service, personality, or cause. From a strategic communication perspective, publicity can be purposeful and intentional and proactively pursued as part of an organized program or campaign. However, unsolicited publicity about an entity also can be generated by others, whether intentional or not. Positively valenced publicity can enhance or bolster public perception (or image) of an entity and can be a tool of reputation management, while mismanaged or disparaging publicity generated by others can tarnish an entity's reputation. In cases of negative publicity, organizations can opt to maintain strategic silence or to orchestra a response. Examples include disputes (wherein publicity is deployed as part of issues management) or extraordinary events (where publicity is a critical tool in crisis communications). Publicity is a major mechanism through which risky situations in society are amplified and can be used to make key members of public aware of threats to public or personal safety, such as natural disasters or other emergencies, to which people should respond to protect themselves.

Publicity involves an entity "being public" (Hallahan, 2010) versus being private or secret. Many modern societies embrace transparency, and thus organizations and institutions are expected to maintain a public presence and use publicity as a tool for public accountability. In particular, public institutions in democratic societies cannot operate in secret, at least not for long. Although some privately owned entities and public figures can be reclusive and intentionally avoid publicity, they do so at the risk of being misunderstood or distrusted, or missing out on opportunities to promote themselves and engender public favor.

Publicity is a strategy or instrument typically associated with public relations and its associated subdisciplines. However, publicity can be created by anyone on behalf of an organization. Within complex organizations, publicity can fall within the province of public relations or corporate communications, marketing (product news and special events), investor relations (financial disclosures), and human resources (employee information). In such decentralized structures, coordination and message integration are essential for the organization to "speak with a single voice."

Importantly, as these examples suggest, publicity can be pursued without regard to purposes commonly associated with public relations, such as building relationships or enhancing an entity's reputation. Marketers treat publicity simply as part of the promotional mix that also includes advertising, sales promotion, and personal selling. Politicians refer to publicity as *free media* (versus *paid media*). Producers of popular

entertainment fare—including movies, TV music, books—rely on a publicity to build audiences but also can use publicity to create parasocial relationships with featured entertainers or authors. Professionals working in this arena are regularly referred to as *publicists* and the publicity work is so named. Health campaign sponsors rely on publicity explicitly to discourage risky behaviors and/or to promote a healthy lifestyle, while the purpose of other information campaigns is to promote prosocial behaviors or cultural values.

The antecedents of modern publicity can be to traced to antiquity—including messages transmitted through smoke signals, tribal drums, stone tablets, papyrus leaflets, and messages on walls. Later, publicity took the form of correspondence, printed handbills, and information supplied to individual newspapers. The first news release—a written notice distributed widely to newspapers—dates to as early as 1758 in the United States.

Many of the origins of modern publicity are traced to the United States, although comparable efforts to promote government, popular entertainment fare, and transportation systems can be traced to other parts of the world. The first corporate publicity departments were created by Krupp (in Germany) in 1870 and by Westinghouse (in the United States) in 1889. Notably, publicity and public relations were used synonymously prior to World War II: for example, pioneer public relations practitioner Ivy Lee used the term *publicity* to describe public relations as known today (Lee, 1925).

Types of publicity

Media publicity

Traditionally, publicity has involved earning coverage in the editorial and entertainment portions of public media—newspapers, magazines, television, and radio. Numerous tactics can be used to gain media exposure, but generally these fall into three broad categories or operational strategies: (i) writing or producing materials (news releases, feature stories, videos, or audio); (ii) providing a spokesperson for interviews, and (iii) staging events for the purpose of gaining exposure (pseudo-events: Boorstin, 1962 and/or hosting reporters at events staged for other purposes. Media publicity thus serves as an extension of the public information system wherein sources supply content that facilitates the production of news and entertainment and effectively subsidizes production costs (for a review see Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997).

Online publicity

As a digital strategy employing new communications technologies, entities also seek public attention through web- and mobile-based channels. Online publicity today can involve the use of *paid*, *earned* (free), *shared* (also free) or *owned* channels (the PESO model). Online publicity can be produced by third-party entities such as bloggers, paid influencers, and users, as well as by message promoters themselves. Of particular note, many online platforms enable users to share, forward, and comment on online content,

thus extending a message's reach and opportunities to gain attention. Whereas traditional publicity works primarily through a process of incidental or accidental exposure to messages by audiences, online media also enable audiences to intentionally search for publicity materials distributed by entities; thus publicity encompasses both information sharing and information seeking (Hallahan, 2013).

Similar to coverage in traditional media, online publicity can include either "hard" news about organizational activities or "soft" feature stories. Digital marketers today tout *content marketing* as an innovative way to attract and engage online users, although the underlying strategy of supplying useful or entertaining content about a product or service has been a foundation of feature story-based media publicity for more than a century. Similarly, many major organizations have embraced *brand journalism* and employ digital brand newsrooms wherein experienced journalists are hired as organizational storytellers (Hallahan, 2014).

Offline publicity

Publicity seekers also employ interpersonal communications to promote ideas. The two-step (multistep) model of media effects, for example, challenged the notion popular in the 1940s and 1950s that media effects were limited; instead researchers pointed out that much media content is redistributed by opinion leaders through word-of-mouth to family and networks of friends. People also often share news and information obtained directly from organizations as well as from third parties other than media, including rumors, gossip, and false news reports. Publicity thus fulfills a variety of audience needs and provides gratifications—as a surveillance tool, as a form of sensation-seeking, as a source of conversational currency, and as a defense mechanism in situations of uncertainty or risk, among others.

Publicity versus press agentry, propaganda, and media relations

Publicity as a process of strategic communication has received minimal attention from researchers in recent decades (Hallahan, 1996) and is generally consider a mundane topic within public relations. Nevertheless, publicity in its broadest sense of creating exposure is an essential component in many strategic communication programs. It also has been critical when considering the purposes for which public relations has been employed over time: profit, recruitment, legitimacy, agitation, and advocacy (Lamme & Russell, 2010).

In part, the disdain for publicity can be attributed to its connection to press agentry, an early form of publicity that focused almost entire in getting a client's name in the newspaper. Many "spacegrabbers" fabricated stories with rampant disregard for truth and were considered a threat to advertising revenues by publishers (Lucarelli, 1993). Press agentry is the first of four models in the evolution of public relations practice suggested by Grunig and Hunt (1984) and continues to be practiced today. As such, for instance, it is common for celebrities to employ a publicist.

Publicity is erroneously equated with propaganda, which usually involves messages controlled by the sender and riddled with lies or half-truths. In most propaganda, the source is not identified, and audiences have limited access to other information. By contrast, effective media publicity must be truthful because it is subject to scrutiny and possible rejection by third-party media gatekeepers who distribute it and by audiences exposed to competing perspectives. Entities seeking publicity for legitimate purposes usually want their names and activities to be identified prominently.

Publicity is also associated with media relations, which can be defined either as the state of the relationship between sources and media personnel, as well as that part of the publicity process in which sources and media personnel interact in person, in writing, or phone conversations. Media relations includes, but is not limited to, the negotiation of arrangements by a publicist as well as the conduct of interviews by a principal (client). Effective publicity and media relations require understanding what's newsworthy, specific media genres and story structures, conventions and routines in news work, appropriate protocols for working with media, and the constraints under which media operate (such as deadlines and ethical standards).

Publicity as a strategic communication tactic: Advantages and disadvantages

Publicity is a communication tactic that typically has as its purpose some combination of persuasion, identity enhancement, impression management, relationship maintenance, and storytelling. Publicity is typically planned as part of an ongoing program or a specific-purpose communication campaign of specified duration, including integrated communication plans. Although many plans manifest deliberate strategy, publicity is a prime example of emergent strategy at work within strategic communications because many specific opportunities are unknown at the time publicity plans are conceived and publicity seekers routinely must respond to emerging trends and situations.

Advantages of publicity

Publicity can be used to (i) signal an entity's planned activities to constituents, markets, or supply-chain vendors; (ii) articulate an organization's values, goals, and positions on issues; (iii) stimulate stakeholder behaviors that contribute to revenues or performance goals—such as buying, investing, donating, voting, or working; (iv) manage the entity's reputation; and (v) create a record of the entity's activities or establish its place in history (Hallahan, 2010).

Entities typically attempt to exploit publicity because there is a ready public interest in their activities. Publicity is especially valuable when a product or service is new, or when promoting generic product categories that tie into people's social or cultural interests where brand identification is not necessarily required (such as the promotion of generic food commodities or the promotion of the consumption of potatoes). Also the cost is

low compared to other forms of promotion (although not "free" when the considerable labor costs that can be incurred are considered). Publicity is information-intensive and can often supply more details than commonly possible to communicate in traditional advertising formats that severely restrict the amount of available space or time. For organizations with limited financial resources, publicity is a default option used in lieu of costlier forms of promotion. Publicity also is frequently used to address secondary products or services, to target secondary markets or audience segments, or to "heavy up" promotional efforts in designated markets or regions through less costly supplemental communications. Meanwhile media and online publicity are the quickest and most effective ways to reach the public at large when responding to extraordinary events.

As a form of persuasion, publicity can be especially effective in creating salience (awareness), knowledge, and favorable audience predispositions toward an entity. When used in combination with other forms of communication, prior publicity can prompt audiences to pay attention to subsequent messages and thus can prime learning of subsequent messages by focusing audience attention on particular message elements (attributes) they have seen or heard previously. For this reason, publicity customarily is the first promotional tool deployed in integrated communication programs. The opportunities to obtain "free" news coverage also are circumvented once large-scale advertising begins because the announcement is no longer newsworthy—unless the announced topic itself sparked an extraordinary response or controversy, or the subsequent promotional efforts themselves are notable.

Publicity plays a critical role in shaping public opinion. Publicity is essential in the agenda-building process wherein activists, advocates, or leaders of social movements seek to build coalitions and garner broad public support for an idea (Cobb & Elder, 1983). Publicity efforts by sources also contribute to and can bias the process of media agenda-setting wherein the salience of topics covered by the media shapes *which* topics are on the minds of the members of the public and discussed with family and friends. Message framing by publicity seekers, if adopted by media personnel, also can indirectly shape *how* members of the public think about a particular topic through *second-order* agenda setting.

Historically, advocates for publicity point to publicity's implied *third-party endorsement effect.* This theory suggests that the mere fact an idea is covered in the news media (or today on the Internet) implicitly suggests to audiences that the idea is important and thus worthy of consideration. An explicit endorsement or recommendation is not required to be considered effective. Research about this argument is inconclusive, especially in experiments that involve comparing the same message presented in the form of news versus advertising. However, people consistently report they prefer to read about products and services as the news (Hallahan, 1999a)—an ostensible paradox in light of various criticisms about the credibility of today's news media.

Individuals for whom a topic is highly relevant (to them personally) are the most likely to exert the effort to read the typical publicity article, unless they are attracted by another reason (such as the presence of celebrity in a story). Individuals with a high need for cognition, a personality trait, are also more inclined to exert the effort to read news about a product vis-à-vis advertising (Hallahan, 2008). Evidence further suggests

people employ different cognitive rules for assessing arguments in information-based publicity versus advertising-based sources and thus might lower their reactance to persuasion attempts (Hallahan, 1999b).

Disadvantages of publicity

Despite its numerous advantages, publicity poses important limitations as a strategic communication tactic. Most notable is the lack of control over the message. Editorial gatekeepers can edit materials, select portions of materials to include or exclude, and can frame stories in ways that are counter to or compromise the publicity sponsor's intent. In the online environment, the ability of users to post dissenting or opposing opinions (as well bolstering posts that might be from undesired sources) further reduces the message sponsor's control. Yet therein lies one of publicity's most important characteristics, publicity's ostensible *credibility*. Notably, evidence today suggests people give as much or even greater credence to opinions expressed by peers (based on personal experiences) vis-à-vis sources considered expert.

Hallahan (2010) identified four types of modern publicity based on the source and valence. *Controlled publicity* (such as the typical personnel or product announcement) is internally generated and almost always favorable. *Compromised publicity* originates from an entity but can turn unfavorable when negative comments or perspectives are added by media or others. *Corroborative publicity* is favorable and originates externally—and is especially valuable because it comes from an ostensibly independent third-party source. *Countervailing publicity* is unfavorable and originated externally—and can include attacks, criticisms, or other detrimental information.

Although highly effective in creating awareness and a possible moderating variable that can shape and maintain organizational–audience relationships, gaining acceptance and shaping behavioral intention, publicity typically needs to be complemented with other communications tools to move audiences along the behavioral continuum from merely awareness toward action. In marketing campaigns, for example, advertising typically is deployed to broaden awareness, heighten desire, and ideally prompt action through repeated exposure. Direct response, sales promotion, and face-to-face contacts (personal selling) are deployed to complete transactions or negotiate terms—interventions not possible through publicity.

Publicity operates in highly competitive, often cluttered media environments, which limits its ability to share knowledge, shape attitudes, and prompt behaviors. Thus publicists must continuously enhance an audience's motivation, ability, and opportunities to process publicity messages (Hallahan, 2000). A particular shortcoming of publicity is the difficulty in achieving sufficient levels of message repetition and to maintain topic salience over time. This requires publicity seekers to expend considerable creativity and labor over time to generate an ongoing and sustained flow of news and information about an entity or topic.

Negative publicity poses particular challenges. Audiences are vigilant and invoke swift, autonomic physiological responses when confronted with danger. Negative publicity can impugn an organization's reputation, although people tend to discount or dismiss such publicity if it contradicts personal experience. However, when audiences

are confronted with mounting dissonant information, or if negative publicity resonates with prior negative perceptions or personal experiences, negative publicity can be especially harmful. It is for this reason that prudent organizations seek to mitigate situations that can result in negative publicity, such as disputes or disruptions that can trigger an organizational crisis. Notably, the public has an uncanny ability to forget negative news.

Emergence of "paid" publicity

The traditional assumption is that media publicity must be earned and involve no payments in order to gain exposure. This tenet of publicity has been slowly dismantled over the past half-century with the rise of various forms of *hybrid messages* (Balasubramanian, 1994) that combine elements of publicity and paid advertising. Examples include editorial matter (paid *advertorials*) that appeared as early the 1940s in clearly labeled special advertising sections in newspapers and magazines, the rise in 1970s of paid product placements in movies, TV shows, and now electronic games; and the concurrent creation of paid infomercials as a full-length entertainment-oriented shows on broadcast and cable TV networks.

The distinction between earned publicity and paid advertising has been further confounded with the emergence of *native advertising* wherein both digital and traditional news outlets sell space on a paid basis that appears exactly like its regular editorial fare—and which can actually be produced by media personnel on behalf of a sponsors. Micropayment systems similarly allow organizations to gain more prominent exposure on search engines vis-à-vis ordinary organic search results. Entities adding posts to Facebook and other social media platforms also can use micropayments to increase the probability that messages will actually appear in the news feeds of followers and to "boost" the reach of messages to other target audiences. Meanwhile independent social media influencers who operate their own websites or video sharing sites or channels are being compensated to endorse products or services or produce special segments—an arrangement not always disclosed or understood by audiences.

Ethical and regulatory concerns

Publicity activities are governed by ethical standards established at the societal, organizational, professional, and individual levels. These include, but are not limited to, public expectations about truthfulness and fairness, organizational policies dealing with disclosure of information, and professional standards focused on maintaining public trust and social responsibility.

Among the numerous ethical concerns raised by publicity are lying, misleading message framing, stonewalling, sandbagging, selective (vs. full) disclosure of available information, failure to seek out information that a publicist should know, puffery, leaking, rumormongering, gossiping, misrepresenting the source of information ("false fronting"), unfair dealing/favoritism, failure to correct errors, blackmailing, spin-doctoring, and defamation of others (Hallahan, 2010). Publicity has been

criticized for filling public information channels with fake news, pseudo-events, and stunts (Fuhrman, 1989), and for encouraging certain people to obsessively seek public attention (pejoratively known as *publicity hounds*).

In many democratic societies around the world, publicity activities are protected against governmental prior restraint. In the United States, for example, political activities by individuals are protected by the First Amendment but publicity activities by for-profit entities are subject to the narrower protections under the commercial speech doctrine. Similar to various other forms of free speech, governments in democratic societies can regulate the *manner* in which publicity is conducted consistent with government's authority to oversee activities in which it has a compelling state interest or where government is mandated to protect the public, including, but not limited to, deceptive promotional practices. Thus strategic communicators must be aware of various restrictions or requirements that might apply. Government can engage in prior restraint of publicity in certain circumstances, such as when the national defense is at risk, a defendant's right to a fair trial might be compromised, or when free speech is used to invoke violence. Government also can mandate the use of publicity and various forms of disclosure by organizations and by government itself to assure the public has access to information it has the right or need to know.

SEE ALSO: Activism; Advertising; Agenda Setting and Building; Coalition Building; Communication Planning; Communication Policies; Corporate Communication; Credibility; Crisis Communication; Digital Strategy; Emergent Strategy; Framing; Gatekeeping; Identity and Identity Management; Impression Management; Integrated Communication; Internal Social Media; Intranet; Investor Relations Communication; Issues Management; Marketing Communication; Media, News; Media Relations; Persuasion; Positioning; Privacy; Propaganda; Public Relations; Relationship Management; Social Movements; Spin; Storytelling; Strategic Silence; Supply Chain Communication; Transparency; Trust; Turns

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