

tend to agree with media coverage that is congruent with their pre-existing opinions, and disagree with coverage that contradicts those opinions. Thus

...media stories are most persuasive with people who have already adopted the viewpoint they present, rather than converting those with opposing views.

Again, the reinforcement value of media.

TOO MUCH MEDIA COVERAGE BACKFIRES

The more media cover an issue, the more negative opinion becomes -- even if reporting is positive & accurate. Every controversy has 2 sides. Allan Mazur of SyracuseU contends that one side is the "establishment" & the other is the "challenge." On each side are passive members (who might express their view in an opinion poll) and active members (who try to influence the public). On issues where there are clearly opposing sides, 1) the media serve as a link between the activists & the wider public; 2) therefore, media coverage of an issue increases during periods of activism, 3) and activism peaks when there is national interest in the issue under protest. Mazur's study concludes that

...as media coverage increases, the public's attitude becomes increasingly more negative. In other words, public opposition on a given issue is a function of the quantity of press coverage the issue receives.

This is true even if the issue is not portrayed negatively by the media. A controversy has opposing sides and both claim to be correct. When the issue holds potential danger for the public, it is likely the public will embrace the safer of the two sides (as Maslow taught).

THE THIRD PERSON EFFECT

If the mass media are limited in their ability to persuade, why do they seem so powerful and important?

Because of the phenomenon known as the "3rd person effect," identified by Davison in '83.

When scholars study the impact of media on target publics, they find it minimal as a rule. But if they study the impact of the same material on managers who feel media coverage is relevant to them, a completely different result occurs.

Executives tend to be media watchers -- or have it watched for them. Coverage relevant to their org's (& others they are familiar with) inevitably comes to their attention. The circles in which these movers & shakers travel are populated with fellow movers & shakers. They notice the coverage, good or bad, which they & their peers get -- and mention it to one another. These "3rd person" comments imply the media coverage has power. The assumption is that if their friends have seen the story, everybody has.

MEDIA USERS CAN SUCCEED IF:

1. They assume target publics are only mildly interested, or not interested at all, & plan accordingly.
2. Specific, reasonable goals are set.
3. Systems are set up, such as skills or knowledge testing, so info received can be translated into behavior.
4. Specific target audiences are delineated. This includes demographics, psychological attributes, lifestyles, value & belief systems, mass media habits.

Who says so? Harold Mendelsohn, whose studies linking info to research have given new value to comm campaigns. (For a packet of case studies using the Mendelsohn Effect, write prr.)

AS INTEREST IN MEDIA FLUCTUATES AMONG STRATEGIC PRACTITIONERS, WHAT ARE REALISTIC PUBLICITY/MEDIA POLICIES, BASED ON RESEARCH? OPPORTUNITY '86: LEARN THE TRUE ROLE & POWER OF MASS MEDIA

Media, society & our knowledge of both have changed -- are changing -- dramatically. Public relations practice has also changed. But on the subject of media use/publicity there is an unsettled feeling. On one hand, many practitioners concentrate on publicity, limiting the field to a one-tool mentality. Most college curricula prepare "journalists" to enter public relations. Some publications essentially define public relations people as those who handle calls from the media.

On the other hand, practitioners have had outstanding success using only direct communication methods. Others follow the dictum of "make news, not news releases." Thought leaders in the field have been moving away from communications toward applied behavioral science.

Where does this leave the working practitioner? Fortunately, scholarly study of the effects of media & of communication generally has been growing. While there may never be a cast-in-bronze solution for such a fluid situation, adequate guidance exists for each professional to establish a personal (or organizational) media policy.

NEED FOR A WORKING POLICY Today's managerial approach means public relations must be measured behaviorally. What did someone do, not do, or let your organization do as a result of public relations efforts? The objective is stimulating behavior, reinforcing or modifying it. Influencing opinion or

HOW PRACTITIONERS SPEND THEIR TIME

Spend Most Time On (Rank Order)	% Spending 25%+ Time
Managing publicity	24.8%
Public relations planning	19.3
Advertising & marketing	18.6
Counseling	16.3
Writing/editing employee publications	14.8
Strategic planning	14.0
Community relations	12.8
Issue management	12.3
Promotions & special events	11.2

Note: Of 9 activities on which respondents spend 25% or more of their time, 5 deal with planning, counseling, or issue management.

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THE SPECIALTIES: Important functions but not engaged in by generalists	% Spending 5% Or Less Time
Preparing video/info prgms	84.6%
Fundraising	83.8
Photography	81.6
Lobbying	81.5
Audio visuals	78.8
Consumer affairs	77.9
Graphics	75.9

-- from pr reporter's 21st Annual Survey of the Profession, 1985



attitudes, showing that messages were received -- even securing positive feedback -- are not enough, except as way stations toward behavior.

Public relations needs to give evidence some action occurred. The question about mass media, about publicity is therefore: what power can they exert on people's behavior?

THE SEMINAL RESEARCH Diffusion Process, or the 2-Step Flow of Information & Influence, remains the basic underpinning. Tho the original work of Lazarsfeld, Katz & others is 40 years old, and contemporary scholars like Everett Rogers are refining the usefulness of the theory regularly, the essence is intact:

1. Information by itself has almost no power to influence behavior or attitudes.
2. Impersonal media like print & broadcast are effective & efficient ways to a) create awareness & b) satisfy the information-seeking that follows awareness.
3. To gain adoption of an idea, product or behavior, personal media (people, experts, opinion leaders) are necessary in order to provide psychological support & social acceptability.

The 6 steps in Diffusion Process are a map of how people (& groups) make decisions:

Phase I Awareness	Phase II Information	Phase III Evaluation	Phase IV Trial	Phase V Adoption	Phase VI Reinforcement
Learns about an idea or practice but lacks detail.	Gets facts, develops interest, sees possibilities.	Tries it mentally, weighs alternatives.	Social acceptability, experimentation.	Full-scale use, adopts it.	Continued commitment, unswerving.

Mass media are effective only in phases I, II & VI, according to the research.

AGENDA-SETTING FUNCTION If media are not able to get publics to act, what is their utility to practitioners? According to studies by Max McCombs & others

...while the media may not tell us what to think, they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about.

Summarizing his research in Public Relations Review (Winter '77) McCombs wrote, "Considering that the overt goals of mass communication are primarily to inform and to entertain, the fact that the mass media have more impact on awareness and knowledge than on attitudes and overt behavior is not that surprising."

Media can't persuade us how to vote, but they do have a voice in determining which candidate gets talked about at the cocktail party, church supper or water cooler discussion where personal media are at work.

He also estimates the time lag between appearance of a topic in the media and its appearance on the public agenda as 3 to 5 months on average. This depends greatly on the salience of the topic, the extent of its coverage & competing agenda items, however.

3 TYPES OF NEWS Various forms of social communication distribute 1) need-to-know, 2) nice-to-know & 3) entertainment (or The Passing Parade) information. They are judged as essential in this order, altho their recreational value is inverse. The extent to which a medium carries each type of news material determines its value for a practitioner's purpose of the moment.

This approach destroys the myth that people eagerly await newspapers or news broadcasts. If they do, found Jim Grunig in 1978, it's not because they need -- or can even use -- the information. He concluded, "There's nothing in mass media that people have to know. For example, most national politics don't affect them directly, nor do floods, disasters & other news items."

Instead, people's level of involvement in a subject determines whether they will seek information -- or merely process it when it crosses their paths. Grunig says practitioners who ignore this fact may be reaching the wrong audiences, wasting time & budget in the process. He stresses these implications:

1. If aiming at a low involvement public, which doesn't need the information (most broad public issues fall in this category)...use mass media, especially tv, because it forces audiences to process the data.
2. If aiming at involved publics, who are actively seeking information on your subject...use specialized publications such as trade or subject magazines, newsletters, direct mail.

If you don't need a car, argues Grunig, tv ads are effective because they make you aware of available models & brands even tho you don't need that data for the moment. But if your car is ready for trade, would you spend the day in front of your tv waiting for car ads?

CONGRUENCE/SELECTIVE PERCEPTION For many years studies have shown that media -- in fact all communications -- face an awesome task in persuading because of human reluctance to be persuaded -- at least on subjects where prior knowledge exists. This is because of "selective perception." People

Marketing communication research reinforces Grunig's "involvement" finding from another viewpoint. In Developing Effective Communications Strategy, Russell Haley emphasizes that "one of the most attentive audiences" for such information is recent purchasers -- especially of high-risk products like luxury autos. Rather than causing the purchases, promotional messages provide emotional reinforcement for those who have already bought. This is an important, if overlooked, objective of public relations activity. But what media do you use, then, to find new buyers?