

Towards a Public Relations' Agenda Setting Theory

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ABSTRACT Limited attention has been paid to inputs into the agenda setting function of the media. Many studies were content with examining how media agenda affects the public as well as the policy agenda and vice versa. This paper takes the position that public relations sources by engaging in what Oscar H. Gandy Jr. calls information subsidies – press releases, statements, conferences and “news commercialization” etc – have tremendous inputs into media content. The specific way, in which this is achieved is through the continuing efforts by public relations practitioners to build goodwill and favourable image for those they represent.

INTRODUCTION

After the media came into being adjuncts of the media began to see the endless possibilities offered by this institution. In the specific case of public relations, practitioners see the media as a tool albeit willing in the continuing task of achieving goodwill and favourable image. This task has over the years been and continues to be prosecuted with vigour and increasing sophistication so much so that practitioners have been indispensable in journalists' performance of their duties.

Public relations practitioners in the public and private sector provide inputs into news through such processes as confirmation of stories, press releases, video news releases, press conferences, media visits and so on. And they do this utilizing state of the art equipments and time tested professionals. As a result, pictures, video news releases, press releases and other items or events meant for the media are irresistible and thus easily get used.

This has translated to about fifty percent of content according to Professor Oscar H. Gandy, Jr. (Wilcox et al., 1998). And in some instances the media does not credit the public relations source of the news thus conferring additional credibility and detracting from the critical examination of such stories by media audiences. This attitude or posture is perhaps traceable to the desire to give the impression that media employees are doing their job themselves not that they are being assisted by outsiders.

As long as this tremendous input to the media continues so much will individuals and companies be portrayed in very positive light. Former

President of the United States, Ronald Reagan benefited tremendously from this arrangement as Croteau and Hoynes (2000) note:

The Reagan team showed remarkable skill at manipulating media coverage by providing television with an irresistible visual to support the “line of the day” – the message the white house wanted the media to emphasize in the day's reporting. In this way they could direct media coverage-at least in visual terms – by making it efficient for the news media to use the visual settings they had orchestrated.

This manipulation of the media and orchestration of visual settings made sure that Reagan came across as a model president and thus guaranteed his high approval ratings.

It is not only high approval ratings that skillful manipulation of the media can throw up. It can improve tremendously patronage and profitability in the business sector, career advancement of individuals and goodwill as well as favourable image of individuals and organizations so projected in the media.

If public relations practitioners are able to, in the ways outlined above and in other ways, influence media content would it not be appropriate to say that they contribute to agenda setting by the media. First a look at the agenda setting postulation is germane.

AGENDA SETTING

There can be doubt about the fact that there is more news everyday than the media can possibly accommodate. It is equally true that there could be a dearth of news to much so that what on a good day would not even merit a mention could make headlines.

However, because the former scenario is the reality, media gatekeepers using news judgement criteria pick and choose what constitutes the day's news. That the choice is subjective is clearly shown in the different headlines and ordering of news item.

This picking and choosing activity "establishes the salience of issues or images in the minds of the public" (Littlejohn, 1992). In other words, if the media decides to impose a news blackout, as sometimes happens, whatever event or person at the receiving end would not be reckoned with in the public consciousness of the audience served by the media. Except of course if there were present alternative media that would convey this news.

This is because in today's world many have come to rely on the media for news and information which lubricates interpersonal interactions. A conversation can be started off among strangers based on the front page news or headlines. This is because the mass media "may not be successful in telling us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling what to think about (Shaw and McCombs quoted by Littlejohn, 1992).

To underline this ability to give media audiences what to think about, Severin and Tankard's (1992) comments are instructive:

A few days to the 1980 presidential elections between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, most public opinion polls said the race was too close to call. Two days before the election, the news media played up a story that the American hostages being held in Iran might be released. As it turned out, they were not. When the election results were known a few days later, Reagan has won on overwhelming victory...

One possible explanation they offer is media agenda setting which highlighted one of the failings of the carter administration and probably swayed public thinking and by extension voting pattern during the elections.

But then this is not the whole story. The viewpoint that the "media agenda affects the public agenda and the public agenda in turn affects the policy agenda" (Littlejohn, 1992). In a number of instances it is not as cut and dried as it first appears. The policy agenda may be so compelling, as the recent fuel price hike in Nigeria, as to force itself on the media and public agenda. Which has an effect on which is not the focus of this paper and need not detain us here. Rather

our concern is with the setting of the media agenda.

WHO SETS THE MEDIA AGENDA?

This same question was posed by Severin and Tankard (1992) who went on to identify two main sources: events occurring in reality and pressure groups or special interest groups. They quote Funkhouser (1973) who suggested a list of five mechanisms in addition to the flow of actual events such as:

1. Adaptation of the media to a stream of events. When the same event occurs over and over again it is no longer considered news.
2. Over reporting of significant but unusual events. Perhaps a good example was the exaggerated coverage of a significant event like the death of Princess Diana even to the extent of crowding out the death of another news worthy personality – Mother Theresa. It even appeared as if the latter chose a wrong time to die!
3. Selective reporting of news worthy aspects of otherwise news worthy situations. This occurs because of the sensational nature of journalism practice. So an annual general meeting of a corporation though a news worthy event, albeit an expectedly favourable one can take a back seat as quarrels and bickerings by shareholders capture the headline.
4. Pseudo events or the manufacturing of news worthy events. Protest marches involving a lot of people like the ones preceding the Iraq war easily get media mention.
5. Event summaries or situations that portray news worth events in news worthy ways. In this connection one can trust journalist to make the news worth while to readers and listeners.

Others, Severin and Tankard (Ibid), identify as setting the media agenda include the chief executives of countries and corporations, government functionaries etc. They also see the content of elite media as setting the tone or direction of other media.

Without seeming to realize it, all these point to the activities of public relations practitioners working subtly and sometimes surreptitiously to influence the media agenda. Even though Severin and Tankard (1992) warn that conceiving the

theory in broader terms beyond politics make the hypothesis less precise and testable, it is the firm belief of this writer that public relations input and influence on the media agenda has expanded beyond politics. A re-examination of these five mechanisms from a public relations perspective is germane.

Even though it must be conceded that significant but unusual events get into the media unaided by public relations practitioners, all the other four mechanisms have tremendous public relations inputs as we shall see presently. Public relations practitioners actively prevent the media from adapting to a stream of events posture. For instance a string of annual general meetings take place. The media reports one or two, subsequently the report would be shorter with a tendency to lump companies holding their AGMs together. This is exactly where the ingenuity of public relations practitioners would come in. They would always explore fresh angles or features of their company's AGM and make these the subject of news and photo releases. If the media still attempts to treat the news as 'the usual', public relations practitioners would engage in what Okigbo (1997) calls 'news commercialization' – they would pay to have the news broadcast. As regards the print media, they have the option of buying space to publish the pictures of the event. This 'picture commercialization' was pioneered by *ThisDay* newspaper in Nigeria (Akpabio, 2000) and is quite popular.

Public relations practitioners are also adept at organizing pseudo events, protest marches, campaign rallies and stops, product launch which are done in such a compelling manner that they cannot but form part of the news. The glitz, the frills all in the presence of television cameras and journalists is a guarantee of media mention.

Even news makers such as government officials and corporation Presidents have a battery of public relations practitioners behind every move. The Reagan presidency is a notable example:

When President Reagan was running for his second term, for instance, he took a tour to promote his administration's record on environmentalism. The tour was full of photo opportunities, including the president standing on a fishing boat in the Chesapeake Bay and the president wearing a Park ranger's hat at Mammoth Cave, Kentucky. Even though environmentalists said the Reagan adminis-

tration had a terrible record on the environment, many people were likely to see the photos... and make a positive link between Reagan and the environment. (Severin and Tankard, 1992)

This identification with the environment in order to be on the right side of public opinion is just one of the many ways and means utilized by public relations practitioners who are actually the brains behind these public appearances of news makers. This identification with the public agenda is also the stuff of which public relations in business is made of:

Forward looking organizations show concern about trends such as women empowerment, concerns about sustainable environment... they prefer to be portrayed as showing interest in women empowerment by claiming to be equal opportunity employers; environmental consciousness by eliminating CFCs as a manufactures of aerosol sprays or contributing to environment groups for organizations in other sectors... (Akpabio, 1999: 6)

The specific ways in which public relations impact the media agenda are through all the attempts to build goodwill and favourable image for those they represent. This effort would embrace:

1. Image Management: Fully conscious of the power of public opinion, public relations professionals devote time and energy towards putting across a scrupulously clean and very positive image of those they represent. In some instances the public image projected may be at variance with reality all in the attempt to earn undeserved favours or goodwill as in high approval ratings, voters' support, purchase decision and so on.

For example America's young, dashing and popular late president, J. F. Kennedy was actually a very sick man before and during his tenure although this was lost to the general public. Information about his health supplied to the public was usually far from the truth. In October 1964 when he was suffering from debilitating back pain and he had to be hospitalized *The Sunday Punch* quotes his office as issuing a statement to the effect that it was meant 'to clear up war time injury'.

In other instances simulation exercises are undertaken with those in the public eye in order to ensure that they look and play the part that

their public office requires. Flint (1997: 1190) wrote of former American President, Bill Clinton:

Every stump, speech, every debate appearance and every interview was scripted-right down to what appeared to be adlib remarks delivered with a thoughtful expression and a contemplative biting of the lower lip (Croteau and Hoynes 2000)

Business are also adept in this image business. Executives are easily distinguished by their well cut suit, designer shoes and ties. They also radiate brilliance and confidence in the media spotlight – a result of the simulated exercises they have undertaken.

2. Choice of Words: Even though image embraces the totality of cues supplied including words-written and spoken, this still merits a separate category because public relations practitioners go to great lengths in their choice and use of language. The language of press releases, press statements, video news releases, press conferences are usually repeated uncritically by media professionals. Thus, the original intent of persuading or foisting favourable perception and image on various publics is accomplished via the media.

A case in point is the Clinton/Lewinsky Saga where the former admitted to having an ‘inappropriate relationship’ with the latter. And the media, as if on cue, kept referring to the affair as an ‘inappropriate relationship’ of course the choice of words detracted from the starkness of the affair if a spade had indeed been called a spade.

This concern with choice of words has informed the use of rationalization instead of retrenchment; economical with the truth instead of lying and many others that make individuals, products and organizations sit well with various publics. Here we have in mind words and phrases such as reengineering of operations, state of the art IT equipments, proactive and so on.

3. Publicity: Public relations practitioners can orchestrate publicity for individuals, organizations, events, products and services through the agency of the media. Irresistible and professionally written press releases, statements as well as product launch, photo opportunities are tools which would come in handy in achieving publicity objectives.

This means that a relatively unknown person, organization, product and service can assume

household name status through the activities of public relations people. A sort of public relations agenda affecting the media and by extension the public agenda.

CONCLUSION

Over the years the media has been promoted as capable of setting the public agenda. By focusing on some events and excluding some others based on news judgement by gatekeepers, media audiences have ready made topics for interpersonal and group communication. There has however being limited attempts to find out the source of media content which informs the agenda setting function. There can be no doubt that public relations sources play a major role in this connection.

The specific ways in which public relations exerts influence is in the continuing attempt to build goodwill and favourable image through the agency of image management and publicity.

And when one realizes that the media influence is greater when there is no prior information or attitude disposition and when receivers of media message are unable to verify information personally (Wilcox et al., 1998) to that extent public relations utilizing the media has a measure of effect.

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