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The Internet: Not the "be-all-and-end-all" for government public relations

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Abstract

This paper provides practical advice for Australian government public relations practitioners in the area of Internet-based PR. It discusses what can realistically be expected from using the Internet to enhance their public relations activities. In Australia, as in most countries, the Internet is a powerful tool for government public relations, but it is not the "be-all-and-end-all" for PR and neither will it replace many public relations functions. Public relations personnel do not need to become "new media" technicians, but they do need to appreciate that audiences use the Internet differently to the way they use other public relations media. Inter alia, *this changes the way documents are written and presented on the Internet compared with more conventional "hard-copy" material. Public relations practitioners must also appreciate that the limiting factor of the Internet in Australia is connection speed (and this shows little sign of improving in the short term), and be aware of the emerging trends of Internet-based PR.*

Introduction

Australian governments at national, state and territory level began integrating new media technology into their delivery of information and services as early as 1995. From that year, when the Queensland Government proudly informed that it would have an "Internet Home Page" up and running by year's end (Neville Jeffress Advertising 1995: 1), we have arrived at the stage where all Queensland Government departments, and many business units within those departments, have their own World Wide Web presence and use their individual Web sites not only for information distribution, but to deliver services and transact e-commerce. It has been an enormous leap in just six years.

As a public relations practitioner in one of these departments, I see the Internet as a significant weapon in the public relations arsenal. But I also understand that it is, essentially, just another (albeit powerful) public relations tool. There is an inherent danger, I feel, in public relations

personnel, and those who educate and train them, believing the Internet has become the sole medium for public relations activities. And I witness such thinking on an almost daily basis. The Queensland Department of Primary Industries, faced with the competing demands of decreasing budgets and increasing service delivery, recently moved to place a number of its publications exclusively on the Internet[1]. To departmental managers, this seemed the answer to their conundrum – posting information on the Internet is (relatively) free, information can be updated (almost) instantly, and anyone with an Internet connection can access it at any time. But the departmental staff "take up" of Internet publications was dismally low[2], and a review is currently underway with a view to reinstating hard-copy to complement the Internet versions of these publications.

Add to this the fact that in rural Australia, where access to the Internet remains low, and there is little demand for government services provided through new media technology (Bonnor 2000: 7), and one begins to see the dangers of governments investing too much in the Internet. There is some argument to providing many departmental documents (internal and external) in Web-based form, and for every department to have a significant Web presence. But departments must realise this is simply an extension to, and not the limit of their public business.

Internet limitations: reader habits, trust, and audience reach

In 2001, the way readers "read" the Internet, the trust they have in what they read, and the audience that can be reached through the Internet are serious limitations to departments wanting to conduct their public business online. There is the potential that these issues might be resolved in the next five to 10 years, but they are real problems for those in the public relations industry now.

Internet commentator and researcher, Jakob Neilsen, in an on-line paper examining how users read on the Web, says succinctly that they don't. "Neilsen's first law of computer documentation," he says, "is that users don't read it. The second law is (that) if they read it anyway, it's because they are in deep trouble and need the answer to a specific problem". Neilsen says Web surveys have shown "over and over again" that users prefer documents in hard-copy format, even if these are downloaded from the Web itself. He says Web authors should write specifically for Web-based documents. Web pages need "scannable text" to suit the way readers read Web documents, using one idea per paragraph and the inverted pyramid style of writing (Neilsen 1997).

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[1] These were the department's external publications ***DPI News*** and ***Research and Extension*** and its internal newsletter ***Prime News***.
[2] The "take-up" rate of these publications in the external environment was not measured.

So what does this mean for departments setting up Web sites? It means avoiding the pasting of entire hard copy documents onto the Web without significant editing. It means re-writing, or at the very least, re-formatting many corporate public relations documents so they provide information easily seen by the eye, with less emphasis on heavy blocks of text. Headings should draw the reader to specific parts of the document and link to other related material. It means providing printed documents in PDF[3] format. And, importantly, it means structuring departmental information according to information categories and not according to bureaucratic structure. The Web reader is not interested in hierarchical structures of government departments. They are interested in hierarchical structure of information.

A matter of trust

A 1998 Gallup Poll in the U.S. suggested that only 11 percent of the population got its news from the Internet, compared with 61 percent who used newspapers. But, 45 percent of respondents to this poll said *they did not trust* the Internet as a news source (Newport & Saad 1998: 30-33)[4]. Similarly, researchers have commented that "the most frightening thing" about the Internet "was that anybody could set up a Web page (and) write about anything with no worries about accuracy" (Sheldon 1998, quoted in Lane 1998: 30-35). This was borne out by a 1999 study of how 41 American politicians used the Internet, which showed that while they believed the Internet facilitated access to raw information, they were concerned about the amount of "raw disinformation" it contained (Douglas 1999: 1).

Perhaps one reason for the "do not trust" factor has been the brief career of the first new media superstar, Matt Drudge. According to one commentator, on his Internet site The Drudge Report, Drudge "published malicious rumours as fact, with the new-fangled speed of the Internet at his back (and) browbeat some insecure Old Media news organisations into repeating them. He hijacked scoops from other reporters. He boasted about his lack of education and his contempt for professional standards" (Rich 1999: 17). The site itself has been described as "a breathless, often juvenile collection of tabloid teasers and news briefs" (Wiscombe 1999: W5).

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[3] PDF stands for 'Portable Document Format', a file utilised by the Adobe Acrobat software suite. Acrobat allows documents to be circulated on the Internet with all codes intact, meaning the document will always look the same on screen and will print out identically, no matter what type of printer is used.

[4] The survey of 1009 Americans was conducted in March 1998 and measured the frequency with which news media were used by the public as a source of news and the perception of each source in terms of accuracy and objectivity. The survey had a + or –3 percent margin of error. Most respondents (75%) used 'nightly network news' for their news and information. 73 percent used local television news, and 62 percent used local newspapers (Newport & Saad 1998: 30-33).

But Drudge was pivotal in what is considered a paradigm shift in journalism and public relations. Matt, and Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. We used to live in what was termed the CNN Generation. No matter where in the world news occurred, the Cable News Network would broadcast it as it happened. But the CNN Generation has become the WWW Generation. Drudge introduced us to the concept of telling us the news *before* it became news. At www.drudgereport.com he told the world about Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinski before CNN broke the story, ushering in a new information order, e-journalism, which was unfounded, uncensored, and unauthorised, but which could be sent around the globe in about two seconds (Wiscombe 1999: W5). And while journalists decried Drudge, that fact that he was right (initially, at least) gave him credibility.

This shift has ramifications for public relations[5], especially for those who work in sensitive portfolios, including:

- There is no place to hide. Bill and Monica discovered it. Truth will out, in the future revealed by people communicating through the power of WWW.

- Reputation is the bottom line. Microeconomic reform teaches that the "bottom line" is the bottom line. It isn't. In a public relations sense, if an organisation's reputation is flawed, no structure can be supported above it.

- Public relations can no longer be "massaged" or have "spin" applied. The best that can be done is to be first with the news. An embarrassing truth will always sound more credible coming from detractors. It's up to the organisation to go public with bad news before its adversaries do.

Ironically, the matter of trust (or the lack of it) may benefit government public relations on the Internet. As the clamour of "unofficial" voices on the Internet, those who "write about anything with no worries about accuracy", grows in volume, people turn to "official" sites for their information (Rich 1999: 17), in the belief that "officialdom" equates with accuracy. Certainly this is borne out by statistics, the most recent of which show that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Website, ABC Online, now records up to 10 million visitors every week (Bryden-Brown 2001: 7). However, public relations practitioners need to understand that even the mantle of being "official" might be used against them. A tactic used by the Australian Wilderness Society in 2000, for example, was to set up a series of forestry-related Web sites that looked identical to

[5] I thank Chris Leptos, former General Manager of the Western Mining Corporation, who, in an address to the Queensland timber industry on 6 November 1998, brought these to my attention.

official government sites, but which contained heavy anti-forestry messages and images. The sting in the tail was that the society gave its Web sites URLs[6] that mimicked the government Web sites (perhaps with just one letter changed), meaning Web users were often misled into thinking they had logged on to an official government site (*The West Australian* 2000: 2).

Audience reach

This is where a reality check needs to occur. Accessibility to the World Wide Web is a significant problem for many Australians. A report by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation said problems with communications links to rural Australia would continue to exist "for some time". It based this assertion on current and projected data transmission speeds for Australian telecommunication lines. The metropolitan standard transmission speed is 28.8 kilobytes per second (kbps) and, at this speed, a Web page can take up to 43 seconds to download. Outside metropolitan Australia, transmission speeds drop to 9.6 kbps, more than doubling downloading time (Groves 2000: 1).

With fibre optic cabling (which I have at my residence, in an older inner-city Brisbane suburb) World Wide Web access can be up to four times the metropolitan standard, around 115.2 kbps. But "heavy" Web pages (that is, pages rich in high-resolution images and/or moving images and sound) still take up to 20 seconds to download. But location is no indicator of Web access. Some new housing estates in Brisbane are being cabled with standard twisted-pair cabling, where, no matter how expensive the computer equipment, Internet connection speeds cannot exceed the 28.8 kbps capacity of that particular cabling. So what does this mean for departmental public relations on-line? For the Queensland Department of Primary Industries, it means recognising that its constituency – farmers, horticulturalists, commercial fishermen and women, graziers and the like – have limited access either to fast computers or fast data transmission lines. Because of this, the department's Web site has a minimum of bells and whistles. It has a "Text Only" option for users to avoid lengthy delays downloading images.

The RIRDC report says Web designers should substitute text for images and should avoid "unnecessary detail" like page backgrounds (Groves 2000: vi). I don't know if I fully agree with this. The World Wide Web is a *visual* medium and Web pages need to look visually attractive. DPI's Web designers certainly try to make the department's pages look as un-bureaucratic as possible. Our experience has been that low-resolution images (about 75 dots-per-inch) still look reasonable on the Web and simple page backgrounds take relatively little time to download. Similarly, sound is becoming vogue, but we provide a button to turn it off.

[6] Universal Resource Locaters – the Web address.

On-line PR dos and don'ts

The "dispersed demand for (Internet) services" in regional and rural Australia (Bonnor 2000: 7), and the fact that many rural Australians cannot access the technology in any event, illustrates the importance of what I believe is a fundamental rule for public relations: nothing beats the personal touch. Departments have to be careful not to invest every PR asset in the Web. There is still no substitute for a fully-resourced public affairs unit getting on with the job of representing the department to the public in person.

Using this credo, I see on-line public relations functions as including:

- A repository of public domain information, with an archived history and a search facility (the Queensland Government's *Hansard* is a good example)

- A broadcast facility for news and events – notwithstanding audience reach, and not substituting other public relations media such as press releases, media launches etc., and

- Any information that is likely to be dynamic. Updating a Web-site is considerably less expensive than re-printing volumes of information in hard copy.

Conversely, I see on-line public relations functions as *not* including:

- Any complex issue that requires a detailed explanation – a response to negative publicity in the press needs a response in the press, not on a Web site, and

- Heavy, bureaucratic information that focuses on the department's internal workings rather than its public face.

Good advice for those contributing to and maintaining departmental Internets is to keep them up-to-date. Nothing looks more unprofessional, in terms of government public relations, than a Web site that proclaims it was last updated twelve months ago, even if the information hasn't changed in that time. On a slow news day, Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* pointed out that a former government member, jailed months before on child-sex charges, still smiled at the world from the Queensland Government's Web site.

Emerging trends

I would like to conclude this paper with a brief mention of some of the emerging trends for public relations online. It is in this area that Internet PR educators and trainers, particularly, need to exercise caution (in terms of emerging legislation) and remain up-to-date (in terms of Internet trends). As government departments move towards greater use of the Internet, for example, public relations people should be aware of the growing legal minefield that exists in cyberspace. Here, a good rule of thumb is that if something is illegal in the real world, it is almost certainly illegal in the virtual world as well. *Apropos* this, government departments need to be careful to whom they are linking their Web sites. It may seem legally watertight to place a disclaimer on a site stating the department does not endorse the links provided, but, to the best of my knowledge, this has yet to be tested. And, anyway, it would be good public relations for a government Web site *not* to link to any organisation that may undermine its credibility.

There is the question of equity. In June 2000, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission released a report on Internet access for "older Australians" and "people with a disability" (National Office for the Information Economy 2000). The report recommended the setting up of a working group to fully address ways for disabled people to gain unrestricted Internet access, but what this means in terms of Web design and the way government public relations might be carried out online has still to be made clear.

In terms of Internet trends, I have noticed in my own department, and in others, a tendency for Internet educators and trainers to want to immerse public relations practitioners in the *technology* of the Internet. Aside from wanting to broaden their skills base (which is, admittedly, a laudable objective), I can see no valid reason why this needs to occur, especially when the model at present is for governments to separate their public relations and Web services functions. During public relations training sessions I often quote: "You don’t have to be able to spell HTML to use HTML". Software advances vindicate this, with public relations practitioners now able to post documents "live" to Web sites through most familiar wordprocessing and desktop publishing programs.

One final trend that is emerging through the use of government Web sites is bad for critical journalism, but good for public relations. A number of Queensland rural newspapers, typically weekly titles with few news gathering resources, log on to government Web sites, download, and then publish the government media releases almost word for word. It saves time for many a hassled journalist and is a sure-fire means of injecting government PR directly into the print media.

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