

Publicity & Gatekeeping in the Media



A presentation by the Mucktracker Team

Objective



Analyze how news coverage influences publicity and public persuasion.

Connect

"There is no such thing as bad publicity." -P.T. Barnum

Do you agree with this quote? Why or why not?



Gatekeeping & Journalism



Regardless of whether you think there is such a thing as bad press, the value of press exposure is clear. While journalists often attempt to present a neutral or even contrarian report of those they profile, mere exposure is often enough to bias an audience toward a subject.

Media organizations are often called *gatekeepers* because they are constantly engaged in making decisions about which activities and voices to place in the public spotlight.

- In politics, this can mean highlighting the voice of one politician, organization, or interest group over another.
- In business, this can mean boosting an audience's awareness of one company over its competitors.

Forbes Example

WORKING REMOTE | 5,855 views | Aug 9, 2020, 07:00am EDT

How 7 Business Leaders Are Redefining Collaboration During COVID-19



Rhett Power Contributor @

Entrepreneurs

I ask entrepreneurs how they overcome their biggest challenges.

News Outlets as PR Machines

Let's look at two examples of news articles that provide publicity for businesses.

NBC News Example

The screenshot shows the NBC News website interface. At the top left is the 'NBC NEWS' logo. To its right is a navigation bar with a search icon, the text 'A business spends \$800 a week to test staff for COVID-19. Could rapid, cheap tests help?', and social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and Email. Below this is a dark blue header with the word 'CORONAVIRUS' in small white letters. The main headline in large white text reads: 'A business spends \$800 a week to test staff for COVID-19. Could rapid, cheap tests help?'. Below the headline is a sub-headline in smaller white text: 'Experts say antigen tests could be used by businesses and universities where there is a demand for frequent, rapid testing.'

What are the similarities and differences?





The first is an online article from Forbes, one of the highest-circulating business magazines, famous for its lists of “top” companies and wealthiest people.

The second is an article on the website of NBC News, one of the major nationwide U.S. broadcast networks.

Although media coverage can bring recognition to a business, it can also bring unwanted attention if the coverage is negative, or even if it deviates too much from the way a company wishes to be viewed by the public.

Therefore, virtually all companies use *public relations* to cultivate a consistent image. Public relations refers to activities that are used to influence public perception.

How should journalists profile businesses?



When profiling businesses, journalists have to weigh the positive or negative publicity they provide the business against their own brand commitment to fairness as well as the news value of the business's story.

Balancing these factors can be challenging because editors use newsworthiness standards to determine which stories to cover. One frequently used standard is human interest—a personal kind of story that puts a human face on a broader topic. This inevitably provides good publicity to the individuals, which can diminish a newspaper's appearance of fairness.



When a business actively seeks positive media portrayals in the press, this strategy is called *media-as-ally*. They may simply solicit media coverage or work closely with a media outlet to craft a story.

It is also essential for news media to maintain a positive public reputation in order to have credibility. Media outlets that wish to be respected for providing news are more likely to maintain a standard of impartiality, whereas some news providers' standing in the public may be based on various other benefits they provide to their audiences.

Check for Understanding

Read the following scenario and answer the questions that follow.



Big Comp, an electronics chain, wants to build their new megastore in the town of Smalltown. They contact a reporter for the Smalltown Gazette to offer a free tour of their new facility, followed by appetizers at Kickers restaurant. Over dinner, executives tell Joe Reporter about the jobs they will create, the environmentally friendly technologies in their new stores, and their interest in revitalizing the downtown area of Smalltown. Joe Reporter proceeds to pen a human interest story on the new business.

How does this scenario show the media-as -ally concept? Do you think this is right? Why or why not?

Apply

Now, go back to the articles from the beginning and consider the relationship between the journalistic priorities of *Forbes*, a magazine for businesses, and *NBC News*, a major broadcast network. Answer the following:

- How might their differing priorities help to explain how each source constructs their articles about businesses?
- How do you think these sources' target audiences reacted to the story angles *Forbes* and *NBC News* chose? How might the audiences have reacted if the stories were switched?



Extension: Public Relations During COVID-19

In April 2020, the website of the public relations trade journal *PRovoke* published an article entitled “PR’s Moment to Shine’: Creativity in the Covid-19 Era.”

Given the grave nature of the global Coronavirus pandemic, consider the following questions:

- How do you think public relations professionals might have seen the pandemic as an opportunity? As a challenge?
- How should news providers respond to corporate PR during the pandemic?

Take a moment to read the *PRovoke* article to get a sense of how a PR professional frames corporate publicity and public relations.

Now search for news stories related to COVID-19. What quotes, facts, or story ideas can you see that have some of the PR elements you read about in the *PRovoke* article?



Wrap-Up

Gatekeeping is the power to privilege some activities and voices over others. This can be done unintentionally or deliberately.

Public relations (PR) describes activities designed to favorably influence an audience's attitude toward an individual, group, organization, or government.

Human interest stories are news stories that provide audiences with an emotional connection to a news subject by presenting personal details about that subject, such as through an individual profile.

Media-as-ally is a strategy in which the press is viewed as a potential means of positive coverage, or even a tool to be manipulated.

