

Perception of Journalists on Public Relations Practitioners and their Practices

Dr. C. Suresh Kumar

Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication, Pondicherry University

***Corresponding Author:**

Dr. C. Suresh Kumar.

Email: mailsureshkumarc@gmail.com

Abstract: The role of public relations is not only to communicate and create awareness but also to gain and hold favourable opinions of the public for an organization. On the other hand, Journalism covers a huge range of output across all media and is recognizable as a form of communication in almost every country of the world. Public relations and journalism are closely linked to each other. Public relation officers greatly depend on the mainstream media for their publicity. There are also instances where the journalists and the public relations practitioners were at war. There has been a fraught relationship between the public relation practitioners and journalists over years. In this scenario, there is a need for finding out what actually journalists opine about the PR and its practices. Thus, the paper attempts to find out how journalists perceive PR and its practices as it will also help to understand the overall ethical practices of the PR professionals and their practices.

Keywords: Public Relations, Journalism, Media, PR practices, Ethics

INTRODUCTION

Public relations and the media are closely connected and interlinked. The Public Relations totally depend on the media. It is because of the media, they get their products introduced in the market. It is through media they persuade the customer to buy their products. No other medium is as effective as the print media where an organization relies abundantly to tell the customer about the product. They take the help of journalists to get their news published. It can be stated that Journalism and Public Relations can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. In the case of Public Relation, it has news it wants to get out and the other side is the Journalism which needs news to cover. Thus, there exist a symbiotic relationship between Public Relations and Journalism. Media today are capable of reaching out to vast and widespread audience to transmit a message throughout the country, a single broadcast for instance can reach millions of people by the human voice alone. Public Relation is a management function which evaluates public attitudes. The policies and procedure of an individual or an organization with public interest are executed to earn public understanding and acceptance. Public Relations professionals are the key for the development of an organization. Public Relation is an art and science as well. A Public Relation professional foresees the events both good as well as bad. Accordingly he/she prepares to face them. In the year 2011, Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defines Public relations as a strategic communication process that builds mutually

beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. In other words, there is a need for the Public Relation Officers to maintain cordial relationship with aggregate people in the society. Thus, it becomes one of the fundamental functions of a Public Relation Professionals. This aspect has been rightly pointed out by Grunig and Hunt's is their most widely cited definition of public relations: Public relations is the management of communication between an organization and its publics[1].

JOURNALISTS VS PUBLIC RELATIONS

The relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners is both complex and ambiguous. It is characterized by both cooperation and conflict. The divide between journalists and PR professionals continues to be a cause of friction. Notwithstanding the amount of data and knowledge we gain, developments in technology or the innumerable channels we use to communicate with, nothing seems to fare to build a healthy relationship. The relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists is, and has invariably been, a complex and necessary symbiotic liaison. Tensions, tempered with distrust and suspicion, exist on one hand and on the other synergies within the relationship allow both to function to produce communication content for the intended effect. Sources, including public relations practitioners, are comprehended as controlling access to, and managing, information, while journalists are seen as controlling sources for communication with the public[2].

Media relations, especially, with the Print media is the oscillator in Public Relations despite the emergence of electronic media like the radio and television. The press provides information and creates the climate and thereby influences attitudes. A study on Global Press-Public Relations Relationship conducted by Rainier PR, revealed that public relations professionals are not viewed with high respect, with a majority of reporters saying that public relations professionals have little knowledge of either clients' or journalists' needs[3]. While studying about the relationship between journalists and public relation practitioners, it can be understood that it is complex and ambiguous one. Despite the fact that none of the two can develop a monopoly over the control and distribution of information, it can be observed that both of them indulge and aim at holding control over the production and distribution of information. The interdependency between the actors involved in this game is based on the interest in mutual cooperation showed by each of the participants. However, the dependency on one another varies in terms of the available alternatives: a) PR practitioners are less dependent on journalists, if they can connect to other means of communication: letters, posters, brochures, the internet, etc; b) journalists are less dependent on PR practitioners if they are able to find more sources, that is, to get information from elsewhere.

For the smooth running of PR practice, the relationship between journalists and the Public Relations Practitioners is essential. With the evolution of modern technology such as internet, global communication patterns and proliferating communication channels, the frame work of media relations has changed. Although, the relationship between the PR practitioners and journalists is important, it is quite difficult to find them in friendship always. Maris Baca, a local reporter for the Star Tribune, explains how thin the line between love and hate can be between journalists and PR professionals, and how there are always the people that walk dangerously close to that line.

The relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners is both complex and ambiguous. It is characterized by both cooperation and conflict. It is the functional nature of the relationship between the two groups that brings out the element of cooperation. Journalists produce news on world and social events. To do so they need sources of information. The fact that these sources are represented or advised by public relations experts does not basically change the nature of this dependence, although it might change its degree. This dependence is however not one-sided. Those individuals or groups involved in the news scene also depend on journalists to reach their audiences. This dependence is even more crucial for

public relations practitioners whose work consists in distributing information about the source they represent in the great game of "news" making. They cannot succeed in their job unless they collaborate with the press. The interdependence of the players is thus based on mutual interest collaboration[4].

However, a positive relationship can be built when the Public Relation professionals understand the media and the journalist's functioning. It mandatory for the Public Relation professionals to maintain and to shape an organization's relationship with the public for which the communication experts - journalists are important. There is a mixed feeling towards PR practitioners. The relationship between the Public Relation professionals and Journalists invariably a bitter and hate relationship. The practices of the Public Relation professionals are not well perceived by the journalists. That is the reason why the journalists do not publish the stories as received from the PR practitioners and a kind of research is done before publishing them. According to the research findings of Fedler and DeLorme [5], Journalists do not form good opinion about the PR practitioners and they believed that public relations practitioners faked stunts to get free publicity, made it difficult for journalists to report legitimate stories, and violated basic rules of news writing. Ryan and Martinson's too endorse the same view and maintain that an antagonistic relationship between journalists and practitioners has existed almost as long as both professions have[6].

METHODOLOGY

Survey methodology is a field of applied statistics which studies the sampling of individual units from a population and the associated *survey* data collection techniques, such as questionnaire construction and *methods* for improving the number and accuracy of responses to *surveys*. Thus, the methodology adopted for conducting the research is survey methodology. As the core objective of the research is to find out the perception of journalists on public relation professionals and their practices, questionnaires with some closed questions were deployed and distributed to journalists belonging to various newspaper organizations including English and Tamil newspapers in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The journalists who answered the survey were from both print and electronic media. Purposive sampling was adopted for the study as the journalists were met according to their availability. Thus, totally 64 journalists answered the survey.

FINDING OF THE STUDY

The respondents who answered the survey were the journalists belonging to various print and electronic media from Chennai, Tamil Nadu. They consisted both from the English and vernacular language media industry. The following diagram

(Diagram.1) reveals the percentage of journalists in different media category in terms of both language and the media type. Thus, it can be noticed from the finding of the study that majority of the respondents are from

the regional newspapers i.e Tamil newspapers followed by regional magazines. Journalists from the English newspapers, English magazines and television channels were minuscule in number to answer the survey.

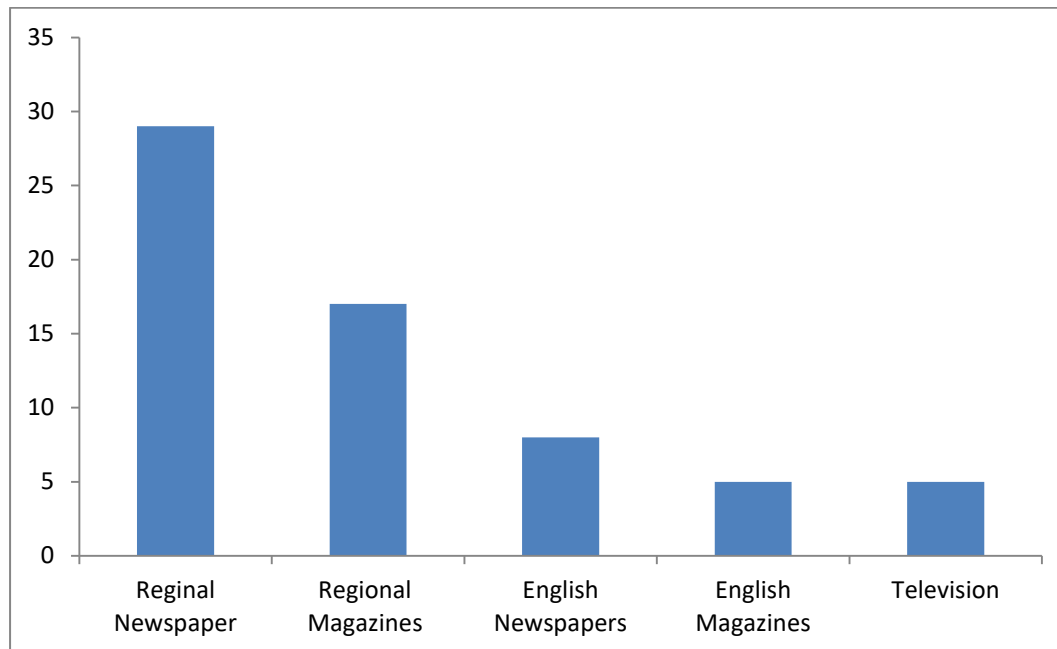


Fig-1: Journalists of the survey

Public Relation Practitioners’ Success in getting Media Coverage

Media coverage is a great way to build awareness, recruit supporters, pressure decision-makers, and drive a campaign to victory. Hence, one of the most

important challenging tasks of Public Relations Practitioners is getting the media coverage. The following table explains to the question as to how far the PR professionals are successful in getting the media coverage.

Table-1: PR Success in Media Coverage

	Frequency	Percent
Valid 4	4	6.3
5	4	6.3
6	10	15.6
7	10	15.6
8	18	28.1
10 Very Much	18	28.1
Total	64	100

The table.1 measures the extent to which the Public Relation practitioners succeed in getting the media coverage. It can be inferred from the above table that the Public Relation practitioners are successful in getting their news stories either published or broadcasted in the mainstream media. More than half of the respondents of the survey opine that the PR practitioners are very successful in getting media coverage. A quarter of the journalist respondents feel

that the PR practitioners are successful in getting the media coverage only to some extent. The rest of the journalists do not consent with the view that the PR professionals are successful in getting the media coverage. It is interesting to note that journalists who do not perceive the PR practices in the good light have consented to the statement that the PR practitioners are successful in getting the media coverage.

Intensity of investigation on Public Relation Practitioners’ news stories

Table-2: Intensity of investigation on PR news stories

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	2	11	17.2
	3	9	14.2
	4	8	12.5
	5	4	6.3
	6	5	7.8
	7	7	10.9
	8	12	18.6
	10 Very Much	8	12.5
	Total	64	100

To the question whether the journalists do any sort of investigation on the received news stories from the Public Relation practitioners, the results provide the mixed responses of the journalists (table.2). Thus, it can be found that more than 40 percent of the journalists do the investigation on the received news stories from the

PR professionals before giving it for publication. On the contrary, it also can be noticed that more than 40 percent of the journalists do not any investigation on the received news items and they simply give it for publishing as it is given by the PR practitioners.

Views on the ethical practices of Public Relation Practitioners

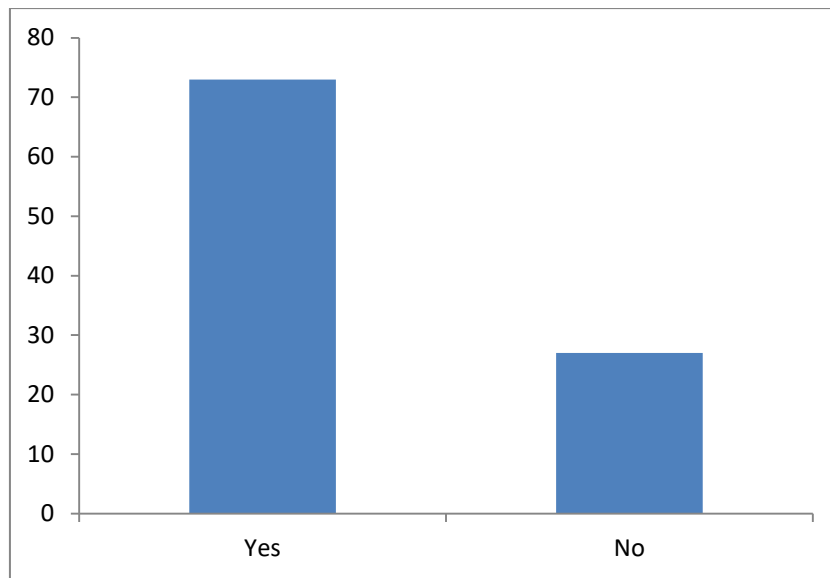


Fig-2: Views on cover practice as unethical

‘Cover practice’ also called as ‘gift practice’ is one of the unethical practices in Public Relations. Thus, it is the practice of offering either money or any form of gift to journalists after having a Press Meet by PR practitioners. There is no compulsion on the part of journalists to receive the ‘cover’. Some journalists receive and some do not. Thus, to the question whether ‘cover practice’ is unethical, 73 percent of the

journalists deemed it as an unethical practice and only 23 percent of them viewed it as not unethical and there is no harm in receiving the ‘cover’ from the PR practitioners. It was found that though most of the journalists feel that the cover practice is unethical, they continue to receive it owing to the low salary received from some of the newspaper organizations particularly, from the regional newspapers.

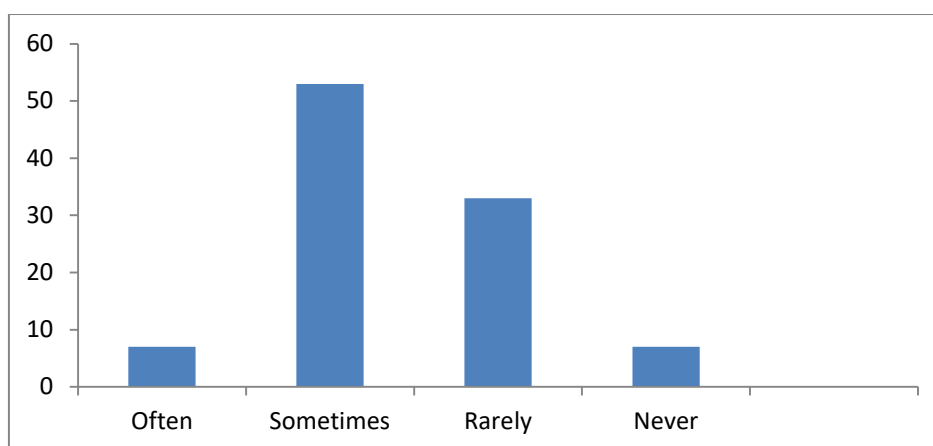


Fig-3: Views on PR practice as ethical

A number of studies on PR practices and the practitioners have raised the concern over their unethical practices. With the emergence of internet, the ethical practices adopted by the PR practitioners came under scanner as studies have pointed out the misuse of social networking sites such as blogs, micro blogging etc., [7]. Furthermore, a number of case studies have shown that, in some instances, inappropriate and even unethical practices are being adopted in social media and social networks, resulting in public criticism and crises affecting the public image and reputation of organizations. Mainstream media is one of the vital instruments for publicity and the growth of an organization. Literatures say that there are number reasons fueling the growing acrimony between the two professions, or at least the short fuses journalists have for many PR practitioners. But, the findings of the present study provide interesting positive notions about PR practitioners' practices. To the question whether PR practitioners indulge in unethical practices, more than half of the journalists have said that only sometimes that the PR practitioners' practices are unethical. It was admitted by more than 30 percent of the journalists that the PR professionals rarely follow unethical practices.

CONCLUSION

Journalists and public relations practitioners do justice to their respective professions. The relationship between them is viewed as a love-hate complexity, at times symbiotic and with camaraderie, at other times tinged with suspicion and distrust. On the surface, the findings of the study on the perception of journalists on the PR practitioners and their practice indicate that though the possibility of practicing unethical practice is not completely left out, journalists do agree that PR practices are ethical to some extent. It is found that most of the journalist respondents of the survey are from the regional language media who receive only minimum pay which forces them to accept gifts from the PR practitioners. Though they do agree with the view that receiving gift in any form is unethical from

their side, still they receive it owing to their economical issues. Furthermore, giving gift is also treated as the token of appreciation. With regard to the investigation for the stories from the PR professionals to be published in the media, a mixed response was thrown where both perspectives were agreed upon by people of both professions. Against the backdrop of the notion that journalists do not view PR practices in a good light, the findings of the study have provide a positive perspective about the ethical practices of PR professionals.

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