

QUALITY MEDIA RELATIONS AN APPLICATION TO THE CHURCH ORGANIZATIONS

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In 2003, I did a study and survey on «*An Overview of the Press Offices in the Asian Catholic Church.*» This included a survey of all the dioceses and bishop's conferences of India, Philippines, Taiwan and Japan. One of the conclusions of this study was that the growing numbers of Asian dioceses are keeping some media activities in one way or another. But, the quality of those relations were not equal, due to various reasons, sometimes political, or an absence of effective religious freedom or technological or professional.

This study showed me that, in a Church, as the one in the Philippines, which is somewhat poor in its material resources, some ecclesiastical organizations were nonetheless quite competent in the field of media relations, on par with other secular organizations in their professionalism. All these analyses helped me to understand the fact that excellence or quality in media relations is not something that depends only or mainly on material resources, but rather on multiple facts. It is in this context that I posted to myself the question: Whether there exist common elements that guarantee quality in media relations? This was the central question of my doctoral dissertation at the School of Church Communication. In this paper I like to share with you some of the results of my research.

The objective of this study and research was to identify the essential quality characteristics for media relations in organizations to be effective in their day-to-day activities and to verify if these characteristics are also applicable for Church institutions and their media activities. The concept of quality, which is central to my presentation, is a primary and universal notion that is difficult and risky to define strictly, although it can be described and illustrated. Here in this paper, I take the term quality which is often used as something that makes the subject efficient.

The originality of this dissertation is in its attempt to point out a quality model of media relations for ecclesiastical organizations. This dissertation tries to offer some parameters that can be useful in developing qualitatively media relations in Church organizations, with the necessary differences and nuances in respect to the media relations of commercial organizations or other non-profit institutions, which are different from the Church.

In order to identify some common quality I analyzed four important authors in the field of public relations regarding their concepts and research on quality media relations. These authors are: Edward L. Bernays, Scott M. Cutlip, Fraser P. Seitel and James E. Grunig. These authors are considered the representatives of four different periods in the process and progress of organizational communication. Bernays is the father of modern public relations and the one who contributed more to the

conversations of public relations as a profession. Cutlip and Seitel are recognized as two famous public relations professors and their main books are the basic texts in many schools of communication. Grunig has contributed much to the field of communication with fifteen years of research in the field of organizational communications and much international research.

The different authors explain media relations in their own terms and enumerate the characteristics in their own way. While Bernays considers the purpose of media relations to persuade the public in favor of an organization, Cutlip presents it as a management action to create effective communication within various publics. Seitel considers media relations a day-to-day activity to create and maintain a good relationship between organizations and the media. And, Grunig presents the model of two-way symmetry for excellence in media relations. Though all four selected authors explain the importance of media relations for the effectiveness of organizations, they differ in presenting the main characteristics for excellent media relations as we see in the first chapter.

Thus, I identify eight «common» elements of quality in the media relations activities of every kind of institution; both commercial and non-commercial. I use the word «common,» because these eight quality elements are an abstraction of the coincident elements of quality present in all four authors, although it is very important to underline that they appear with the different nuances of each author.

According to the common points of these authors, we could define quality media relations as a *professional relationship* based on *research* and finalized to provide *relevant information* about the organization to the appropriate media and transmitted with *authority*, *credibility*, *clarity* and with a desire for the *common good of the public*.

Media relations, as the term indicates, is the relationship of an organization with the media. The essential and immediate public of media relations activities is journalists. Therefore, to clarify the idea of media relations, we must know who a journalist is and what are the key points that define quality in their profession: journalism. That is why I studied also and analyzed four authors from the field of journalism to comprehend the characteristics of quality journalism.

The selected authors were, Michael Schudson, Jay Rosen, James Carey and Tom Rosenstiel. Their teachings are often quoted and discussed even in contemporary journalism. Schudson is recognized in journalism by his «cultural turn» to the field. Rosen is a heroic character in the circles of discussion on «public journalism.» Carey brought the «interpretive turn» into journalism which changed the face of journalism. And, Rosenstiel is honored with his research on «good journalism» in the contemporary world.

These authors present many concurrent characteristics for good journalism, though obviously they differ. An «excellent» journalist is defined as a reporter faithful to the sources, having conventional knowledge, serving the public as well as the media organization with excellent literary expressions. Some of the characteristics of quality journalism varied from one author to another but, the basic agreements are

most profound. The study of these authors concludes with the seven quality characteristics of journalism which are most common to all of them. They are:

Interpretation to offer necessary context to clarify the importance of facts and their relevance and implications for the public;

The systematic effort to provide *documentation* on the cause and consequences of each item a journalist is talking about;

An intellectual attitude of *independence* that allows a journalist to avoid the tendencies of unhealthy commitments;

The *truthfulness* or the ‘dependence’ on truth for getting the facts straight and making sense of them through accurate interpretation and explanation to make clear different aspects of the same reality;

Public service orientation for having the public always in mind, serving it materially and spiritually;

The capacity of *bridge builder* that enables a journalist to have contacts with a number of important sources, which enables him to match the interests of his sources and the public

And finally, *professionalism*, the qualities that enable a reporter to be excellent in his work.

After the precedent analyses we could identify points of contact between media relations practitioners and journalists. This is very delicate because finding homogeneity among authors that give diverse propositions, representing different times and different scientific and doctrinal spectrums is difficult.

Looking for common elements is a work of abstraction and of reflection that can lead to useful results. If diverse persons of different periods repeatedly coincide on some points in their analysis, then it is worth trying to give attention to these similarities. Here, of course, we could find the essentials, both in the ambit of the relationships of the institutions with the media and that of journalism or in any other professional sphere.

«Being a quality media relations practitioner means helping journalists to do their work better in a professional and successful way.» A good journalist, on the other hand, keeps a professional media relations practitioner as his credible source for information. Our study of quality in both media relations and in journalism shows many points of healthy and possible collaboration between the media relations practitioners, who looks to improve their work guided by the parameters of excellence, and journalists, who seek also to do their work as best as they can.

Thus we identify the following common grounds where both journalists and media relations practitioners can work together for the betterment of their professional obligations and for the development of the proper organizations and society.

a) *Truth*: Practitioners are obliged to provide truthful information and reporters seek and report only such truth. The «love for truth» makes them both sincere in their profession and loyal to their respective organization.

b) *Professional Status*: The professional status of practitioners and journalists make them understandable to each other and able to meet the obligations of the profession more efficiently.

c) *Mutual Respect*: This concept accepts the individuality and freedom of both practitioners and reporters in realizing their profession. The essence of mutual respect is doing what is competent to one and not trespassing into the professional areas of the other.

d) *Relevant Information*: The relationship between the practitioners and reporters is mainly for information. The relevance of this information makes the practitioners more and more close to the journalists.

e) *Service to Public Good*: The aim of both professions is providing what is needed for the public.

f) *Mediation*: Both practitioners and journalists are the mirrors of the public, through which they see and experience the world.

The natural final station of this trip is to consider Church media relations and how this quality model is applied in different instances like a diocese, a bishop's conference or a religious event.

For this purpose I had some personal interviews with the media relations persons of three organizations of the Church. The first was with Fr. Damian McNeice, the former press officer of the diocese of Dublin, Ireland. He was interviewed in the second week of June, 2005, at the Vatican. The second interview was done in Sweden with Maria Hasselgren, the press officer for the Church in Sweden on June 20, 2005. And the third interview was after World Youth Day in Cologne in Germany on September 14, 2005. It was done with Matthias Kopp, the press officer for that great event in the Church.

The criterion behind the selection is on a representative level; the Catholic majority country, Catholic minority country and an event in the Catholic Church which has a universal dimension. It is a qualitative selection rather than quantitative. These interviews were more case analyses than simple interviews. Dublin is the capital city and an archdiocese in Ireland, which has well coordinated media relations and a good atmosphere for media activities. Stockholm is the only diocese in Sweden, which has an entirely different atmosphere in the midst of other Christian communities. World Youth Day media relations has a temporary but universal character.

The second source for this conclusion is the analysis of the existing bibliography which especially refers to the relationship of ecclesial (Catholic) institutions with means of communication.

Therefore, I conclude that, with some modifications and adjustments, the quality characteristics of media relations are absolutely applicable for Church organizations:

a) *Relationship*: In Church media activities, relationships involve understanding and accepting the position and profession of each other. Media relations practitioners do not consider journalists to be ecclesiastical collaborators or as being obliged to report the Church, but rather independent professionals. This does

not mean that the Church is at the mercy of journalists and media people. The experiences of experts in Church media relations specify the advantages of being professional in relationships as in secular organizations. Moreover, one other specification of the «relationship» in this ambit is that for a Church media practitioner, relationships have a value more profound, because Christians should see the image of Christ in the other. Relationships in Church media relations are, therefore, considered not only as cooperation, accessibility, understanding, personal contacts and mediation but also as a human dialogue in the deepest sense.

b) *Relevance*: The question of relevance of information in Church communications goes a step further than in secular organizations and emphasizes the importance of transmitting the identity of the Church. The existence and message of the Church is always objectively relevant and is aimed at the salvation of all. But it is the duty of a media relations person for the Church to explore ways to show the subjective «relevance,» that is the relevance for the media, especially for the journalists, in a way to have «news value.»

c) *Research*: For the above mentioned obligation of media relations, the practitioner for the Church needs research in order to find out the essence of the message and identity of the organization and especially to find the appropriate media for its proper fruitfulness in the public. The media practitioner for the Church must find out the possibilities to present professionally the invisible message and essence of the Church through «visible» means. Practitioners for the Church must have a pre-hand knowledge about audience specifications to prepare the message appropriately.

d) *Desire for the Common Good of the Public*: The objective aim of the origin and existence of the Church is the salvation of people. The Church considers transmitting an attitude of hope in the life of people as one of its profound duties. The Church is a communion and is expressed always through neighborly love, brotherhood, response to human values, dignity of the person, gospel values, etc. Therefore, the Church always stands for the people and the media relations of the Church is a growing awareness of this objective and its realization through media activities.

e) *Credibility*: Since Christ, the founder and protector of the Church, is identified as «truth,» the Church itself should be a symbol of truthfulness and its activities must be credible. Credibility is of the most important assets in Church media relations more important than in other organizations.

f) *Authority*: The person representing the Church before the media is very important in media relations for the Church. The identity and witnessing value of the media relations person is an important factor in Church media relations. The reputation of the Church itself, to a certain extent, can be affirmed or negated by the one who speaks in the name of the Church before the media. Therefore, the knowledge, the integrity, the character, etc. of media relations person are important in Church media relations.

Another aspect of this authority is the relation of the superiors to the media relations practitioner. There should be an atmosphere to share the developments

regarding the Church with the practitioner. The unity and nearness with the bishop and other superiors make the practitioner an authentic voice of the Church.

g) *Clarity*: The media relations person for the Church must be an expert to clarify and explain the significance of these texts and teachings to the media and to the people, according to their intelligibility, without distorting the essential message.

h) *Professionalism*: In the Church, media relations is not only a question of good will, but, as in any organization a job that requires professionalism to deal with professionals. Media relations is a profession whether it is in the Church or in any other profit or non-profit organization. All professional qualities that a secular media relations person must have, such as intellectual capacity, accuracy, literary skill, availability, concept of time, equanimity, etc. are essential also to a Church media relater.

In short, the media relations person for the Church must be an «expert» because the present world demands too much and only a professional can satisfy the needs of the media effectively. There are no shortcuts to quality media contacts other than being professional. Such persons could entertain and satisfy the reporters and can create good ties with the media.

I hope that this paper will help the practitioners to evaluate their media activities. I appreciate the practitioners for their enthusiasm in working with the media to share the activity and identity of the Church.

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