Glorifying the Mundane: A Challenge for Public Relations

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ABSTRACT

Increased regconation for ordinary people who have conscientiously and ordinary deeds well done are very important in public relations perhaps qualifying as heroic in Boorstin's terms. The thesis gains support from both critical-rhetorical theorists and logical posivitists in communication literature. Also, it has roots in applied research and public relations practitioners' reflections from field such medicine and law enforcement. Critical analysis of Benoit's strategies seem to recognize that the ordinary person counts. Therefore, it is a challenge for public relations when a promotional mind-set contributes to focus on celebrities in media presentation.

Keywords: *ordinary people, celebrities mind-set, ordinary in police work, ordinary in medicine, image repair discourse, value in public relations*

INTRODUCTION

Around the world, a great deal of effort goes into making a big splash with innovative, eye-catching scientific discoveries, diplomatic break-throughs, record home-run totals in baseball, dazzling plays in World Cup soccer, and so on. Athletes hire agents to portray them as superstars. Scientists race to report discoveries first, hoping to win Nobel Prizes. Advertisers create novel and, they hope, memorable characters such as the GEICO cavemen to generate public discussion or buzz and attention. (The cavemen are presented to suggest that even a stupid person can afford and use GEICO automotive insurance. On U.S. television, these bearded gentlemen suffer greatly from the insults heaped upon them.) Such messages often hype a person, organization or program—portraying it as "larger than life" and more spectacular, perhaps, than concrete achievements warrant.

About 45 years ago, historian Daniel Boorstin (1962) noted unfortunate results of such hyping. He used the term *pseudo-events* to denote happenings planned expressly to gain publicity. Pseudo-events usually are not fraudulent in the fullest

sense, according to Boorstin (1962: 39-40). But they bear an ambiguous relationship to reality that probably increases skepticism if not downright cynicism. They present a built-in temptation to put one's best foot forward. And this often involves concealing or downplaying negative aspects of the sponsoring organization, yielding "impression inaccuracy" (Culbertson & Chen with Shi 2003: 16-20).

Such a promotional mind-set contributes to a focus on *celebrities*—people who are famous because they are promoted heavily and go over well in media presentations. Modern society has few real *heroes* who can serve as useful role models, according to Boorstin (1962: 45-71). Heroes are famous because they make enduring contributions. These people last, gaining respect for decades or even centuries.

A society built on celebrity tends to breed cynicism, Boorstin worries (1962: 253). Small wonder that, today, western leaders and institutions often command the trust of only a small minority among their constituents. A few decades ago, when pseudo-events seemed less pervasive, trust ratings tended to run much higher.

Recently, many observers have argued for increased recognition that ordinary people who behave conscientiously—and ordinary deeds well done—are very important, perhaps even qualifying as heroic in Boorstin's terms. At first glance, perhaps, such people and deeds seem mundane and boring. However, they are necessary for success in most endeavors. The CEO of a grocery-store chain may get much publicity. But the clerks and baggers who make change for and check out customers really count. Without these low-level workers, the firm would go broke.

This thesis gains support from both critical-rhetorical theorists and logical positivists in the communication literature. Also, it has roots in applied research and practitioner reflections from fields such as medicine and law enforcement. We now turn to these analyses.

ACADEMIC ROOTS

A few years ago, the well-known Excellence Study sponsored by the International Association of Business Communicators examined public relations practice in several nations (J. Grunig 1992; Dozier et al. 1995; L. Grunig et al. 2002). The study has stimulated much debate about a central proposition: *Two way symmetric communication is an ideal for public relations.* The researchers contended that symmetry needs to be reflected in a communication effort—though not, as some critics have suggested, to the exclusion of asymmetric (persuasive) communication. Space limits preclude a detailed discussion of the two-way symmetric model. We focus on one central notion. *A communicating organization or person needs to view his or her publics as partners—as equals—to be listened to as well as spoken to.* A partnership is a relationship between people who seek to work together, not with one party simply trying to dominate, bend or mold the other to suit his, her or its needs (Grunig & Hunt 1984, chapter 2).

This is in keeping with the argument of philosopher Jurgen Habermas that, in public dialogue, arguments should win or lose on their merits as viewed with rational analysis and discourse—and in light of what benefits society as a whole.

Verdicts should not be decided by vast differences in resources or persuasive talent (Habermas 1989: 118-9).

In the critical-rhetorical literature of public relations, this argument for giving voice to the "little guy" gains support. Holtzhausen (2000) envisions a type of public relations which fosters ongoing disagreement or dissensus, not consensus in which those with deep pockets tend to prevail in the end. Henderson (2005) calls for her country, New Zealand, to approach genetic science with a national identity which fosters a green economy that sells to niche markets around the world. This, she believes, would feature open public discourse not dominated by scientific experts and large companies. Vlad, et al. (2006) report reduced credibility for Merck, the pharmaceutical giant, when it recalled the drug Vioxx without admitting guilt or apologizing when the drug was found to be harmful. Such an admission would have implied recognition that company and customers were fallible partners.

Benoit and his colleagues (1999) have detailed strategies for coping in crisis situations. For example, some firms seek to evade responsibility by claiming what happened was simply an *accident* that could not be foreseen or prevented. Others say "Gee, we erred, but we had *good intentions*." Still others provide *excuses*—reasons why things went wrong despite "our best efforts." And some crisis managers practice *mortification*—accepting blame and saying "We are sorry."

In using the first three of these strategies, at least, the client is apt to come across as insincere, as striving to save his, her or its hide by appearing to be almost omnipotent and above reproach. Such insincerity surely conveys negative sentiments about audience members by implying they are gullible (Goffman 1956). Such critical analysis of Benoit's strategies seems to recognize that the ordinary person counts. Lose his or her support, and you don't get very far in politics, science, religion, business, or any other field of endeavor.

The notion that ordinary people and activities count also gains support in religious writing. For example, a well known U.S. pastor named Rick Warren urges people to admit their weaknesses and do only what they are equipped to do well (Warren 2002: 272-278). He preaches that people should think like servants of God, not leaders of humans (pp. 265-271). Humble servants are said to attend to other people's needs (pp. 259-260) and to take special care of resources really owned not by them but by God (pp. 260-262). We now discuss the importance of ordinary activities and people in medicine and police work.

THE ORDINARY IN MEDICINE

Modern medicine has made great strides with wonder drugs, transplant surgery, and other marvels that seemed impossible a few decades ago. All this saves lives. However, the field's tendency to promote itself as hard, progressive science has several down sides. For one thing, such publicity obscures the fact that medicine is at least as much art as science. Diagnoses and treatments go wrong more often than some doctors admit. And, when things go well, it's often because of intuition and a willingness to innovate rather than established scientific procedure (Gawande 2002: 191-248).

In a large-scale survey, 42% of all respondents failed to recognize such limitations. These people agreed that "modern medicine can cure almost any

ailment" (Culbertson, Denbow, & Stempel, 1993: 236). Such confidence may seem like positive public relations, but it can lead to disillusionment—and a false assumption that an individual practitioner is incompetent—when things go wrong. Such disenchantment, in turn, contributes to law suits and a growing malpractice insurance industry that help push health-care costs through the ceiling. Furthermore, emphasis on the power of science has encouraged and stemmed from the growth of medical specialties and subspecialties. These trends, in turn, may encourage physicians to lose sight of the fact that different organs and organ systems are interdependent. As one physician told the author, "Some doctors spend years and years studying, say, the pancreas. When you do this and then see a patient, you naturally tend to view him or her as a walking pancreas with a few ancillary appendages!" (Culbertson, Denbow, & Stempel 1993: 232)

Such a narrow focus can hamper diagnosis and treatment. In addition, it leads some specialists to lose sight of the importance of doctor-patient relations. Another doctor told the author that "Good relations with patients are 90% of the battle. If you don't get along with them, they aren't going to do what you want them to. Thus your efforts as a physician become a waste of your time and theirs." (Culbertson, Denbow, and Stempel 1993: 235). In a related vein, doctors insist that good diet, exercise, and other aspects of preventive medicine are very important. This suggests that a patient's well being is largely his or her own responsibility. Doctors cannot take care of everything.

Yet the fairly widespread belief that physicians are all-powerful may reduce motivation to practice good "wellness." Why bother to strengthen our hearts through exercise and good nutrition, this reasoning suggests, if a heart ailment can be cured by pills or shots? Unfortunately, not everyone recovers from a heart attack. And treatment of such a condition is bound to be more painful and expensive than preventing it. (Culbertson, Denbow & Stempel 1993: 242-244). Dr. Atul Gawande, surgeon and best-selling author, argues that conscientious performance of seemingly mundane tasks save more lives, in many cases, than do major scientific discoveries. For example:

- Thousands of people die each year because physicians, nurses, and other medical professionals do not wash their hands as fully and often as they might. This is not as simple as it sounds, according to Gawande. A hospital has so many germs and other harmful microorganisms that the doctor who sanitizes so as to get rid of them all might have little time to treat patients! As a result, modern hospitals go to great lengths to make hand washing thorough and easy, studying carefully how one might also sanitize instruments even in the middle of difficult surgery (Gawande 2007: 13-28).

- In the American Revolutionary War of the late 1700s, 42% of wounded soldiers died. In the current Iraq War, that figure has declined to 10%. Of course, the techniques of medicine have improved. However, much of this change has resulted not from medical sophistication, but from the logistics of providing care. Treatment of a wound within a few minutes can be pivotal. Thus the Army has created mobile field hospitals that offer immediate treatment. That is followed by quick evacuation to rear-area hospitals in

Kuwait, then to more complete facilities in places like Landstuhl, Germany, and finally to rehabilitation and major-surgery centers such as the Walter Reed Medical Center near Washington, D. C. (Gawande 2007: 51-69).

- A study of the clinics most successful in treating a dread disease, cystic fibrosis, found that these facilities did not differ much from those with average success rates in applying sophisticated diagnostic and treatment procedures. What set the top clinics apart was a staff that badgered patients to take their treatments faithfully. Also significant was the invention and use of ingenious devices such as a shaking vest that applied pressure regularly to each of 14 pressure points as needed to clear phlegm out of lungs (Gawande 2007: 201-230).

- About once in every 15,000 surgeries, a medical team leaves a bandage or equipment inside the patient! While rare, this is not insignificant with millions and millions of operations performed each year. Major problems ensue. Progressive hospitals have instituted systematic procedures such as counting scalpels and bandages during surgery to guard against such disasters. All of this is part of a fledgling "science of performance" covering seemingly mundane problems and measuring ways to avoid them (Gawande 2007: 231-248).

THE ORDINARY IN POLICE WORK

Similarly law-enforcement people show great sophistication and bravery in catching bad guys and bringing them to justice. Television programs from *Gunsmoke* to *Law and Order* have long celebrated police as heroes. A study by the author showed that Americans are well aware of all this. And they naturally rely on cops as protectors in what often seems to be a rather violent, unsafe world (Culbertson et al. 1993: 123-151). However, cops, like doctors, have realized they cannot insure public safety and well being all by themselves. Help from citizens is needed to prevent crimes and catch criminals. And this means cops must establish good community relations by acting as helpers in countless seemingly ordinary ways.

In fact, police now spend more time serving people than catching bad guys. Tasks range from unlocking car doors and guiding parades through town to lecturing on drug abuse in schools, helping old people across streets, and rescuing cats from window ledges. (Bard 1973; Fink & Sealey 1974). A survey by the author suggested citizens of a midwestern U.S. city approved of such behaviors -- but *only if they felt the police were doing a good job of catching bad guys*. After all, such catching is **the** core police function. Without that, citizens may not feel safe. And safety is the key need that citizens feel cops must help meet (Culbertson & Shin 1989: 164-165).

Another significant issue in modern police work is *professional perspective*. In many large cities, SWAT teams behave much as military units do. They break down doors to arrest drug pushers, etc. However, cops have come to realize they must often decide quickly whether am arrested person belongs in the corrections or mental-health system. And the two realms operate with quite different values. Cops tend to be rule-oriented enforcers bent on bringing bad guys to justice.

Mental-health professionals, on the other hand, are trained to focus on therapy and rehabilitation (Baker 1985: 140; Walthier et al. 1973).

One liberal-minded guy who became acutely aware of this conflict in values was Brian Willingham, a cop in a U.S. inner-city. In a book called *Soul of a Black Cop*, Willingham bemoans the fact that he often had little time to give young kids the attention and counseling they might need to turn their lives around. He tried his best, coaching little-league teams and the like. But he became very demoralized that tight police budgets and resulting rules forced him often to arrest a kid one day and see him back on the streets stealing and suffering a week or two later (Willingham 2004).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Rhetorical and critical scholars have more in common than they generally recognize with the scholars on the IABC Excellence research team, according to this analysis. Both imply a need to respect ordinary people and actions. Various critics have advanced at least four objections to the two-way symmetric model as an ideal:

- True symmetry, implying equality of resources, persuasive skill, and status among actors, seldom exists in the real world (McKie 2001).

- Certain cultures have *high power-distance* as a central tenet. This implies an assumption by most or all citizens that a few people naturally do and should have power over many others. And, in such a setting, symmetric communication may not be viable (Sriramesh & Vercic 2003; Taylor 2000). Further, cultural beliefs are said to be very difficult to change (Culbertson, Jeffers, Stone, & Terrell, 1993: 53-63).

- In any society, contending groups often have inherently competing interests creating win-lose situations that preclude shared interpretations (Deutsch 1960).

- A traditional Marxist view holds that one cannot eliminate inequities without violent revolution. And that does not seem to be a palatable option in this nuclear age.

Despite these points, both the Excellence team and critical scholars see gross inequality as bad—as destructive of society and economic or social justice. Both want to empower the little guy—the ordinary customer or citizen. That, in turn, involves establishing the importance of what often seems mundane. Thus, both camps seem to share a common wish or goal. What about practical implications for such fields as medicine and law enforcement? We propose several.

First, it seems important to create public support and acceptance of what Gawande (2007: 234) calls the infant science of performance in medicine. He contends this science already contributes greatly to medical success by measuring the role of techniques such as hand washing and bandage counting. For example, giving birth is not an easy process. It poses danger for both mother and child. However, mortality

rates have gone down dramatically in recent decades as physicians evaluated the success or failure of various techniques. In order to do this, they had to devise a widely accepted measure of success or failure.

Eventually, an insightful physician named Margaret Apgar came up with a simple measure named after her. When a baby was born, a nurse could easily assign a rating from 0 to 10, granting two points on each of five criteria—the baby was pink all over, he or she cried, he or she breathed vigorously, he or she moved all four limbs, and he or she had a heart rate over 100. One score was recorded a minute after birth, a second reading four minutes later. A score of four or below in the two measures was cause for concern. A 10 indicated a perfect birth (Gawande 2007: 186-187). The Apgar score proved to be a good predictor of a baby's health prospects. And, when it was widely used, it allowed comparison of one physician or hospital with another. That, in turn, helped motivate a rather universal search for excellence (Gawande 2007: 169-200).

Second, research by the author and his colleagues has shown that Americans generally are satisfied with the quality of health care they receive. But they realize that good care is not available to the 47 million or so people without health insurance (Culbertson & Stempel 1985). This, in turn, has led many politicians to promise a true national system with insurance for all. At this writing, however, no such system exists. Ordinary people with fairly low incomes clearly have the largest stake here. A third implication is the need to enhance personal contact between cop or physician and client. Gawande (2007: 251-252) urges doctors to talk informally with patients, asking about their wives and kids or their jobs. He believes this leads to a belief among patients that doctors really care about them as human beings.

Doctors of Osteopathic Medicine learn early on to shake hands with their patients at the beginning of a consultation. Simple contact helps establish a human connection. And, in the United States, D. O.'s emphasize such contact partly because they regard each patient as valuable. After all, M.D.'s—physicians in the dominant allopathic school—outnumber osteopathic doctors and get most of the publicity (Culbertson, Dembow, & Stempel 1993: 235-242).

In the United States, cops tend to travel around their assigned areas in patrol cars. This is efficient—one can cover lots of territory in a short time and respond quickly to distress calls. However, a patrol car cannot help an old lady across the street! As a result, cop and citizen often meet primarily where there is fear and suspicion of a crime. That, in turn, does not foster mutual understanding. As a result, in some areas, cops are returning to the old-fashioned practice of walking their beats (Cain, 1973; Culbertson, Jeffers, Stone & Terrell 1993: 125). Also, in some cities such as the one where Willingham (2004) worked, police are working out of small stations in the communities they serve. That permits quick response, informal interaction and a feeling of closeness between cop and citizen.

Fourth, the author's research revealed a strong need for more training of police in social-science disciplines pertinent to community relations (Culbertson, Jeffers, Stone & Terrell, 1993: 125). Particularly pertinent, it seems, is the study of mental-health philosophies and practices. As noted earlier, cops tend to be the first responders who must deal with people engaging in deviant behavior. Thus they decide, at the outset, whether a person belongs in jail or in a mental facility. And, as also noted earlier, law-enforcement and mental-health personnel have very

different philosophies and values (Baker 1985: 140; Walthier et al. 1973). Fifth, recent experience suggests the importance of "Neighborhood Watch" programs. In these efforts, citizens watch their neighbors' property and report suspicious activity to the police. Such programs have grown in recent years and have helped foster a sense of community as well as safety (Viviano 1981).

Many other implications showing the importance of seemingly mundane activity by ordinary people could be suggested. Here we list just a few examples.

One thing is clear, the human costs of mundane errors—and the benefits of conscientious mundane effort—can be dramatic. Reporting with a human-interest flavor on all this can command media attention. We close by making one important point. Communicators cannot promote a mundane activity effectively simply by attaching an impressive-sounding label to it. For example, many garbage collectors now call themselves sanitary engineers. This rings true only when the persons involved engage in rather sophisticated behavior that requires extensive training befitting an engineer. To be taken seriously, communication people must make the case that such sophistication exists and plays an important role in garbage collection. Otherwise, cynicism and derisive comments may result.

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