

THE NEW DYNAMIC OF CORPORATE MEDIA RELATIONS:  
ENGAGING THE PRESS THROUGH DIALOGIC COMPONENTS  
OF WORLD WIDE WEB SITES

by

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(Under the Direction of Bryan H. Reber)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the use of dialogic components of Fortune 500 Company Web site press rooms. Using a twofold approach, print journalists were interviewed to determine what components of online press rooms they found most valuable and desirable. A content analysis was then conducted of all Fortune 500 Company press sites to examine what content they were providing. Results showed that corporations have substantially increased their presence on the Web for press from previous research, and that dialogic components on the Web are in line with what journalists use. This study also suggests that operationalized elements of dialogic theory as it applies to the Web should be continually revisited as technology develops.

INDEX WORDS: Corporate public relations, World Wide Web press rooms, dialogic theory, dialogism, relationship management, PR/journalist relationships, Web site content for the media

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## CHAPTER 1

### JUSTIFICATION AND PURPOSE

“Journalists often work under tight deadlines.”

*- Nielsen Norman Group*

The above quote is certainly not presented as the opening to this work as an earth-shattering new concept. However, it did serve as the sub-headline for a piece published in January of 2008, discussing the needs of journalists in today’s world, and it underscores a cardinal rule in the practice of media relations today. Without a doubt, the World Wide Web has become an integral part of the “toolbox” for corporate public relations professionals in their communication efforts. E-mail has all but replaced the traditional printed press release, and even entire press kits are being disseminated via the Web. News cycles continue to shorten, putting both journalists and PR professionals under tighter deadlines. For the next generation of both professions, the classic printed “press kit” delivered by post may well become a relic of the past.

However, just how much of an effect the Internet is having on relationships between journalists and public relations professionals is still unclear. While research has been conducted examining different components of online press rooms, how PR practitioners view the Web, and myriad studies have examined the effective use of

various functionalities of Web sites, little has been done to examine what effect, if any, corporate Web sites explicitly for use by the media are having on the interaction between writers and PR staffers. This study attempts to shed more light on the role that these “virtual press rooms” play in that interaction.

Journalists are more pressed for time and have greater workloads due to massive downsizing and changes in the industry. As a result, news organizations have embraced new technology, in that news gatherers now routinely go online to communicate with individuals and find information that will aid in the reporting process (Esrock & Leichty, 1999, p. 457). “[Journalists] can research immediately and publish breaking news,” says Ibrey Woodall, Director of Marketing and Sales for TEKgroup International. “There are more deadlines, and they’re tighter” (in Garcia, 2007). The possibilities that the Web offers for corporate media relations are especially noteworthy, as a sample of journalists in 2006 indicated that 74 percent of story ideas came from Web sites (Arketi, 2006). In a previous study, 70 percent of working journalists listed the company Web site as the first stop when researching a breaking story or a feature (Magnet, 2002). If journalists cannot find what they are looking for on a Web site, it could very well impact whether they include information about that company in the story (Nielsen Norman Group, 2008). However, this evolution of the journalistic process has resulted in many opportunities for the corporate Web site if practitioners will only take the time and effort to take advantage of them.

Public relations practitioners believe a Web site symbolizes an organization's competitiveness, enhances an organization's image, and increases the practitioner's personal sense of professionalism (Hill & White, 2000). Center & Jackson (1995) suggested that the desired outcome of any public relations activity should be enhanced organization-public relationships. Organizations may engage in a variety of relationship-building strategies and tactics with members of the press, and the organizational Web site is becoming an increasingly important tool in building and maintaining those relationships (Vorvoreanu, 2006). Journalists have repeatedly said that poor Web site usability could reduce or completely eliminate their press coverage of a company (Nielsen Norman Group, 2008). This means that keeping up with technology and learning to use the Web as a key tool for sharing knowledge, ideas or corporate information must be an integral part of the public relations process. The corporate Web site is also an integral way to enhance an organization's credibility with the media. In his book, *Online Public Relations*, Horton (2001) was explicit in his directive about how an organization's site should be structured:

To help establish credibility, PR practitioners should insist on placing as much information online as possible that reveals the background and authority of organizations and individuals. Do not stint on history, resumes, testimonials, or media clips. The more you provide, the easier it is for users to verify facts and to become open to a message (p. 80).

While several studies have examined the content of both corporate and non-profit Web sites to see how those organizations were meeting the needs of the media, there has been limited attention on how PR practitioners are using the Web to foster dialogue and build relationships with members of the press.

Most companies, regardless of their size, are working to create some kind of presence on the Internet, either to improve sales, enhance reputation, or provide more information to their constituencies. Within a framework of dialogic and relationship theories (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Kent & Taylor, 1998), this study seeks to examine the practices of *Fortune* 500 companies in using the Web to build and maintain relationships with the press. Using a two-fold approach, this study will build on previous research to examine the employment of dialogic components in *Fortune* 500 company Web site press rooms, and attempt to shed new light on just how these sites facilitate, improve, or, in some cases, damage relationships between PR people and members of the print media.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL BASIS, BUILDING BLOCKS AND BACKGROUND

#### *Theoretical Foundations*

Much attention has been focused on the Web as a tool for building relationships with various constituencies and publics (Newland & White, 2000; Kent, Taylor & White, 2001; Gustavsen & Tilley, 2003; Reber & Kim, 2006; Vorvoreanu, 2006; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). An integral part of the continually evolving use of the Web as an arena for enhanced relationship building and interaction is its effect on dialogue between public relations professionals and journalists.

The term “dialogue” has appeared in the public relations literature for more than three decades (Taylor, Kent & White, 2001). Precipitated by an ever-growing number of media outlets, the idea of the “mass media” is being constantly redefined, and the practice of public relations is shifting to (or perhaps rediscovering) interpersonal channels of communication (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 2000). In the existing literature, it seems that a theoretical shift has taken place, moving from an emphasis on public relations as managing communications to public relations as identifying communication as a tool for negotiating relationships (Botan; 1996, Hon & J.E. Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 2000). In light of the

growing emphasis on relationships in public relations, dialogic theory appears to be joining and even replacing the concept of symmetry. As Botan (1997) suggests, “dialogue manifests itself more as a stance, orientation, or bearing in communication rather than a specific method, technique or format” (p. 202). While symmetry focuses on the “use of research and dialogue to bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes and behaviors of both organizations and their publics” (Heath, 2001, p. 12), dialogue centers on the actual communication transaction. That is, for a dialogic relationship to exist, parties must view communicating with each other as the goal of a relationship (Kent & Taylor, 1988). Communication should not be a means to an end, but rather an end in itself (Kent & Taylor, 1988).

#### *Tenets of Dialogic Communication*

To further define and offer understanding of the components of dialogic communication, Kent and Taylor (2002) created five tenets of a dialogic orientation:

**Mutuality** – an acknowledgement that organizations and publics are inextricably tied together. Mutuality is characterized by an “inclusion or collaborative orientation” and a “spirit of mutual equality” (p. 25). All individuals engaged in dialogue should “have positions of their own, and should advocate for those positions vigorously (p. 25).” Dialogue is premised on intersubjectivity and seeks to understand the positions of others and how people reached those positions. Participants in dialogue “should be viewed as persons and not as subjects” (p. 25).

**Propinquity** – dialogic propinquity means that “publics are consulted in matters that influence them, and for publics, it means that they are willing and able to articulate their demands to an organization” (p. 26). Propinquity is created by three features: *immediacy* (that parties are communicating in the present about issues, rather than after decisions have been made), *temporal flow* (its focus is on a continued and shared future for all participants), and *engagement* (a respect of other discussant(s) and the risk of attachment and fondness).

**Empathy** – in dialogic communication, empathy refers to the atmosphere of support and trust that must exist if dialogue is to succeed. Dialogue involves *supportiveness*, creating a climate in which others are not only encouraged to participate but their participation is facilitated. Dialogue also presupposes a *communal orientation* between interactants, whether they are individuals, organizations, or publics. Empathy also encompasses confirmation, or acknowledging the value of the voice of others in spite of one’s ability to ignore it.

**Risk** – Although participants who engage in dialogue take relational risks, dialogic participants also risk great rewards. This tenet of dialogic communication includes *vulnerability*, in that through self-disclosure and risk relationships are built and the possibility for exchange on the part of participants exists. Dialogic communication is, often, *unrehearsed and spontaneous*. This spontaneity assists in the sharing of individual beliefs, values and attitudes). Dialogic risk is often a difficult concept for

public relations practitioners, but Kent and Taylor (2002) insist that it “creates understanding to minimize uncertainty and misunderstandings” (p. 29).

**Commitment** – the final principle of dialogue includes the characteristics of genuineness, in that organizations and publics that deal truthfully with one another are much more able to come to mutually beneficial solutions. Commitment also calls for shared meaning, or working toward a common understanding. Commitment to interpretation means that efforts are made to grasp the positions, beliefs, and values of others before their positions can be equitably evaluated (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Relationship refers to the interdependence between two or more people (O’Hair, Friedrich, Wiemann & Wiemann, 1995). Relationships form, according to Broom, et al. (2000) “when parties have perceptions and expectations of each other, when one or both parties need resources from the other, when one or both parties perceive mutual threats from an uncertain environment, or when there is either a legal or voluntary necessity to associate” (p. 17). Relationship building can be seen as the central activity of public relations (Grunig & Huang, 2000). The links that form relationships can be moral, economic, social, geographic or situational, but the common factor is that there is interdependence and interaction between the two parties because they need or want each other for some reason (Coombs, 2001). Hon and Grunig (1999) argued that “the most productive relationships...are those that benefit both parties in the relationship” (p. 11), and suggested that relationship maintenance requires access, positivity or

making the relationship enjoyable, open, network building, along with other elements (pp. 14-15). In a series of interviews with company CEOs, Dozier, L. A. Grunig and J. E. Grunig (1995) found that company CEOs felt that, “public relations has value when it develops good relationships with strategic publics – relationships that, in particular, helped an organization withstand a crisis” (p. 230-235). Pearson (1989) concluded that dialogic exchanges “produce an intersubjectivity that blends shared and opposing views on key issues. Although consensus might not result on every issue, sufficient agreement, or concurrence, allows parties to continue dialogue in cooperative competition” (p. 44). Disagreement gives motive and rationale for such exchanges to test which area of meaning achieves coordinated and mutually rewarding behavior (Pearson, 1989).

Philosophers and rhetoricians have long considered dialogue as one of the most ethical forms of communication and as one of the central means of separating truth from falsehood (Kent & Taylor, 2002). According to Taylor et al. (2001), the concept of dialogue may now best capture the process and product of relationship building, given public relations’ shift to a more relational approach.

Two key concepts of dialogue are important in its application to public relations theory. First, dialogue demands resolution because differences of opinion strain the patience and challenge each party’s desire for concurrence (Heath, 2001). This is in concert with Pearson’s (1989) idea that ethical public relations should involve a dialogic

“system” rather than monologic “policies.” Second, dialogue begins with assertion, an action or a statement, and counterstatement. According to Heath (1994), “The dialectic of act and counteract characterizes relationships between companies [and other organizations] and their stakeholders” (p. 235). Ledingham, Bruning, Tomlinson and Lesko (1997) found that many factors that influence personal relationships (trust, openness, involvement, investment and commitment) also affect organization-public relationships.

The dialogic framework was a cornerstone of the work of Jurgen Habermas (1984), who relied on the principles of dialogue to examine communication ethics. Inherent in Habermas’ concept utilization of dialogue is a belief that ethical communication cannot be dominated by any one party. Thus, dialogue involves a cooperative, communicative relationship (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

From a seminal philosophical view, John Stewart, in an article published in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* in 1978, identified four foci that characterize the work of communication scholars and teachers who adopt a dialogic perspective. First, dialogue shifts the primary objective of communication from “message” or “effect” to the dynamic, complex, content-driven communicative “transaction,” “reciprocal bond,” or “relationship” (Stewart, 1978). Stewart argues that one can appropriately apply concepts of self disclosure, self assertion, or empathetic listening only after gaining a clear understanding of what a “relationship” means (Stewart, 1978). The second

characteristic of dialogic approaches to communication is experimentalism (Stewart, 1978). Put simply, this concept emphasizes that transactional experiences present a much more fertile ground for understanding the concept of dialogue than accumulating factual information on the subject (Stewart, 1978). The third feature is a focus on self and subjectivity (Stewart, 1978). Stewart identifies “self-disclosure,” “sensitivity to self,” and “ability to cope with self” as traits of this feature (1978). For the purposes of this study, these traits are ascribed to an organization’s Web site. The fourth and final characteristic of dialogic communication is holism, which Stewart defines as “the conviction that speech communication [should be approached] from a point of view that embraces a multitude of interdependent cognitive, affective, behavioral, and contextual variables” (1978, p. 185).

Critics have suggested that dialogue threatens to become a paternalistic approach to communications. An organization could selectively choose only those stakeholders who could reciprocate through an economic and emotional attachment (Stoker & Tusinski, 2006). Other researchers have noted that just because an organization and its publics create “dialogic” communication structures, they may not be engaging in true dialogue (Gunson & Collins, 1997). Additionally, Kent and Taylor (2002) note that if the dialogic process is subverted through manipulation, disconfirmation, or exclusion, then the end result will not be dialogic. For corporate Web sites, lacking the dialogic loop in Web communication, Internet public relations

becomes nothing more than a new monologic communication medium, (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

*Relationship building through mediated Web dialogue*

Public relations professionals are constantly seeking ways to interact more effectively with the media (Cantelmo, 2001). The Web seems to be a natural extension of existing media relations strategies, providing a more efficient way to disseminate information and build practitioner-journalist relationships (Hill & White, 2000).

Some scholars suggest that the World Wide Web offers an opportunity for organizations to build more equitable relationships with publics (Esrock & Leichty, 1999). To support the goal of public relations as a tool to “build community” (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988), Bessette (1997) recognized that the Internet provides a mechanism to facilitate communication interchange and enable community discussion. Dialogic communication, then, would be an important component of any organization’s Web site.

Of the many other perspectives that can be brought to bear on issues of public relations’ use of the Web to engage journalists, one of the most intriguing is that of relationship management (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000, p. xiii). This perspective encompasses public relations as “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994, p. 2). According

to Hon and Grunig (1999), "Public relations makes an organization more effective...when it identifies the most strategic publics as part of a strategic management process and conducts communication programs to develop and maintain effective long-term relationships between management and those publics" (p. 9). The relationship paradigm also provides one framework in which to explore the linkages between public relations objectives and organizational goals, for constructing platforms for strategic planning and tactical implementation, and approaching evaluation in ways understood and appreciated by the ruling management group (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000, p. xiii). An organization's Web site, particularly in the area of media relations, is a tool that provides a direct communications medium to support building meaningful and "mutually beneficial" relationships. The organization-public relationship indicators of trust, openness, involvement, investment and commitment also fit well into Kent and Taylor's (1988) principles of dialogic public relations and the Web.

Hon and Grunig (1999) identified two types of relationships that public relations programs attempt to achieve: exchange relationships and communal relationships. In an exchange relationship, one party is "willing to give away benefits to the other because it expects to receive benefits of comparable value to the other" (p. 20). In a communal relationship, "both parties provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other – even when they get nothing in return" (p. 21).

While the existing research is limited, interest in “Net relations,” “Online PR” or “Internet PR,” that is, the use of Internet tools and technologies to facilitate the communication process between organizations and their publics, is growing. Research has shown that there is a gap between the goals that practitioners have for organizational Web sites and what those traditional sites are capable of delivering in terms of building relationships between an organization and its stakeholders (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). Beyond information distribution, the Web provides an additional way for PR professionals to build relationships with members of the press by creating another avenue for dialogue.

From a relationship-building standpoint, the Web provides an efficient tool to supplement phone conversations, face-to-face contact, e-mail exchanges and other interactions between practitioners and members of the media. Journalists are reporting that they have less staff to cover the news and the majority are stating that they have more work to do now than ever before (“What a Journalist Wants,” 2000).

As a dialogic medium, the Internet may be viewed as a “convivial tool,” in that technology itself cannot create nor destroy relationships, rather, it is how the technology is used that influences organization-public relationships (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 324). This idea was explored by Clifford Christians (1990), who argued that convivial technology was socially responsible because it “maintains a kind of open-ended conversation with users...because convivial tools conform to the desires and

purposes of their users, rather than transform human desires to fit the shapes of the tools, they can become true extensions of human subjects” (p. 272). For public relations practitioners and journalists, this idea of an “open-ended conversation,” with the Web playing an integral part in that conversation, is particularly relevant to the examination of dialogic communication between the two parties. Since PR practitioner-journalist relationships are constantly shifting and redefining themselves based on current happenings at their respective organizations, shifts in management, changes due to crises, and multiple other factors, it seems that a convivial view of dialogue between the two disciplines serves as a practical way to examine exchanges as a way to take into account their fluid nature.

#### *Interorganizational Relationships and the Web*

Another perspective from the area of organizational theory that could affect the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists, particularly when it comes to the application of Web components for interaction, lies in the idea of Interorganizational Relationships (IORs) (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 2000). Theoretically, organizations enter relationships because of their dependence on other organizations for resources (Houghland & Sutton, 1978; Van de Ven, 1976). By the nature of their jobs, journalists are dependent on the organizations they report on for information, as, conversely, organizations are dependent on news outlets for the dissemination of that information. Researchers have estimated as much as 90 percent of news content is

influenced or created by public relations sources such as press releases (Arketi, 2007).

The term “linkages” appears frequently in discussion of IORs (Broom, et al., p. 11), which would seem to flow logically into a discussion of the interdependence that interactive components of a corporate Web site could potentially engender. This is particularly applicable in the exploration of journalists potentially “linking” from their stories written for their on-line publications to elements (such as RSS feeds or downloadable fact sheets) that would reside on a corporation’s Web site. Broom, Casey et al. (2000) recast Oliver’s (1990) “contingencies of relationship” (pp.243-246) into characteristics of linkages and exchanges, several of which apply to the IOR perspective of the use of the Web. *Reciprocity* refers to cooperation, collaboration, and coordination among organizations, rather than domination, power and control (Broom et al., 2000, p. 12). *Stability* affects dialogue through the Web in that these linkages help to achieve orderly, reliable patterns of resource flow and exchanges (Broom, et. al, 2000, p. 12). *Legitimacy* refers to the interactive component of the intraorganizational relationship that lends justification and the appearance of agreement with prevailing norms, rules, beliefs or expectations of an organization that journalists hold that hopefully adds value to the journalist-reporter relationship (Oliver, 1990, pp. 245-246).

## *Building Blocks & Background*

### *Dialogic Communication via the Web*

Kent and Taylor's (1998) research into the area of dialogic relationships via the Web provides the foundational underpinnings for this study. Their principles serve as a useful means of operationalizing relationship theory concepts.

1) **Create a dialogic loop.** A dialogic loop allows publics to query organizations and, more importantly, it offers organizations the opportunity to respond to questions, concerns and problems. For dialogic communication to take place on the Web requires a commitment of resources on the part of Web site providers. Moreover, it is not helpful to have published electronic mail addresses for organizational members if these individuals do not respond to their messages and are not committed to or capable of negotiating relationships with their publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

2) **Information should be useful to all publics.** Information is made available to publics [for the purposes of this study, journalists constitute a public] not to stifle debate or win their assent, but to allow them to engage an organization in dialogue as an informed partner. "Content" is what should drive an effective Web site. Sites are visited because they have something of on-going value to offer visitors. This feature offers the basis for a dialogic relationship because publics come to rely on an organization's site to provide useful and trustworthy information (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

3) **Web sites should generate return visits.** A Web site must not be static. It must promise and provide updates regularly and can generate more return visits by including features such as online forums, question and answer sessions with executives or other information pertaining to current happenings at the organization (Kent & Taylor, 1998). For journalists, Web site content developers (i.e., PR practitioners) must be even more cognizant of the need to provide up-to-the-minute information and feedback for inquiries.

4) **Interface should be easy.** Web sites should be arranged intuitively, that is, flow logically from one area to another, and be easy to navigate. Dialogic public relations seeks to create lasting, genuine and valuable relationships with its publics. The Web is designed to be rich in content, however, sites intended to provide information should do it as quickly and efficiently as possible (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Horton (2001) stated that “dumping facts online in a jumbled and confused manner discourages individuals from finding what you have to say and damages credibility. Users want information in ways that they understand” (p. 80). For journalists, this is particularly important given the limited time members of the press usually have to search for information.

5) **Web sites should conserve visitors.** Finally, links should not lead users away from an organization’s site to others’ sites (Kent & Taylor, 1998). For journalists, the more accurate, timely, and appropriate information they can find on the corporate site

the less likely they are to turn to other sites where they might find less credible information. However, Horton (2001) argued that “Placing links from your organization’s Web site to outside sites is part of credibility enhancement. It helps users cross-check information. Linking to a story about your organization on an established publication’s Web page is particularly powerful” (p. 80).

There are limits to the idea of dialogic communication via a company’s Web site with the press. Hon and Grunig (1999) suggest that “good relationships [between public relations practitioners and] reporters are ones in which both feel they have some degree of control over the reporting of the organization...that they have a communal relationship so each helps the other even though they may get nothing in return” (p. 24). However, since dialogue requires equality among parties and the sharing of information, even the most sincere corporation might find it difficult to create a situation of equality in communicating with its various stakeholders, especially reporters (Stoker & Tuninski, 2006). Also, there is always an element of reactivity in public relations, and the timing of an event may prevent corporate practitioners from providing journalists with the information they desire as immediately as they desire it on the corporate press site. Also, not all communication requires dialogic orientations. If a journalist is simply looking for the latest stock quote for a company, for instance, then there is no need for a dialogue if that information is readily available to them.

From a larger perspective, however, dialogue plays a large role in where the journalist goes to get that information.

### *Dialogue vs. Interactivity*

In order to fully explore the elements of a Web site that can be considered dialogic, there must also be some attention given to the issue of interactivity. Whereas the two ideas are similar, some of the principles of dialogic communication do not necessarily relate to interactivity. In a study conducted in 2000, David Fortin defines the continuum of interactivity as:

The degree to which a communication system can allow one or more end users to communicate alternatively as senders or receivers with one or many other users or communication devices, either in real time or on a store-and-forward basis, or to seek and gain access to information on an on-demand basis, where the content, timing and sequence of the communication is under control of the end user, as opposed to a broader basis (Fortin, cited in Dholakia, Zhao, Dholakia & Fortin, 2000, p. 4).

Not all of Kent and Taylor's (1998) criteria relate to interactivity criteria. Ease of interface, for example, is more related to usability. However, there are some concepts of interactivity that directly relate to the idea of dialogue, particularly in Web site design. In his book, *Designing Business: Multiple Media, Multiple Disciplines*, Clement Mok (1996) discusses the four Cs of successful interactive design: "control, consistency, context and

corroboration" (p. 132). These directly relate to the idea of dialogue and the Web. First, Mok (1996) argues that "users should have some level of control over an experience" (p. 132). In a Web site environment this means that users should have control over where they are going, how to get there and how easily they can stop and start the experience (Mok, 1996,). Second, the experience should be consistent (Mok, 1996). For example, the use of fonts, graphics and layout should be the same throughout the Web site. This also relates to the dialogic principle of usability. Mok's third criterion is that the interactivity created on the site should be there for some reason, it should have meaningful context for the user (Mok, 1996, cited in Gustavsen & Tilley, 2003, p.3). Finally, interactivity should support the content of the Web pages (Mok, 1996). For example, if videos are being used as a medium on a Web site, they should help the user understand the content of the page, and not be something that distracts from the information present (Gustavsen & Tilley, 2003, p. 3).

## CHAPTER 3

### PUBLIC RELATIONS' USE OF WEB SITES

Until Kent and Taylor published their 1998 article "Building Dialogic Relationships Through the World Wide Web," public relations literature about the Web had consisted mainly of essays and background about the Internet, and had "operated under a monologic communication continuum, suggesting that the public relations practitioner's role was primarily one of information gatherer and disseminator" (p. 325). Even so, three years earlier, a study of technology issues in public relations found that both "reach" and "relationship building" were of "paramount concern to public relations practitioners" (Johnson, 1997). Since then, several researchers have examined how the Web can be used to create and enhance communication between journalists and the media (Callison, 2003; Esrock & Leichy, 1999; Esrock & Leichy, 2000; Newland & White, 2000; Reber & Kim, 2006; Ryan, 2003; Seltzner & Mitrook, 2007; Shin & Cameron, 2003; Taylor, Kent & White 2001; White & Raman, 2000). Relationships can also be adapted and changed through the World Wide Web (Kent & Taylor, 1998). With new tools such as blogs, wikis or RSS technologies becoming increasingly more popular, the idea of the Internet as the key tool for sharing knowledge, ideas or corporate information is growing (Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel, 2006). Web sites also

“offer corporations an important impression management tool because they represent a constantly available source of information for an organization’s publics, as well as a means to gather information from members of those publics” (Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007, p. 345). While the impact of this new reality on corporate communications in companies and organizations is still not well-defined, it is obvious that the Internet is a rapidly changing environment and PR professionals should be aware of its importance (Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel, 2006).

In 2003, Callison conducted a study of all *Fortune* 500 company press sites examining the presence of online press rooms, what those rooms were actually called on the site, and the material included in such press rooms. Out of 499 sites examined, 195 contained press rooms labeled with names that clearly identified the linked area of the Web site as a media resource (Callison, 2003). Labels for press rooms appearing in his research included “News Room,” “Press Room,” “Media,” “Media Center,” or “Media Relations” (Callison, 2003). No other label was used more than 10 times (Callison, 2003). For content, the average press room in the 2003 study contained 6.46 (SD=3.62) different items (Callison, 2003). Press releases were the most common item present, appearing in 189 (97%) press rooms (Callison, 2003). Executive bios or profiles were the next most common item, appearing in 100 (51%) of the sites examined. A public relations practitioner listed by name appeared in 112 (57%) of the sites in his study, with numbers appearing in 96% of the press rooms where an individual was the

most intimate contact (Callison, 2003). The results of many of the studies and experiments that have been conducted on public relations practitioners' use of the Web have led researchers to mixed conclusions. Much of the existing research has indicated that many corporate communications and public relations professionals are still ill-equipped to handle changes in communication that the Internet provide, and are behind schedule when it comes to Web use (Adams, 1999; Geibel, 1999; Gower & Cho, 2001; Holtz, 1999; Porter & Sallot, 2003). This suggests a need for continuing adaptation of strategic plans to incorporate this new reality, and the necessity of an understanding of online processes beyond simple use (Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel, 2006). In their foundational research, Kent and Taylor (1998) insisted that, for practitioners to create and maintain sites that "enhance interest in their organization," "contribute to public dialogue" and "increase public knowledge and awareness," they must strive for sites that are constructed with an understanding of how the Web functions (p. 326). More recent research has suggested that corporate Web sites may also benefit by utilizing the emerging personalization capabilities of the Internet medium to interact with various audiences, thereby enhancing their corporation's image (Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007).

Other studies have found that public relations professionals at least perceive the importance of a Web site for engaging in interactive communication, and are contributing regularly to their organization's Web site. A survey of members of the

Public Relations Society of America conducted in 2003 reported that 98 percent of respondents contribute to their organization's Web site, and most post materials directly to their sites (Ryan, 2003). Virtually all of the respondents to the survey agreed that organizations must supply links for submitting comments, suggestions, or complaints, and 84 percent or more agreed it is important to establish links for contacting the public relations department directly, for engaging in interactive communication, and for helping organizations gather their publics' ideas (Ryan, 2003). However, the same study found differences in the attitudes of for-profit organizations and not-for-profit organizations about the importance of dialogic links. Not-for-profit practitioners agreed more strongly that three dialogic links (for contacting organizational leadership, for gathering their publics' ideas, and for contacting a parent organization) were important, while those who worked for profit-making organizations agreed more strongly that news releases and annual reports should be posted (Ryan, 2003). Additionally, not-for-profit practitioners felt more strongly that sites should be easy to find and easily accessible than their for-profit counterparts (Ryan, 2003).

A 2007 study assessed corporate impression management techniques among 110 *Fortune* 500 company Web sites (Connolly-Ahern & Broadway, 2007). The researchers found that all 110 sites utilized a competence (appearing intelligent) strategy, and 63.6 percent of the sites used an ingratiation (appearing likeable) strategy. All but four Web sites offered an e-mail address for consumer feedback. Nearly 75 percent of the sites

offered an active link to a help desk, and 10 percent of the sites offered a way for visitors to personalize site content on each visit (Connolley-Ahern & Broadway, 2007). This raises interesting questions about what kinds of, and how much, information is provided by *Fortune* 500 companies for explicit use by the press. It also raises questions about dialogic tools available specifically for members of the media on *Fortune* 500 company sites.

From the perspective of the press, past studies have indicated that the majority of the time many corporate sites have not provided the information that journalists were looking for (Bransford, 2001). Another study found that online sites for journalists are only modestly interactive (Gustavsen & Tilley, 2003).

A survey conducted in 2005 showed that while 75 percent of journalists believed that a dedicated universal resource locator (URL) was essential and easier to use than a 72-character URL, only 10 percent of the top 50 companies on the *Fortune* list carried a direct URL to their online newsroom (example: media.companyname.com). However, 90 percent of the top 50 *Fortune* 500 companies do believe in prominent placement of the newsroom link, and locate it “above the fold,” requiring no scrolling. Sixty-four percent of the top 50 *Fortune* 500 companies had one-click access to the newsroom from the corporate homepage, while all of them require no more than two clicks to access the newsroom (Momorella & Woodall, 2005).

Other research has suggested there is substantial room for improvement in online public relations. A study by Callison (2003) determined that companies ranking higher on the *Fortune* 500 list were more likely to have online pressrooms than those ranking lower on the list, but suggested that clearly linked press sites offer little value if their content is lacking. Other research has indicated that journalists reported often not finding what they were looking for on company sites, and a few even suggested that their coverage of companies with poor Web presence is skewed negatively, if they cover the companies at all (Esrock & Leichty, 1999). Subsequently, content analyses of company Web sites have been conducted and have confirmed media allegations that these sites are not sufficiently providing information journalists seek, and the content that is provided there is overly difficult to locate (Callison, 2003).

In a study examining dialogic features of activist organizations' Web sites, it was found that while almost all of the Web sites in the study provided general contact information, fewer than half had contact information for specialists or experts (Reber & Kim, 2006). More alarmingly, most organizations did not respond to an e-mail asking questions about media relations tactics (Reber & Kim, 2006).

In the Bransford study (2001), journalists indicated that they like the immediate delivery capabilities of the Web, and they were likely to visit a corporation's Web site before telephoning a corporate media relations expert. The study concluded, however,

that a visit to the company Web page was no guarantee that press releases, corporate information, or contact information would be found.

An experiment with 20 journalists asked them to find basic information on 10 corporate Web sites for a hypothetical story assignment (“Corporate Web sites get a D,” 2001). Participating journalists searched for a PR practitioner’s telephone number, management information, and organizational commitment to social responsibility. On average, the journalists found answers to each of the questions only 60 percent of the time, and in every single case, journalists said they would have to leave the sites because they failed to deliver the needed information. In 2006, Alfonso and de Valbuena Miguel expanded the existing body of research by exploring the use of the Internet as a communications and relationship tool with the media by leading international companies. According to their study, most large international companies (92 percent) have a specific Web site designed to meet the informational needs of the media, and all of the companies analyzed had press releases on their sites (Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel, 2006). They also found that the use of security elements, such as the need for a username and/or password to access the online press rooms, was clearly a minority phenomenon (Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel, 2006). They concluded that corporate communications and public relations professionals are still behind schedule when it comes to Web use, that they should adapt their strategic vision to deal with this new reality, and that they need to understand online processes beyond simple use.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

With the growing need for more efficient, streamlined information-gathering tools for journalists, and the importance and value of solid relationships between PR professionals and members of the press, this research seeks to answer several research questions relating to both issues:

**RQ 1: How do journalists use corporate Web sites to gather information?**

**RQ 2: What dialogic tools do journalists use in their interactions with corporations via online press rooms?**

**RQ 3: What do journalists desire in the form of dialogic components of Web sites they visit for the companies they cover?**

Understanding how corporate Web sites are attempting to engage journalists in dialogic communication will help public relations professionals advance their practice and develop new ways to engage the media. Therefore, this study seeks to address the following research questions.

**RQ 4: What relationship-building dialogic components do *Fortune* 500 companies have as part of their online media relations sites or pages?**

**RQ 5: Do these Web sites provide easy-to-use features for journalists?**

**RQ 6: What methods/tools do these Web sites employ to encourage journalists to visit them first before contacting the public relations staff of the company directly?**

**RQ 7: What methods do these Web sites have for encouraging return visits by members of the press?**

The final research question refers to the application of existing dialogic communication theory to Web-based dialogue between journalists and *Fortune* 500 company public relations staffs. Kent and Taylor's (1998) typologies, as listed in the literature review, have dominated the public relations literature since the late 1990s, but Web applications have changed dramatically. Therefore, this research attempts to determine whether the existing typologies continue to stand the test of time or whether they need to be revisited.

**RQ 8: Do the existing typologies of online dialogic communication define and encompass current public relations-journalist relationships?**

## CHAPTER 5

### METHOD

The methodology for this study followed a two-step process. First, a series of in-depth interviews was conducted among members of the business press to inquire about their use of interactive elements of Web sites for the companies they cover. The purpose of these interviews was to provide answers for the first three research questions, capture richer data, and provide guidance for the second step of this research, which was a content analysis of *Fortune* 500 company Web press rooms.

#### *Journalist Interviews*

Interviews were limited to business reporters at the top 100 circulation newspapers in the country and major news services, including Reuters, Bloomberg, and the Associated Press, in order to provide focus and define the sample for the study. The selection process for the journalists to participate in these interviews was purposive in nature, in an attempt to capture a mix of members of the press who covered a range of industries from different regions of the country.

The interview instrument consisted of 18 open-ended questions (a copy of the interview protocol is in Appendix A). All of the questions were framed according to

dialogic communication theory tenets to address the first three of the research questions for this study.

**RQ 1: How do journalists use corporate Web sites to gather information?**

To answer this question, the researcher inquired about the journalists' research and information gathering process, how often they visited corporate Web site press rooms in their research, and how they used those sites. The interviewees were also asked their opinions about the credibility and newsworthiness of information included on a corporate Web site press room.

**RQ2: What dialogic tools do journalists use in their interactions with *Fortune* 500 Companies through Web press rooms?**

This question attempted to examine communications between journalists and the PR departments at *Fortune* 500 companies to see what links exist between behavior and the structure of Web press rooms; that is, to determine if and how these Web press sites are incorporating dialogic principles, and if journalists are using them. Questions for journalists here included what communication methods would they be most likely to use to reach a public relations practitioner at a company, whether they would visit the corporations' Web site before phoning their company's public relations office, what information they looked for on the site, and their use of capabilities such as instant messaging or real-time chat if given the opportunity.

The questions were divided to make the distinction between preferred communication methods among companies the journalist covered often and companies they seldom cover or had never covered before to determine if there were differences in how a writer would go about interacting with a particular organization.

This question leads to a third:

**RQ3: What do journalists desire in the form of dialogic components of Web sites the visit for the companies they cover?**

Here, journalists were asked explicitly what they would like to see added to corporate Web sites to improve their interactions with the public relations staff.

#### *Web site Coding, Sampling Frame, and Coding Instrument*

The second part of this study seeks to address the last four research questions. Using the feedback from the journalist interviews as a guide, a coding mechanism was developed using an operationalized construct of Kent and Taylor's (1998) principles of dialogic relationship.

The sampling frame for the Web sites in this study consisted of the rank-ordered *Fortune* 500 list of companies on the *CNN Money* Web site ([http://www.money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2007full\\_list/index.html](http://www.money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2007full_list/index.html)) as of February 2008. Because the *Fortune* 500 company list is published only once a year, this meant using the roster of companies from the 2007 report. In all cases, the corporate Web sites had a direct link off of a CNN Money "snapshot" page

(<http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500/2008/snapshots>), which gave a top-line overview of the corporation.

For content analysis, the Web sites of all 500 companies were randomly assigned to six coders who visited the sites between February 26 and March 22, 2008. In addition to company name, *Fortune* rank, Web address and industry, each site was systematically coded for content using the deductive operationalization of Kent and Taylor's principles (1988) as developed by Taylor et al. (2001). Data gathered from the journalist interviews was also included in the form of specific content mentioned in the interviews that journalists look for in corporate press rooms. This research extends Callison's (2003) study, in that newer technologies such as RSS feeds, blogs, podcasts, streaming video, and the ability to real-time chat were coded. To provide continuity and measure changes or improvements to corporate press rooms, any item that was present in 20 percent or more of the press rooms in Callison's (2003) study was specifically coded. As in Callison's study, it was expected that some press rooms would not be linked to the homepage. Coders indicated if another term ("Company Information" or "About Us" for example) had to be "clicked through" to enter a secondary page that either served as the portal to the press room or eventually linked to the press room. Coders also recorded how many clicks it took to get from the homepage to the press room. Additionally, knowing that many journalists who are seeking information from these corporate press rooms usually need information quickly, the coders were instructed to

spend no more than four minutes searching for the press room on each of the corporate sites they visited. They also recorded the time it took them to locate the press room if a tab was not clearly visible on the homepage.

Unlike Callison's (2003) study, coders were instructed to look at the information provided on the main "About Us" or "Company Info" pages and code for the information present on those pages. For example, if company history was not in the press room but could be found on the main "About Us," page, coders were instructed to record it as present. These decisions were justified by the fact that members of the media have become adept enough at Web site navigation to be able to locate such information quickly, even though they had to go slightly deeper into the site (Garcia, 2007). Also, if press releases, financial presentations, or other items that might be useful to journalists were clearly visible on the "Investor Relations" main page, then those items were coded as being present. This decision was based on responses from journalists in the interview portion of this study, as several of them indicated that they frequently visited the "Investor Relations" portion of a corporate site for information. However, if the information was buried further into the "About Us" or "Investor Relations" portions of the site, then those items were not coded as being present. The researcher based this decision on Callison's (2003) idea that, while the information may be present on the site, unless it is readily accessible, it does little to make the journalist's life easier or foster dialogue between the company and members of the press.

Specific contact information for the media was recorded to replicate Callison's (2003) study, with modifications. Coders noted whether the names, office phone numbers, and individual e-mail addresses of the public relations staff of the company were present, as well as whether or not there was a general e-mail address and general telephone number for inquiries. Only contact information included on the homepage, under a "Contact Us" tab on the homepage, or in the press room was recorded. As the purpose of this study was to determine what *Fortune* 500 companies are doing to make their Web sites more useful to the media, if the general company telephone number existed somewhere on the site but not on the homepage or the press room pages, the coder noted that the phone number was not available for journalists. Additionally, a generic e-mail address was coded for only if it was specifically for members of the media. Whereas Callison (2003) coded for "pager number" and "home telephone number," the researcher concluded that due to the prevalence of portable e-mail devices, those two items could be omitted from this study. Finally, as with Callison's (2003) study, since media kits often link back to other press room content, current press releases for example, both would be recorded as present.

With the exception of one category (Methods and Tools to Encourage Journalists to Visit the Site First), the Web sites were coded using the categories operationalized by Taylor et al. (2001), such as ease of interface, presence of a dialogic loop, usefulness of information to media publics, conservation of visitors, and generation of return visits.

### *Ease of Interface*

Members of the media should be able to navigate the press rooms of *Fortune* 500 companies and find information easily. To address research questions five and six, items coded for this principle included whether or not there was a clear link to the press room or an “About Us” section on the company’s homepage, the presence or absence of a search engine on the homepage, whether certain content or the entire press room was password-protected and, if the press room was not a link from the homepage, how many pages the coder had to go through to find the press room. If the press room was clearly visible on the homepage, it was counted as zero. If the press room was located under an “About Us” section, it was counted as one. Further navigation to find the press room was to be recorded as incremental page click-throughs. Additionally, if the press room was not clearly visible on the homepage, coders were instructed to record the time they spent searching for the press room on the site, and if it took them longer than four minutes, they were instructed to end their search.

### *Dialogic Loop*

For research question four, the features of a corporate Web site that would encourage interactivity were included in this portion of the coding instrument. The ability to engage in real-time chat with PR professionals at a company and the opportunity for journalists to provide feedback on the site were two of the elements coded. Also coded for was the ability for journalists to view real-time video of

presentations or speeches through the site. Additionally, the presence of blogs, streaming video, podcasts and RSS feeds were included in this portion of the coding instrument. While these are not tools *for* dialogic communication, they are newly emerging tools that that could *encourage* and foster dialogue between the PR staff and journalists. This was based on the idea that the use of communication to “build dialogic relationships with publics” has the same qualities as “building interpersonal relationships and trust” (Taylor, et al., 2001, p. 267). Therefore, all of these features of a Web site do, in fact, foster more intimate relationships between a company and a media public.

#### *Usefulness of Information to Media Publics*

As Esrock and Leichty (1999) noted, certain publics, such as media, investors, and customers, are more often targeted than others. Features that target media publics include press releases, speeches, company history, biographies of executives and, most importantly, contact information for the public relations staff. Because *Fortune* 500 companies are publicly traded, access to financial data is also an important component of any corporate press room. Features of usefulness of information to the media include links to SEC documents, current press releases, a press release archive, a press release search engine, financial presentations, photographs, downloadable documents, a company profile, and quarterly and/or annual reports (the coding instrument is included in Appendix B). For this study, to address the fifth research question, 22

specific items were coded as being present or absent in *Fortune* 500 company online press rooms.

### *Conservation of Visitors*

Existing research suggests that corporations should try to keep visitors on their own site rather than encouraging them to “surf” to other sites (Taylor, et al., 2001). To address research question six, this study focused primarily on providing journalists with the information they need and fostering dialogue rather than encouraging them to spend more time on the site when they do visit. Consequently, conservation of visitors was measured as important information (such as current stock price, current news postings and contact information) being available on the main press room page, the availability of links to get them to the information they might need (such as links to subsidiary/division sites), and a clear posting of the last time and date the site had been updated.

### *Methods and Tools to Encourage Journalists to Visit the Site First*

This category was included in this study to examine what *Fortune* 500 company Web sites might be including in their online press rooms to encourage journalists to start there for information to directly address research question six. This was based on the fact that, according to the interviews conducted by the researcher, writers often began their research by using a news service rather than the company’s official site. By including such features as an opportunity for press to register with the company for

regular updates other than press releases, an archive of press releases, and updated news aired or printed about the company, the press site would be more useful to members of the media and might be used more as an initial source of information.

#### *Generation of Return Visits*

The principle of generation of return visits establishes the conditions upon which relationship building can take place (Taylor, et al., 2001). Relationship building requires time, trust, and a variety of other relational maintenance strategies that can only occur over repeated interactions (Taylor, et al., 2001). To address research question seven, Web sites were evaluated to see if there was an explicit statement encouraging journalists to return, if press releases had been posted within the last seven to 10 days, whether there was a current calendar of events included on the press site, and whether the site contained an invitation to create a bookmark to provide quick return access.

#### *Intercoder Reliability*

The coders for this study were students enrolled in an introduction to public relations class at the University of Georgia. The students used this project to fulfill a course requirement. Four pairs of coders separately investigated 25 randomly selected common sites of the 500. Due to low agreement, one set of coders received additional instruction and coded their initially assigned sites a second time. After re-coding, coding decision agreement was figured by the Holsti method per site. Intercoder agreement averaged .91 across the 100 sites commonly coded. Six of those students

coded the remaining 400 Web sites, while the remaining two students totaled the results and performed random checks of Web sites for consistency. Because of a coding error and problems with one site loading for a student coder, two sites were revisited and coded by the researcher one week after the coding period. Additionally, the researcher performed random coding checks throughout the analysis of the results to ensure consistency and correctness in data recording.

The final question this research addresses is the application of existing dialogic communication theory to Web-based dialogue between journalists and *Fortune* 500 company public relations staffs:

**RQ 8: Do the existing typologies of online dialogic communication define and encompass current public relations-journalist relationships?**

Kent and Taylor's (1998) typologies, as listed in the literature review, have dominated the public relations literature since the late 1990s, but Web applications have changed dramatically. Therefore, this question attempts to determine whether the existing typologies continue to stand the test of time or whether they need to be revisited. In their interviews, journalists were asked about their use and opinion of new technologies, what specific new technologies they have found useful on corporate press sites (such as the opportunity for real time chat or online press conferences), and their attitudes about linking or referring readers to corporate sites for blogs, RSS feeds, streaming video, podcasts, photos, or downloadable documents, such as fact sheets.

The information gained from their responses was then compared against what *Fortune* 500 company Web sites are actually providing to determine if the existing typologies should be amended, revised, or shifted to accommodate emerging relationships brought on by changes in journalist's Web use.

## CHAPTER 6

### FINDINGS

#### *Journalist Interviews*

Web searches were conducted on each of the journalists invited to participate in interviews to ensure that they at least occasionally wrote about a *Fortune* 500 company. Fifty-three journalists at top 100 circulation newspapers and wire services were sent an initial e-mail asking them to grant an interview with the researcher for the study, with 11 agreeing to the interview. Ten interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 30 minutes. One journalist who had agreed to participate was unable to do so due to repeated scheduling conflicts and breaking news.

The journalists interviewed for this study ranged in age from 22 to 61 years, with a mean age of 38.8 years. Seven were male, three were female. Each of them had worked as a journalist for at least five years, with experience levels ranging from five years to 39 years. Seven of the interviewees indicated that there had been a change in their job responsibilities, if not their job description, in the past year, with three of them indicating increased responsibilities because of cutbacks, reorganization or the addition of writing for the newspaper's online version. The other three had either been shifted

to their current beat or had joined their current organization in their present capacity within the past year. Job titles included “Staff Reporter” (two), “Business Reporter” (five), “[Specific Industry] Editor” (two), and “Senior Editor” (one). All of them covered at least one *Fortune* 500 company on a regular basis. Newspaper circulation for the publications they worked for ranged from 90,000 to 410,000. The sample included writers from every region of the country, as well as one wire service reporter. An editor from a major consumer business publication was also interviewed and included. At 10 interviews, redundancy became apparent in interview answers, suggesting that a level of saturation had been reached even with the limited sampling frame.

*News in Print vs. News on the Net: What the Reporters are Writing For*

Of the nine journalists who were on staff at a print publication, seven indicated that they wrote for both their publication’s print and online product. Two “wrote for the online edition and updated for print,” three were on staff for both their online and their print publication, and two indicated that their organizations were in the process of developing a dedicated reporting staff for their Web sites, with their material being posted online in the interim. The other two reporters indicated that their organizations had a completely separate reporting and editorial staffs for their print and online editions. Three of the writers pointed out that their print publications had become vehicles to cover topics more “in depth” or go into more detail about what they had

written “immediately” for posting on their online versions. One journalist put it this way:

You’re going to shift what you do in print because you’ve already put stuff out online you’ve already broken your own news online locally, so you’re going to write a different kind of story in print because you know some of your readers have already seen your stuff before, so you’re going to have more of a spin ahead, not breaking news in print but the next step beyond that. Even on a story that you’re breaking, that you have a scoop on, you’re going to do a different kind of lead on it [on the online version vs. the print edition]. In addition to that, the Web gives you all kinds of opportunities to do interactive stuff, photo galleries, all kinds of things.

This information seems to fit with many of the journalists’ desire for more in-depth information on corporate Web sites, which will be explored in the following sections.

***RQ 1: Journalists’ use of corporate Web sites to gather information***

Eight of the writers interviewed indicated that they visited a corporate Web site at least once a day or more, and a ninth indicated that he visited corporate Web sites at least once or twice every two weeks. The remaining interviewee said that he visited corporate sites only six to eight times a year, primarily due to the fact that his beat included more regional and local news coverage than reporting on major corporations,

but that reporter indicated that he reported on local facilities that were owned by a *Fortune* 500 company. The decision was made to include this interview in data analysis to gain a perspective of a journalist who used corporate Web sites less frequently.

All of the journalists in the study indicated that they primarily use corporate sites to brief themselves on information in preparation for direct contact with the public relations staff at a company. Writers were united in their attitudes about the presence of contact information for PR professionals on a press site, as all 10 of the interviewees indicated that they go to corporate press rooms to look for specific contact information for members of the public relations department. Several respondents indicated that they would most likely begin at a corporation's Web site and supplement what they found there with prior news coverage about the company. One respondent said:

I typically will begin at a corporate site, mainly because it's a good way to get yourself briefed on things they're not going to want to repeat to you. You get a lot of things out of the way like, when did your company start, when did you start doing this, when did you acquire this company. But how useful [the sites] are depends, sometimes I'll get a lot of information and just need to ask a few questions, and in some cases I'll have to ask a lot more.

Usually, consulting a corporation's Web site was accompanied by a search on a subscription news aggregator service, such as Bloomberg, to find articles written about

the company. For example, one journalist said, "For a company I have not covered a great deal in the past, I'll go to something like a Lexis-Nexis or a Dow-Jones search, and I will search for specific news related to my story. I tend to look at many different articles from many different sources." Another journalist said that "Three out of four times, I go straight to the corporate site. If I see something there that in my view might be exaggerated or overly-hyped, I might then start backtracking around to see what other sites have to say." One journalist was particularly critical of corporate press rooms, saying that, "Often times I find that corporate press rooms are not designed to distribute information, they're designed to control it based on what the media has to say about the company." This same writer was complimentary of the investor relations sections of those same companies, noting "As they're generally designed to help an investor understand what a company actually does," with the caveat that "it doesn't apply universally throughout corporate America, but it's a pretty good rule of thumb." A different opinion was expressed by another interviewee, who said that for them, "The [online] newsroom helps me a lot, it's so much easier. I like the convenience of having a one stop place to click and know that I'm going to get a bunch of good resources there."

#### *What They Look For*

The journalists in this study consistently mentioned five things that they look for on corporate Web sites:

1) **Specific contact information for PR staff.** Personal e-mail addresses, multiple phone numbers, and contact information for after hours.

2) **Company background information.** Items listed included company history, an archive of press releases, locations, biographies of executives and basic facts about the company. One reporter even mentioned that she would like to be able to find executives' birthdates on the site.

3) **Financial information,** including not only SEC documents, but recordings of past earnings telephone calls available as archived audio files, PowerPoint® presentations from shareholder's meetings, and quarterly and annual reports.

4) **Discovering what the company itself had to say about an issue vs. a major news archive or other reports.**

5) **Journalists also mentioned that they used a corporate site to keep from having to interact with the PR staff at particular organizations.**

Of the specific information the journalists indicated that they look for, financial documents were mentioned most frequently. Seven of the 10 cited SEC filings or earnings information as a specific thing they look for on corporate Web sites. Nine mentioned using the corporate site to "confirm information" or to "get general information about a company" as one of the main reasons they visit press sites. Only one of the journalists, a staffer with a regular weekend column, indicated that she used corporate press sites for story ideas, and that was only when "I have a hole to fill in the

paper, like on Sundays when we have a brief item on [several companies]...then I'll go to their Web site, look up their press releases, and find something interesting." Even then, the writer followed that comment with, "Very often it's hard to find [something] because even on their corporate site where they're trying to get information out...I find that corporations in general don't appreciate what really is 'news' outside." Another reporter indicated that "generally I'm not there to look for stories...I'm there because something has happened and I need to learn about the company, so [something] is already newsworthy because I'm there."

### *Credibility of Information*

Journalists were mixed in their attitudes about quoting material directly from a corporation's press site. Six of the interviewees said that they did so regularly, with one responding that she definitely had. "If I'm referencing a bio, or company history, I think that would be times when I would. And then when you're referencing facts, like the number of stores a retailer has, that will often be attributed to the Web site."

Another response indicated that they did so because of a company's reluctance to engage in dialogue with the press:

Actually, believe it or not, with the companies I write about, often they don't want to talk, so we do pull stuff from their Web site, such as a mission statement or from a press release that's on their site to represent the comment the company [should] have because they're under

investigation by the SEC and don't want to talk. We have to find something, so often it's something that's off their site, either a press release or an "About Us" section.

Others said that they quoted something "at least once a week," or that it was "very common" for them to do so. One of the interviewees subscribed to an RSS feed for one of the companies he covers, and said that he "often" quoted from that source. Still others said they did so "only if it was from a press release on the site."

Many of the journalists seemed to be skeptical of information on the site, either because of "hype" or timeliness issues. Four of the 10 who did regularly quote information from Web sites said that they always cross-referenced financial information reported on the site or in a press release with actual SEC documents. One writer with nearly 20 years of experience and who reported exclusively on a particular industry, said, "I'm very skeptical of claims that do not have numbers [actual revenue or sales] behind them, I'm skeptical when they talk about claims of 'we anticipate sales of...' I just don't like to quote those numbers, quite frankly. I mean, they really have no basis in even projected research." One journalist indicated that even when he did quote information on a corporate press site, he would still make a follow-up phone call because "even for the basic information, [I] don't necessarily trust it enough." Three indicated a higher comfort level with the credibility of companies they interacted with

more regularly. According to one writer, "A lot of it depends on your relationship with the company and their track record of being truthful with you."

*RQ 2: Dialogic tools used in the interaction of journalists with corporations via online press rooms*

The 10 journalists were asked a series of questions regarding their interaction with Web sites for companies they had regular contact with, and then were asked to apply those same questions to companies they had infrequent contact with. For companies they were familiar with or dealt with often, five of the journalists said that they would be likely to visit a company's Web site before contacting them. Four of those five said they would use a capability like instant messaging or real-time chat available on the site. Somewhat surprisingly, two of the four journalists who responded they would not visit a company's site before contacting them said that they also would be likely to use such a capability if it were available to them.

While the majority of journalists interviewed were open to newer forms of communication to interact with the corporations they cover regularly, only two had actually used a capability on a company's Web site (instant messaging) to communicate with the PR staff there.

*Communication "Clues" on a Deeper Level*

By far the majority of journalists favored the more traditional methods of telephone and e-mail when contacting PR staff. Six preferred telephone, two preferred e-mail and two said they would use either, with a preference for direct phone contact.

Comments included, "My preferred method of contact is phone, only because it's more spontaneous and there are more [unspoken] clues...there's a whole other level of information there that's not in written communication," and "You can't get a feel for...the gravity of the situation over instant messaging, like you can't hear the tone of someone's voice drop. There's basically no way to pick up on a nuance online or through e-mail." One journalist said they relied on e-mail almost 90 percent of the time, because, "These [PR] people are constantly checking e-mail with their Blackberries [personal e-mail devices], so e-mail is really the fastest way to get them vs. a situation where they have to wade through nine messages to get to mine."

There seemed to be a greater level of reluctance to visit a corporate Web site or use communication tools on a Web site as a means of interacting with the public relations staff at an organization or company if there was an existing relationship between the journalist and the PR staff. "Well, if I have a relationship with them I'm not sure why I would go to the Web site," said one reporter. When asked if she would visit the company's Web site before calling the PR contact, another said:

No, [I wouldn't go to their site first] because...part of the reason is that I already know what's happening or I have relationships with those people. Also, I may need to act very quickly if it's a breaking news story, obviously, and I know enough of what the company's story is. I certainly don't need to go refer to some company's Web site. I would probably go

back at a later time and check maybe some discrete facts if I didn't ask them about it.

*Companies with "Infrequent" or "No Prior" Contact*

When a relationship did not exist between a journalist and a particular company, there seemed to be more of a willingness to go to a company's Web site. All 10 of the journalists said that they would be likely to visit a site before attempting direct contact with the PR staff there.

And there was this comment about using communication tools on a company's Web site:

I probably would [use them], but I think I'd rather just talk to them on the phone. I'm kind of insulted when they have something like "media@company.com." Like sometimes companies just get so big that they are pretty insulting to anyone who wants any kind of information. I would feel like instant messenger is a way of saying, "hey, we don't want to talk to you, we're not going to e-mail you, but here's this capability and we might get back to you in four or five days".

One journalist referenced an instance when they needed information quickly and the only contact they could find was a generic "pressroom@company.com." According to the writer, "It was a horrendous situation. They allowed you to send an e-mail, but

of course I didn't get a response to the e-mail, and had no idea even whether or not the e-mail was up and running for them."

The interviewees indicated that they did look for the same kinds of information on sites that they visited infrequently as they did for sites they visited regularly.

Contact information, background information, company fact sheets, press release archives, earnings information, links to media coverage and annual reports were all mentioned by one or more of them as information they would look for.

While two of the journalists in this study said that they would use e-mail or a communication tool available on the Web site as their initial means of contact for a new company, a phone call was still the preferred method for the other eight. One of the writers who said that he preferred e-mail also said, "If they don't get back to you, then you just won't write the story."

#### *Tools Journalists Use*

While many of the journalists expressed frustration when searching for contact information, seven of the interviewees said that they did use e-mail addresses available on the site, either for specific individuals or a generic address specifically for the media. One reporter even indicated that she uses one major manufacturer's Web site as her "rolodex" for specific contacts in different areas of the company. There was a general dissatisfaction with generic e-mail addresses and as one writer put it:

Sometimes I have [used them], but I feel like that's the least desirable.

And often times the people who respond to you are extremely rude and inhospitable. The best thing to do in that situation is to turn to an earnings press release or a major corporate news release and cut that information out. If you can't find or are unable to get a real person to talk to in corporate PR, you go directly to the CEO or CFO and then you get a pretty immediate call back.

Another said, "I will work tirelessly just to get a phone number." Other comments included, "When you e-mail [a generic address] you don't know who's going to see it or when," and "If that's my last resort, I'll do that, but generally before that I've called the main switchboard to try to get through to whoever it is."

All of the interviewees said that they had used financial presentations posted to a Web site, and eight of them indicated that they regularly "listen in" via Webcasts of quarterly earnings updates or year-end reports. One writer indicated that he used online chat functions and blogging when he was covering a specific industry before he was moved to his current beat. "It's a new process that a lot of people aren't familiar with, but it is a clever way to reach a lot of people," said another writer.

**RQ3: *What journalists desire in the form of dialogic components on the Web sites they visit***

Most of the journalists interviewed wanted more information, and they wanted that information easier to find.

I really love to see a newsroom link on [the homepage]...in the sense that the opening page has a link to current releases, what's been written about them, their media contacts, after hours contact information, et cetera. Of course the problem that companies run into is that they hate doing it because they get dinged all the time by folks who aren't media people.

This was one response to a question about what sites could do to make journalists' interaction with them easier. Seven of respondents listed easy-to-find contact information as the number one thing they desired from company Web sites. Only one respondent indicated that he would prefer instant messaging as his primary means of communication: "Of course I would use [the ability to instant message]. And with the advent of g-mail, where you can get an instant rapport going...I'm just beginning to dabble with it but it's very good because it's instant."

The journalists were also asked about components of corporate Web sites, specifically company blogs, RSS feeds, streaming video, podcasts, photographs, and downloadable documents, such as fact sheets, and whether they would actually link to those components in a story for their online edition or reference them in print. One of the participants indicated that he would never link to corporate sites because of standing policies of his news organization, and that linking was a "topic that's a current debate with online journalists." Three of them indicated that they would link to certain elements of a corporate Web site, but, according to one "it's got to be something useful

for the readers who they're going to have trouble getting somewhere else," and that there was no "hard and fast rule" about linking outside of the news organization's site. Another indicated that their news organization's strategy was to keep visitors on his publication's site, but that he occasionally linked to "releases or statements or things they put up like that." Of the remaining six writers, responses were split, as seen in table 6.1

**Table 6.1: Attitudes about Linking to Particular Corporate Site Components\***

<b>Web site Component</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Possibly</b>
<b>Company Blogs</b>	0	5	1
<b>RSS Feeds</b>	3	2	1
<b>Podcasts</b>	3	2	1
<b>Links to Photos</b>	3	3	0
<b>Documents</b>	3	3	0

\*Note: These numbers are in no way meant to generalize across all business reporters or reporters in general. Their purpose is only to report findings from this research.

One of the interviewees was unfamiliar with what an RSS feed was, and that same writer indicated that he would not link to documents on a corporation's Web site but that he would "have [our] staff redo them, [we wouldn't] just regurgitate what we found on a corporate site."

Regardless of their use of newer communication tools like blogging or RSS feeds and downloadable documents, nine of the journalists agreed that at least some of them were an important component of corporate press rooms on the Web. "[They're] hugely important. It's changed the whole nature of the business. I can remember slogging

through three-ring binders looking for information...and reaching people was impossible. So [newer communication methods] have changed my life over the past eight years.”

Regarding the importance of more recent communication tactics such as blogs, podcasts, RSS feeds and downloadable documents, all but two of the journalists agreed that they were an important component of press rooms, whether or not they were actually being used. As one writer put it:

I think they're important. Even if they're not being linked to, I think it's important for engaging a journalist. As objective as we always like to pretend we are, we all have our biases, and we're just naturally going to have a more favorable opinion toward a company that's more open, and if that means having information online then so be it. It works well in a lot of instances.

One writer found newer forms of communication on the Web particularly useful in tight deadline situations:

I think [these components] can be really helpful, especially if we're trying to get a comment from an executive and they've got a podcast of the guy talking about stuff or a recording of their earnings call we can listen to in a pinch and pull stuff from. Say a company in [city] was going to reorganize and there's a big message from their CEO. If they podcast that

or post links or do anything with it digitally so that people can find it [through] our site, then that's great. I think it's an unused tool that people can probably do more with, but that takes time and money, and a lot of execs aren't okay with that kind of stuff.

### *Frustrations*

Frustrations journalists had with corporate Web sites centered around a lack of information, which was mentioned specifically by nine of the interviewees. Lack of easy-to-find contact information was mentioned by three of the 10 journalists.

"Basically, the fact is that some of them don't provide any information at all," said one writer. "If you're going to have an online press room, then actually have one. If it's going to be a waste of a journalist's time, then don't bother." A frustration expressed by three of the journalists was a "lack of organization and poor means of access."

Quotes from the interviews regarding frustrations with Web sites included:

"There are better ones, there are not so good ones, and there are those that just don't have them...the lack of information...the lack of a newsroom overall is a problem."

“It would seem that corporate PR people are building these [sites] more to satiate the desire of an executive than to help create or develop perceptions about a company, but I think that’s an age-old problem.”

“I think I’ve already said this, but there are many corporate Web sites that you have to dig and dig to find the contact information, and that just drives me up the wall.”

### *Content Analysis of Web site Press Rooms*

Of the 500 coded Web sites, only four did not contain an area designated for media or were abandoned after searching the site for at least three minutes. One site was completely password protected and was therefore not coded for information. Percentages were computed against all the 495 remaining Web sites. Three hundred sixty-one (73%) of the sites had links to a press room labeled with a name (“Press Room,” “News,” “Media Info,” “For the Press,” “Corporate News,” etc.) directly from their homepage. One hundred thirty-four (27%) of the sites housed their press rooms or press areas under another tab. With few exceptions, this was either the company’s “About Us” section or the company’s area for investors. Table 6.2 shows the distribution of where press areas were located. Even when press rooms were located under another tab on the homepage, only 39 (8%) sites required two or more “click

throughs” to get to press releases or other information useful to the media. Two hundred ninety-five (59%) of the sites contained a general search engine box on their homepage, allowing a journalist to search for information in that manner if needed.

**Table 6.2: Where Corporate Press Rooms Were Found**

<b>Press Room Location</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent of Total Sites</b>
Company homepage	361	73%
“Investor Relations” area	62	13%
“About Us” or “About (Company Name)”	57	12%
“Corporate Information”	10	2%
“Our Company” or “Our Firm” or “Our Company Home”	3	>1%
More Information	2	>1%
Total	495	100%

Twenty-eight sites were partially password protected, primarily for photographs and the ability to view Webcasts of financial presentations. Table 6.3 shows the materials that were password protected on the sites analyzed.

**Table 6.3: Password Protected Content on Corporate Web Sites**

<b>Protected Content</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Photographs	15
Contact information	6
Earnings presentations/calls	6
Financial releases	1
Total	28

**RQ 4: *Relationship-Building Components of Fortune 500 Company Web sites***

The fourth research question considered the components of a Web site that would foster dialogue between journalists and the corporation in question. Table 6.4 shows the frequency of the items measured in this study. Of the 495 sites examined, 207 (42%) had the ability for journalists to view financial presentations or other “live” video through a capability of the corporation’s Web site. Two (>1%) of the sites allowed the press to communicate with the public relations staff at the corporation through a “real time chat” feature, usually available through a third-party application such as Google® or Yahoo!®. Thirty-three (7%) of the sites featured blogs, usually by the company’s CEO or other senior executive. One coder noted that a site contained blogs written by outside experts. Another coder noted that a company gave the opportunity for visitors to the site to post to a general consumer blog. RSS feeds were available on 192 (39%)

sites, while 296 (60%) of the sites offered some type of streaming video, in the form of financial presentations, commercials, short “how-to” videos or other content. Podcasts were found at 79 (16%) of the sites. While blogs, RSS feeds, streaming video and podcasts were not always for the explicit purpose of the press, they were available from the site’s homepage, press room, “About Us” or “Corporate Information” area or the main investor relations page.

**Table 6.4: Dialogic Components on Corporate Web Sites**

<b>Site Component</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Streaming Video	296	60%
Ability for Real-Time Video	207	42%
RSS Feeds	192	39%
Opportunity for Feedback	92	19%
Podcasts	79	16%
Blogs	33	7%
Real-Time Chat Feature	2	>1%

#### *RQ 5: Easy-to-Use Features for Journalists*

The fifth research question explored the specific items that were included in corporate press rooms. Names of specific PR contacts were found on 284 (58%) sites, with specific phone numbers for them in 254 (51%) press rooms and specific e-mail addresses in 192 (39%). A general e-mail address for press inquiries was found in 251 (51%) of the press rooms visited. Fax numbers for PR staff were included on 65 (13%)

sites, with 21 (4%) public relations practitioners providing their cell phone numbers. A general office phone number was available on 369 sites (75%), with a physical address on 87 (18%) sites. Press releases that had been posted within the past 30 days were found on 457 (92%) of sites, while press releases that had been updated in the past seven days were found in 325 (66%) of press rooms. Two hundred twenty-five (45%) sites contained a press release search engine. Links to SEC documents were found on 458 (93%) sites, either in the company's press room or on the main page for investors. Any downloadable documents, including fact sheets, corporate information, product information, brochures, and financial information were found on 422 (85%) of corporate sites. A general company profile was found 383 (77%) times, with a corporate history or backgrounder found on 363 (73%) sites. Three hundred sixty-five (74%) sites contained biographies of executives, and 81 (16%) contained speeches by executives. Table 6.5 contains all components that were measured and their frequencies.

**Table 6.5: Easy to Use Content for Journalists**

<b>Content</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Links to SEC documents	458	93%
Updated press releases (last 30 days)	457	92%
Any downloadable document	422	85%
Company profile	383	77%
General office phone	369	75%
Executive biographies	365	74%
Financial presentations	364	74%
Company history/backgrounder	363	73%
Philosophy/Mission	349	71%
Updated press releases (last 7 days)	325	66%
Photographs of executives	306	62%
Names of PR Staff	284	57%
Specific phone numbers	254	51%
Generic e-mail	251	51%
Press release search engine	225	45%
Personal e-mail address(es)	192	39%
Photographs of products	180	36%
Physical address	87	18%
Speeches	81	16%
Fax number(s)	65	13%
Cell phone number(s)	21	4%

**RQ 6: *Methods and Tools Employed to Get Journalists to Visit the Site First***

For research question six, the components of each site that would be an incentive for journalists to visit the press room first were examined. Forty-nine (10%) sites allowed members of the press to register with the company, and 283 (57%) sites

contained some type of feature or third-party news (i.e., a in-house generated feature or a “clipping” from a major newspaper or broadcast news source). This also included features written specifically for the corporate Web site itself. Press release archives going back at least three months were found on 461 (93%) sites. Many sites contained all press releases (that had been posted to the site) for the past several years. At least some important information, such as recent stock price, recent news, general corporate information, or product information appeared on the homepage of 468 (93%) sites.

#### ***RQ 7: Methods to Encourage Return Visits***

Analysis of items that would encourage return visits by journalists included postings of news releases within the last seven to 10 days on 325 (66%) sites. A calendar of upcoming events, such as financial presentations, product releases, issuance of quarterly/annual reports, or other information was included on 306 (62%) sites. Twenty-six (5%) sites invited the journalists to bookmark the site for return visits, and 19 (4%) sites contained an explicit statement inviting journalists to return in the future for updates. Table 6.6 lists the items and their frequencies.

**Table 6.6: Items Encouraging Journalists to Return to the Site**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Press Releases 7-10 days	325	66%
Calendar of Events	306	62%
“Bookmark Now” Invitation	26	5%
Invitation to Return	19	4%

**RQ 8: *Existing online dialogic communication typologies and their application to current public relations-journalist relationships***

In their 1998 article “Building Dialogic Relationships Through the World Wide Web,” Kent and Taylor stated that, “The Web provides public relations practitioners an opportunity to create dynamic and lasting relationships with publics; however, to do so requires that dialogic loops be incorporated into Web pages and Webbed communication” (p. 325-326). With this study, the original operationalizations of Kent and Taylor’s principles from the study conducted by Taylor, et al., in 2001 of activist Web sites were expanded to include newer technologies. Through the interviews and content analysis conducted for this study, modifications and additions were made to two dialogic principles, and another measure was added.

*Principle One: The Dialogic Loop*

Kent and Taylor’s (1998) first principle of a dialogic loop “allows publics to query organizations and, more importantly, it offers organizations the opportunity to respond to questions, concerns, and problems” (p.326). In addition to the opportunity for user-response and offering regular information via e-mail, this study coded for the ability to real-time chat with public relations staff, material presented in real-time video (such as financial presentations), blogs, RSS feeds, streaming video, and podcasts (Table 6.5)

*Principle Two: The Usefulness of Information*

“In light of hierarchic and structural issues, audience-specific information should be organized such that it is easy to find by interested publics...[and] create positive attitudes by being easily accessible to all publics, and by providing all publics – both generic and particular – with ‘useful’ information” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 328). In addition to the items coded for in 2001, this study added the operationalizations based on Callison’s 2003 examination of *Fortune* 500 company Web sites (Table 6.5)

*Methods/Tools to Encourage Journalists to Visit Them First*

This measure was added to this study because journalists indicated that they often visited Web sites for background information rather than engage in direct contact with the company. This study measured the elements of Web sites that would encourage a visit to the Web site for information that they could acquire easily, including press release archives, the opportunity for press to register with a company, and news published or aired about a company. In dialogic theory, this fits most with the principle of usefulness of information (Table 6.6).

## CHAPTER 7

### DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In view of past research, press relations on the Web is becoming increasingly sophisticated. This study revealed that 361 *Fortune* 500 companies now have links to press rooms directly from their main pages, significantly more than the 122 companies in Callison's 2003 study examining all *Fortune* 500 Web sites. Only 39 sites required more than two click-throughs to reach them, which is also improved from the 73 identified by Callison. However, it should be noted here that any indication of a press room regardless of its designation as "News" or "Media Information" on a company's main page was not recorded as a click. Therefore it might not have led a journalist to a specific press room, but it did lead to information that would be useful to the press. It should also be noted that Web sites seem to be moving toward a more integrated approach to media relations on the Web, as this study revealed that much of the information that business journalists desire is now residing into more investor-oriented areas.

#### *Use of Corporate Web Sites to Gather Information*

The first research question in this study dealt with journalist's use of corporate Web sites to gather information. Kent and Taylor (1988) noted that an important

consideration of dialogic communication is to provide information with value. From the data here, *Fortune* 500 company press sites are improving in the area of usefulness of information provided to the press. While many of the journalists interviewed expressed a desire for more specific content on the Web sites they visit, it would appear that more information is appearing in press rooms than past research has indicated. While the percentage of sites providing news releases (92%) is not vastly different from Callison's 2002 study, with the exception of the statistically higher number of sites with press rooms, significantly more *Fortune* 500 company sites are providing company histories and backgrounds, executive biographies, press release search engines, and other data valuable to members of the media.

However, there is still an undercurrent of distrust among journalists when it comes to information available on a corporate press site, indicating that wariness of the press towards PR people that has been a constant element of that relationship is alive and well. Additionally, the interviews for this study would indicate that there are some sites that do an exceptional job of providing information, and some that do not. For principles of dialogic communication on the Web, the data suggests that corporate Web sites are doing a better job of providing useful information and are easier to use than past research has suggested. It also appears that *Fortune* 500 company Web sites are providing more of the kinds of information that journalists desire.

*Dialogic Tools Used in Online Press Rooms and What Journalists Desire*

Research question two asked about the nature of dialogic tools used in the interaction of journalists with corporations via online press rooms, and research question three posed the query about what journalists desire from those online press rooms. Consistent with past research, it appears that the Web as a medium for fostering interaction between the press and public relations professionals may not be developing as fast as expected. The journalists interviewed for this study seemed to desire more intimate communication than the Web is designed to provide. As several journalists noted, there seems to be a greater comfort level with the traditional e-mail exchange, and there is a desire for the more nuanced communication and the immediacy that actual voice exchange provides.

Additionally, several of the responses from the journalist interviews indicate that, in some instances, an exchange relationship (Grunig & Hon, 1999) serves the purpose of both the journalist and the PR professional, thereby alleviating the need for a true “communal” relationship in particular instances. While streaming video, the ability for real-time video and RSS feeds all seem to be a growing part of corporate Web sites, they are not necessarily primary things that journalists look for or use to engage in dialogue with a corporation. While blogs are considered nice features for a corporate Web site, the journalists in this study who mentioned them seemed to regard them not

as a personal expression of the CEO or whoever was writing them, but as yet another “filtered” communication mechanism from the PR department.

Fewer than 1% of Web sites in this study provided real-time chat as an option, but six of the journalists interviewed said that it was a medium they would use if it were easily available for them. At the same time, several journalists mentioned the ease with which elements of the communication exchange in real-time chat could be misconstrued. Future studies may show a growing preference in real-time chat as a means of more immediate information exchange as it becomes more available. Public relations professionals should recognize that this capability provides an easy and immediate exchange of information available to them with the correct technology.

The frustrations felt by the journalists in this study regarding the inclusion of specific contact information for public relations personnel on corporate Web sites seems well-founded, as only a little more than half of the sites contained the names of public relations staff at the companies they worked for, while even fewer provided specific contact methods, such as phone numbers and e-mail addresses. The 57% of sites in this research containing specific contact names of PR staff is identical to the percentage that was found in the 2003 Callison study. Apparently corporate Web sites have not improved in providing accessibility to their corporation’s PR staff. A reluctance to provide specific contact information could be driven by the fact that putting such information on a corporate Web site makes PR practitioners possible recipients of calls

and e-mails from anyone with access to the site. Additionally, such contact information makes practitioners available virtually 24 hours a day, seven days a week. However, it does seem that at least some journalists recognize the hesitance of individuals to include their contact information.

The dialogic potential of the Web for public relations also seems to be hindered by the continued disregard for communication via a corporation's "media@company.com" e-mail address. Kent and Taylor (1998) noted that in order for dialogic loops to be incorporated into Web sites, they must be complete. If companies are to make their Web sites more useful forms of interactive communication, then there must be an individual available to respond to questions and requests sent to the company via the generic inquiry vehicle. It also seems that to serve the needs of the media effectively through dialogic components of Web sites, PR staffers need to incorporate updates to their Web sites to coincide with the release of announcements or other news from the company. That is, if a release is being sent out to the general media through traditional methods such as news release services or e-mail, it should also immediately be posted to the organization's Web site.

The issue of technical proficiency noted by Kent and Taylor (1998) seems to have moved to an entirely new level. While the comfort level of using the Internet for various purposes has improved vastly, technology continues to advance. While its use by journalists and public relations professionals in their interaction seems limited,

instant messaging is now common. Will video phones be an issue in the future? Only time will tell.

### *Relationship-Building Components of Fortune 500 Company Web Sites*

The fourth research question in this study dealt with examining the relationship building components of *Fortune* 500 companies with the press. Kent and Taylor (1998) and Horton (2001) disagreed on the issue of links contributing to the dialogic criterion of conserving visitors. This study seems to suggest that, for journalists at least, Horton's assessment of outside links enhancing credibility might be more important than conserving a journalist's singular visit to a corporate Web site if, in fact, the link leads them to information they need. In the area of relationship development and ongoing dialogue, this research indicates that Kent and Taylor's (1998) principle of generating return visits is more important. The data in this study finds that journalists are visiting the sites they need to visit without incentive other than the value of the information contained on the site. Regular posting of press releases, background information, SEC documents and other information seem to be incentive enough for journalists to regularly return to a corporate site. This is not consistent with Kent and Taylor's idea that simply updating "information" or trying to include "interesting" content, more consistent with a one-way model of communication, is not enough. These Web sites do seem, however, to be making progress with providing the "tools" that Kent and Taylor suggest to encourage return visits, such as easily downloadable

information, technical information, financial information and links accompanied by the *information* necessary to access public relations professionals who can help to tailor information to a specific journalist's needs. Whether or not the public relations person in each particular situation is completing the dialogic loop was beyond the scope of this study. Additionally, the calendar of events providing news of upcoming financial presentations coupled with the fact that many of the journalists interviewed said that they took part in such presentations would seem an indicator for repeated return visits to a site. Other elements, such as explicit statements inviting return visits or bookmarking might not be necessary.

#### *Easy-to Use Features for Journalists*

The fifth question in this study examined the features of Web sites that would be easy to use. Kent and Taylor (1998) stated that visitors who come to Web sites for informational purposes, or even for curiosity, should find the sites easy to figure out and understand. Only one site in this study was abandoned because a coder spent longer than three minutes looking for the press room. Journalists are becoming more adept at maneuvering through a corporate Web site, but there still seems to be an issue of the ease with which information is located. While press rooms may be clearly marked, information may reside more deeply in the site, resulting in frustration if a journalist is looking for something quickly. However, the writers interviewed indicated that if they need information, they will go to a corporate site to get it. While few of the

sites offered an opportunity for the press to register, almost half did include a search engine for archived press releases. Additionally, the journalists in this study indicated that, particularly for companies they were unfamiliar with, they would visit the company site before contacting the public relations staff there, underscoring the need for sites to provide useful content that is easy to find.

### *Getting Journalists to Visit the Site First and Make Return Visits*

The sixth and seventh research questions asked about methods that corporate Web sites employ to get journalists to visit them first and what methods those sites use to encourage journalists to return. Many of the journalists indicated that they would probably visit a company's site first if they were unfamiliar with the company, so it is imperative that they find information there that would provide a good first impression of a corporation. Since most of the journalists indicated that they go to sites first to get background information on a company, the importance of a press release archive is evident. Archives going back three months were found on 461 sites, with many sites containing press releases for the past several years. Half of the sites contained some type of news other than press releases that had been written or aired about either the company or one of its products or services. However, it would seem that *Fortune* 500 company sites could do a better job of updating the press releases that are posted on the site, given that 45% of the companies in the study did not have anything posted from the last seven to 10 days. The indication of important information on 93% of main

pages is a positive indicator for journalists to return to the site once they've found the information, provided it is updated regularly.

*Existing Online Dialogic Typologies and their Application to  
Current Journalist-Public Relations Relationships*

Question eight dealt with the application of current typologies of dialogic theory to current journalist-public relations relationships. Technologically, Web capabilities have expanded somewhat since the initial operationalization of dialogic principles by Taylor, et al., for their 2002 study of activist Web sites. In addition to the variables of offering user-response and offering information via e-mail in the previous study, this work expanded on those variables and examined additional dialogic elements, and added an additional operationalization. Again, while some of these are not truly dialogic in nature, they still are elements of a Web site that would foster a relationship between a journalist and a corporation.

According to the journalists interviewed, at least some of them are taking advantage of these newer technologies, and suggested that as newer technologies become more available, they will welcome them as well. Journalists also certainly seem to be taking advantage of press release archives and news published or aired about the company as a resource before contacting the company directly. It would seem that, in order to keep dialogic theory current as it relates to Webbed communication, it will be necessary to revisit existing operationalizations and continually update and test for

those technologies and how they are being used in dialogue between members of the press and the companies they cover.

*A New Principle, "Relationship Initiation and Enhancement"*

Finally this research suggests, in addition to the five existing principles developed by Kent and Taylor (1998) (i.e., ease of interface, usefulness of information, conservation of visitors, return visits, creating a dialogic loop), a sixth category should be considered and explored. The sixth principle is "Relationship Initiation and Enhancement".

This new principle is different from the existing ones because it suggests an avenue for initiating a relationship. While the existing principles argue for usefulness and ease of interface, for example, initiation and enhancement characteristics remain undefined. Journalists in this study provided a rationale for this new principle when they said they would be particularly likely to visit a Web site first if they were unfamiliar with a company.

Past research has not looked at press relations sites in such a way. Existing measures may be moved from current categories to develop the more appropriately describe "Relationship Initiation and Enhancement". For example, Callison's (2003) link from homepage measure should be included in the proposed initiation and enhancement principle. Additionally, contact information should be coded as a relationship initiation and enhancement measure. Finally, Kent and Taylor's measure

“important info available on first page” would more correctly exemplify relationship initiation and enhancement than “conservation of visitors” – the principle in which it currently resides. The addition of this sixth principle would further define and provide a more accurate and realistic application of dialogic communication as it occurs between journalists and PR practitioners on a company or organization’s Web site.

### *Validity and Reliability*

Validity is achieved when a measuring device measures what it is supposed to measure (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000). Content validity of the coding mechanism was reached by basing items coded for on Callison’s 2003 study, Kent and Taylor’s principles (1998 & 2002) and using the information gained through the journalist interviews. Construct validity was reached by using a coding form that would be representative of material from past studies. The coding mechanism also reflected what today’s journalists look for in the way of dialogic components of Web sites. Validity of the journalist interviews was also reached by basing interview questions on the five principles of dialogic communication via the Web (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Face validity was based on the practical experience of the journalists and of the researcher’s 11 years of practical experience in the public relations field.

By providing both qualitative and quantitative results for this study, opinions of journalists were analyzed against the quantitative data provided by the Web site coding, which supported the qualitative results

## CHAPTER 8

### LIMITATIONS, CONSIDERATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

#### *Limitations*

In creating dialogic components of online press sites, at issue could be the battle for control of a corporate Web site, limiting the influence of the public relations staff of a company by what is incorporated into an organization's Web presence (Hill & White, 2000). While a 2003 study found that 98 percent of respondents to a mail survey of PRSA members said that their public relations departments contribute to their organizations' Web sites (Ryan, 2003), there is limited research on how much control the public relations staff of a corporation has over the corporate Web site.

External validity is the degree to which findings of this study can be generalized beyond the conditions of this study (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000). Limiting journalist interviews to print reporters poses questions about broadening the results of the survey to online or broadcast journalists who may look for other elements in the Web sites they visit for content and news. Additionally, while this study attempted to capture a cross-section of business journalists who cover different industries and who are located in different cities, the sampling frame was small and purposive. Some of the opinions expressed by those interviewed may not be generalizable to the broader pool of

business journalists at other publications. Additionally, reporters who cover different beats, such as entertainment, government, and local news may not have the same opinions regarding Web use, particularly as a dialogic medium, as business writers.

Another limitation is the generalizability of findings from *Fortune* 500 industries to smaller companies. It is hoped that *Fortune* 500 companies would be leaders in making use of newer technologies and communication techniques, while that may in fact not be the reality. A study of smaller, newer or more innovative companies might find that they are making use of a broader range of communication techniques via their Web sites to generate media awareness and coverage than the more established companies in this study.

#### *Considerations*

There is the consideration of the Web as a medium still in its infancy. While the Internet has experienced explosive growth in the last 10 years, its use as a dialogic medium is only beginning to be explored. That, coupled with the emerging concept of “dialogue” as it relates to the relationship between journalists and public relations professionals has a huge impact on the speed with which corporate public relations professionals come to embrace new technologies as a way to further relationships with members of the media.

### *Future Research*

An area for future research also lies in exploring dialogic components of Web sites across industries. This lies both in the area of public relations and journalism. Do reporters who concentrate on a particular industry, such as technology, desire more dialogic components on the Web sites of the companies they cover? Do public relations professionals in a particular industry, such as media and communications, do a better job of Web site maintenance and keeping their sites user-friendly? More in-depth study in this area could help PR practitioners in specific industries tailor their Web sites to meet more specific needs of journalists who may be more likely to write about them.

Another approach, from the view of the public relations practitioner, would also serve to supplement and enrich the data found in this study. Investigating the relationship between practitioners and Webmasters, any power struggles that exist, and whether the Web is actually under the control of the public relations department may provide deeper insight into why sites are structured as they are.

The idea of a sixth dialogic principle, the principle of "Relationship Initiation and Enhancement," should be investigated. Such research would further define the role and characteristics of how relationships are initiated and enhanced via Web communication, and provide context for the Web and its role in ongoing dialogic relationships between journalists and PR professionals. Additionally, the principle should be investigated regarding its application to other relationships with a Web dialogue component.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

The role that corporate Web sites play in communications between journalists and public relations professionals will continue to change with technology. It is the hope of this researcher that the findings from in this examination of *Fortune* 500 company press sites will further the concept and application of dialogic theory to communications between journalists and corporate public relations professionals. Additionally, results of this study pointed to an addition to the theory of dialogic communication via the Web. The consideration of a sixth principle of dialogic communication may provide further definition and context for Web press rooms in ongoing dialogic relationships, which should be explored with future research.

While there will most likely always be some level of distrust among journalists regarding information they receive through perceived public relations vehicles, it is hoped that with continued dialogue, journalists will come to see corporate Web sites as credible resources for information. More importantly, future studies related to dialogic communication and dialogic theory, it is hoped that both journalists and public relations professionals continue to increase their use of the Web as an important tool in creating and maintaining their dialogic relationships.

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## APPENDIX A:

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The following research instrument was used to gather the information for the interview part of this study. Questions have been identified with the research question they were specifically designed to address.

#### Research Question 1

- In your research and information gathering for a story involving a corporation, where do you begin?

*[This line of questioning was followed up as appropriate. For example, "Why do you choose this source?" and "What information do you find here that is most useful?"]*

- How often do you look for information on corporate online press sites or press rooms for those stories?
- Can you give me some illustrations of information you look for on for on corporate online press sites or press rooms?
  - Do you use these sites primarily to write about breaking news, on background or for lead generation?
  - When was the last time you actually quoted something from a corporate press room or site?
  - How do you determine if information on a corporate website is credible and newsworthy?

#### Research Question 2

*Note: the following questions were asked twice: once for companies the journalists interacted with often and a second time for those with which they had infrequent or no interaction. The purpose was to determine if their communication methods changed depending on the relationship.*

**For these questions, think of a company that you have frequent contact with or cover often.**

- Are you likely to visit a corporation's website before phoning their public relations office for information?
- What do you look for when you visit that company's website?
- What communication methods would you be most likely to use to reach a public relations practitioner there? Would you use a capability present on the site, like the ability to instant message?
- What would you like to see added to corporate websites to make your interaction with the public relations staff at that organization easier?

**Now I want to ask you to apply those questions to a company you have infrequent contact with or have never dealt with before.**

- Are you likely to visit a corporation's web site before phoning their public relations office for information?
- What do you look for when you visit that company's website?
- What communication methods would you be most likely to use to reach a public relations practitioner there? Would you use a capability present on the site, like the ability to instant message?
- What would you like to see added to corporate websites to make your interaction with the public relations staff at that organization easier?

**These next questions deal with your experience with corporate websites in general.**

- Give me an example of the qualities and content of what you consider to be excellent online press sites.

*[Follow up questions included: "Can you give me some examples of corporations you cover that you think that excellent online sites?" and "What makes these sites excellent?"]*

- Do you ever use the e-mail address listed on the website for the public relations professional to communicate with them?
- Have you found other communication tools available for you on the sites you've visited, such as the opportunity for real-time chat or online press conferences? Have you ever used them? Have you found them useful? Why or why not?

- How, if at all, does your organization's online product drive what you're looking for?
- Do you ever link to corporate sites in your articles? What specifically would you consider linking to out of the following, if any?
  - Company Blogs
  - RSS Feeds
  - Streaming Video
  - Podcasts
  - Links to photos
  - Downloadable documents, such as fact sheets

### **Research Question 3**

- How important are more recent communication tactics, such as blogs, podcasts and downloadable documents to an online press room?
- What are/have been your frustrations with online press rooms as a whole or specifically?

*Demographic information was gathered at the end of the interview session, which included the questions below:*

- What is your job title?
- How long have you been in your current job? With your current organization?
- How long have you been a journalist?
- What is your age, or age range?
- Has there been a change in your job description or your job in the past year? What was it?

## APPENDIX B:

### CODING INSTRUMENT

#### The New Dynamic of Corporate Media Relations Coding Instrument

Name of Company: \_\_\_\_\_

Rank: \_\_\_\_\_

Web address: \_\_\_\_\_

Coder: \_\_\_\_\_

Time/Date coded: \_\_\_\_\_

Industry (if obvious):

- Manufacturing
- Retail
- Technology
- Insurance
- Healthcare
- Holding company/investment conglomerate
- Banking
- Travel/leisure
- Automotive
- Media/communications
- Foodservice

#### I. Ease of Interface

Is there a clear link to the press room on the company's home page?      YES    NO

*(Often the press room will be located under an "About Us" tab or "Company Information" or "Investor Relations". If you click on that tab and then see a clearly labeled "Press Room" or "For the Press" or "Press Information" tab then the answer to the following will be 1. Use your intuition if it isn't there...and keep track of how many clicks it takes you to get to something that the press would use.)*

If not, how many pages did you have to click through to find the press site? \_\_\_\_\_

If the answer to the previous question was 1 or more, what was the name of the tab on the home page that the press room located under?

\_\_\_\_\_

Is there a search engine box on the main page of the company's press site? YES NO

Is the entire press room password protected? YES NO

Is any part of the press room password protected? YES NO

If so, can you tell what material(s)?

- photographs  
 contact information  
 speeches  
 position papers  
 logos/illustrations  
 OTHER (specify):

*(Note: if the press room takes you longer than 3 minutes to find, move on)*

If you were unable to locate the main press room on the site, approximately how long did you search for it? \_\_\_\_\_

## II. Usefulness of Information to Media Publics (circle one)

Specific contact information for PR staff		
Names of PR staff	YES	NO
Phone numbers for specific PR staff	YES	NO
Personal e-mail address(es)	YES	NO
Cell phone	YES	NO
Fax number	YES	NO
Physical address	YES	NO
Generic e-mail address for inquiries	YES	NO
General office telephone number	YES	NO
Current press releases (defined by the next two answers)		

Updated in the last week	YES	NO
Updated in the last month	YES	NO
Speeches	YES	NO
Downloadable documents	YES	NO
Company history/backgrounder	YES	NO
Company profile	YES	NO
Press release search engine	YES	NO
Corporate biographies of key executives	YES	NO
Statement of Philosophy/Mission	YES	NO
Links to SEC Documents	YES	NO
Financial presentations	YES	NO
Photographs of executives	YES	NO
Photographs of products	YES	NO
Company logos	YES	NO
Quarterly/annual reports	YES	NO
Media kits	YES	NO
OTHER (specify):		

### III. Conservation of Visitors

Important information/links available on 1 <sup>st</sup> page	YES	NO
Links available	YES	NO
Posting of last updated time and date	YES	NO
OTHER (specify):		

### IV. Dialogic Loop

*(These are things that would encourage dialogue or conversation between journalists and the PR staff at the company)*

Material presented in real-time video	YES	NO
Ability to real-time chat with public relations staff	YES	NO
Blogs	YES	NO
RSS Feeds	YES	NO
Streaming Video	YES	NO
Podcasts	YES	NO
Opportunity for press site feedback	YES	NO
OTHER (specify):		

**V. Methods/Tools to encourage journalists to visit them first**

News alert service	YES	NO
Opportunity for press personnel to register with the company	YES	NO
Press release archives	YES	NO
News published/aired about the company	YES	NO
OTHER (specify):		

**VI. Return Visits**

*(These are things on the site that would encourage journalists to return)*

“Bookmark Now” ability	YES	NO
Calendar of events	YES	NO
Explicit statement inviting journalist to return	YES	NO
Posting press releases within the last seven to 10 days	YES	NO
OTHER (specify):		