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Public relations battles and wars: journalistic clichés and the potential for conflict resolution

Judith Scrimger*, Trudie Richards¹

*Department of Public Relations, Mount Saint Vincent University,
166 Bedford Highway, Halifax, NS, Canada B3M 2J6*

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Abstract

The association of public relations with images of hostile relationships and metaphors of violence in the Canadian print news media was explored. A search of the on-line data base Canadian Newspaper Source provided a sample of articles which used the terms public relations battle or public relations war to describe a variety of communications between organizations and publics; analysis suggests the phrases were inflammatory, and often did not accurately reflect intent and/or reality. The implications of journalists' use of these metaphors of violence were discussed in the context of public relations as a means of bringing about harmony in relationships.

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1. Introduction

One of the more common images of public relations in North American culture concerns violent confrontation.¹ Journalists are a common source of this imagery when they associate public relations with heightened conflict by using such phrases as *public relations battle* and *public relations war* to describe a wide range of discussion on public issues and disagreements or negotiations between organizations and their publics. At the same time, public relations scholars and professional associations have argued that collaboration is an essential value of public relations and that mutual understanding and harmony between an organization and its publics are legitimate goals of the public relations function.² Some scholars have argued that public relations is a potential means of conflict resolution.³

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-902-457-6480.

E-mail addresses: Judith.Scrimger@msvu.ca (J. Scrimger), Trudie.Richards@msvu.ca (T. Richards).

¹ Tel.: +1-902-457-6210.

Public relations scholars and practitioners regularly bemoan the journalistic portrayals of public relations which create negative images of the practice as unethical and manipulative.⁴ Little analysis has been undertaken to date to explore the extent to which public relations is associated with metaphors of violent conflict.

This study closely examines the contexts in which journalists use the terms public relations battle and public relations war in Canadian newspapers, and speculates on the influence of these descriptors on the potential of public relations to mitigate conflict between organizations and their publics.

2. Methodology

A world wide web search on May 24, 2001, using the Google search engine, generated 1,900 examples of the phrase public relations battle and 2,340 examples of public relations war.⁵ To find a manageable sample, we used these same terms in an on-line search of the Canadian Newspaper Source database, which provides full-text articles from 95 regional Canadian newspapers, four major news wires, and *The National Post*.⁶ The majority of publications became part of the database in May, 2000. The search was conducted on December 30, 2001 using the phrases public relations battle and public relations war as search terms. The search generated 77 articles containing the term public relations battle and 81 containing the phrase public relations war. After multiple versions of the same stories were removed (wire service copy published in several different newspapers, for example), the researchers established a working sample of 63 items.

While this study is primarily qualitative in nature, the researchers found it useful to group the 63 items into broad content categories. The 63 items were read closely and independently by the two researchers who then came together and through negotiation established the following categories of content: type (news, editorial/opinion, column, letter to the editor); subject areas (politics, business and economics, labour disputes, environmental issues, and citizen and interest group activism); and contexts in which public relations is associated with violent imagery (initiatives to seek public support, use of the news or advertising media to stake out a position, and a disagreement between two or more groups/organizations).

3. Findings

Between February 11, 1999 and November 29, 2001, 25 items included the term public relations battle. A total of 38 items published between April 23, 1999 and December 17, 2001 included the term public relations war. These items were found in 23 separate newspapers in six provinces from metropolitan dailies (e.g., *National Post*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Montreal Gazette*) to smaller local papers (e.g., *Truro Daily News*, *Orillia Packet and Times*, *Campbell River's Courier-Islander*). Nearly 80% (50 of 63 items) occurred in news articles; the remainder occurred in editorials, letters to the editor, opinion pieces, and columns.

The subjects in which issues are frequently portrayed as being a public relations battleground include: politics (31), business and economics (17), labor disputes (13), the environment (7),

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