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ABSTRACT

Electronic newspapers offer a new media channel for public relations materials, but a study of their proposed use and implications for the profession does not fit well into already established research areas. This paper reviews the development and features of electronic newspapers and suggests new avenues of research and uses pertinent to the public relations profession. Much of the literature for the paper was gathered through one year of online discussions on news forums and interest groups with more than 800 leaders in this developing field, ranging from software programmers to top executives. Information to date suggests electronic news services, particularly electronic newspapers, may provide unique opportunities for public relations teaching, practice, and research, but caution is advised until further research and testing demonstrates the viability of this new medium. Contains 100 references and 1 table of data. (Author/RS)

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# Implications of Electronic Newspapers for Public Relations Teaching, Practice, and Research

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## **Abstract**

Electronic newspapers offer a new media channel for public relations materials, but a study of their proposed use and implications for the profession does not fit well into already established research areas. This paper reviews the development and features of electronic newspapers and suggests new avenues of research and uses pertinent to the public relations profession. Much of the literature for this paper was gathered through one year of online discussions in news forums and interest groups with more than 800 leaders in this developing field, ranging from software programmers to top executives. Information to date suggests electronic news services, particularly electronic newspapers, may provide unique opportunities for public relations teaching, practice, and research, but caution is advised until further research and testing demonstrates the viability of this new medium.

## **Introduction**

The public relations profession traditionally has relied on the news media to provide a critical pipeline to publics. In turn, research demonstrates that newspaper content comprises 50% or more information originating from public relations sources (Cutlip et al., 1994; Sachsman, 1976; Wilcox et al., 1995).

The new electronic news media, then, may promise many opportunities for public relations practitioners. Although electronic newspapers were declared dead as a mass medium in the mid-1980s (Alexander, 1990; Broadcasting, 1988; Noll, 1985), in less than 10 years the electronic newspaper industry has rebounded. Approximately 75 newspapers are online with more joining up each day, and interactive services in general have increased to 2,700 from just 42 in 1989 (Resnick, 1994).

This paper examines the implications of the resurgence of electronic newspapers for public relations teaching, practice, and research. Going beyond opportunities for story placement, this study examines how aspects of electronic information services in general and electronic newspapers in particular could affect the public relations field.

## **The History of Electronic News Services**

The British Broadcasting Corporation launched the first commercial information service--Prestel--in 1979 (Sigel, 1983a). But their assumption that consumers' primary demand would be for information retrieval services proved false, and the BBC and other early European developers of information services soon

found themselves failing because of the lack of a subscription base (IRD Report, 1983; Meyer, 1988; Paillart, 1989; Palmer & Tunstall, 1988; Rogers, 1986; Sigel, 1983b). Of these early European efforts only the French Teletel system was successful, partly because the system developed spontaneously in response to consumer demand for user services, such as chat boards, e-mail, and reservation, banking, and polling services. Only 4% of connect time is spent obtaining general news and information (Branscomb, 1988; Charon, 1987; IDATE, 1987; Petrella, 1988).

The first U.S. commercial service, The Source, came online in 1979. Analysis of the most used services on The Source in 1980 revealed e-mail was the most popular feature, followed by bulletin boards, then chat lines. An index to these first three services was the fourth most used; news was a distant fifth (Tydeman et al., 1982). In fact, by the mid-1980s stand alone newspaper ventures such as Knight-Ridder's Viewtron and Times Mirror's Gateway both collapsed, with estimated losses of \$50 and \$30 million, respectively. Although these two service providers accounted for less than 3% of all U.S. information service subscribers, their failure seemed to sound a death knell for the entire industry. In 1986 the U.S. had over 100 information services, but they were viewed only as a niche market for special interest groups (Broadcasting, 1988; Noll, 1985).

But the increased penetration rate of home computers (now about 33%) persuaded more companies to launch information services. The current major providers--Prodigy, GENie, Delphi,

America On-line, and CompuServe--have over 2.6 million user accounts, with about 5 million total users. Although the original user profile was that of the young, male "electronic innovator," surveys show users are 35% female, 12% are over age 55, and 40% run home businesses (Garfinkel, 1990; Steinberg, 1993). Over 60 newspapers have established partnerships with these information services to capitalize on their market penetration and relative ease of use (Table 1; Reilly, 1993). Another 15 electronic newspapers are available through the Internet, which comprises academic, military, government, and commercial networks here and in 40 other countries linking 20 million users, with one million more joining each month (Anthes, 1993; Cooke & Lehrer, 1993; Elmer-Dewitt, 1993; Wagner, 1994).

**\* Implications of History for Public Relations Teaching**

An important lesson for students is that the glamour of new technology does not necessarily make it better or more effective; the viability of a new medium must be established before devoting too many resources to it. Additionally, the original service providers failed in part when they proved unresponsive to user preferences, demonstrating for students the need to establish and maintain two-way communication with publics.

**\* Implications of History for Public Relations Practitioners**

Practitioners must also avoid the allure of new technology and proceed with caution until time and the market demonstrate whether electronic newspapers are a passing fad or a new media channel of import. Because these early trials suggest news

consumption is limited on the services, practitioners may need to tap other avenues of communication, such as chat groups and bulletin boards. However, use of these more informal channels may raise ethical concerns about whether the commercial source of the information is clearly identified (see Social and Ethical Issues for a full discussion of this point).

**\* Implications of History for Public Relations Research**

Because no primary content material remains from the early trials, archival work and interviews with early service providers are necessary to determine what public relations efforts if any were tried on these services and what their range was. Also, given the success and breadth of services offered on the French Teletel system, cross-cultural work could establish what public relations efforts have proven effective in that country.

**The Network Cultural Milieu**

A culture has developed among users of the electronic web, with well-codified norms and rules and punishments for breaking those rules (violators of "netiquette" are "flamed," that is they are subjected to scathing replies; CompuServe, 1994). For example, users who spread an unsolicited commercial message in a discussion group, a practice known as *spamming*, are routinely flamed. Spamming is symptomatic of a serious challenge for those in the public relations field; most members of the network culture object to commercial messages in any form and develop strategies to block them out (Cooke & Lehrer, 1993). These users envision an open, democratic, commercial-free electronic world,

characterized by anonymity; social class, gender, and physical transparency; and the free sharing of information (Online, 1994).

Detailed information is freely available through services such as the Gopher, the World Wide Web (WWW), the WAIS (Wide Area Information Server), FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions), News Groups, and Usenets (Sachs & Stair, 1994). Because members of the net view themselves as active information gatherers and sharers, they are suspicious of online subscription-based newspapers as the products of perhaps biased journalists who have selected, shaped, and formatted information for them (Elmer-Dewitt, 1993; Online, 1994).

A conceivable newspaper alternative may be constructed through the use of computer programs called knowbots, which emulate human intelligence to search resources and provide information retrieval. These programs can compile information from each day's news, such as wire service copy, to meet personally defined needs (Online, 1994). Given that many users have free access to the Internet through work or educational facilities, these programs suggest a low-cost alternative to industry products.

Members of the Network Culture are increasingly younger users because they find the multi-media nature of the net appealing (Online, 1994). Research suggests younger users prefer computer-driven information delivery (Catlett & Brooks, 1994; Thompson, 1993) and have an affinity for electronic newspapers (Brooks & Kropp, 1994; Hammer & Kennedy, 1993), providing an

avenue for reaching a target audience not well served by traditional newspapers.

**\* Implications of Network Culture for Teaching**

With the growth of the Information Superhighway, educators must teach their students not only the traditional research and writing skills but the skills necessary to work in this environment. Although some students are members of the Network Culture, many are not and may be subject to computer phobia (Harmon & Sawyer, 1990; Mahmood & Medewitz, 1989). The anxiety can be overcome and skills gained by arranging bibliographic instruction sessions with research librarians and giving assignments requiring the use of electronic media as research tools, such as issues management projects or production of up-to-date fact sheets or backgrounders.

However students must be trained in the cultural rules of the net if they are to effectively communicate on it. The online PRFORUM news group carries guidelines for student use and suggests students learn to use the system judiciously. Some educators have required students to use the net for communicating with them outside of class, working on group projects, and filing final projects. An unexpected benefit of these trials has been an increase in candid communication among group members and the instructor (Musich, 1992).

**\* Implications of Network Culture for Practitioners**

Use of knowbots can increase the efficiency and reach of environmental scanning efforts, allowing practitioners to

practice more effective issues management. Because users tend to be upscale, active information seekers, the medium allows precise targeting and two-way communication with active opinion leaders on a variety of topics. Practitioners must take care to avoid overtly commercial sounding messages, though, or risk being flamed. And reaching these publics may be labor intensive, much like person-to-person efforts. The dynamics of electronic newspaper use may be much like those of an 800 number phone bank, with additional effort needed to use less-organized network communication channels.

**\* Implications of Network Culture for Research**

Electronic information services allow researchers to access databases and gather information cheaply and quickly. Resources such as historical archives and government agency files are coming online, allowing researchers to gather data without the travel, time, and documentation previously required. Scholars are able to share ideas and receive immediate feedback from the worldwide academic community, although care must be taken to establish ownership of materials shared over the net. As academic budgets are cut, networks also provide low-cost opportunities for paper teleconferencing and subscribing to online journals.

Researchers need to conduct ethnographic research of the Network Culture to determine how practitioners can best use electronic networks to disseminate information. Some broad stereotypes of business seem to exist on the net, and these must

be delineated and their role in fueling antipathy toward commercial messages examined. Also of interest is whether users distinguish between advertisers and public relations practitioners on the net and view them differently, and if public relations experts could present themselves as sharing expert knowledge and thus become accepted contributors to news groups.

### **New Journalistic Practices**

The mechanical effort required to convert the hard copy newspaper to electronic copy has been ridiculed as *shoveling*, with the resultant product known as *shovelware* (Online, 1994). As electronic papers grow, journalists may become mere *shovelers* and information providers, with little opportunity to exercise journalistic enterprise and maintain traditional journalistic ideals (Abernethy, 1991; Hester, 1982; presstime, 1993). But newspaper staff will have to become more technically adept, gaining proficiency in multi-media techniques or jobbing out news gathering to syndicates with these skills (Reilly, 1993).

In the past, the size of the newshole has been governed by the amount of advertising available. But for electronic newspapers, size is limited only by the energy and time needed for production, promising greater story length and breadth of coverage (Mason, 1993). News judgment, then, may become a matter of organizing and hierarchically arranging access to stories rather than exercising gatekeeping functions to choose which stories will be made available to readers.

In fact, many electronic newspapers are providing unedited content to users, including regular wire services and PR Newswire and Businesswire (Christopher, 1994). *Access Atlanta*, the electronic version of the *Atlanta Journal/Constitution*, makes PR Newswire available to subscribers and is considering running unedited news releases of local interest (personal communication, Brian O'Shea, 1994). Although journalists traditionally claim to disdain news releases, research demonstrates they judiciously use them when the information is newsworthy, localized, and validated (Berkowitz, 1993; Pincus et al., 1993; Turk, 1988).

Some members of Network Culture believe reporter's notes should be made available to allow checks on story accuracy and to evaluate how journalists have shaped the coverage. Others claim online access to reporters' notes will provide fuller coverage and more interest (Online, 1994). Allowing readers access to story notes, however, may make reporters less willing to tackle controversial topics (Dalton, 1993). Such stories could generate a vast e-mail response, and critics contend reporters will become preoccupied with schmoozing the reader (Online, 1994).

But Dennis Dubé, who leads Apple's E-World project, points out that reader-generated information comprises the majority of newspaper content, and requiring reporters to keep up with their e-mail will put them in close touch with important media sources (personal communication, 1994). Conceivably, electronic newspapers could become more relevant and contain more local information as a result.

**\* Implications of New Journalistic Practices for Public Relations Teaching**

The availability of unedited news releases and their story counterparts allows instructors to demonstrate to students which releases are used and how they are edited. These examples often graphically illustrate the importance of context, timing, and localization. Additionally, they are useful in demonstrating how releases may spark a story which journalistic enterprise then takes in unanticipated directions.

Students must also learn to provide stories with multi-media interest, not simply good copy. Electronic newspapers currently contain moving images, animation, and sound, making their production more similar in many ways to that of a VNR (Bender, 1993; Christopher, 1994; Grossberger, 1994; Reilly, 1993).

**\* Implications of New Journalistic Practices for Public Relations Practitioners**

Mailing list maintenance now requires that journalists' e-mail addresses be regularly updated as well as their place of employment, job title, and fax number. Practitioners may also have to establish and maintain relationships with media syndicators if they become the primary suppliers of multi-media content to electronic newspapers.

Because electronic news staff seem to have abandoned the traditional gatekeeping role, the greater newshole size should increase chances for story placement. However, with the larger amount of news available, placement within the hierarchy of stories may become crucial, and such placement is not guaranteed.

Localization of news releases will take on increased importance in placement as electronic newspapers come to depend more heavily on highly localized information. It remains to be seen how much added value is obtained through placement of a news release as editorial copy in an electronic newspaper. Finally, access to reporter notes may help catch inaccuracies and make reporters more accountable, a problem encountered often by corporate practitioners (Wilcox et al., 1995).

**\* Implications of New Journalistic Practice for Public Relations Research**

The literature suggests electronic newspapers will result in a reworking of the reporter-source relation. If the journalistic endeavor becomes one of technical-level shoveling rather than skilled news defining, the well-documented reporter antipathy toward the public relations profession may change (Aronoff, 1975; Kopenhaver et al., 1984; Pincus et al., 1993; Ryan & Martinson, 1988). Research is needed to explore how this changing dynamic might affect the role of public relations information subsidies to the news media (Gandy, 1982; Turk, 1986).

As the size of the newshole increases, research will be needed to determine what types of information editors use to fill it. Do news releases tend to get buried at the bottom of the organization stack, making them harder for readers to access? Even given direct access to news releases, however, readers may choose to ignore them. Experimental research, monitoring log activity, and focus groups may form the basis of a new type of gatekeeping research designed to determine what readers access.

### Content Features of Electronic Newspapers

Electronic newspapers serve as gateways to information beyond the copy offered by the paper. Online chat groups discuss special interest topics, online opinion polls are conducted and results instantly reported, home shopping opportunities exist, and updated restaurant menus and reviews can be perused. Stories in the newspaper's morgue, related stories on a topic, stories buried in potentially vast electronic back pages, stories in other papers, and newspaper databases such as clip files, survey data, and reporter's notes can be accessed (Reilly, 1993).

Electronic phone directories can be updated daily and provide search capabilities such as phonetic searches (i.e., Kreisler for Chrysler), searches by address or by locality, searches by profession or service (with the system automatically providing the correct heading for professions--physiotherapist for masseuse), and through natural language. On the French Teletel system, a vocal inquiry about "places to fix my car" results in a listing of car mechanics in the area (Dupagne, 1990; Gecsei, 1983; TE&M, 1991).

Researchers are striving to make content flexible for different ages, interests, and reading levels through features like personalized versions or routing the paper based on demographics (Bender, 1993; Conniff, 1993; Haddad, 1993; Husted, 1992; Mason, 1993). Other custom features include advertisements tailored to the user's demographics or based on previous online activity. Subscribers can use key words to search classified

ads, saving search parameters to call up only new ads that fit those criteria.

Given the potentially unlimited newshole, highly localized neighborhood news such as school menus and Parent Teacher Association newsletters is feasible. Immediacy is another feature of electronic news services, limited only by economic constraints on updating stories as they unfold. While sports and financial news are obvious prospects for this news content feature, it could also be used for services like up-to-the-minute road conditions during severe weather (Schrama, 1988). The offer of immediate poll results during the 1992 elections swamped the Prodigy network, effectively shutting down the service to many users (Prodigy Newsletter, 1992). Discussion groups can provide immediate feedback as well. Television producers have taken to logging onto the boards to get feedback on how last night's episode was received (Online, 1994).

Past research supports Bogart's contention that most people will use the information highway for "infctainment" but not hard knowledge (Freedom Forum, 1993). The director of Apples' E-World project describes it as a meld of news content with many other elements, providing interaction and communication opportunities (personal communication, Denis Dubé, Apple E-World, 1994). The early market research demonstrating that users want mainly communication opportunities cannot be overlooked (Aumente, 1987; Charon, 1987; Deveze, 1988).

**\* Implications of Content Features for Public Relations Teaching**

The depth and breadth of information available electronically means students must be able to negotiate the web of newspaper morgue files, reporters' notes, and interconnected databases. Without well thought out search strategies, research efforts using the web can quickly result in information overload; such hapless researchers have been termed Information Superhighway roadkill. Students must also be taught to monitor chat groups and instant polls as part of environmental scanning, which can also be unnecessarily time consuming unless strategies for scanning are taught as well.

**\* Implications of Content Features for Public Relations Practitioners**

Electronic newspapers provide practitioners with another communication channel to journalists. E-mail can be used to comment on stories, rebut them, or pitch ideas. On chat boards, practitioners can serve as advocates for their clients, answering questions and arguing points.

The construction of personalized papers creates narrowcasting opportunities with precision targeting of specific, active publics. And the larger newshole and greater localization of stories provides smaller organizations and non-profits more opportunities to place items such as community calendar notes.

Electronic directory services offer practitioners another communication channel to publics; it is estimated that 21% of the U.S. population consults the phone book each day (Dupagne, 1990).

The French experience demonstrates that an electronic directory serves as an "ice breaker" for those fearful of new technology, broadening the potential electronic audience (Meyer, 1988). Because of their unique search capabilities, they can also be used to construct highly targeted mailing lists.

Establishing services on electronic boards can improve information flow to publics without a concomitant labor investment. Online expert systems provide specialized information and advice to consumers, and they have proven enormously successful in France (IDATE, 1987).

Although online opinion polls are unscientific, they can have a bandwagon effect and should be monitored. Discussion groups should be monitored for the almost instantaneous feedback they can supply on anything from new product packaging, to environmental statements, to fundraising efforts.

**\* Implications of Content Features for Public Relations Researchers**

The availability of newspaper morgues and databases allows researchers to directly access information and avoid the costly fees charged by many newspaper research services. Electronic telephone directories also facilitate the pulling of telephone survey samples and may be particularly useful for gathering a stratified or quota sample.

Researchers need to perform content analysis and focus group studies to determine whether users are interested in knowledge or infotainment. Another area of user research is whether users take advantage of search capabilities on electronic medium or if

they tend to browse and expect to be able to satisfy their information needs in this less-structured manner.

### **Commercially Sponsored Information**

Online services have successfully convinced many media buyers that they are a viable market and are competitively priced with broadcast media (Levin, 1993; Winski, 1993); in 1992 Prodigy claimed 200 advertisers in six industries (Target Marketing, 1992). Currently, advertisements appear as teaser boxes or windows, and users can select to "dive into" the advertisement. The need to pursue commercial information may mean ads attract only active information seekers and may be copy heavy to meet their information needs (Breuckner, 1994). Advertisement inquiries, ordering history, and other database information is used to deliver highly personalized follow-up ads online as well as private e-mail customized to the user's profile (Bender, 1993). Electronic papers offer the advertiser a marketing advantage by making direct response/ordering features available.

Other advertisers have used infomercials to build their market base. Panasonic's use of a full-page ad and sweepstakes garnered 45,000 responses, complete with consumers' names, addresses, and buying plans (Johnson & Hume, 1992). Public service announcements (PSAs), such as America Responds to Aids, would probably be well received in electronic newspapers, despite the lack of history of FCC rulings regarding space in newspapers (Elliott, 1992).

Multi-media advertisements (Breuckner, 1994) offer full-motion video display ads. However some analysts believe a more effective technique is to commercially sponsor an "electronic place"--a McDonalds' playground or a Nike World, offering enjoyable locations for exposure to and information about products provided by the sponsor and by other users (personal communication, Dennis Dubé, Apple E-World, 1994).

Public relations practitioners can deliver messages in unique ways in electronic newspapers. The unedited local wire service and reader access to PR Newswire both afford opportunities to offer commercial messages. However, because these media outlets are unedited they may not carry the credibility of editorial content. It remains to be seen whether users distinguish between journalistic content and public relations releases (Cameron, 1994; Cameron & Curtin, 1995).

The audience for these messages is also highly fragmented. Although the network is 20 million strong and growing rapidly, that population is scattered over approximately 5,000 nodes. Because users tend to be active information seekers and much of the information available is tightly grouped by subject and interest, however, narrowcasting efforts may be facilitated.

Another opportunity for public relations efforts will be the forums or discussions among readers and journalists pertaining to stories. Online discussion enhances the opportunities to rebut, praise, critique, or clarify stories. Netiquette allows brief announcements, and public relations professionals may be accepted

as story commentators within limits, although sending e-mail product and service announcements, fundraising pitches, and persuasive messages will certainly be viewed as "spamming" and result in "flaming" (see Internet Culture).

The public relations practice of real-time response, the process of monitoring stories on wires and within public-access databases where reporters make stories in progress available, may be enhanced or hampered (Thomsen, 1994). Comments and corrections can be made before stories are run and may be made directly to a reporter's electronic mailbox. However, it is conceivable that a breaking story will run online as soon as it is finished, dramatically cutting the lag time available for public relations staff to contact a reporter before a story goes to press. And once a story runs, it will experience error inertia as never before. The story can be readily clipped and archived. Depending on regulatory factors, the clipped story can be widely shared almost immediately, increasing dissemination of the erroneous information at an exponential rate (Mulgan, 1991; New York Times, 1993).

**\* Implications of Commercially Sponsored Information for Public Relations Teaching**

Because of publication lag, all textbooks covering new technology are inevitably out of date by the time they are published. Instructors must gather material beyond the basic textbook to teach students about new technology opportunities and how to use them. In turn, electronic newspapers are ideally suited for teaching integrated marketing techniques, such as the

melding of public relations efforts into information heavy ads and the direct response potential. Students must learn to think in terms of new ways to gather marketing information and new ways to use interactive capabilities, rather than simply transferring current techniques that do not take advantage of the medium's capabilities.

Students must also be taught how to communicate on electronic media; they must learn how to enter discussions without appearing fluffy or overtly commercial. And although users can maintain a certain anonymity online, judgments are still made about a user based on language skills and their proficiency in net talk (i.e., all caps to indicate yelling or :) to indicate a remark said with a smile).

**\* Implications of Commercially Sponsored Information for Public Relations Practitioners**

Practitioners will have to add online communication channels to their media mix; PSAs will no longer be the province solely of broadcast media. Sponsored information places offer tremendous opportunities to practitioners as ways of reaching actively interested publics, making targeted pitches and in-depth information available, and overcoming in part the fragmentation of the medium. But problems may arise with administrator efforts to censor references to competitors and with user credibility of information offered in a sponsored forum. Whether electronic information should be censored at all is sharply debated (Berman & Rotenberg, 1991; Card, 1991; Lacy 1991; Zachmann, 1990).

The immediate response capabilities of the net make the provision of calls to action and enabling information to users more crucial than ever. Conversely, practitioners can use these same capabilities for real-time monitoring and response. Flame reduction could serve as a type of online crisis management. But the emphasis on real-time response will necessitate a change in work habits: a few days of real time can seem an eternity on the net. Practitioners will have to monitor electronic communications frequently and respond immediately; news will no longer be a once a day affair to be consumed with the morning coffee.

**\* Implications of Commercially Sponsored Information for Public Relations Researchers**

Researchers need to investigate whether readers distinguish between editorial content and commercially sponsored content and the effect it may have on credibility. Longitudinal studies are required to determine if a sleeper effect occurs (Cameron, 1994). The efficacy of new forms of communication must be established; for example, determining the role of online PSAs and infomercials, establishing reader response to them, and determining their use in creating a market or support base. Finally, the problem of error inertia must be explored to determine its prevalence, lifespan, and diffusion speed and patterns.

**Social and Ethical Concerns**

One area of ethical concern for public relations professionals using electronic media to sponsor electronic

forums, FAQ centers, and the like is the need to be open about sponsorship. Less than full disclosure of organizational involvement in the dissemination of information in these channels may put practitioners in conflict with PRSA guidelines that prohibit false front organizations. Labeling practices, such as those used on some VNRs, may be necessary to fulfill ethical guidelines, but questions remain over how effective such techniques are in practice (Cameron & Curtin, 1995).

The sophisticated, interactive advertising and customized consumer information databases available online raise questions of whether advertisers have an unfair advantage, at least until users develop an awareness of how to use this new technology (Nelson, 1994). Additionally, manipulation of information, particularly photographic images, has become problematic. New technology allows digital images to be changed in ways that are undetectable, but the use of "doctored" photographs results in questions of motive and may destroy a practitioner's credibility.

Because electronic information services tend to attract active information seekers with higher socioeconomic status (CECD, 1982; Cutler, 1990), some analysts are concerned electronic newspapers will contribute to the information gap, particularly if currently inexpensive newspaper content is made available only through high-cost equipment (Gould, 1989; Husted, 1992; Rogers, 1986). The resulting polarization could extend along class lines as well as those of technological capability and benefit recognition, retarding progress toward the more

democratic society envisioned by Network Culture (Christopher, 1994; Freedom Forum, 1993; Willis, 1994). However, early predictions that electronic information media would contribute to the gender gap have not been borne out (Deveze, 1988; Meyer, 1988; Steinberg, 1993).

Some critics predict increased dependence on electronic networks will result in increasing human isolation. As electronic media increasingly are used for "chatting," instruction, shopping, and even telecommuting to work, less opportunity for social interaction arises. Ironically, the formation of the global village may be concomitantly decaying the immediate sense of community and contributing to a loss of self (Churbuck & Young, 1992; Dyrli, 1993; Gergen, 1992; Hargadon, 1994; Willis, 1994).

Others believe the anonymity of the net has led to antisocial behavior, such as the prevalence of flame attacks and computer sex services (Chidley, 1994; De Lacy, 1987; Tempest, 1989; Veyron, 1985). In France, sex chat boards account for 20% of total revenues although they form only 5% of total service providers (Browning, 1988; Deveze, 1988; Moutet, 1986; Tedesco & Janssen, 1988). The anonymity of the net also abets computer crime, providing perpetrators with free access and almost unlimited range to their victims. Besides theft of data, users have fallen prey to scams such as electronic pyramid schemes. The continued linking of information networks into an Information

Superhighway brings with it the possibility that users will be providing criminals with offramps into their homes.

**\* Implications of Social and Ethical Concerns for Public Relations Teaching**

Instruction in ethics is a necessary part of students' academic preparation, but it is often slighted in the curriculum. Because new technology brings with it new scenarios and unique problems, ethics should be taught not just from a situational standpoint but using an integrated, systematic approach. Students must be encouraged to develop the critical thinking skills that would allow them to analyze ethical dilemmas from a variety of viewpoints and respond in a socially responsible manner. That same notion of social responsibility could be extended to train students to take responsibility for disseminating information to their publics regardless of their socio-economic status and to demonstrate its applicability to their lives.

**\* Implications of Social and Ethical Concerns for Public Relations Practitioners**

The ethical dilemmas that practitioners face daily may become more problematic with electronic media because of the ease and prevalence of information and data manipulation. As always, the PRSA Code of Professional Standard should guide practitioners' judgment. The practice of ethical public relations also demands that practitioners make information available to technologically disadvantaged publics when appropriate, and, in fact, it seems logical that practitioners

are well situated and skilled to help close the information gap rather than contribute to it.

The problems associated with the lack of professional licensing may be compounded by the anonymity of the net, with anyone able to claim to be a practitioner or representing a group or cause. Unfortunately, solutions to this problem seem no less problematic in the electronic world than elsewhere. A practitioner's credibility continues to be the best badge of capability and authenticity the profession offers.

Practitioners will need to balance the advantages of the electronic world with socialization needs. Telecommuting can be more economical and responsive to worker needs, but the need for interpersonal interaction at regular intervals must also be stressed. Similarly, e-mail can provide a quick, convenient method for communicating with clients, but it must not be viewed as a substitute for face-to-face conferences and the advantages they accrue. Finally, practitioners must protect their computer files, using encryption techniques to safeguard sensitive material from easy access and performing regular scans for machine viruses (see Berman & Rotenberg, 1991; Branscomb, 1988; Lundstedt, 1990). Even the privacy of e-mail can be violated, and a recent edition of *PR Tactics* advises practitioners not to put anything in e-mail they would not like to see published on the front page of *The New York Times* (see also Willis, 1994).

**\* Implications of Social and Ethical Concerns for Public Relations Research**

Research is needed to determine whether users can readily distinguish between editorial content and commercially sponsored information and what labeling techniques are effective. How electronic newspapers contribute to the information gap needs explored, with directions provided to practitioners about ways they can bridge this gap. Although studies have not demonstrated a gender gap, research is needed to determine if gendered differences exist in the way electronic media are viewed and used and how these may relate to the feminization of the public relations field. The shifting of communication channels to more mediated and less personal ones also raises issues of effects and whether these new channels enable or detract from symmetrical two-way communication models.

**Conclusion**

Research to date indicates electronic newspapers will be a qualitatively different medium from their hard copy counterparts, with less hard news orientation and more opportunities and "places" to meet and exchange ideas with active information seekers. Because of their real-time interactive capabilities, they can almost be viewed as online focus groups, with obvious advantages for public relations professionals if they can learn to effectively use this new communication channel.

But the historical record also demonstrates that caution is in order. Although the new electronic information services were forecast to be the panacea to all our problems (including

removing the agony of preparing income tax returns; Cornish, 1981), critics note that the average consumer does not have a personal computer "sitting somewhere between his [sic] VCR and his microwave oven" (Nahon & Pointeau, 1987). Should this new generation of electronic newspapers prove successful, however, indications are they will provide unique opportunities for the teaching and practice of public relations, with concomitant research devoted to making the most of the opportunities offered.

Table 1. Online Information Services

Parameter	America Online	Compu- Serve	Delphi	GEnie	Prodigy
No. of Accounts	200,000	1,100,000	>100,000	400,000	870,000
Maximum No. of Users/Account	5	1	5	1	6
No. of Countries Served	1	135	60	30	1
Information Databases	45+	1,200	1	200	none
Encyclopedias	2	2	2	1	1
Magazines	4	200	2	na	12
News Wires/ Sports Services	1	29	3	12	1
Newspapers	2	56	none	na	4

Information compiled from Steinberg (1993) and from the services themselves.

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