12. Media Relations

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On March 20/21 2004, the headline “Maori Fish Scams” dominated the front page of Wellington’s Weekend edition of The Dominion Post newspaper. The story began, “Customary Maori fishing rights are being widely abused, fisheries officers say” (Loh Ho-Sang, 2004, p. A1). Two photographs accompanied the story. One showed seven people in wetsuits and scuba gear walking through calf-deep water (one man held his thumb and little finger in the air); and the other showed crayfish piled on the ground and in orange plastic buckets.1

This chapter analyses the “Maori Fish Scams” article using agenda setting, a model of media influence on public opinion. Various individuals and organisations responded to the article, and the overview below of those reactions introduces a range of practical media relations techniques that can be used by any organisation seeking to voice a public opinion. For businesses in particular, media relations skills can critically influence vital factors such as brand awareness, reputation and crisis survival.

What is Media Relations?

Media relations and public relations perform quite different functions. Public relations (PR) is communication management and aims to make organisations transparent and responsive. Since the 1960s, organisations have increasingly faced legal and moral obligations to balance financial success with social, environmental and ethical responsibility. PR as a three-step process ensures firstly, that organisations listen to and understand public expectations for reasonable behaviour, secondly, that organisations’ behaviour matches those expectations and finally, that they are publicly recognised as responsible.

Media relations (MR), on the other hand is a specialised sub-branch of public relations dealing primarily with step three of the process — recognition. MR staff increase public awareness and understanding of an organisation’s activities by sending information to the media and by inviting the media to see operations firsthand. MR is not necessarily the best method of obtaining public recognition, however. Patterson argues that today’s main PR challenge “isn’t getting noticed, it’s getting be-
A common historical argument for using media to communicate has been that editorial (anything written by a journalist) has more credibility with audiences than direct communication (such as advertising), because it is seen as coming from an independent third party.

However, academic research suggests that this may be one of the many popular ‘myths’ surrounding media influence (Hallahan, 1999). Many experienced PR practitioners consider MR to be less ethical and, given increasing media and public cynicism towards ‘PR stunts’ and ‘spin doctors’, less effective and trusted than other PR methods (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Direct and personalised communication that enables organisations to gather feedback and create dialogue with employees, communities, governments, shareholders, members, customers, trading partners and other stakeholders is increasingly gaining ground (Bartlett, 2004). The media remain, however, too powerful for any business to ignore.

**Media Power**

The media are extremely influential social agents. Some media theorists suggest that media power can range from discrediting political leaders, to toppling governments and even to starting or stopping wars (Griffin, 2003). For businesses, negative media coverage can decrease sales, reduce financial standing and destabilise trading relationships. Conversely, media have the power to disseminate information rapidly, which can be invaluable when organisations need to reach mass audiences cheaply and quickly, such as during product recalls.

Organisational MR, therefore, deals both proactively and reactively with the risks and opportunities of media power. Proactive MR builds positive reputation by communicating good behaviour. Typical tasks include running events and collating media information kits, along with creating a media policy and media risk management plan. Policies determine who is authorised to speak with the media, and ensure that all spokespeople are trained. Risk plans assess the likelihood of, and prepare for, negative media scenarios or crises (from a serious accident to hostile or biased coverage). Reactive MR responds to damaging coverage, usually by launching and adapting a pre-prepared response plan, including key messages that demonstrate the organisation’s concern for the safety, wellbeing and interests of all its stakeholders. Reactive MR communicates evidence that the organisation is behaving appropriately, and can only be effective if that evidence is available and accurate.

Quality MR, then, takes a strategic view that any publicity is not necessarily good publicity. Even positive media exposure is wasted effort if it does not reach audiences connected with the organisation, such as
politicians who make laws regulating the relevant industry, customers who buy products, donors who respond to fundraising requests, competitors who adapt to news about strategies, or shareholders who base investment decisions upon financial news. MR’s key consideration is the nature and number of audience members reached, not the nature and number of media stories.

When media coverage does reach relevant audiences, however, it can significantly impact their views and decision making. How, and just how much, the media can influence these publics is explained in the theory of agenda setting.

**Agenda Setting**

Journalism professors McCombs and Shaw, who first used the term ‘agenda setting’ to describe news selection in 1968, say the media have the power to choose which events are considered significant or unimportant by society (McCombs, 2000). Not all daily world events can fit into a newspaper or news bulletin, so the media select and filter events when crafting ‘news’. Further, McCombs and Shaw argue that elements not selected by the media are not usually discussed in the community either. McCombs and Shaw conclude that the media decide what will be ‘on the agenda’ for public discussion, arguing that these selections are made according to an informal code of ‘news values’.

**News Values**

O’Sullivan Hartley, Saunders and Fiske (1983) define news values as “professional codes used in the selection, construction and presentation of news stories in corporately produced mainstream press and broadcasting” (p. 153). You will not find such a code framed on the wall at your local newspaper — partly because news values are slightly different for each publication, depending upon its market positioning and competition, and partly because evidence of hard ‘rules’ would contradict press freedom, journalists’ most revered principle. Instead, then, news values are naturalised values, learned by watching and imitating others on the job. Journalists learn what is newsworthy, developing a ‘nose for news’ (Manning, 2001; McGregor, 2002a).

In its simplest sense, news means something new or new information about an old happening. (The _SS Titanic_ sinking, for example, was particularly news in 1912 when it happened, in 1985 when scientists located the wreck, and again in 1997 with the release of a big-budget, star-studded movie about the incident.) News also has to be ‘interesting’. Commercial news is selected on the premise that sensation — highly emotive stories, particularly about sex, crime, scandal, drugs or violence...
will appeal to a wide audience and increase media circulation, in turn generating advertising revenue.

For example, in New Zealand newspapers specifically, research has shown up to 56% of news devoted to crime in a single issue (McGregor, 2002b). Other common news values include proximity (economic, geographic or other relevance to the target audience); impact (a large effect on a few people or moderate effect on many people); conflict or competition (especially with a deserving underdog winner or an ‘innocent’ victim); and elite people (anyone who is already famous such as celebrities, royalty, sports stars or politicians).

O’Sullivan et al. (1983) argue that, in all mainstream media, priority is given to stories about the economy, government, industry, foreign affairs, any domestic affairs with a conflict or human interest angle, disasters and then sport. Within such stories, priority is given to personalisation (‘human interest’), conflict, violence, and reference to elite nations, elite people or negativity (bad news). In New Zealand, Gideon Porter, an experienced broadcast journalist and at the date of writing Television New Zealand (TVNZ) Māori Issues Correspondent, argues that mainstream news values also have a racial inflection. He says all bad news has an “ooh-ah factor”, but “Māori bad news” has “more chance of making the front page” (G. Porter, personal communication, August 19, 2004; Walker, 2002).

Whether MR staff consider news values appropriate or not, they often use them to obtain media coverage. Not-for-profit organisations, for example, use celebrity endorsement for fundraising drives. Unless the fundraising is for a disaster (impact), it is unlikely to be newsworthy on its own, but using elite people to add news value increases the likelihood of coverage.

Social Factors in Agenda Setting

News values partly explain why only some recent and interesting occurrences receive media coverage. Sometimes there are also social and interpersonal factors at work. For many audiences, regular news consumption provides an important element of social belonging. The broader and deeper the base of shared material, the more bonding generated. The social benefit of being ‘in the know’ about current news builds group members’ appetites for more on the same topic (Rubin & Windahl, 1986). Conversely, the ‘spiral of silence’ theory suggests that people who feel they are in the minority in their understanding of a topic are likely to keep quiet and ‘go with the flow’, even when they do not share a group’s interpretation of an issue (Noelle-Neumann, 1984). These factors help to explain why public opinion largely follows media agendas.
In the absence of other information, media agendas dominate decision making about what topics are important (Iyengar, 1990). McCombs (2000) also argues that the media “may not only tell us what to think about, they also may tell us how and what to think about it, and perhaps even what to do about it” (para. 5).

**Topic Frames**

Once ‘newsworthy’ topics make the agenda, there is a second level of agenda setting where the media emphasise certain attributes of those topics and cue audiences to ‘read’ them in certain ways. Entman (2002) calls this ‘framing’. McCombs and Shaw believe that media frames tell audiences how to think about topics, for example, by choosing which viewpoints on each topic are aired and in what order or priority. Frames include ‘contextual cues’, which are not actually part of the content, but are familiar or understood ‘points of reference’ as to how that content is intended to be read (Iyengar & Simon, 1993).

For example, an item is cued as ‘important’ if it is placed on the newspaper’s front page or as the ‘lead’ (first) article in a news broadcast. The source quoted first, with the largest or only photo, or with the most ‘column centimetres’ is cued as the most ‘important’ viewpoint in a story. Most media coverage uses headlines, pictures, captions and prioritised sources to tell an authoritative version of what is happening. Entman (2000) believes media frames “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 391).

For example in the “Maori Fish Scams” article, the headline sets a particular problem definition and causal interpretation for the story that follows. First, the issue is categorised as a particular category of ‘problem’: a ‘scam’. Scam, defined in Princeton University’s WordNet online dictionary as a “fraudulent business scheme” (2004, para. 1) has two key connotations. These are ‘intentionality’ (i.e., a scam is deliberate, not accidental fraud) and ‘organisation’ (scams are planned and systematic recurrences, not isolated incidences, of fraud). The “widely abused” comment in the story’s first line and subsequent reference to “organised criminals” reinforce that frame (Loh Ho-Sang, 2004, p. A1). Second, the headline defines the problem’s cause as a collectivised racial group, “Maori”. Finally, the headline’s front-page centre position, and large bold type, cue readers that they should consider the ‘scam’ of great importance and relevance.

Framing analysis also examines numbers and ratios of sources in stories. Of the “Maori Fish Scams” story’s 23 paragraphs, 21 are attributed to a single source, identified as a Fisheries Ministry team leader. The source is reported to allege various criminal offences “by [persons
doing] illegal customary fishing”, including fraud, poaching, intimidation and vandalism. The other two paragraphs quote a judge in a fishing-breach case describing a particular fishing permit as “disjointed” (Loh Ho-Sang, 2004, p. A1). None of the quoted sources provides evidence of widespread criminal activity that would support the headline’s “scam” frame. That does not necessarily prove that either headline or story is ‘wrong’, however, only that one does not completely reflect the other. Lack of fit between stories and headlines is not unusual, because headlines are created in the subediting and layout stages of newspaper production, not by journalists.

Framing analysts also consider photos and captions. The main accompanying photo is captioned, “Dive training: A member of a Gisborne-based dive course flashes the Mongrel Mob sign as he emerges from the sea” (Loh Ho-Sang, 2004, p. A1). The reference to “Mongrel Mob” is not explained in the story. For readers familiar with the term’s customary use to refer to a ‘gang’, and previous media coverage alleging that ‘gang’ is linked with violence, drug use and crime, the caption reinforces the story’s frame of an organised crime problem. Framing analysis asks, however, what other captions could also fit a depicted image, and how that might alter the way the photo is interpreted by audiences. The hand signal may be a gang sign, but it may equally be the ‘hang loose’ gesture, which the ‘Ripionary’ surf lingo lexicon describes as a gesture in “universal use” since the 1960s to indicate “being in a relaxed metabolic and clear minded state” (Mathews, 2004, para. 6). The caption does not provide date, time or names of those photographed to substantiate its chosen interpretation of the gesture. The caption provides a tenuous link between photo and story via the ‘organised crime’ frame. A subsequent complaint by one of those photographed confirmed that the image was not connected with the story directly; those pictured had no factual relationship to the story content.

The second photo is captioned, “Seized Crays: More than 500 crayfish, many undersized, confiscated recently on the East Coast. It was claimed they had been caught according to customary rights” (Loh Ho-Sang, 2004, p. A1). This caption also avoids specific time and date information, and uses passive voice (“it was claimed”) to avoid identifying who made the customary rights claim, where and when. No information about quotas or legal sizes is given to enable readers to make their own judgement. Again, the photo-story link is at the level of the frame and not based in the actual story content; the fisherman discussed in the story stated that the photograph did not show his catch. Frame analysis asks how a different photograph (for example, of fishing infringements by a recreational Pākehā or international commercial trawler) might have changed the frame, perhaps from a ‘Māori problem’ to ‘protecting NZ fisheries’.
In agenda setting terms, both stages have occurred in this article. First, the topic has been selected by the media as newsworthy and placed onto the public agenda. Second, the issue has been framed. It has been signalled as important by its front-page placement, and certain attributes of the issue have been shown as important by their inclusion, prioritisation and added emphasis in headlines, introductory paragraph, photos and captions. Other possible viewpoints and interpretations are shown as unimportant by their exclusion.

Framing Analysis as a Tool for Media Response

The first step in responding to media framing is to determine what type of frame is being used. Knight (1999) defines fact-based frames as those providing objective information or documented evidence, including up-to-date background or context to issues. Sometimes a fact-based frame will use highly educated or scientifically trained advocates or experts to present a range of facts. By contrast, interest-based frames tend to focus on needs, desires and visions of ‘how it ought to be’, rather than concrete data. Value-based frames centre on disagreements about right or wrong, cast opposing protagonists in the roles of ‘moral’ or ‘immoral’, or allocate blame for ‘doing wrong’. Relational frames concern emotional bonds among disputants, often using emotional, accusatory language to highlight issues (especially breaches) of trust, control or intimacy.

The “Maori Fish Scams” article is primarily value-framed, in that the collective group referred to as “Maori” is blamed for moral wrong-doing in fishing practices, and for making “threats” that prevent the interviewed fisheries officer from enforcing fisheries law (Loh Ho-Sang, 2004, p. A1). The Fisheries officer is framed as a David-sized defender of fisheries law’s moral standard, in conflict with the Goliath-sized might of an organised Māori “poaching labour force” (Loh Ho-Sang, 2004, p. A1).

The second step in responding to framing is to analyse how the particular frame defines the problem, its causes and remedies. The “Fish Scams” issue is defined racially, as a “Maori” problem. It is also framed as a situation of widespread lawlessness, in which fishing is “out of hand” and law enforcement is “increasingly dangerous” (Loh Ho-Sang, 2004, p. A1). Although no explicit remedies are proposed, the Fisheries officer’s claim that “something needs to be done” suggests he lacks power to uphold the law. The inferred remedy is to supply more power and resources to Fisheries officers, to strengthen their side in the conflict with Māori poachers. Framing analysis does not seek to prove such a frame is wrong, but rather to show its effects, and that other frames are possible.
Frame Effects

It is likely that placement of any article about widespread lawlessness and violent conflict (the Fisheries officer alleges his car may have been torched by poachers) on the front page will create public interest in the issue. Opposition politicians often add their voices to calls for action, with the result that governments feel it prudent to respond by addressing community anxiety. In this instance, Prime Minister Helen Clark responded immediately. The following day, the New Zealand Press Association (NZPA) reported that Clark had requested fisheries minister, David Benson-Pope, to “look into ongoing claims of abuse of customary fishing regulations” (NZPA, 2004, para. 1).

If Clark’s request for an inquiry eventually leads to the actual remedy implied, that is, greater resourcing of the Ministry’s policing role, the article will have contributed to a spiral of events known to media theorists as ‘empire building’. Louw (2003) argues that groups such as the military or the police focus media attention on rising crime or security threats, creating ‘moral panic’ in the community, which in turn pressures governments to increase funding and resources to those same security organisations. Whether rousing such ‘moral panic’ is deliberate or not, ‘securocrats’, as Louw calls them, do usually benefit from media coverage that reinforces reasons for their existence.

In the “Maori Fish Scams” case, even if Benson-Pope’s inquiry leads to a different remedy, or all allegations are found false, media coverage did motivate political action; Benson-Pope launched a review. The coverage also necessitated a response by Fisheries’ communication staff. Fisheries’ Communications Manager, Alan Meek, says fishery issues are always “of huge interest to the public” (A. Meek, personal communication, August 19, 2004) in New Zealand, but particular concerns emerged around customary fishing as a result of a range of media coverage, including a Coastwatch documentary on Television One which showed Fisheries’ officers, coastguard and marine police on duty. A key concern was whether customary fishing rights were being “abused for non-customary activities i.e., selling”, but there “wasn’t any evidence of that”. Meek says his communication department’s role is both proactive and reactive — to “try and anticipate issues” — and, in this case, to “react as swiftly as we can” (A. Meek, personal communication, August 19, 2004).

Other Frames

The third step in using frame analysis for MR is to show how alternative frames define the problem differently and, if applicable, suggest alternative remedies. One way to assess alternative framing is to ask ‘what’s
missing?” Missing perspectives may include the opinions of individuals or organisations discussed by the article but not quoted, anyone subsequently affected by the article, or anyone who could offer expert insight. In the “Maori Fish Scams” article some inclusions could be: a senior Fisheries voice, voices representing Māori, comment from the police on organised crime, detail directly from lawyers in the reported legal case and a response from the fisherman whose case is mentioned. Comments from any of those sources could potentially shift framing in follow-up coverage.

Responding to Media Frames

If an organisation has been disadvantageously framed in the media there are several possible avenues of response. First, MR staff consider whether to respond at all, and if so whether to respond in the same medium. Dilenschneider (2000) recommends only choosing to respond in media outlets “where facts are important” (p. 9). In other words, if a tabloid medium known for sensationalism treats an organisation with sensationalism and bias, MR staff should accept that most audiences recognise it as such and maintain a dignified silence.

Another key factor is whether primary stakeholders use and trust the medium in question. Hoani Jeremy Lambert, a senior consultant on Māori communications, argues that Māori organisations are wary of responding to criticism in mainstream media, first because of high uncertainty as to how they will be portrayed, and second because many of their stakeholders neither use nor trust such sources (H. J. Lambert, personal communication, June 9, 2004). Increasingly, direct and personalised communication, perhaps via regional newspapers, Māori radio, community newsletters or a hui, is preferred (H. J. Lambert, personal communication, June 9, 2004). Walker points out that unrepresentative and largely negative coverage in mainstream media has led to Māori “seceding from mainstream media to construct their own positive stories . . . in magazines such as Mana and Tu Mai and newspapers such as Kokiri Paetae” (Walker, 2002, p. 231). Porter says Māori audiences are increasingly listening to Māori radio and watching Māori TV (G. Porter, personal communication, August 19, 2004). Organisational communication efforts must respond to these audience shifts and preferences. Agenda setting theory suggests that if stakeholders are well informed by trusted methods, impact on their decision making from mainstream media coverage is minimised.

The only fisherman named in the “Maori Fish Scams” article, for example, did not respond in The Dominion Post, but was interviewed in The Gisborne Herald, where he was more likely to reach the local community whose opinions he was most concerned to change. The story claimed the
fisherman had been “used as a scapegoat and made an undue example of by the Ministry of Fisheries” (Curtis, 2004, para. 1), and was now the topic of gossip, to the extent that he found it hard to leave his house.

The quotes that the Gisborne article attributed to the fisherman re-framed two aspects: first that The Dominion Post’s photo of an unidentified crayfish catch, which he said had been assumed by readers to be his catch, was unconnected with him and many times larger than his catch, and second that he would appeal his conviction for illegal fishing. The article’s relational framing of events reversed the ‘David vs. Goliath’ moral frame of the first article, in which individual Fisheries officers were portrayed as facing the overwhelming and faceless might of organised crime. In the Gisborne article, the fisherman became the scapegoat, up against the faceless might of “the Ministry’s current campaign” (Curtis, 2004, para. 12). The fisherman’s quotes created a relational frame that questioned Fisheries’ level of community consultation: “I’ve used those permits for years, if there was a problem why didn’t (Fisheries Gisborne team leader) Martin Williams tell Mrs Nikora that she couldn’t give out permits” (Curtis, 2004, para. 10).

The fisherman’s response in the local paper with a smaller circulation was more strategic for his personal objectives than trying to be heard in the larger newspaper, The Dominion Post, because it was the Gisborne community whose opinions impacted on his quality of life. The fisherman did not try to directly refute the original article’s frame by arguing about morality or rebutting the organised crime allegations. Rather, he used different frames to put an alternative viewpoint.

The lesson for organisational MR is that a ‘knee-jerk’ response using the same frame and media as negative coverage, even if refuting the argument, may simply reinforce how audiences perceive the issue, and what they see as its important aspects. A more strategic response could mean using different media, writing directly to all members, customers or shareholders, or inviting stakeholders to a meeting or information event, which can be an opportunity to shift the issue to a different frame. By placing an advertisement, giving a calm and factual version of the issue, in a local media source that is used and trusted by those audiences may also be an effective tactic.

**Direct Responses**

If an organisation’s important stakeholder groups use and trust the media source in question, MR advisors may feel it necessary to respond in editorial within the same media. In these circumstances, several options are available. One is to approach the journalist directly and request an interview. If the approach is positive and non-confrontational, with an offer of new information that will ensure a follow-up story is newswor-
thy, most journalists readily accept such offers. Journalists are usually dedicated to principles of balanced and unbiased reporting and welcome opportunities to present alternative viewpoints to those already published.

Howard and Mathews (1988) suggest MR staff should also be willing to take some responsibility for any media mistakes or omissions. Even after receiving information, journalists may not have been able to find an appropriate contact within an organisation to comment or elaborate, so a key MR responsibility is to check that the website and switchboard staff have clear, up-to-date media contact information, and to make sure that nominated spokespeople can be reached at any time.

The Media Release

The media release, a short story written in journalistic news style and using one or more news values, is the most common method of alerting the media to an organisation’s views. Releases are usually e-mailed or faxed to media outlets, briefly draw attention to a newsworthy item, and provide a spokesperson's contact details.

For example, Fisheries provides regular media releases on its website; releases posted publicly in this way have the advantage of communicating directly with the public and stakeholders as well as being available for use by the media. Fisheries did not respond immediately to the “Maori Fish Scams” article. Within three weeks, however, a release was posted that used a factual frame to reposition the problem as “customary fishing” (Ministry of Fisheries, 2004, para. 2) regulations, not “Maori Fish Scams”. The release framed the problem as a combination of unclear regulations and “abuse by an irresponsible minority of fishers”, proposing “review of the amateur fishing regulations” (MFish, 2004, para. 1) as the solution. The word Māori did not appear at all in the first half of the release, and appeared only twice in the context of “collaboration with the Minister of Māori Affairs and Associate Minister of Fisheries, Hon. Parekura Horomia” and “endeavouring to work with Māori leaders to address a range of issues relating to the management of customary fishing” (MFish, 2004, para. 5). The original article’s frame of a ‘Maori versus Fisheries’ conflict was not rebutted; rather, it was simply avoided, as was any suggestion of a ‘scam’ or organised deception.

Fisheries minister David Benson-Pope particularly emphasised the review was “prompted by the actions of a small number of abusers” (MFish, 2004, para. 8). The Dominion Post appears not to have reported the review announcement, although it was covered in The New Zealand Herald (Taylor, 2004). Regardless of whether The Dominion Post reported Fisheries’ release, however, Fisheries’ low-key, fact-framed response successfully avoided a ‘worst case scenario’ in which a response that denied
there was a ‘Māori scam’ may have simply led to repetition of those key words (and reinforcement of their accompanying racial stereotypes and moral oppositions) in subsequent headlines (e.g., ‘No Māori Fish Scam, says Minister’).

When Journalists Won’t or Can’t Report Additional Views

If speaking directly and sending a media release both fail to elicit a response from a journalist, Hudson (1994) recommends using letters “to circumvent journalists if they are not willing to give you a hearing” (p. 61). She says letters should be “short and make one or two points clearly” (p. 61). In response to the “Maori Fish Scams” article, for example, Kewene Pepperell wrote a short, sharp rebuke to The Dominion Post, which appeared in the Letters column on page 6, March 25, 2004. Pepperell called the article a “cheap shot”, listed two fraud cases involving non-Māori, and questioned why those were not labelled “Pakeha scams” (Pepperell, 2004, p. 6). Pepperell’s retort used a moral frame, but with a different perspective to the article’s original Fisheries vs. poachers frame, this time placing The Dominion Post and aggrieved Māori at opposite ends of the moral spectrum:

Little wonder Maori feel aggrieved right now. This sort of sensationalism falls a long way short of the standards I thought you’d set for yourselves. Shame on you. (Pepperell, 2004, p. 6)

The 128-word letter was published in full and provided a powerful alternative perspective.

Another possible remedy for media inaccuracy is a letter to the editor marked ‘not for publication’. If an approach to a journalist has been unsuccessful, possibly a phone call or e-mail to the editor explaining what happened may obtain a follow-up story, apology or retraction. Howard and Mathews (1988) recommend that if organisations want a retraction or correction printed, the request should specify its size and placement. They advise being prepared to negotiate on these elements, but caution against offering to drop further action even once a retraction is printed, because organisations may need to seek legal damages later.

Finally, if trust has irreparably broken down with both journalist and editor, and an organisation feels a media outlet has injured it and is unwilling or unable to offer sufficient remedy, MR staff may seek legal advice about defamation. They may also consider complaining to the New Zealand Press Council (NZPC) or the Broadcasting Standards Authority N.Z. Porter urges injured parties dissatisfied with the outcome of a direct complaint to a media outlet to pursue complaints as “an important part of the process of slowly changing media attitudes” (G. Porter, per-
sonal communication, August 19, 2004). He says media outlets “won’t blacklist” complainants, but complaints will “make them [media] think about what they do”.

Shortly after the “Maori Fish Scams” article appeared, a woman who was visible in the main photograph successfully complained to the NZPC. The NZPC found that the combined photo and caption “would lead a reasonable reader to the clear inference that this group is associated with the Mongrel Mob” (“Complaint Over Photo,” 2004, p. 10), and that The Dominion Post had “breached Press Council principles relating to accuracy, correction, subterfuge and manipulation of photographs” (“Complaint Over Photo,” 2004, p. 10).

While such remedies may in time change media attitudes, in the short term, an organisation’s interests are best served by establishing strong, positive, professional relationships with the media in the first instance, so that whenever anything about the organisation is planned for publication, MR staff are the first to know and have ample opportunity to provide plentiful, accurate information.

Review Media Planning and Policy

A final, important aspect of any media encounter is to learn from the process and, if necessary, adjust media policies and risk management strategies. For example, if reported comments by an employee were unauthorised, MR staff might need to reinforce media policy internally and provide additional media training. In this case, there was no breach of Fisheries’ media policy. Meek explains that, because Fisheries works closely with communities and community media in isolated locations, a centralised, tightly controlled media policy is inappropriate for its needs, and regional officers are authorised to comment on most issues. Exceptions are made for ‘national issues’, for example, whether officers need defensive equipment to work in the field (A. Meek, personal communication, August 19, 2004). Likewise, all organisations need a media policy that balances stakeholder needs with anticipated media interest, considering carefully which spokespeople are appropriate for what topics, and preparing suitable responses.

Conclusion

This case study has provided an opportunity to show how the media use headlines, pictures, captions, placement, selection and prioritisation of sources to frame issues that they cover. Examining the responses to the article has illustrated how an understanding of framing and counter-framing can help keep responses to media coverage constructive and avoid repeating media frames. A framing analysis approach looks at
how the issue has been framed, considers the effects of that frame on key audiences and ensures those audiences have access to alternative interpretations. This may mean using alternative media, or avoiding the media altogether in favour of other PR methods, such as direct mail or meetings.

As the range of responses to the “Maori Fish Scams” article suggests, there are alternatives to engaging directly in argument with the media. A key role of MR staff is to assess which avenues will enable an organisation to reach important stakeholders, with a message that is framed in its preferred terms. This should only ever occur, however, within the context of broader three-step PR activity which ensures firstly that organisations are transparent and responsive in their dealings with all stakeholders, before communicating those dealings to the media.

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References


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1 The Dominion Post declined permission to reproduce the article and photographs as an illustration to this chapter, and at the date of writing online postings of it at the www.stuff.co.nz website have been removed. However, the full text without photos or captions is available in the Factiva database (Document DOMPOS0020040323e03k0003i), accessible through most university libraries.