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Two-way symmetrical communication and interactivity on the web: a case study of two South African non-governmental organisations

First submission: March 2002

Practitioners who use the internet as part of their public relations efforts often still do not apply the interactive features to their fullest potential. This article is based on a study that aimed to address the void in public relations research as far as the application of new communication technology is concerned. The research focused on the interactive nature of the internet by applying the two-way symmetrical model of public relations to the websites of ten South African NGOs. This article deals with two of these NGOs and their use of the World Wide Web. It was confirmed that more than technical knowledge is required to manage a website successfully. Much more important is a sound understanding of the communication function within an organisation, especially with regard to public relations. Understanding and practising the two-way symmetrical model would in the long run be beneficial to the optimum use of an organisational website.

Simmetriese tweerigtingkommunikasie en interaktiwiteit op die web: 'n gevallestudie van twee Suid-Afrikaanse nie-regeringsorgansisasies

Skakelpraktisyns wat die internet as deel van hulle skakelwerkaksies gebruik, pas dikwels nie die interaktiewe eienskappe van die internet optimaal toe nie. Hierdie artikel is gebaseer op 'n studie wat ten doel gehad het om die leemte in skakelkundige navorsing wat betref die toepassing van nuwe kommunikasietegnologie te ondersoek. Die navorsing het op die interaktiewe aard van die internet gefokus en die simmetriese tweerigtingmodel van skakelwerk op die webwerwe van tien Suid-Afrikaanse NRO's is toegepas. Die artikel bespreek twee van hierdie NRO's en hulle benutting van die Wêreldwye Web. Die ondersoek het getoon dat 'n deeglike begrip van die toepaslike kommunikasiefunksie en van die rol van skakelwerk waarskynlik baie meer belangrik is as tegniese kennis vir die suksesvolle bestuur van 'n webwerf. Die begryp en die toepassing van die simmetriese tweerigtingmodel kan op die lang termyn lei tot die optimumgebruik van 'n organisasie se webwerf.

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Non-profit organisations are often unwilling or unable to invest in paid advertising because of limited financial resources (Marchand & Lavoie 1998: 34).[1] According to researchers, the internet or the World Wide Web (WWW) has the potential to effect greater equality in the positions of the various stakeholders in the communication process.[2]

By means of a well-designed website, such organisations can become empowered by making themselves more widely heard and by becoming more visible. They can interact with potential sponsors as well as with the public, without spending a lot of money. WWW pages give organisations the opportunity to participate in discussion on public policy issues, especially when, for example, a "powerless" non-governmental organisation (NGO) wants to challenge the practices of a large corporation or government.[3]

Expanding on this, Esrock & Leichty (1998: 305-6) say that public relations practitioners working in the spheres of social responsibility or development can use their organisations' websites to build their images, and set their agendas on policy issues. Unfortunately NGOs usually do not have many people on their staffs and they are not necessarily trained to use a medium such as the internet to its full potential.

The interactive nature of the WWW as an internet application was therefore researched in order to explore its potential usage by non-governmental organisations working in the developmental sphere in South Africa. It is argued that the obvious advantages which the internet offers these organisations can only be experienced if they use the medium strategically and according to the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

1   Paper delivered at the annual conference of the Southern African Communication Association in Pretoria, 27-28 September 2001. Cf also Naudé 2001.
2   Cf Coombs 1998; Esrock & Leichty 1998; Heath 1998; Marchand & Lavoie 1998; Berthon *et al* 1996.
3   Cf Esrock & Leichty 1998; Coombs 1998; Elliot 1997: 7; Holtz 1999: xvii.

1. Theoretical background

Kent & Taylor (1998) proposed dialogical communication theory as well as the well-known two-way symmetrical model of Grunig and Hunt (later called the mixed-motive model) as a theoretical framework to enable public relations practitioners to build dialogical relationships through the WWW.[4] Considering the interactive nature of the WWW, this model is a very useful theoretical framework for studying public relations in this context. In the two-way symmetrical model, the public relations practitioner mediates the relationship between the organisation and its public(s). The goal is mutual understanding and two-way communication (dialogue) as opposed to other models of public relations where persuasion or the dissemination of information is the main aim (Grunig & Hunt 1984: 21).

Dialogue results when parties view communication as a goal of the relationship rather than just as a means to an end. Two-way symmetrical communication refers to the organisation's responsibility for creating the procedural means by which interactive dialogical communication will become possible. Communication systems, processes and rules must be in place in order to create a dialogical relationship with the organisation's publics.

The organisation's website is thus one of the tools or structures that can be used to reach true dialogical interaction, if designed according to five specific principles (Kent & Taylor 1998). As has been mentioned, the interactive nature of the WWW can facilitate the creation of such dialogue. Interactivity can be defined as the extent to which participants can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time (Steure 1992; Rafaeli 1988).

It is a multi-dimensional concept that can manifest itself in various forms (Ghose & Dou 1998: 30). However, several studies have revealed a discrepancy between the interactive capability of the medium and the actual implementation of interactivity on websites (Ha & James 1998: 470). Relatively few organisational websites are designed to create meaningful two-way communication between orga-

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4   The two-way symmetrical model and its application within public relations theory is discussed in more detail in Naudé 2001. Cf also Grunig & Grunig 1992.

nisations and their public(s), and many communication researchers have indicated the need for more research in this area.[5]

2. Research method

The websites of ten NGOs were qualitatively analysed and interviews were conducted with their public relations practitioner or media/communications officer. Some NGOs did not have a communication department, and in those cases the interviews were conducted either with the chief executive officer (CEO) or with the person responsible for the organisational website or communication functions within the organisation.

In establishing the research design, the emphasis was placed on insight and an understanding of the broad context in which the organisations operated. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to establish the following:

- to obtain general background information on each NGO;
- to determine the public relations model practised as well as to obtain an indication of the relevant organisational culture, and
- to gather information on NGOs' expectations, problems and successes with regard to their websites.

Qualitative content analysis was conducted with the following objectives:

- to determine interactivity in NGOs' websites, and
- to investigate dialogical communication and signs of a two-way symmetrical model of public relations in the websites.

Data obtained by means of these two research methods were used for the following purposes:

- to establish which public relations model/s fitted the characteristics of the websites, and vice versa, and
- to compare the assumptions of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations to characteristics of the NGOs as well as to their websites.

5   Cf Esrock & Leichty 1998; Ha & James 1998; Kent & Taylor 1998; Ghose & Do 1998.

For the purposes of this study the 2000 Programme for Development Research Directory (Prodder) was searched for NGOs operating in Gauteng and the North-West Province, and using websites. Of the more than 2500 listed NGOs operating in these areas, only fifty had websites, and at the time of the study they were all operating in Gauteng. The final selection of NGOs for the study was done in such a way as to maximise comparisons. The inclusion of smaller and larger NGOs working in a variety of development spheres gave the study a more realistic view of the situation in which these organisations operate. In the words of Christians & Carey (1981: 369):

> We need all the varieties of human society — cross-cultural and historical — to set the questions properly and avoid flatness in description.

The small number of NGOs included in the study makes it impossible to generalise the findings to all NGOs in South Africa. However, by studying a small sample it is possible to learn more about each organisation and to understand the unique problems and circumstances of each NGO.

For the purposes of this article two NGOs were selected for discussion and comparison in terms of the principles guiding the study.

3. Case study A

3.1 Background

Organisation A concentrated on community development projects as well as on the establishment of healthy family relationships, and had several regional offices in various parts of the country. However, this case study focuses only on the national head office of the organisation. This comprised four people and was headed by a board of management. However, the day-to-day activities of the head office were managed by a management committee comprising some members of the board of management as well as individuals from the community.

The organisation's website, set up in 1998, was created and sponsored by an outsider.

3.2 Reasons and aims for setting up a website

The main reason for creating the website was to market the organisation's services by informing more people about it and what it stood for. The aim of the website was to create greater awareness of the organisation.

The website itself did not facilitate any real efforts to generate feedback or two-way communication with visitors. The link to the webmaster was not considered effective in obtaining feedback, as the webmaster was an outsider and any feedback obtained would not go directly to the organisation.

3.3 Appearance and layout

As the website cannot be shown without identifying the organisation, its appearance and layout will be briefly described.

No distinctive colour scheme was evident on the website, and the font sizes on the various pages differed vastly. The only graphic material on the website was the organisation's logo, which appeared on every page, as well as a map of South Africa on the first page. The size of the logo was problematic, however, as it was very large on most pages — so large that it did not fit on the page, and the website visitor therefore had to scroll down to see the lower part of the logo as well as the other information contained on the page. This was inconvenient and it did not create a good impression.

The website contained very little content, which may be identified as a serious shortcoming.

3.4 Target and functions

The target group for the website was described as comprising the general public. This is a broad, vague description and it would be more useful to provide more specialised information for a variety of identified target groups.

As a result of the limited content of the website, the only function it could fulfil for its visitors was to provide general organisational information and countrywide contact information.

3.5 Successes, problems and failures

Organisation A's website at the time of the analysis could be described as dormant and a very limited asset to the organisation. The interviewees could not relate any examples of successes relating to the website since its inception. No feedback or inquiries had been received after its launch. One interviewee said that she had not consulted the website for the past year. She did not even know if it was still operational.

The website had not been updated since its inception in 1998 and no research had been done before or after its launch. The reasons for this were given as a lack of time, a lack of technical knowledge and a lack of money and human resources.

Despite these obvious problems, the interviewees were quite satisfied with the website and stated that they had not experienced any problems with it.

3.6 Integration of media

The website's universal resource locator (URL) and the organisational electronic mail (e-mail) address appeared on the letterheads of the organisation, as well as on a list of addresses of its regional offices that was often distributed to other organisations and individuals. On examination it was found that the pamphlets and posters used by the organisation did not carry this information. The only other publication issued by the organisation was its annual report, which contained only its e-mail address, not its website's URL.

It was therefore deduced that the organisation viewed its website as functioning separately from its other publications and that no real effort had been made to promote it via hard-copy publications. The fact that the website contained no material such as pamphlets, press releases or annual reports also meant that its potential to distribute publications on a global scale had not been realised.

3.7 Public relations models

The organisation did not employ a full-time media officer or public relations practitioner, as the financial resources were not available. Communication functions were shared among the staff working for

the head office. However, none of them had any communications or public relations qualifications.

From the interview with a representative of the organisation it was clear that it did not realise the value of public relations efforts or media work. It seemed that few or no efforts had been made to elevate the image of the organisation nationally, and the dormant status of the website also illustrated this point. Contact and collaboration with other organisations did exist, but there was no integrated public relations function.

The organisation was described as playing a radical and idealistic role in certain contexts, and a critical social role in others. The radical role referred to its efforts to effect policy changes by being represented and very active on governmental policy-formulating committees. The idealistic role was played in the sense that the organisation worked towards improving various aspects of family life and marriage. It played a critical role because it frequently commented publicly on policies and related issues. As the organisation did not really have a public relations or communication function, none of these three roles was affected by such a function.

The management style of the head office was decentralised, as its branches countrywide were autonomous, handling their own decision-making, finances, fund-raising, and programmes on a day-to-day basis. Every branch had its own constitution, stemming from the national constitution. The organisational culture was described as more participatory/transparent than authoritarian, because the national director could not make any decisions without consultation.

The organisation was furthermore described as open to innovation and change, and not mired in traditional practices, as it had to adjust to the changes in South African society. The example was given of involving black people in the organisation and its board of management after the political situation changed in 1994.

The work done by the organisation at the grassroots level was described as in a certain sense looking after the needs and interests of the general public, because many of its programmes were aimed at empowering people. One example was teachers, who were trained to identify the signs of child molestation. These teachers in turn trained

others, and in the process several individuals were empowered and protected.

At the time of the study the organisation had not been involved in conflict situations with either its regional offices or any other organisation. Its conflict handling procedures would aim to resolve any conflict situation by means of negotiation with the management committee of the head office or its board of management.

The interviewees said that no formal strategic planning was done in the organisation and that planning was mostly *ad hoc*. The biennial meeting of the executive committee handled some planning for the organisation as a whole. Other planning was usually done by the national director and then submitted to the head office's management committee for approval.

Although Organisation A appeared to operate transparently, no signs of transparency were found on the website. It contained no annual reports, no press releases, and no details about donors, or sponsors. The organisation frequently had contact with national and international organisations, and one could therefore recommend that the organisation's website be used to promote and facilitate such contacts. However, this potential was not recognised at the time of the interview.

3.8 Interactive characteristics

3.8.1 Dimensions of interactivity

As has been mentioned, the website carried very little content and almost no sign of interactive features was found. With regard to the choice dimension of interactivity the website offered unrestricted navigation but no other choices in terms of graphics or language.

The connectedness dimension was limited as most of the links on the website were internal, carrying very vague and limited information about the organisation. Other links were to the e-mail address at the head office, to a regional office and to a similar organisation. Only one of these links was operational at the time of the analysis.

In terms of the information collection dimension, no overt monitoring devices were found on the website. The only indication of a mo-

nitoring device was a counter on the first page. During the interview it was established that covert monitoring devices were not used.

Examples of reciprocal communication were limited. There was no true interactive communication present on the website. The only reciprocal communication via the website was the provision of e-mail addresses, telephone numbers and physical addresses, all of which represent only reactive communication. Furthermore, none of the content on the website was directed at the playfulness dimension of interactivity.

In view of the low level of interactive dimensions the website scored very low on the interactivity continuum, as having only a limited level of interactivity at the time of the study.

3.8.2 Functions and forms of interactivity

The organisation did not use many of the functions of interactivity. The only form of customer support on the web site was the invitation from the web master for feedback. However, this does not qualify as true interactive communication, because there was no specific form for the website visitor to fill in. Furthermore the feedback via e-mail went directly to the webmaster, who was not attached to the organisation.

The only other function of interactivity on the site was the search for more information, referring to the map with the various provinces, allowing website visitors to identify the branches of the organisation in their vicinity.

3.9 Principles of dialogical/two-way communication

As the organisation did not realise the importance of public relations in general, it did not realise the potential of the WWW in this regard either. Therefore most of the basic principles of two-way communication were absent from the website.

• Dialogical loop

A limited version of a dialogical loop was present on the website in the form of links to the e-mail addresses of the organisational head office, and the webmaster. However, reaction was delayed as it took the organisation four days to reply to the researchers' test message.

- The generation of return visits

The website did not rate very highly on this test, as it carried extremely limited information, with a potentially limited usefulness to its target market. The content of the website was not logically organised as some aspects were repeated with certain links, presumably in an attempt to make up for the lack of content.

The generation of return visits was not promoted by regular updating of the website, as there was no indication of any updating whatsoever. There was nothing in the website that would motivate a first-time visitor to visit it again.

- Ease of use

The table of contents on the first page of the website was easy to use, but not very well organised, because of the repetition of information already mentioned. Apart from this criticism, the website was easy to use, as the relationship between text and graphics did not delay downloading. It was therefore not necessary for visitors to have the latest hardware or software in order to gain access to the website.

3.10   Organisation A: findings

This website was a typical example of how an organisational website should not be managed. It had been set up two years previously and had been dormant ever since. In the first instance the website itself had many shortcomings. It was not attractive, its content was not well organised and it contained very little useful information. Furthermore, it had almost no interactive characteristics and two-way communication was not even a possibility. It seemed to be a typical example of a website set up only because the organisation had to have a web presence — that is, presence for the sake of presence.

The website was not managed at all, and had not been managed since it had been set up. The interviewees did not even know if it was still in operation. The result was that it did not provide the organisation with any positive results at all. In the two years it had been in operation, it had only drawn 61 hits. The interviewees did not know whether it was listed with any search engines and the organisation did not promote the website in any significant way.

The reason for this situation was due mainly to the fact that an outsider designed the website (free of charge) and that the organisation did not have the technical knowledge, finance or manpower to manage it. More importantly, it did not realise the importance of public relations or communication functions for internal or external communication. The potential of a website for two-way communication was therefore not recognised either. The organisation seemed to be concerned only with day-to-day survival. No strategic long-term planning with regard to communication appeared to be done.

It was therefore to be expected that Organisation A would not practise the two-way symmetrical model of public relations, judging the probability by the characteristics of the website.

However, apart from the fact that the organisation's communication function needed improvement, it displayed some characteristics that would be compatible with a two-way symmetrical approach to public relations. It had a decentralised authority with respect to its several autonomous offices, which meant that employees at other offices would have autonomy and responsibility in doing their work. The organisation was also fairly innovative, and did not cling to traditional ways of doing things.

Although the interviewees maintained that the organisation was rarely involved in conflict situations, they could relate procedures for handling any conflict which appeared. However, their explanation of these procedures was not specific enough to determine without doubt whether they would fit the two-way symmetrical approach. The interviewees could not describe an example of a conflict situation in which the procedures had been used.

The critical and idealistic social roles played by the organisation would be compatible with a two-way symmetrical model of public relations. However, at the time of the interview these roles were not supported by any strong communication function. Apart from its annual report and a few pamphlets issued from time to time, the organisation did not publish any other material in support of its various social roles.

In our assessment of the approach taken with regard to public relations, the organisation gave the impression of having an internal

orientation which was an example of an asymmetrical worldview. It seemed that employees could not be objective about the organisation or see it as others saw it. It was evident that the interviewees, in particular, were very happy with the organisation as it was, and that they did not really care about the fact that its website was in such a dormant, unmanaged state.

Organisation A was therefore evaluated as generally in accordance with a public-information model of public relations, but with no clear strategic goals or efforts. From time to time, when a specific event was imminent, the organisation would seek publicity, moving to a press-agency/publicity model of public relations. However, neither of these two models was consciously followed, as no definite thought was given to the communication aspect within the organisation.

4. Case study B

4.1 Background

Organisation B, operating from its Johannesburg office, was involved in projects aimed at, in general, empowering women, but more specifically with regard to the use of new media technology.

The full-time staff of the organisation at the time of the study comprised three people: the information co-ordinator, the project manager and the training co-ordinator. Additional staff included an intern as well as a project co-ordinator who worked with the organisation from time to time.

Organisation B also interacted with other structures, for instance an information strategy team comprising women from various sectors around the country. This team guided the organisation on strategic issues. Another structure was an advisory group, comprising women in positions of power.

The organisation's website was formally launched in March 1998 after a process of consultation with women across the continent. It was the information co-ordinator's task to develop the content of the website. The intern was responsible for updating the website. The organisation also made use of an external technical person to develop specific technical tools for the website.

It is important to note that Organisation B differed from the other NGOs included in the study, as its website was an important reason for its existence. It was therefore not a luxury or an optional medium of communication, but an integral part of the goals and operation of the organisation.

4.2 Reasons and aims for setting up the website

Organisation B had definite strategic reasons for setting up its website. Some of these reasons were listed on the site and included the following:

- to serve women's information needs in a user-friendly way and locally appropriate way;
- to make information communication technology (ICT) accessible to women, allowing them to define the content of that technology;
- to empower women to create their own relevant knowledge;
- to empower and train women to use electronic media strategically and effectively;
- to develop a platform/space for discussion and mobilisation around women's issues, and
- to develop indigenous, relevant, useful information sources.

The organisation aimed to create an information-sharing culture by means of its website. Its aim for the website was not to develop the content itself, but rather to gather existing information and to make it accessible. The interviewee explained: "We envisaged people sending us information about anything and everything, but obviously our specific agenda is women's empowerment."

Specific aims for the website were listed and included the following:

- to use cyberspace to inform and mobilise women;
- to transform the way technology is used;
- to give every woman access to electronic information;
- to organise a two-way flow of information;
- to develop technologically empowered women;
- to develop an information base, and
- to develop linkages between women.

Note that the aim of organising a two-way flow of information was to ? the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. This indicated at an early stage that Organisation B was probably applying the principles of the two-way symmetrical model.

An analysis of the type of content on the rest of the website revealed that it contained general as well as specific information on women's issues. The website provided a bulletin board where visitors could post their messages, and could thus serve as a platform for the discussion of relevant issues. It contained up-to-date news about women's issues and events, but no press releases from the organisation itself. Content such as annual reports, donor forms or feedback forms were not to be found there either.

The content on the website informed women about several issues, including human rights, violence against women, technology and health. The website also offered a strong invitation to its visitors to get involved in two-way communication. Several pages contained invitations to react and to send feedback, to submit details of other websites, and so forth.

4.3 Appearance and layout

The first page was attractive and served as a gateway to the website, as it did not contain any information. The website had a very simple design, using minimum colour. The background was white and the text mostly black. The logo appeared on every page. The use of a white background throughout enhanced legibility, as most colours were highly visible against a white background.

The rest of the website had a consistent look in terms of design and layout. The limited use of graphics gave it a relatively fast download speed. Excessive use of graphics would not have been suitable on this website, because it contained a vast amount of information. It could be argued that graphics were not needed to conceal a lack of content, as was often the case with websites containing limited content.

Two of the main content categories on the first page led to sub-websites covering specific projects undertaken by the organisation. The first allowed visitors to connect to a community radio station on women's and gender issues. The necessary software needed to listen

to this radio station's programmes via the internet could be downloaded from the website, and the programmes could also be downloaded for re-broadcasting on other radio stations. The second link was to a Women and Human Rights site related to another of the organisation's projects.

The website also offered its visitors the option of registering for an e-mail newsletter to notify them of any new content on the site.

4.4 Target and functions

Organisation B targeted the following groups in order to expand women's access and use of the internet: Urban and rural women without access to the internet, for whom access is a long-term goal; civil society in general; NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs); sectoral groups; organised women; women in self-employment and small business; women in neighbouring countries; women in the media; women in government; women information workers, as well as men and women with an interest in gender issues.

On the website it was explained that the organisation targeted women with both primary access (direct access from home or work) and secondary access (access from somewhere else, for instance a library, community centre, or internet café). The target was summarised as primarily those women who had access to the internet individually or through organisations, those with secondary access, and marginalised women.

As a result of its extensive variety of content the website could have several functions for its users. Besides information about the organisation, it also carried general as well as very specific information on gender issues. Women using the site could be empowered by its information. The site also served as a platform for the discussion of gender issues on its bulletin board. As the website had two search functions (search the site and search its archives), visitors could also easily search for specific information.

The website could be used to find a job, as vacant positions were listed. Regularly updated lists of events and related news could be useful in keeping users up to date with gender happenings internationally. Another use for the site was the option of submitting

information about gender events or other related websites that could be included on the site.

4.5 Successes, problems and failures

The interviewee explained that website visitors were very active, as the organisation received approximately 150 inquiries per week via the site. It has gradually received more and more hits since its inception. The organisation was satisfied that it was reaching its aims. Its success was also illustrated by the fact that approximately 800 people had subscribed to the weekly mailing list carrying information on new additions to the website.

Concerning problems, there was a technical problem with regard to keeping track of statistics on visitors to the site. The organisation was in the process of reprogramming the many documents on the website as a database, so that it would be easier to manage. The user statistics programme could not monitor the usage of the database, and special software had to be developed to solve this problem.

Another problem concerned partner organisations and community radio stations participating in some of the organisation's projects. The idea was to get community radio stations and NGOs working together in "creating decent content and programming" for community radio. The interviewee explained that

> … it was really difficult trying to get people understand that information sharing is not about ownership, although it brought about bigger ownership. If we all own it we have more power in it and that keeping something closed is narrow-minded. It is hard to convince people that information sharing is also enriching.

4.6 Integration of media

Organisation B put a lot of effort into the integration of new and traditional media. At the time of the study, the organisation did not have a newsletter, as many other NGOs did. However, the interviewee explained that although the organisation used information technology almost exclusively, it was always used in collaboration with other "tools" or media. The reason was the reality that large parts of South Africa and Africa do not have the infrastructure or access to be able to use the new information technology. This was one of the reasons

why the organisation started its radio project, which made it possible to access information on the website via radio. In this way, people who did not have access to the internet could also share in the information on the website.

The interviewee explained: "ICTs are never used in isolation." Some of the content on the website was also conveyed to people at the grassroots level by others who had access to the internet. People were often trained to make information on the website available and understandable for others who were not able to make use of the website themselves.

Another way in which the organisation tried to increase access to the internet was by publishing a pamphlet called Women'sNet (2000). The pamphlet explained the internet in very simple terms and could be used by organisations or individuals wanting to know more about information technology. The pamphlet had also been translated into French and was distributed throughout Africa.

It was clear that the various communication media used were highly integrated and that every medium was used as a pointer to the website to increase people's (especially women's) usage of information technology across Africa.

4.7 Public relations models

The organisation displayed many characteristics that could be associated with the practice of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

The organisation did not employ a full-time media officer or a public relations practitioner. Instead, communication functions were mostly fulfilled by an information co-ordinator who was responsible for aspects such as developing all the organisation's web resources, maintaining contact with the organisation's partner organisations, developing content and "developing a sort of a public face for the organisation". The information co-ordinator had a degree in feminist theory and political science.

The interviewee stressed that the organisation followed a participatory approach in everything it did:

> From a development ethics perspective we don't believe in using co-
> lonialist methods, that 'we know better and we will tell you how to
> do it'. We will speak to people, saying that 'your knowledge is as
> important as mine and perhaps if we exchange it we might end up
> with a useful product'.

She also explained the importance of understanding the power struc-
tures in various communities and that

> ... different communities have different needs and that we need to
> be sensitive to it. And by far, we are not the people who know about
> your needs, you are the best person to ask about it.

The organisation played a radical role because it advocated change
in society: "The reality in South Africa is that the poorest people are
excluded and the poorest people inevitably are women who do not
have access to information technology and infrastructure." Advocacy
and lobbying were used at every level, from grassroots to govern-
ment, to try to ameliorate this situation.

To improve women's access to information technology, the orga-
nisation also played a critical role, for example in criticising govern-
ment structures or policies. It also played an idealistic role in trying
to give more women access to information technology and to em-
power them by so doing.

The public relations or information co-ordinating functions were
essential to the organisation in fulfilling these social roles. The or-
ganisation used electronic media to lobby, to criticise and to state its
ideals in terms of gender issues in South Africa. At the same time it
advocated the increased use of information technology by women to
try to achieve the changes it advocated. It could be said that the web-
site was the organisation, therefore its communication function
formed the core of what it did.

It was made clear that all employees participated in policy-
making within the organisation. It seemed that the organisation fol-
lowed the same transparent and participatory approach internally as
it did externally with its public and stakeholders.

In terms of a centralised/decentralised authority, the interviewee
responded by saying "we are very much against hierarchies". She ex-
plained that although the employees had specific functions and titles,
"those only denote our roles within the organisation". The transpa-

rent way in which the organisation functioned fitted the model of decentralised authority, where employees themselves wield much authority and take considerable responsibility.

The organisation's innovative nature was illustrated by the means employed to make information from its website available to women without direct access to the internet. The training projects and the radio project were good examples.

It was clear that the organisation valued networking and input from other organisations. The interviewee explained that they did not deal with every organisation in the same way, and that "we build relationships with people around how they want us to deal with them".

The two-way symmetrical model was also implied by the organisation's conducting a "social and ethical accounting, auditing and reporting process". This entailed identifying all the organisation's stakeholder groups and accessing how it was fulfilling their needs, for example:

> If we say we're doing this, do you think we are doing this? We evaluate ourselves, but on your terms. We're opening up the space for people to say: This is what you're not doing right.

The organisation played an important role in protecting women against government and business policies and practices. It believed in the empowerment of women in order to enable them to protect themselves with regard to their human rights, political rights and other issues. This protective role has already been mentioned.

According to the interviewee, conflict was dealt with by means of negotiation, by

> ... opening up a conversation, speaking about it, trying to be as honest as possible, coming up with solutions without getting aggressive or angry about it. We sort of say: 'these are our needs, this is how we think you can address them. We understand that you have different needs; let's speak about it'.

The organisation engaged in strategic planning sessions in which every employee was involved on an equal footing. This meant that the information co-ordinator, as the person responsible for some of the public relations functions, was fully involved in the process. The

organisation also held strategic planning sessions with its information strategy team, as well as with its advisory group.

The website contained two aspects that could be described as signs of transparency. The first was information on the organisation's sponsors, along with links to their websites. The second was a very detailed document explaining how the organisation and the website were formed. This document also contained information about the organisation's staff, including consultants and other members.

4.8 Interactive characteristics

4.8.1 Dimensions of interactivity

The website demonstrated more examples of interactivity than most other websites analysed in the study.

With regard to the dimension of choice, the website offered unrestricted navigation as no registration was requested before or during navigation and no fees were payable as a prerequisite for navigating the website. With regard to unrestricted navigation the website therefore provided a high level of choice.

The website did not provide a choice between a graphic and a text version. This choice was not, however, seen as a necessity as the website contained minimal graphics and the download speed was thus not affected by graphics and photographs.

The only aspect of choice which the website could improve would have been by offering a choice of various languages, which was not done. The inclusion of an African language could be considered, as women from disadvantaged communities are one of the website's target groups. However, lack of time and manpower could preclude this. It could also be asked whether those with access to the internet would not, in all probability, be fluent enough in English.

The website offered a very high level of connectedness because of its many internal and external links. Although these links left the website visitor with an overwhelming feeling of connectedness and also impressed with the richness of the content, caution should be exercised not to lead visitors away from the website too easily. One method of safeguarding against this is to keep the logo at the top of

the page that the link leads to. Another method is to provide a link back to the website on the first page of the linked page. This was not done at the time of the analysis.

The website did not contain any overt monitoring devices such as a registration form or a hits counter. However, statistics were kept of web visitors by means of covert methods.

Several examples of reciprocal communication were found on the website. Most of these could be classified as reactive communication, but the presence of a bulletin board where visitors could post messages and discuss relevant issues was an example of true interactive communication.

Reactive communication included the provision of contact details as well as the invitation to visitors to contact the organisation with suggestions, feedback and descriptions of other needs. Visitors could react to the invitation for feedback via an e-mail link provided on the website. However, this could be improved by asking specific questions about the website by means of a feedback form. Other examples of reactive communication were the invitation to add events to the events listing and the option of subscribing to a newsletter to be notified via e-mail of new additions to the website.

Although the website offered several options for reciprocal communication, this aspect could still be improved. The inclusion of a feedback form with specific questions on the website has already been mentioned. The bulletin board as an example of true interactive communication could be elaborated on by developing it into a live chat room where participants could discuss issues online in real time.

Although the website did not contain any conventional examples of playfulness such as games or post-cards, the bulletin board could be so described. Its presence could arouse curiosity and prompt visitors to become more involved and to participate in two-way communication via the website. Reading the messages posted on the bulletin board could also be an entertaining experience for website visitors.

As the website did not include interactivity devices on all four levels, it could not be rated as having a high level of interactivity. However, it did contain several examples and it was therefore decided that a rating between moderate and high interactivity would be justified.

4.8.3   Functions and forms of interactivity

Several functions and forms of interactivity were applied on the website. Customer support was present in the form of downloadable software to listen to the internet community ratio station on gender issues. Listeners could also make online inquiries if they had trouble accessing the radio station. Another example of customer support was the invitation to send comments or feedback via e-mail. This option could be improved by including a more formal feedback form, as was explained earlier.

Marketing research was not present in the form of a site or product/programme survey. However, the website did include suggestions of new or future programmes and activities planned by the organisation which could be described as a form of market research, since website visitors could comment on these suggestions or ask questions about them via e-mail.

The only example of the option to search for more information was the inclusion of a search function on the website. As has been indicated, the website could be searched in two ways. In the first instance the whole website could be searched, and in the second instance the archived documents on the site could be searched separately. This function was a convenient way for visitors to locate specific information and to save navigation time, which was important as the website contained a vast amount of information.

Advertising/promotion/publicity was done by means of the bulletin board, which could be described as a form of user group operational on the website. Another form of advertising/promotion/publicity was the list of job opportunities posted on the website. These postings did not link to any outside source, but merely provided the contact information for applying or inquiring about various positions. The bulletin board could be viewed as a form of entertainment and playfulness, as was indicated earlier.

4.9 Principles of dialogical/two-way communication

Several principles of two-way communication were applied on the website. The interview also revealed several important principles of two-way communication that had been practised in the organisation.

- Dialogical loop

The dialogical loop was present in various forms on this website. Both reactive communication and truly interactive communication formats were present on the website, as has been described.

The first reaction to a test message from the researcher was delayed as it was only answered after more than two weeks. This had to be ascribed to the large number of inquiries received via the website, as the organisation did realise the importance of prompt reaction to inquiries.

- The generation of return visits

The website should succeed in motivating return visits, because it was regularly updated. Other aspects that would be convenient for return visitors were the New This Week section and the option to subscribe to the newsletter on new additions to the site. Return visits could also be motivated by the useful information on the site. The content of the website would be useful to a variety of publics and the contact made with its visitors would also be beneficial to the organisation.

- Ease of use

The website was easy to use because its text/graphics relationship did not adversely affect its download speed. It was also easy to use because there were no special requirements for hardware. The fact that special software was needed to tune in to the radio station did not decrease the ease of use, as this software could be downloaded from the website.

The only aspect that could hamper its ease of use was the organisation of its tables of contents. The first page contained two sets of content categories, some overlapping even within the first set. Though this organisation of content would not really confuse website visitors, it could lead to frustration and irritation.

4.10   Organisation B: Findings

Organisation B had an impressive website with usable information that was relatively well organised. The website was attractive and had several interactive features. It was used to create two-way communication between the organisation and its public. This did not mean that it was without shortcomings, however. Although it dis-

played several interactive devices, its level of interactivity could still have been improved by adding features such as a feedback form or a chat room or even live forums from time to time.

Although the organisation did not employ a media officer or a public relations practitioner, the information co-ordinator was responsible for more or less those functions. This meant that, although a small organisation, it still realised the importance of both internal and external communication.

It was evident that the organisation made use of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. One of its aims listed on the website stated explicitly that the promotion of a two-way flow of information was envisaged. The following two quotations were examples of some of the statements by the interviewee, illustrating this approach:

> From a development ethics perspective we don't believe in using colonialist methods, that 'we know better and we will tell you how to do it'. We will speak to people, saying that 'your knowledge is as important as mine and perhaps if we exchange it we might end up with a useful product'.
>
> We build relationships with people around how they want us to deal with them.

The organisation believed in frequent contact with its public, keeping its "ear to the ground". Mutual understanding was important when dealing with the public. The organisation believed in collaboration with its public and the communities that it served. It valued networking and contact with other organisations and was open to adaptation to the input of others. It therefore realised the importance of interdependence, an open system and the fact that it functioned in a state of moving equilibrium. The organisation valued change and innovativeness, also reflecting a two-way symmetrical worldview.

Other aspects fitting the two-way symmetrical model included the organisation's decentralised and participative organisational culture. Equity was important in the organisation, as every employee had an equal opportunity to grow and to provide input. Employees were trusted with autonomy and responsibilities, for example in

structuring their workdays themselves and being able to work either from the office or from home.

The organisation also believed in interest-group liberalism, as it protected women, in particular, against government and business by making them aware of their human rights and providing crucial information on a variety of women-related topics. The critical social role played by the organisation, along with its communication activities, was reflected by the statement that it "would never be satisfied by any status quo". Many of the goals of the organisation, as well as its website, were idealistic in nature, reflecting another role of public relations within a two-way symmetrical model.

Besides the various signs of the practice of a two-way symmetrical model, it became evident that the organisation sometimes had to make use of persuasive techniques as well. However, it was clear that these techniques were used in an ethical manner, by means of negotiation and sometimes mediation. Even when conflict arose, the organisation strove to reach a state of mutual understanding. Therefore it was concluded that the organisation made use of a mixed-motive model of public relations.

5. Conclusions

Vast differences were evident between these two organisations, firstly in terms of their websites and secondly concerning their views on and approaches to communication and public relations. Whereas organisation A wanted to have a presence on the web without clear strategic goals or a target group, organisation B approached its website as a necessity with well-defined goals and target groups. Organisation A did not realise the value of communication and public relations in general, while organisation B used an information co-ordinator to manage communication both online and offline.

These case studies reflect some of the findings of the study as a whole, especially in terms of the connection between an organisation's view on communication and its handling of a website. The two organisations could be placed along a symmetry continuum with organisation A leaning more towards the asymmetrical side and organisation B more towards the symmetrical side. In fact, it could be

assumed that organisation B practised the mixed-motive model of public relations.

In terms of an interactivity continuum, organisation A could be placed more towards the non-interactive side, while organisation B could be placed more towards the truly interactive side. Consideration of these two organisations clearly confirmed the relationship between two-way symmetry and interactivity, which was also found with regard to the other NGOs analysed in this study.

This study therefore also confirmed that to manage a website successfully requires more than technical knowledge. A sound understanding of the communication function within an organisation, especially with regard to public relations is probably much more important. Understanding and practising the two-way symmetrical model would lead to optimal use of an organisational website in the long run. This is attainable and preferable for all NGOs, even those not as focussed as Organisation B on using new technology.

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