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Media Catching and the Journalist–Public Relations Practitioner Relationship: How Social Media are Changing the Practice of Media Relations

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With the changing media environment and the evolving online atmosphere, traditional media relations strategies (e.g., news release and media kit preparation and distribution) are shifting to practices that are more relevant to a social media environment. The purpose of this article is to define the changing interplay between journalists and public relations practitioners and to analyze the phenomenon of "media catching," a reversal of the traditional media relations' communication patterns. Given its rapid increase in the past 2 years, journalists are eager to turn the tables and target large numbers of public relations practitioners for specific content for story ideas. The researchers employed content analysis, and the units of analysis were 3,106 reporter requests sent through the Help-A-Reporter-Out (HARO) list and media-related Twitter updates from HARO founder, Peter Shankman, during a 6-month span. Analysis revealed that traditional news outlets more often used the Twitter venue, yet new media outlets preferred the LISTSERV technology.

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The importance and value of this study for public relations practitioners and scholars are in the study's attempt to profile the trend of media catching, and to discuss the importance of fielding media requests from a variety of news outlets because of the importance of intermedia agenda setting.

The activities of media relations, including pitching content to reporters, are staples of the public relations industry. Spicer (1995) wrote that public relations practitioners, regardless of title and tenure, engaged in traditional public relations activities, including a variety of writing and media relations activities. Additionally, Napoli, Taylor, and Powers (1998) found that practitioners wrote an average of seven pitch letters per month, and in Fawkes and Tench's (2005) survey of 100 public relations employers, the core competencies desired by employers hiring public relations practitioners were writing skills and a knowledge of media relations.

Journalists and public relations practitioners celebrate the worst media relations pitches by publicly pointing out poorly crafted news releases on the BadPitchBlog (n.d.). Meanwhile, bloggers and journalists have combined forces to scorn practitioners who fail to target their media lists appropriately on the PRspammers wiki. Although many public relations texts state that the journalist–public relations practitioner relationship is an interdependent one, recent action taken by journalists to end media pitching abuse calls to question the status of the relationship. Indeed, Julia Hood, an editor at *PR Week*, declared pitching dead at the 2008 Edelman New Media Academic Summit (personal communication, June 26, 2008). On his blog, Micropersuasion, Edelman Vice President and AdAge columnist Steve Rubel (2008) agreed, shoveling the last bit of dirt onto the media pitch:

> To be sure, there are a few companies that get it right all the time—mostly those with content like ABC News, the *New York Times*, Pew, Hitwise, Forrester, IDC and others. The rest simply don't. However, I can't fault these PR pros. They're doing their job. They are doing what has always worked for them and I guess continues: sending out lots of email pitches in hopes that some stick. But those days are coming to an end.

Given the increasing number of practitioners acknowledging that traditional media relations is beginning to lose its dominance in public relations programming, it is important for public relations scholars and educators to explore the emerging new era of media relations. As Rubel (2008) agreed, traditional media pitching will always play a role in public relations efforts for some organizations; however, a new trend—termed *media catching*—is rapidly gaining momentum in organizational publicity efforts. Essentially, media catching is the turning of the tables of the traditional process. Rather than having practitioners contacting lots of journalists, broadcasters, and bloggers in hopes of gaining media placements, thousands of practitioners are being contacted at one time by journalists and others seeking specific material for stories, blog postings, and Web sites with upcoming deadlines.

The purpose of this research is to examine how the social media landscape is changing and impacting the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners. By conducting a content analysis of the Help-A-Reporter-Out (HARO) requests, this exploratory research explores which individuals and media outlets are using media catching to obtain information and what type of information is being sought.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Journalist–Public Relations Practitioner Relationship and Agenda Setting

With nearly 40 years of scholarly research on the agenda-setting theory, ample evidence exists to demonstrate the impact mainstream and Internet media outlets have on informing and influencing how the public view a variety of topics (e.g., Sweetser, Golan, & Wanta, 2008; Wallsten, 2007). In their conceptualization of a media relations theory, Zoch and Molleda (2006) discussed the role that public relations practitioners play in the agenda-setting theory when they attempt to place positive news stories about their organizations in media outlets. Whether through news releases, feature pitch letters, or other public relations materials, information subsidies have a profound impact on how organizations are portrayed in the media (Davis, 2000).

In recent years, public relations scholars have examined the impact of media relations efforts on news coverage. For example, research has examined the impact of news releases on how the media portray political candidates (Kiousis, Mitrook, Wu, & Seltzer, 2006), the use of news tip sheets by environmental journalists (Curtin & Rhodenbaugh, 2001), the use of organizational communication to shape an organization's image (Carroll & McCombs, 2003), and the impact of media references and live interviews on donations to crisis relief efforts (Waters, 2007). Media coverage that stemmed from information subsidies was even found to influence policy issues that were not salient on either the media or the public's agenda (Berger, 2001). These studies, among others, have shown clear linkages between public relations materials, media coverage based on the materials, and beneficial outcomes for the sources. For these reasons, publicity and media relations components of public relations campaigns continues to thrive as the discipline is moving more toward relationship management. However, even in media relations, there is growing evidence that the principles of relationship management are influencing how both parties of the relationship communicate with and perceive one another.

A large body of research about the professional relationships, stigmas, and stereotypes between journalists and public relations professionals exists (Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997; Kopenhaver, Martinson, & Ryan, 1984; Pincus, Rimmer, Rayfield, & Cropp, 1993; Sallot, Steinfatt, & Salwen, 1998; Shin & Cameron, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). Tilley and Hollings (2008) characterized the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners as a love–hate relationship with dissonance experienced by the journalists. Although journalists often have to work with public relations practitioners, journalists and journalism educators have not viewed public relations practitioners favorably (Cline, 1982). However, recent research indicates that those adversarial views may be shrinking (Shaw & White, 2004).

According to Sallot and Johnson (2006), in 107 interviews with journalists, one-third of them estimated that between 60 and 100% of US news content involves contact with public relations practitioners, yet 74% reported that public relations practitioners' lacked news sense, values, accuracy, timeliness, and presentation style. Along with the misunderstanding of news values and misapplication of publicity tactics, journalists worried about the increasing use of information subsidies as identified by Gandy (1982). According to Tilley and Hollings (2008), journalists are also worried about "the ways in which public relations material can shape the news agenda by providing easier access to content from particular sources" (p. 2).

Despite these concerns by journalists, strategic communicators from every ilk are being encouraged to use traditional media relations tactics to increase their presence in mainstream news stories. For example, Daniel (2000) encouraged administrators at community colleges to focus on relationship building with journalists using online news rooms, and Wells and Spinks (1999) suggested that manufacturing companies should utilize media relations efforts to increase brand awareness and strengthen relationships in the business-to-business community. Similarly, political advisors recommend that politicians incorporate an active media relations program into their office management (Lipinski & Neddenriep, 2004).

Regardless of the tactics used, media relations focuses on a public relations practitioner's interactions with various media for the purpose of informing the public about an organizational campaign (Howard & Matthews, 2006). Zoch and Molleda (2006) identified the key strategies behind media relations efforts, including crafting a message strategy designed to position the organization appropriately, targeting audiences that support the organization's mission and goals, using consistent messages and organizational spokespeople, and following up on media inquiries in a timely manner. These strategies echoed a *best practices* checklist created by Kent and Taylor (2003) for online media relations efforts.

When these strategies are followed, organizations are likely to see an increase in the amount of media coverage for their organization. Comrie (1997) found a moderately strong positive correlation between proactive media relations efforts and the amount and tone of resulting media coverage. However, proactive media relations efforts are not the only factors that influence media coverage.

Shin and Cameron (2003a) found that the interpersonal relationships between South Korean journalists and public relations practitioners greatly influenced the outcome of an organization's media relations efforts. The networking brought about by interpersonal relationships was a key component to Yoon's (2005) scale for determining media relations success. When the relationship between the journalist and practitioner is cultivated, the two parties have a better understanding of each other. For practitioners, this understanding results in increased awareness of media deadlines and communication preferences while journalists gain insights into what public relations practitioners can contribute to their stories.

Cho (2006) found that public relations practitioners have varying amounts of power in their interactions with journalists; however, to maximize that power, practitioners must assess the relationship status with journalists. This assessment includes reviewing how the organization was covered in past news stories, how the journalists previously responded to information subsidies, and how influential the journalist is in setting the agenda on a particular topic.

At the root of the power distribution in the journalist–practitioner relationship is communication. For media relations to be effective, open two-way communication must be present in the relationship. Howard and Matthews (2006) encouraged practitioners to go even further by asking journalists how they prefer to receive media relations pitches. Research indicates that journalists "were impressed with the growing number of public relations practitioners who regularly ask journalists to update their contact information and preferences" (Sallot & Johnson, 2006, p. 85). However, updating databases is meaningless if practitioners fail to capitalize from the information provided by journalists. Gray and Balmer (1998) suggested that organizations will have more success when they use the contact methods preferred by the media, and increasingly the preferred form of communication involves electronic media pitching.

Social Media and Public Relations Trends in Online Media Relations Outreach

E-mail. Although blast-faxing news releases was a common media relations practice in the 1990s, it has been replaced by e-mail. E-mail is journalists' preferred method of contact when being pitched story ideas by public relations practitioners (Sallot & Johnson, 2006) although many prefer not to receive attachments of photographs, fact sheets, and other materials with the e-mail due to potential Internet viruses. Duke (2002) found that two-thirds of the science public relations practitioners surveyed reported that e-mail is essential in media relations. Nearly 90% of these practitioners felt that e-mail has helped them to increase media coverage to some degree with 20% reporting e-mail greatly increased their media coverage.

With one-third of Americans using blogs as an informational source (Smith, 2008), public relations practitioners are increasingly reaching out to the blogging community to pitch organizational stories. Prior to e-mailing bloggers about story ideas, practitioners are encouraged to participate actively in blogs (Rowse, 2007). Similar to journalists and broadcasters, bloggers prefer e-mail pitches to all other forms of media relations communication (Burns, 2008). However, unlike journalists, bloggers were not wary of attachments to e-mail pitches; instead, the supplemental information was preferred (Burns, 2008).

Web sites. Previous research has indicated that most large corporations and most governmental agencies have Web sites (Alfonso & Miguel, 2006; Callison, 2003); however, the information provided in an online newsroom is often lacking. Ninety percent of Fortune 500 companies have Web sites, and most are designed to serve a variety of audiences, including customers, potential customers, investors, potential employees, and, to a much lesser extent, media (Esrock & Leichty, 1999). Callison (2003) found that the organizations ranked higher in Fortune 500 were more likely to have an online newsroom than those ranked lower. More recent research found that large companies, regardless of their country or industry, recognize the importance of online media tools for corporate communications and understand that those tools should be easily accessible (Alfonso & Miguel, 2006).

However, understanding that need does not equate to implementation, as research indicates that information provided in online media rooms, is frequently lacking. Esrock and Leichty (1999) found that although 88% of the organizations included news release on their Web site, only 60% of the organizational sites provided the names of a media contact person for follow-up questions. Less than half (39%) of the 2001 Fortune 500 Company Web sites had an online newsroom dedicated to providing the media company information (Callison, 2003). Nonprofit organizations did not fare any better, as Waters and Lord (2009) found that advocacy groups failed to provide the basic contact information so journalists could contact them about their concerns.

This dovetails with Reber and Kim's (2006) research that found that although most environmental nonprofits provided general contact information for the organization, they provided contact information for individuals less often. Additionally, these groups did not have media rooms, did not post media releases, or did not have other interactive features that enabled dialogic communication with journalists.

When organized media rooms are present on organizations' Web sites, the quality of information included in the newsrooms was lacking. On average, online newsrooms provided 6.5 pieces of information, with the most common items being news/press releases, executive biographies, and executive photographs (Callison, 2003). Backgrounders also were found to be fairly common in corporations headquartered in Europe (Alfonso & Miguel, 2006). Other items found in online newsrooms included financial data and annual reports, audio and video archives, copies of executive speeches, downloadable graphics, and organizational histories at for-profit organizations (Callison, 2003) and nonprofits (Waters & Lord, 2009).

Social media news release. Sweetser and Lariscy (2008) defined social media as being "centered around the concept of a read–write Web, where the online audience moves beyond passive viewing of Web content to actually contributing to the content" (p. 179). The social media news release, launched in February, 2006, allows for readers and observers to interact, contribute, and build on the content presented by organizations. Todd Drefen, principal at SHIFT Communications, launched the social media news release because "the banal, unhelpful, cookie-cutter press releases of yore have outlived their pre-Internet usefulness" (Defren, 2006, p. 3). With the embedding of photos, audio, and video and the linking to microblog and blog posts, the social media news release is a vehicle to increase the discovery rates of media releases via search engines and to gain traction with bloggers and other social media outlets who want quick, compressed details and information from organizations. Although the social media news release was still e-mailed to others to pitch organizational story ideas, the new format of the release allowed for multimedia attachments and other documents to be attached to the e-mail pitch in a virus-free environment. Educators have recognized the importance for learning how to use the redesigned news release as it becomes more prominent in online media relations efforts (Anderson & Swenson, 2008; Russell, 2007).

Although e-mail list management software systems, such as LISTSERV, have allowed groups of people to interact and communicate virtually since the 1980s, the interactive intent of electronic mailing lists allow for its classification as a form of social media. To promote online media relations efforts, several public relations organizations have created mass distribution lists so that public relations practitioners can send their press releases to large numbers of journalists. PR Newswire and Business Wire are two of the leading services that practitioners can use to reach targeted audiences. However, other groups have been created to provide even more targeted media pitching opportunities using LISTSERV technology. Black PR Wire, Hispanic PR Wire, and Out-News Wire disseminate media releases and announcements to targeted, diverse audiences. Christian News Wire and Law.com Newswire, for example, allow public relations practitioners to focus their efforts on journalists and bloggers covering specific industries. Although these services offer the advantage of pitching a story to a wide variety of news outlets, the subscription costs are often high, and many practitioners question their cost effectiveness (Rubel, 2008).

Media Catching

Several expert request services including ProfNet and HARO serve the needs of journalists who are looking for sources and information and public relations practitioners who are willing to give. ProfNet is a service of PRNewswire that serves as an "online community of . . . professional communicators, . . . created in 1992 to connect reporters easily and quickly with expert sources at no charge" (ProfNet, n.d.). According to ProfNet, it has 27,000 registered members and offers services such as geographical targeting, topic filtering, and topic alerts. ProfNet is free for journalists, but it requires membership fees for public relations practitioners.

In response to journalists asking for sources for their stories, Peter Shankman created the HARO group on a social networking site in November, 2007. Rather than creating an environment that replicated traditional media pitching where practitioners send their story ideas and news releases to journalists, the Facebook.com group encouraged journalists to toss specific information requests to the group. As an expert request service, HARO is a simply formatted list of media opportunities that are sent to all subscribers. HARO offers a diversity of responses because the service's membership extends beyond journalists and public relations practitioners. HARO allows everyday people who are not professional communicators to join and become a source. HARO connects journalists and sources without any intermediaries and without a fee. Also, HARO's founder vigorously polices service abusers who send untargeted and unauthorized pitches; those who do not abide by the rules governing the service are purged from the membership and are outed to the members.

The concept was received very well, and the group was forced to migrate to an e-mail mailing list when HARO exceeded Facebook's capacity limits. Also, in 2008, Shankman used Twitter to distribute urgent messages from journalists who needed information before the next edition of the HARO mass e-mail message.

Using the e-mail mailing list, individual journalists ask for very specific content for stories they were working on while reaching large numbers of public relations practitioners. Thus, the concept of media catching was created. Rather than pitching stories to journalists and competing for printed space or airtime, practitioners are now attempting to catch media placements for their organizations by responding to journalist inquiries. The competition for a journalist's attention remains; but instead of submitting a story based on an organizational perspective, practitioners search for story topics tossed out by journalists that are relevant to their organizations.

Since HARO was founded in November 2007, its popularity among journalists and public relations practitioners has grown exponentially. According to Peter Shankman, the founder of HARO, the service has 80,000 sources and 30,000 journalists and issues 3,000 queries per month (Abraham, 2009). The researchers chose to use HARO to explore the media catching concept because this service started as a social media experiment to connect journalists to sources without intermediaries, without membership fees, and with the explicit encouragement to share openly received queries.

Research Questions

Based on the literature review of the journalist-practitioner relationship, this study will profile the phenomena of media catching through a content analysis of the expert requests sent through HARO. The broad research question guiding this study is the following: What are the common interactions between journalists and public relations practitioners that facilitate media catching? The subresearch-questions guiding this study are the following:

RQ1: What topical requests are sent via the expert request service HARO?
RQ2: What outlets are using the expert request service HARO?
RQ3: What types of journalists are using the expert request service HARO?
RQ4: What types of stories are being sought?
RQ5: From what regions of the country are most of the requests for expert originating?

RQ6: What response mechanisms are the journalists using to communicate with the experts?

METHOD

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a content analysis was determined to be the most beneficial first step in understanding the growing trend. In this exploratory research, content analysis allows for the development of a demographic profiling of the users and organizations that post requests through the HARO service. The research team decided to code the HARO requests that were sent through both the e-mail mailing list and the Twitter updates. This approach allowed the researchers to assess the use of the service for journalists who had immediate deadlines by examining the Twitter updates, as well as individuals with lengthier deadlines by coding the e-mail list requests.

The research team analyzed a total of 3,106 requests. To analyze the Twitter updates, the team coded all of the messages marked "URGENT" by the HARO team that were sent in a 6-month period from August, 2008 to February, 2009. The urgent label was used to identify all media requests that had pressing deadlines. The total number of Twitter updates coded was 304. To analyze the HARO list requests, a systematic sample was taken from all media information requests. Every third request was coded by the team by analyzing the morning, afternoon, and evening editions of the e-mail list for a 5-month period. The total number of list messages coded was 2,802.

The researchers determined that the best coding strategy was to use the classification scheme HARO requires those submitting requests to complete before the messages are sent to the list or Twitter followers. When submitting a request, users are required to summarize their request briefly, provide their contact information and type of media outlet, decide whether they wish to be contacted directly by public relations practitioners or have information forwarded from the HARO team, state whether the request is tied to a specific geographic region, and give a deadline. Additionally, users must categorize their requests into one of seven topical categories (general information, business and finance, technology, travel, lifestyle and entertainment, healthcare, and gift bag requests). It should be noted that gift bag requests do not involve traditional media placements, but involve events, varying from conferences to fundraisers, request information from public relations practitioners to place in registration bags, door prizes, and other opportunities to place branded-items in front of individuals.

After reviewing the different categories and discussing various ways that the media outlet type could be interpreted, the researchers coded 20% of the Twitter updates ($n = 60$) and 10% of the HARO list requests ($n = 280$) to calculate the intercoder reliability scores. Using the Scott's π formula, the intercoder reliability scores were deemed acceptable as they ranged from 92.1% to 97.3%. Although content analysis suggests that coders examine 15% to 20% of the overall sample before coding separately (Neuendorf, 2002), the high reliability scores and the standardized scheme derived from a closed-ended form gave the researchers confidence that further coding of e-mail list messages was not warranted to demonstrate sufficient intercoder reliability.

RESULTS

The study sought to explore the media catching trend by exploring who is actively involved in tossing information requests to public relations practitioners and what type of information is wanted. To draw a picture representing the current state of media catching, frequencies were calculated for all of the study's content analysis variables in the 302 Twitter updates and 2,802 e-mail messages. As described earlier, the Twitter updates were sent out throughout the day when journalists had immediate, pressing deadlines. The list messages, however, were sent through three editions. A chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 6.00$, $df = 4$, $p = .19$) reveals that the distribution of messages was mostly balanced with 843 requests (30.1%) being sent in the morning edition, 972 (34.7%) being sent in the afternoon, and 987 (35.2%) being sent in the evening list.

RQ1: What Topical Requests are Sent via the Expert Request Service HARO?

The topical requests from Twitter and the HARO list were similar in their distribution. Although their ranking varied, general information, business and finance, and lifestyle and entertainment topics were the most commonly needed information by users of both HARO distribution channels. The remaining categories were ranked identically for the two channels. Not surprisingly, gift bag requests were the least used category given that this form of media placement is only tangential to traditional media placements. The undeterminable topics generally fell into a political category, and subsequent investigation of the data revealed that these generally occurred in the 2 weeks preceding the 2008 presidential election.

RQ2: What Outlets are Using the Expert Request Service HARO?

Table 1 illustrates that a variety of media outlets are participating in the media catching trend. Mainstream media (television news outlets, newspapers, wire services, and magazines) dominate the use of the last-minute urgent HARO requests being sent through Twitter while Internet information outlets (Web sites and blogs) appear with greater frequency on the HARO list. For many of the outlets, the distribution is very similar (e.g., radio interviews requests represent 3% for each channel).

Despite the reliance on the Internet and social media technologies (Twitter and LISTSERV) to disseminate HARO requests, Web-based outlets were not the ones who were most actively using the service. Instead, traditional mainstream media appear to be some of the biggest players in media catching. Social media tactics such as blogs, podcasts, and Web-based forums lag behind their mainstream media counterparts despite outnumbering them. However, these are not the only types of requests being made through HARO. Organizational communication (e.g., newsletters), advertising (e.g., billboards), and interpersonal communication (e.g., participant seekers) are all sought after through this media catching phenomenon. The latter category

TABLE 1
Frequency of Media Outlet Requests by HARO Users

	Requests distributed through HARO's Twitter account		*Requests distributed through HARO's Listserv*	
*Category classification chose by journalist**	*Number of requests*	*Percentage of total requests*	*Number of requests*	*Percentage of total requests*
Television	49	16%	147	5%
Newspaper	87	29%	295	11%
Wire Service	18	6%	62	2%
Consumer Magazine	25	8%	709	25%
Book	0	0%	151	5%
Trade/Business Publication	12	4%	191	7%
Web site (traditional)	26	9%	730	26%
Web forum	5	2%	12	.4%
Blog	8	3%	172	6%
Radio	10	3%	69	3%
Podcast	8	3%	35	1%
Freelancer	0	0%	42	2%
Billboard Company	0	0%	1	0%
Newsletter	0	0%	40	1%
Participant Seekers	0	0%	12	.4%
Undeterminable	56	18%	134	5%

involves workshops, conferences, and fundraisers seeking to find people to participate as speakers, in conference panels, and as attendees, respectively. These frequency results indicate that although mainstream media are dominant players in media catching, other Web-based outlets and interpersonal activities are exploring how they can take advantage of the service.

RQ3: What Types of Journalists are Using the Expert Request Service HARO?

It is informative to know what media outlets are most often using the HARO service to engage in media catching, but there are many different levels of employees at these outlets, ranging from entry-level journalists and interns to managing and senior editors in print publications and from field reporters to anchors and producers in broadcasting. At Web-based news sites, the titles vary from site owner to podcaster to blogger. The submission form that must be completed before HARO will distribute an informational request does not use categories to define what an individual's job title is. Instead, the open-ended question allows for individuals to write their full title (or titles if they are also involved in freelancing work or have multiple duties). The research team wrote each description down as listed and then attempted to collapse them into categories to describe who was involved in media catching.

The largest numbers of individuals participating in media catching on HARO's list comprise the *Web author* category (25%). This group ($n = 694$) consists of Web site owners, bloggers, podcasters, moderators of Web site forums, and others who use the Internet and social media to distribute news and commentary. The next largest group, journalists ($n = 549$), represent 20% of HARO list users. This group consists of individuals who identify themselves as being employed by trade publications, magazines, and newspapers. The editors of these publications ($n = 331$) represent 12% of the participants. The category of broadcasters ($n = 113$) consists of television field reporters, anchors, and televised talk show hosts, and they represent 4% of HARO list participants. The associate and executive ($n = 365$) producers of the televised media outlets are 13% of HARO participants.

The remaining 26% of media catching participants consist of freelancers ($n = 471$), public relations practitioners ($n = 187$), and other organizational representatives ($n = 92$), such as a founder, chief executive officer, or vice president. When freelancers posted messages to the two HARO outlets, they were more likely to request information for stories destined to be pitched to a variety of news outlets (82%). Public relations practitioners and organizational representatives, on the other hand, were most often asking for gift bag requests and participatory action by others (68%).

RQ 4: From What Regions of the Country are Most of the Requests for Expert Originating?

The majority of HARO requests were not focused on specific geographic regions on both Twitter (78%) and the list (83%). However, there were numerous requests that were geocentric in their nature. To determine if particular geographic regions of the United States were more active in media catching than others, frequencies were calculated and presented in Table 2.

The Northeastern United States is the region of the country that most often participates in media catching—not surprising, given that it houses New York City, often considered the media capital of the world. However, other areas with a large media presence, such as the mid-Atlantic region with Washington DC and the West Coast with Los Angeles, pale in comparison to the participation of the Northeast. Information requests made over Twitter and the list are fairly evenly distributed though more international requests are made through the HARO list.

RQ4: What Response Mechanisms are the Journalists Using to Communicate with the Experts?

Finally, the media catching process would not be complete if public relations practitioners were not given a variety of methods to relay the information back to the journalists. The HARO group allows those requesting information the ability to be contacted directly by public relations practitioners or allows them to have the responses facilitated through HARO's employees. When HARO serves as the mediator between the journalists and

TABLE 2
Frequency of Geographic Requests by HARO Users

*Category classification chose by journalist**	*Requests distributed through HARO's Twitter account*		*Requests distributed through HARO's Listserv*	
	Number of requests	*Percentage of total requests*	*Number of requests*	*Percentage of total requests*
Northeast	33	46%	167	42%
Mid-Atlantic	10	14%	17	4%
Southeast	7	10%	44	11%
Midwest	7	10%	55	14%
Southwest	2	3%	23	6%
West Coast	8	11%	58	14%
Western Mountains	3	4%	13	3%
International	1	1%	24	6%

the practitioners, contact information for the journalists is confidential. Practitioners submit information to HARO, and that information is then forwarded to the journalists so that HARO staff can determine which practitioners can be contacted. Even though this method is less likely to produce follow-up contact from practitioners, journalists rarely use the anonymity option. Only 12% of requests on Twitter have journalist information withheld from practitioners, and a smaller percentage uses this method on the list (6%). Reflecting Sallot and Johnson's (2006) findings, the journalists continued to prefer contact through e-mail. Overwhelmingly, journalists preferred e-mail when compared to telephone, social networking accounts, and instant messaging.

DISCUSSION

This study found that a variety of media outlets are engaged in the media catching trend to cover national and regional topics that range from business and finance news to lifestyle and entertainment features. Whether the individuals using the HARO service are journalists, broadcasters, bloggers, or forum moderators, they all have individual needs for the stories and ideas they are working on for their information outlets. Perhaps journalists used social media applications to take action due to tightened deadlines, restricted research capacities, and to reduce the headaches caused by poor media relations practices (Jewitt & Dahlberg, 2009). Certainly not all practitioners abuse the media relations process with misdirected pitches, slow response to media inquiries, or less-than-honest answers to journalist's questions. However, public relations watchdog groups, such as PRWatch.org, frequently highlight these abuses in modern practices. Industry advocates have strongly urged journalists to take proactive stances in their dealings with public relations practitioners to avoid falling for one-sided presentations of stories and half-truths (Schwitzer, 2004) and to ensure that public relations practitioners do not bypass the media's gatekeeping responsibilities (Berkowitz, 1990).

As mentioned in the introduction, BadPitchBlog.com (n.d.) and the PRspammers wiki are frequently used to call out public relations practitioners who are not taking the time to update media lists to determine contact preferences and what a reporter's beat is or what a blogger's interests are. Although these social media forums are a helpful source for venting by the recipients of poor media pitches, they do little to make the lives of a journalist easier. However, the media catching phenomenon does.

Regardless of the media outlet, those working on news stories often find themselves needing information to complete the story under a tight deadline. In these situations, it is not uncommon for the reporter to turn to long-established, trusted news sources through direct calls, e-mails, and instant messages (Howard & Mathews, 2006). But, when journalists, reporters, or bloggers are assigned a news story by an editor or producer, they may not have the contacts necessary to obtain that information in a quick manner. Media catching through services like HARO or ProfNet allows the reporter to disseminate very specific information requests to large numbers of public relations and strategic communication practitioners. By reviewing the responses, the individual is able to determine which practitioners have the most relevant information for the current news story.

Public relations practitioners understand the benefits of proactive media relations efforts (e.g., increased awareness for key publics, decreased advertising expenditures), and the addition of media catching to traditional media pitching expands the practitioners' abilities to secure news coverage in desired outlets. However, agenda-setting research has shown that public relations practitioners can benefit their organization exponentially through proactive media relations efforts due to the effects of intermedia agenda setting. Although a practitioner may be striving for placement on a television newscast or in a daily newspaper (the two largest users of HARO's Twitter service), successful placement may lead to discussions of the organization or issue in virtual media outlets as well.

Although primarily focused on political elections, agenda-setting research has routinely shown that traditional media news coverage is highly correlated with discussions on electronic bulletin boards (McCombs, 2005; Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwo, 2002). Newspaper coverage has been most often found to influence Internet conversations on both the topics being discussed and the characteristics of those topics (Lee, Lancendorfer, & Lee, 2005). Vliegenthart and Walgrave (2008) found that newspapers also have a strong influence over television. Television advertising (Lopez-Escobar, Pablo, Maxwell, Federico, & Lennon, 1998), newscasts (Iyengar, 1990), and nightly programming (Holbrook & Hill, 2005) not only influence the public's agenda and conversations, but mainstream media also influences what is being discussed in blogs (Wallsten, 2007).

With significant support for an intermedia agenda-setting approach from traditional to mainstream media, a practitioner may feel that concentrated media relations efforts should be focused on traditional media. However, ample evidence exists that public relations practitioners should not cast aside interviews with bloggers, online communities, and virtual newscasts. Sweetser et al. (2008) found mixed support for the intermedia influence. Their study on the 2008 presidential campaign found that news coverage and blog discussions correlated positively with one another. Statistical analysis showed that there was mutual influence of the topics discussed by the two media outlets and the agenda was not set solely by traditional media. Schiffer (2006) also documented how conversations in the blogosphere by activists helped generate media coverage for a controversy largely ignored by political and media elites. Additionally, online newspapers and newscasts have been shown to have significant influence on stories distributed by online wire services, which are often picked up my mainstream media and discussed in virtual communities (Lim, 2006).

The research on agenda setting supports a proactive media relations effort inclusive of pitching traditional and new media outlets, as well as catching requests from individuals from the entire media spectrum. Although traditional information subsidies have been shown to influence public opinion on political candidates (Kiousis et al., 2006) as well as corporate reputation (Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Kiousis, Popescu, & Mitrook, 2007), online media outlets also play a significant role in building awareness among key stakeholders, as well as other media outlets. As Sweetser et al. (2008) demonstrated, blogs also influence mainstream media conversations. A plurality of the HARO LISTSERV information requests came from users affiliated with various forms of Internet media (e.g., traditional Web sites, discussion forums, podcasts, blogs). Given the strength of intermedia agenda setting, practitioners should not discount the impact that awareness on the Internet.

In seeking to conceptually define media catching through an examination of the HARO LISTSERV and its corresponding Twitter account, this study found that a significant number of information requests came from traditional and new media. Scholarly discussions on intermedia agenda setting reveal that public relations practitioners should be open to all possible news outlets. If a response to a media catching inquiry is published or broadcast, practitioners should move quickly to be proactive in additional media pitching efforts because intermedia agenda setting is a short-term, yet powerful, process (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008). Results from a survey of 774 health journalists indicate that the presentation of news topics in other media outlets, whether it is traditional or new media, is a stronger influence than information subsidies (Len-Ríos et al., 2009). The savvy practitioner will incorporate media pitching and media catching into their media relations repertoire.

This study does not claim that journalists have never contacted public relations practitioners for unsolicited information before social media. The end goal of the interdependent relationship between journalists and practitioners is that each party is free to go to the other when information is needed (Franklin & Murphy, 1999). Over time when journalists build a working history with a practitioner, they often develop a sense of trust and recognize that the practitioner is not going to feed them one-sided stories because of the harm that can cause toward the practitioner's professional reputation (Howard & Matthews, 2006). This interpersonal form of media catching has gone on as long as journalists have been pursuing their own stories.

What this study does pose, however, is that the media catching is a phenomenon that public relations practitioners must adapt to and become familiar with to engage journalists. For a journalist working on deadline assignment and needing specific information, media catching presents a social-media parallel to using a real-time search engine that can retrieve immediate, accurate, and quick responses from a network or database of practitioners. Being able to disseminate an informational request to a large number of public relations practitioners produces multiple responses who can serve as sources for the story. Journalists are experimenting with Twitter to collect sources and to find story ideas, and public relations professionals are interacting with journalists via Twitter and Facebook. With HARO, the journalist has the benefit of having the channel moderated by Peter Shankman and his assistant that ban people who abuse a journalist's request with organizational spam, irrelevant responses, and those that waste the journalist's time when facing deadlines.

Practitioners responding to HARO listings must be willing to participate in accurate dialogue with reporters regarding requests for experts and information. If the practitioners and experts send off-topic e-mail, phone, or Twitter responses to requests, that respondent risks banishment from HARO membership. This willingness is a key component to developing lasting relationships with journalists (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999). Openness concerns the willingness of both parties to engage actively and honestly in direct discussions, and it has repeatedly been shown to be impactful on how stakeholders develop trust with organizations (e.g., Waters, 2009). However, another cultivation strategy is equally important in regards to media relations. Access—making one's self available to others—is a key determinant of placement for organizations engaged in media relations activities. If a practitioner is not able to respond to journalists' inquiries by deadline, that slowed response damages the practitioner's reputation and the journalist may reconsider contacting the source for information in the future.

This article highlights the struggles that journalists have had in their interactions with media relations specialists. Rather than continuing to face poor media relations efforts, media production practitioners ranging from podcasters and bloggers to producers and journalists have joined together to toss their own story ideas to public relations practitioners in efforts to see who is going to catch the topic. Although the practice has existed on small scales in the past using highly developed interpersonal networks, social media have elevated the practice to facilitate conversations between journalists and relevant practitioners across the globe.

Although HARO primarily has requests for American media outlets, the number of international requests increased over the 5-month time period the data for this study were collected. This expansion of the media catching phenomenon would not have happened without social media.

Social media services like Twitter and list technologies were vital to the success of the HARO phenomenon. However, these communication channels are not the only ones that practitioners need to embrace. HARO started out as a Facebook group, but quickly outgrew the social networking site's capacity, and it was forced to evolve to satisfy the demand for its services. So too, public relations practitioners who embrace blogging, podcasting, and other forms of social media communication must be willing to accept that they may have to abandon the technology when it places barriers to maintaining and establishing relationships with publics or when it becomes outdated and replaced by newer technologies.

That does not mean that practitioners should shy away from social media because it will ultimately fade and morph into a new communication channel. Instead, public relations should openly embrace social media because it enables real conversations. Whether responding to a blog posting, sending a stakeholder a private (or public) message over Facebook, or engaging in conversations about YouTube videos, social media provide stakeholders with direct access to organizational representatives. Practitioners must be ready to handle that access, even in traditionally one-sided specializations, such as media relations. J. E. Grunig (2001) acknowledged that the practice of public relations had not truly evolved to being symmetrical. Although specializations, such as community relations, activist relations, and fundraising, have a natural leaning toward open discussions with stakeholders, other public relations specializations are not far behind due to the increasing impact of social media.

CONCLUSION

In their discussion of how an item becomes news, Deacon, Fenton, and Bryman (1999) discussed the intricacies involved in the news-making process from the journalistic and public relations perspectives. This combined approach focuses on the love–hate relationship between the two groups, the gatekeeping role of the journalist, and the purported unbalanced promotion of an organization's objectives. Overall, it paints a challenging picture for media relations specialists. However, it fails to take into consideration new technologies that have caused a shift in the traditional approach to media relations efforts.

No longer are journalists passively receiving news releases and media kits from practitioners wanting to get publicity for their organization. Instead, journalists are throwing their own needs at practitioners through social media outlets. This phenomenon highlights just how important adaptation is to organizational success. Singer (2005) stressed the importance of adapting to the new media environment if organizations seek to prosper with their media relations efforts. The excellence theory states that proper public relations must be proactive and engaged in monitoring the organization's surroundings (Dozier, L. A. Grunig, & J. E. Grunig, 1995). This includes the virtual environment. Public relations, including media relations, cannot fall into a routine of producing static programming; instead, practitioners should seek out new communication channels and possibilities for engaging all of our stakeholders. Failing to do so could result in organizations and practitioners being labeled outdated and irrelevant.

Limitations

No study is perfect, and this study has limitations in its scope. First, the reduction and simplification of individual titles may produce a biased interpretation of who is involved in the media catching process. As evidenced in public relations literature, titles given to individuals may vary widely, although people may have similar duties and responsibilities. Another limitation may be the examined tweets and list messages that occurred during the fall holiday months, where information requests may have centered more on travel, consumer shopping, and lifestyle/entertainment than in a nonholiday time period. Another limitation was the exclusion of other media requests systems. After data collection was underway, ProfNet—a similar service run by PR Newswire—started Tweeting urgent media requests from journalists.

The final limitation of this study is that it is a first-level analysis of the users and the requests; it does not investigate how the information was used, who responded to the requests, when the information was used, and what the final product—blog posts, news stories, magazine articles, books, podcasts, and radio shows—resembled.

Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, additional research must be conducted on the satisfaction and experiences of those using the service.

Also, ethical dilemmas abound with having a public relations practitioner serving as the mediator and gatekeeper for media requests. What are the perceptions of this dynamic? Additional research must be conducted on the shifting relationship between journalists and practitioners. Previous research on the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners has focused on the antagonistic tension between these groups. Yet, the nature of the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners may be changing. Journalists and public relations practitioners may have moved or are moving into a more cooperative, pragmatic agreement that meets the needs of both groups. As media catching grows and as the number of outlets promoting the trend multiplies, there may be a greater understanding that information gatherers must engage with public relations practitioners to obtain sources and embellish ideas. Ultimately, there may even be a shift in the thinking of journalists and public relations practitioners that media relations is becoming more relationship-focused and centered on a continued dialogue rather than a series of one-sided media pitches.

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