Media Relations in Bosnia: A Role for Public Relations in Building Civil Society

ABSTRACT: This paper offers a benchmark of the status of media relations in Bosnia. Public relations has expertise at relationship building and, therefore, it can influence democracy building. In a place such as Bosnia, the practice can be more than merely a business function; it has an important role in the development of civil society. The media relations function of public relations is a tool to bring like-minded groups together to articulate needs, pressure government, and represent interest group needs. Thus, the function of media relations places the practice of public relations squarely at the center of building civil society in Bosnia.

Maureen Taylor is an assistant professor in the School of Communication, Information and Library Studies at Rutgers University, NJ.

In 1989, the world cheered when the Berlin Wall, long a symbol of oppression, was torn down. In the decade that followed this historic event, many watched as the former East bloc nations started down the path of democracy and free market economies. The nations that are emerging from communism provide an unique opportunity for public relations practitioners and researchers. Media systems in these states were once controlled by the government, but today, independent, commercial media outlets are slowly beginning to appear. With independent media and economic development come many opportunities for public relations.
Public relations is in a nascent stage of development in the post-Communist world. Thus, the best way to follow its development is to study the evolution of the practice in each nation in the region. The development of public relations in certain nations, including the newly reunited Germany, Hungary, Romania, and Slovenia already has been described. These studies show how the social, political, and economic situation of each nation shapes public relations practice; but more research is needed to understand the opportunities and challenges for public relations practitioners and scholars.

This article offers a benchmark study on the development of media relations in the newly formed nation of Bosnia (previously part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia). It examines the major issues facing organizations that seek to build relationships with publics, and it also examines the issues that face media in the early stages of commercial development. The data for this article consist of survey responses of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that describe the public relations needs of organizations that want to publicize their activities to citizens. In addition, interviews with independent media editors and journalists in the two entities that make up Bosnia—the Bosnian Federation and the Republika Srpska (RS)—were conducted to learn about the media situation. Together, these responses offer a description of the beginning stages of media relations in the post-communist state of Bosnia.

**CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA RELATIONS**

The topic of media relations was selected for this article because the concepts of free press and public communication are at the heart of developing civil society in Bosnia. Public relations is a relationship-building tool and, as a mediated communication activity, it has a central role to play in civil society initiatives. The concept of civil society is not new. It has been considered by philosophers such as Aristotle in the *Politics*, Georg Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right*, Antonio Gramsci in the *Prison Notebooks*, and Jurgen Habermas in his *Theory of Communicative Action*. The concept has itself progressed through a Hegelian dialectic in that attitudes toward it have ranged from support for it as a model for society, to the view that it was a tool to create a utopian Communist society, to a realization that it is a communicatively constructed public sphere that reflects the intentions of its participants.

Civil society characterizes all efforts by “private and public associations and organizations, all forms of cooperative social relationships that create[d] bonds of trust, public opinion, legal rights and institutions and political parties that voice public opinion and call for action.” It strives for a balance between various publics and government. According to Gramsci, civil society is not a substitute for government power, but rather it is the “dialectical unity between government power” and the people. Organizations, such as professional groups, trade unions, legal societies, cultural groups, and religious groups, mediate relationships between
governments and isolated individuals. To serve as mediators between government and publics, these organizations can use many public relations functions.

At a time when social processes have broken down and resulted in human crises (Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo), many international governments and non-government organizations have made civil society initiatives a major part of their humanitarian efforts. At its very core, civil society means that there are “institutions that represent groups within the society, in broad cultural, political, and ideological senses, both in the context of society itself and in relation to the state.” Many nations in crisis no longer have functioning institutions, and one of the first tasks for international humanitarian organizations is to foster civil society groups to limit the power of government and empower individuals.

Relationship building between social groups and the presence of a free media are key components in civil society. According to Shaw, “the most critical of all civil society institutions” is the development of a media system that allows for communication between groups. The second most important aspect of civil society is for the media to support the development of organizations that articulate public needs and opinions. It is here that the role for public relations in civil society becomes most clear. Public relations, through its focus on media relations and relationship building, is an integral part of the civil society function. Civil society organizations need to reach various publics with information and to create links between like-minded groups. Public relations in general, and media relations in particular, can help civil society organizations speak to and listen to relevant publics.

Although media relations is only one of many important functions of public relations, it is traditionally the one often associated with the practice. Media relations has a central role within the practice of public relations because the media are the “gatekeepers controlling the information that flows to other publics in a social system.” The media relations role is a traditional role for practitioners because it functions to “maintain media contacts, place news releases, and figure out what the media will find newsworthy about their organizations.” Businesses, not-for-profit organizations, and even terrorist organizations rely on media relations to communicate important messages to multiple publics.

The literature on media relations has mostly focused on placements of news releases. Walters, Walters, and Starr described media relations, or the dissemination of news releases, as “concerned with issues and events that reporters do not have the time or resources to cover.” Thus, media relations provides the “information subsidy” that serves both the needs of the media and needs of the source or organization. Until now, media relations research has examined pragmatic topics, such as the factors that determine or enhance which news releases get published.

Although most discussion of media relations is focused on pragmatic relationships with the media, some scholars and practitioners have questioned what public relations would be like without the media relations function. Grunig, arguing for a symmetrical communication relationship between organizations and publics, suggested that “the better public relations becomes, the less public relations practitioners will need the media.” Likewise, Hallahan suggested that new
technology may actually cut the media out of the public relations loop.17 But unlike Grunig, Hallahan viewed this diminished relationship between organizations and the media as a negative outcome because “a loss of public reliance upon and confidence in the mass media could be devastating for public relations, journalism, and for society-at-large.”18 Indeed, veteran public relations practitioner E. W. Brody warned that as traditional broadcasting becomes “narrowcasting,” mediated messages will become less important.19 Thus, in the future more focus on “interpersonal, behavioral and environmental communication become logical extensions of public relations practice.”20 These views are thought provoking, but still in the minority, and media relations continues to be an important function of public relations practice and research.

Although some have taken a critical stand about the information subsidy relationship,21 a continued flow of information from organizations to the media is a foundation of democratic societies.22 One way to understand the variations of media relations in emerging democracies throughout the world is to examine nations in different stages of media development. Botan noted that international public relations has “an exciting future and there is a need to study and redefine our understanding of the social role of public relations.”23 Likewise, Taylor and Kent argued that to learn more about international public relations, it is important not only to explore the similarities between the practices of public relations in the United States and other nations, but also to examine the differences.24 The same is true for understanding media development. Gaunt has reported that the news media in nations around the world can be quite different.25 Because training, personal experiences, social systems, and objectives will all influence journalists’ selection and processing of information, the best way to gauge media relations is to look at both sides of the media relationship—the organizations that seek to work with the media to communicate their positions and the media representatives who serve as gatekeepers of organizational messages.

The nation of Bosnia was selected for this study of media relations and civil society building because the nation is in its early days of institution building, media development, and public participation in the political realm. It offers a benchmark study of some of the issues that influence the relationship between organizations and media. As Gaunt noted, it is necessary to study all factors that effect media development, and the next section of this article looks at the social and political situation in Bosnia to show why civil society initiatives, fostered by the media relations function, are imperative for peace and democracy in the region.26

**BACKGROUND ON BOSNIA**

Whereas many other nations in Eastern Europe emerged from Communist rule with little more than confusion, disillusionment, and economic instability, Yugoslavia was not so fortunate. Yugoslavia was once considered the model of the ethnically diverse state. Yet, it experienced heightened ethnic nationalism during the late 1980s. By 1991, the wealthier republics of Slovenia and
Croatia had seceded from the Federation. One year later, when the Republic of Bosnia declared independence, the Bosnian Civil War began. The fighting between Bosniaks, Bosnian Serbs, and Bosnian Croats created over 2 million refugees and left over 200,000 people dead. Many of the parts of Bosnia that were once ethnically integrated are now “ethnically cleansed.”

During the Bosnian Civil War, the regional governments controlled all media and used television, radio, and print outlets as propaganda tools. Because there were no independent media, these governments were able to totally control information about the war and the outside world. The fighting in the region continued until the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995. Today, Bosnia remains a divided nation. The three major regions—Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Republika Srpska—coexist in a tense relationship. Bosnia is home to Bosnian Muslims, the Republika Srpska has mostly Bosnian Serbs, and the Herzegovina region contains the majority of Bosnian Croats. All three regions contain large numbers of refugees who were forced from their homes during the war. The fragile peace is maintained by the presence of the United Nations Stabilization Force troops who continue to monitor the situation and separate the entities.

Today, the government in Bosnia continues to control most state and municipal radio, television, and print outlets. However, with the assistance of the international community, there are now many small, new, commercial media outlets. These private media are in the beginning stages of development and face many challenges. The economy is the most significant issue in the development of public relations and an alternative media. The economy of the three regions has suffered almost as much as the people. Unemployment is staggering, and the regional governments and the NGOs employ most of those citizens fortunate to have jobs. The rest of the Bosnians get by with donations from international NGOs. These last years have been very difficult for the people of the region, and without the donations and services of NGOs, many people would be without food, shelter, education, legal advice, or a political voice.

The war destroyed much of the infrastructure of the nation. The automobile, computer, and steel industries have collapsed, and very few people are working in the jobs that they had before the war. The average citizen has no income to purchase consumer goods and, more importantly for the alternative print media, no money to purchase newspapers or magazines. Likewise, small business owners lack financial resources to pay for advertisements in local media. The media also face harassment from the government they criticize. Journalists and editors face physical threats and often have materials or services needed for operations—electricity, access to roads, printing presses—withheld.

After the Dayton Peace Agreement, numerous international NGOs set up offices in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska to foster peace and help with the rebuilding process. Organizations, such as the International Red Cross, Catholic Relief Services, Save the Children, U.S. Agency for International Development, and various United Nations humanitarian organizations, donated large amounts of money, personnel, and resources to rebuild the war-torn area. Their mission is 2-fold. First, NGOs serve the immediate needs of the population by
distributing food, clothing, housing, and social assistance. Second, the NGOs also help to create civil society organizations and institutions that can allow for public discussion and resolutions of problems before violence is again viewed as the only option.

MEDIA RELATIONS OF NGOS

NGOs are at the foundation of the international relief efforts. They play a role second only to the regional governments in serving the needs of the people. In post-crisis situations, such as Bosnia, “the nongovernment organizations are particularly important in that, although based in the West, they operate across the globe. They have been seen as institutional expressions of the emergence of a global civil society.”28 Although NGOs have traditionally worked in relief efforts, “a growing trend with the NGO community is the extension of their work from the humanitarian to the political level in attempting to influence military, diplomatic and humanitarian policy.”29 Although the short-term material assistance that these organizations offer usually ends in 2 or 3 years, the long-term hope is that certain fundamental principles will remain after the last NGO staff leaves to address other crises.

The good intentions of NGOs are clear; however, research shows that not-for-profit organizations often lack the expertise and sophistication in their public relations efforts that is necessary for maximizing their impact.30 In what ways does public relations help organizations to accomplish their goals? To understand media relations in Bosnia, the researcher conducted a study of NGO media activities during the summer of 1998. This study benefited from the assistance of an international volunteer association, the International Council of Volunteer Agencies (ICVA), which serves as an umbrella organization to help NGOs coordinate relief efforts and used the results of this survey to plan media relations workshops for its members. As part of its assistance, ICVA provided the phone numbers and contact names of members of its NGO Forum. Members of the Forum meet weekly to discuss their activities, share information, and amplify their efforts through cooperation. The Forum’s meetings also ensure that relief services are not duplicated or wasted.

The sample included 50 NGOs that were members of the NGO Forum or that have collaborated with ICVA on civil society or humanitarian relief projects. The NGOs represented included family assistance organizations, democracy organizations, youth organizations, human rights groups, legal advice, refugee associations, and cultural organizations. A Bosnian national conducted the phone interviews. Responses were translated into English, coded, and tabulated.

To ascertain the perceived importance of media relations for these organizations, the NGOs were asked which person in the organization was responsible for media contact. Sixty percent of the organizations identified the president of the organization as the contact person. Twenty percent of the organizations identified one or more members of their organization as having this responsibility, and
another 20% did not have a designated media spokesperson. Bosnia, like many nations, is a culture that respects titles and positions, and the high percentage of NGO presidents as media contacts supports the practice of having the person with the most prestige represent the organization to the media and to the public. This is a positive sign of the respect that public relations may eventually enjoy in the region.

In follow-up questions, respondents were then asked to identify the frequency of media tactics, such as press releases, press conferences, and media events. Only 20% of the NGOs have ever written news releases. Instead, many reported that they telephone friends who work in the media and invite them to events. This may point to the interpersonal dimension of public relations that is now receiving attention in the research literature. Twenty-eight percent of the NGOs have held a news conference in the last 2 years, and 45% have planned media events to gain coverage. Media events included roundtable discussion with community leaders, elected officials or experts on particular topics; exhibits; competitions; lectures; and seminars. A common response for why each NGO held media events will sound familiar to American public relations practitioners: “you have to have something interesting to get media attention—children, important guests, something exciting.” Thus, the media relations of NGOs appear to be similar to that of many Western organizations. The NGOs recognize the importance of the media in disseminating their information and seek to attract attention and coverage of their events.

However, it is here that the similarities between Bosnian media relations and Western media relations end. Bosnian NGOs in this survey can encourage the media to cover their organization’s events, however, to ensure the actual appearance of stories in the media, these organizations must pay for publicity. Of those organizations that have received media coverage in the last 2 years, 61% reported that they had to pay to have their event or story appear in the media. Even more telling is the finding that 57% had paid for coverage during the 3 months before the survey. Topics that these organizations paid to have covered included the introduction of new community services, forums for political candidates, educational activities, and cultural programs. These topics are important activities that the Bosnian general public should be informed about. Moreover, these events and programs are at the core of civil society building in the region.

Respondents in this survey recognize the importance of building relationships with the media and also understood the value of media coverage for the success of their activities. Eighty percent identified a member of the organization to serve in the media relations function. The high percentage of organizational presidents serving as the media contact shows that they consider media relations very important. However, many organizations seemed resigned to a one-sided relationship with the media. One respondent noted that, “the media are as poor as we [NGOs] are. They think we have more money than they do, and think we should buy advertising to get our messages out.” In Bosnia, the perceived line between advertising and news is blurred.

It appears that media relations in Bosnia is not based on the principle of the
information subsidy, but, instead, it is also based on an economic subsidy. However, before conclusions about the unprofessional behavior of the media are drawn, it is important to look at what issues constrain the relationships between the organizations that seek publicity and the emerging commercial media. The next section illustrates the other side of media relations in Bosnia: the media situation.

ISSUES FOR ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN BOSNIA

Many of the issues that today constrain the media in Bosnia can be traced back to the former Communist system. The former Yugoslavia followed an authoritarian/Communist model of the press. Under this model, “the media of mass communication owe a duty to support the state. They achieve their own ends by assisting in achieving the ends of the state.” State-controlled programming was never critical of the government and instead showed the commonalities of the Yugoslavian people rather than focusing on their differences.

The media in Bosnia are partly blamed for the genocide of the 1990s. Government media ownership and manipulation heightened ethnic tensions. Today, with support from international humanitarian organizations, Bosnian alternative media offer different perspectives than the state media. Commercial media, known as “alternative,” include radio, television, and print outlets that now serve many regions of the nation. However, the extent that these outlets positively affect people’s lives is still unclear. Jakubowicz has predicted, there is a “less than optimistic outlook for the future” for Bosnian media because the country has not yet made the difficult transition to either a fully democratic political system or a fully free media.

To learn about media relations and civil society from the journalists’ perspective, in-depth interviews were conducted with 32 alternative media outlets (20 radio, 4 television, and 8 print). The 32 selected media outlets were grant recipients of the U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID). Approximately 70% had also received some form of support from other international organizations. The interviews were conducted with the assistance of Bosnian translators. Interviews followed a moderately scheduled format. During the interview, the editors and journalists were asked a series of questions ranging from organizational mission, target publics, editorial and marketing practices, relationships with NGOs, relationships with other media, and needs and obstacles that impair their activities. Interviews were tape recorded, and the translated versions were transcribed for analysis.

The media have an important role in that they have become a part of the democratization process and yet must still report on it for their audiences. Shiras noted that, “given the media’s critical role in mobilizing public support and influencing public policy, they are both observers and participants” in the civil society process. Two major findings that illustrate the nature of media relations in Bosnia emerged from these interviews. First, the most consistent finding about
Bosnian alternative media is that they acknowledge the important role that they can play in changing the political situation. Second, efforts of these alternative media organizations are constrained by enormous economic problems.

The Media as Democracy Builders

The alternative media representatives interviewed for this study viewed their role in Bosnian society as change agents or democracy builders. Editors and journalists in both the Bosnian Federation and the Republika Srpska believe what they do—reporting objective information, offering opposition candidates a place to speak, and reporting on the abuses of government—is important for the public. Moreover, all respondents identified their organizational mission as both a media business and a contributor to democracy.

Two functions within this change-agent role are important for the development of civil society. First, the media serve as self-appointed “watch-dogs” of government. Although the watch-dog function is necessary for keeping elected officials accountable for their actions, it may diminish the media’s desire to cover less sensational events, such as the civil society activities of NGOs. The editor of the largest daily in the Republika Srpska illustrated this point, “we don’t get a lot of press releases to generate stories. Sometimes they [businesses and NGOs] send information and we sometimes send out a journalist to look at the issue.” However, when asked about potential stories about government officials and issues of corruption, the editor responded, “if we think something is wrong or unclear we send a journalist to fish around. Information is important to get out. We must cover it.” Favored topics for news include information about fraud, government abuse, and community violence. According to one Bosnian magazine editor, the rationale is clear for this strategy: “The role of the independent media is to watch the government, and tell the people what the state-controlled media won’t. People need to know what is happening. It is time to make everyone accountable for his actions.” Consequently, there is a strong focus on “hard” news stories rather than on the “soft” news that the media relations efforts of NGOs often generate.

A second function of the change-agent role is the practice of offering candidates with moderate or pro-democracy platforms an opportunity to communicate their positions. In Bosnia, independent political candidates and community leaders with pro-democracy views cannot get fair media coverage on the government-controlled outlets. Alternative media provide these politicians their only opportunity to reach a large number of people. Media also contribute to the civil society function because they are the only outlet for citizens to voice their opinions. All of the radio and television stations that were a part of this study have “contact programming.” Contact programs allow political candidates and elected officials to communicate their positions to a wide audience. These programs let the public call in to the station and ask important questions. This format was unknown before the war, but it is crucial for civil society because it gives the public an opportunity to ask difficult but important questions of their leaders and potential leaders. Moreover, broadcast contact shows offer opposition candidates media
exposure that the state-controlled media refuses to give. For example, one radio station in the Federation planned to have the current elected leaders appear for contact shows. The radio station would play excerpts by the politicians from their past election speeches and interviews and then use these excerpts to ask the politicians why they did or did not achieve certain political promises. This is an effective way to hold political leaders accountable for their campaign platforms.

With all this emphasis on creating a new role for media, it would be natural to assume that the alternative media are successfully serving the civil society function and monitoring much of the Bosnian social and political scene. However, media coverage of important issues is not as strong as journalists and editors would like. The next section examines the reason for this situation.

Media Constraints

A constant theme in the responses of the alternative media was their lack of resources to adequately perform the Western function of the media. Although the international community, including Soros Open Society Fund, USAID, Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Stabilization Force, has contributed equipment, money, and expertise, the alternative media are, for the most part, working with minimal resources. Only one media outlet (3%) claimed that it could sustain its operations without some outside support. Two more media (6%) planned to be self-sufficient by early 1999.

The alternative media rely on international donors to pay electricity, salaries, equipment, transportation, and in the case of print media, printing and distribution costs. As one radio station director who operates in a remote area commented, “without USAID [money], I couldn’t operate. When they leave, I will have to shut down. I have no way to even pay the electric bill.”

Financial problems are not the only obstacles to media relations. Indeed, one editor of a popular weekly Serb magazine noted that the public is not always ready to support the alternative media. Sales of print media are often sluggish, and many people resent the investigative or scandal-seeking nature of the alternative media. This editor noted that sometimes when circulation drops after a couple of issues of investigative reporting, he must place a sexually provocative cover on his magazine to attract readers. The financial motive is very strong for most media outlets. One radio station owner in the Republika Srpska was attempting to capitalize on organizations and politicians growing desire for publicity. He stated, “if an organization—business, political or NGO—has something important to report, we can help them. We have recently completed a press conference room. Anyone can rent it and have a press conference. That is how we will cover their events.” Although this may seem unprofessional to Western media and public relations practitioners, it is the reality of paying for publicity in Bosnia.

Today the media relations role appears to be a dominant function for public relations. But, as economic and political development occurs, there will be expanded opportunities for public relations. It appears that media in Bosnia recognize their important role in shaping civil society, yet are constrained by a lack of
financial resources. The change-agent role of alternative media offers several opportunities for a profession of public relations to develop. The “watch-dog” function of the media will require organizations to keep open relations with the media and listen to public concerns. If organizations fail to respond to public demands, the media is willing to expose problems and criticize organizations. Likewise, organizations that seek to participate in the political scene can work with media to feature their candidates and leaders on the newly created programming formats.

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE MEDIA: CONVERGENT INTERESTS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

It is obvious that NGOs and alternative media in Bosnia have convergent interests in fostering civil society. Both groups seek to improve the situation in the nation, and both are constrained by economic factors. Media relations is beneficial for Bosnian media; the organizations that attempt to create civil society; and most importantly, for the people of the region. NGOs need to extend their reach beyond their members, and the newly established alternative media are the most effective way to communicate with many publics. Although alternative media outlets contribute to civil society by offering venues for political discussions, they will also need new sources of information to fulfill the change-agent role that they believe they have. This is where the practice of public relations is needed.

Numerous NGOs in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska organize public forums, roundtables, and political discussions. Other NGOs create and distribute information about vital topics, such as return to homes in other regions, ethnic tolerance, and election materials. Because of these efforts, citizens in both Bosnia-Herzegovina and Republika Srpska have more local and regional political information than ever before. As one NGO president stated, “today, if someone wants information about a situation, there is an NGO for them.” Many of these NGOs use information as a basis for stimulating participation in political development.

NGOs play an important role in ensuring that citizens have alternative information. Yugoslavian citizens have always had access to the government’s perspective through the state-controlled media; but today, thanks to alternative media, Bosnian citizens can also learn about different views. NGOs need media coverage to amplify the reach of their activities and encourage participation. The people of the region need to be aware that there are ways other than violence to solve problems. Public relations can serve as important tool for NGOs to achieve their mission.

A civil society is a place where many voices are heard, many positions debated, and disagreement respected and tolerated. Relationships between NGOs and alternative media outlets are one of the most important ways to ensure this dialogue. It would be too easy, and ethnocentric, to expect media relations in Bosnia to resemble American practices. As economic, social, and political factors
change, so too will the media relations function. This study has offered a benchmark of the current status of media relations in the nation. Public relations has expertise at relationship building and democracy building. In a place such as Bosnia, the practice of public relations is more than merely a business function. The media relations function has an important role in the development of civil society in Bosnia. Public relations is a tool for bringing like-minded groups together to articulate needs, pressure governments, and represent isolated groups. Thus, the function of media relations places the practice of public relations squarely at the center of building civil society in Bosnia.

Acknowlegments: I would like to acknowledge the U.S. Agency for International Development, Office of Transition Initiatives and the International Council of Volunteer Agencies, Banja Luka Office for their support of this research.

NOTES

9. Ibid., p. 31.
11. David M. Dozier, Larissa A. Grunig, and James E. Grunig, Manager's Guide To


18. Ibid., p. 19.


20. Ibid.


22. Turk and Franklin, op. cit.


26. Ibid.


34. Glenny, op. cit.; Silber and Little, op. cit.