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How television news programs use video news releases

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Abstract

Video news releases are an important public relations tactic, but use by television stations is difficult to evaluate. While electronic tracking exists, data are rarely shared or published. This study analyzed proprietary data regarding the use of 14 VNRs, which resulted in 4,245 airings across the U.S.

Findings indicate all sizes of markets are likely to use VNRs, but smaller markets are more likely to use longer video segments, and to use them later in the day or days after the initial satellite feed. The most common use was as a voice-over story in an early evening newscast. VNRs associated with children and their safety or health got the greatest number of uses. The results have implications for public relations practitioners who need to make cost-effective decisions regarding tactics to target specific audiences. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The term "news release" took on new meaning in the mid-1980s when organizations began distributing video news releases (VNRs) to television newsrooms. VNRs began as clumsy promotional efforts on videotape, sent to television stations by mail or overnight service. Few were used. But throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s, VNR producers became more sophisticated in connecting VNRs to topical events, placing sponsor logos less obtrusively, and understanding the needs of newsrooms.[1] Today VNRs are an important communications tool for private and nonprofit organizations, and VNR distribution is big business.

Medialink, the largest VNR firm, produces and distributes about a thousand VNRs a year, roughly double the number of its nearest competitor. Medialink sales in 1997 were $27

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million, rising to $30 million during the first nine months of 1998.[2] Most VNRs are now distributed via satellite feeds, and the technology of VNRs has advanced to the point that broadcast journalists can preview them online using streaming video.[3]

A typical newsroom may have ten to fifteen VNRs available per day. Only the most well-produced and newsworthy will make the air, and even those chosen will most likely be edited and changed from what was sent.[4] A typical VNR may be only 90 seconds long, but the submission usually includes extra video, sound bites, and a suggested script displayed on screen. (The script is often sent via fax as well.) A reporter can create a voice-over story in which the video and natural sound are played while the television audience hears the anchor reading copy, or sound bites and/or visuals from the VNR can be included in a story written by the reporter.[5]

Video news releases that are selected to be included in news programs in the approximately 800 television newsrooms in the U. S. can reach an audience of tens of millions of people. Nonetheless, the stakes are high. Production and distribution costs for a VNR can range from $10,000 to $25,000. Most video news releases never air, and even among the few that are selected to air, it is often a VNR-based story that is dropped from a newscast that is "running long."[6]

To date there has been little research available to help public relations professionals improve the effectiveness of the use of VNRs as a communications tool. The current study attempts to contribute to our understanding of actual use of video news releases by television stations.

1.1. Review of the literature

Scholars have explored VNRs from several different perspectives, but most scholarly research about video news releases has focused on ethics and perceptions (of news directors, public relations practitioners, and viewers). Chang used co-orientation analysis to compare the views of public relations practitioners and television news directors.[7] The findings of the study reflect the view reported in professional trade journals, which are split along predictable lines, broadcast journalism articles bemoan VNRs as a weakening of standards, and broadcasters deny they use them.[8] Public relations articles concentrate on how to use VNRs as part of an overall PR effort, report on new technologies, and note the benefits of use.[9] Chang also found that practitioners believed VNRs legitimately contribute to news content, but news directors still viewed VNRs as public relations promotion disguised as news.[10] However, both groups agreed that the use of VNRs would increase.

Ethics of VNR use have received the most attention in academic research. Several scholars make the ethical point that VNRs are audience deception: viewers assume they are seeing the product of a station's news gathering and independent judgment, but actually are being handed over to the perspectives, images, and goals of the VNR production company's client.[11] Interestingly, much of the research about the ethics of VNR use stemmed from the Feb. 22, 1992, *TV Guide* article "Fake News." It called for a continuous on-air graphic labeling the VNR as such.[12] Tuggle and Ferguson weighed whether on-air labeling of VNRs would be appropriate. Their experiment found no difference, nor any advantage in terms of

credibility of the news story, retention, and recall for continuous labeling. The authors concluded, "the suggestion in the *TV Guide* article has no support in fact."[13]

Owen and Karrh looked at VNRs from the perspective of the television viewer, and found that viewers attach more credibility to VNRs appearing within newscasts than to commercials for the same firms within the same newscast.[14] Other studies have looked at VNRs as an information subsidy.[15]

Only one study was found that looks at how video news releases are used in television broadcasts. Cameron and Blount gathered "air checks" (taped complete newscasts) and used content analysis of the air checks to see how those newscasts handled the VNR "America Responds to AIDS" created on behalf of the Centers for Disease Control. The researchers concluded that packaged VNRs were heavily edited with most of the footage used coming from the B-roll. Stations used video components from the VNR in their own stories about the AIDS issue, rather than using the VNR as produced for the CDC.[16]

1.2. Agenda building and information subsidies

The study of VNR use has potential benefit to public relations, but also can contribute to mass communication theory. Agenda building is the observation that a society's political and economic elites use their power to secure distribution of carefully crafted mediated messages, with the expectation that the cumulative effect of the messages will move public opinion in the desired direction. One way this is done is by generating events specifically for news coverage, what the historian Daniel Boorstin called "pseudo events." Public relations practitioners, of course, have known for decades that making news coverage easier makes news coverage more likely. This can be done through a variety of techniques ranging from simple mailed press releases to elaborately arranged satellite windows so local TV news anchors can interview celebrities or national politicians. Agenda building takes a step back from traditional agenda setting: the idea that repeated news themes lead to public adoption of the salience of those themes.

Agenda building asks who sets the media agenda. In two separate studies, Turk and Gandy answer this question by showing that government, businesses, and activists set much of the media agenda by providing "information subsidies."[17] Gandy notes, quite properly, that the likelihood information subsidies will become news content is affected not only by such things as source credibility, but also by economic factors within the newsroom –that is size of the news "hole" compared to resources available for news gathering.[18]

Those ideas about information subsidies fit nicely with research into the gatekeeping process in local TV news. Harmon found that potential news stories face a producer presumption against devoting scarce resources to distant locales.[19] McManus put it more bluntly. He analyzed level of news gathering effort and market size. As he expected, he found little initiative in small markets. However, even in midsize and large markets most TV news stories were merely processed information from other sources (satellite feeds, wire copy, news releases, etc.).[20] The McManus findings suggest local TV newscasts logically would be frequent users of VNRs. However, Cameron and Blount found that smaller, resource-poor television stations did not use VNRs more than stations in larger markets, nor were they more

likely to use them in packaged form. The resources of the television station did not affect how or if the VNR in their study was used.[21]

1.3. A critique of industry research

Industry surveys to determine VNR use has yielded conflicting numbers. Firms that distribute VNRs claim substantial use, but news directors hardly ever admit to much, if any, VNR use.[22] However, a 1996 Nielsen survey found that 100% of the newsrooms surveyed used VNRs. That figure holds today, and in 1999 more than 90% of U. S. television stations report they use VNRs either the same amount or more than they did a year ago.[23]

These discrepancies result from several problems associated with using surveys to measure VNR use. Surveying news directors can lead to inexact results because news directors may not be involved in these specific news decisions. The more likely persons to survey would be producers, assignment editors, and some specialized health or consumer reporters who often are not asked. Furthermore, broadcast journalists may have varied ideas of what constitutes a VNR. For some, only a videotape that shows up in the mail in an envelope from a PR firm counts as a VNR. Some may not see that an American Medical Association satellite feed with an on-screen and faxed suggested script is a VNR. Other times, local TV news workers may not realize they are using a VNR because the material arrives "second-hand" from a regional or network/national satellite feed (CNN Newsource, CBS Newspath, ABC NewsOne, etc.). VNRs may end up in compilations of reporter packages, video, and sound bites, and there may be no labeling of the source of the material.

To further complicate the issue, public relations practitioners/VNR producer and broadcast journalists may have different definitions of what constitutes "use" of a VNR. Is ten seconds of cover video a use? From the public relations perspective, the answer is yes. The broadcast journalist, anxious to maintain a self-image of independence, may say no.

A separate problem is determining how many VNRs that are distributed are actually used. Although almost all television stations use VNRs, it is likely that they are choosing the same handful to air. Berkowitz and Adams found that 78% of releases sent to local television stations were rejected.[24] Their finding is congruent with that of Minnis and Pratt who looked at all print news releases received by a weekly newspaper, and determined that only 34% were used.[25] For obvious reasons, the VNR producer/distributors are reluctant to report what percentage of VNRs are aired. Their figures report growth in the video news release industry, but the figures refer to the increase in sales and profits.[26] The industry argument that the benefits of VNRs outweigh their cost applies only to those that are aired, and no figure could be found that reports what percentage of all VNRs distributed are aired.

1.4. Electronic tracking

Electronic tracking, which most VNR producers now use, provides a reliable indication of VNR use for those that air. SIGMA by Nielsen Media Systems covers 212 markets. Another system, RTV Reports' VeriCheck, operates in the top 75 markets. Its system, Video Encoded Invisible Light, works directly with the video picture. Pulses of light create computer-readable information bits. Collection points then confirm VNR use. The technology can

inject an invisible code onto the video signal. The code, a time and date tag placed on the Vertical Blanking interval, is picked up by decoders and transmitted to a central computer. The time, date, location, and duration of the VNR use thus can be reported. TeleTrax is the newest system that electronically "watermarks" videos.[27]

However, the tracking data for individual VNRs usually are proprietary. Even if the data are analyzed to look for more than total air time (usually translated by communication practitioners into equivalent advertising dollar value), the results are not often shared, nor compared to data from other organizations to provide a meaningful picture of how VNRs are used. This study attempts to add meaning to the tracking reports, and share the results so they may be helpful in using VNRs effectively.

2. Method

The study is a secondary analysis of both proprietary and government data concerning 14 VNRs: eight obtained through a Freedom of Information request to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, one each provided voluntarily by the U.S. Census Department and Priceline.com, two provided voluntarily by a light manufacturing company that requested anonymity, and two produced for the American Academy of Pediatrics and supplied by Orbis Broadcasting Group.

The American Academy of Pediatrics "Kids and Alcohol" VNR was distributed by satellite in late 1998. The VNR on the latest in elevator technology was made available in early 2000. All remaining VNRs were distributed by satellite during 1999. Because VNRs that report medical and consumer information more often are used by television stations than other VNR subjects,[28] the researchers believed the large proportion of medical and consumer VNRs would provide a rich and largely representative data set.

Orbis and the VNR sponsors tracked the use of these VNRs using the SIGMA Monitoring Service, a method of discovering a signal code on the VNR. The signal can be picked up from the broadcast airwaves of the station using the VNR. The SIGMA data were supplemented with video tracking observations and surveys done by Video Monitoring Service. The monitoring proceeds for six weeks from the first day of VNR distribution.

The unit of analysis is each broadcast use of the VNR. The data supplied to the researchers included the station, city, state, market rank, station affiliation, the airing date and time, the amount of the VNR video used, and the projected TV households audience based on ratings for the time period in which the VNR was used. Data were entered into Microsoft Excel, SAS JMP, and Statview statistical programs for these secondary analyses.

3. Results

Looking at all data sets together ($n = 4{,}245$), the VNR was broadcast the same day as the feed for about two-thirds of all uses. The VNR aired the next day after the feed about 18% of the time. Eleven percentage of the airings occurred in day two through ten, and only about 3% day eleven or later.

The 5–6 p.m. hour had the largest number of VNR uses, 25.5%. Another 7.3% aired from six to seven in the evening. Early morning newscasts also used many of the VNRs; more than 19% of the uses were between five and nine a.m. Late evening newscasts, ten p.m. to midnight, were 18% of the VNR uses. Noon newscasts comprised about 6.9% of uses.

A review of the most and least popular VNRs among these fourteen yields some suggestions regarding newsroom priorities. The five most used all dealt with threats to children: a "crazy string" recall, 780 uses; infant suffocation on adult beds, 586; a recall of a dangerous trapeze-style swing, 490; a safety concern regarding some bunk beds, 465; and a recall of toy and youth basketball nets, 394.

The four least used VNRs tended to be thinly disguised promotional items regarding businesses. A priceline.com VNR regarding "Y2K" travel yielded only 30 uses. The VNR on changes in elevator technology was used 35 times, and the new Internet strategy of a light manufacturing firm 58 times. The only exception to this pattern was the relatively lightly used, 48 tracked VNR uses, Consumer Product Safety Commission's yearly roundup of toy safety.

A simple regression analysis, excluding a handful of network and cable VNR uses, was conducted to answer the following questions:

1. As one moves from large to small markets, will there be longer use of the VNR video?
2. As one moves from large to small markets, is there greater use of the VNR later in the day?
3. As one moves from large to small markets, is there a greater tendency to use the VNR on days following the initial satellite feed?

Markets are ranked according to the number of television households, with New York City ranked number 1and the smallest market, Glendive, Montana, ranked number 210. The correlation between market rank (from large to small) and length of video used was very strong and statistically significant in predicted direction; small markets tended to use each VNR for more seconds than did large markets ($p = .0001$). Regarding the second question, small market stations also were more likely than large markets to use VNRs later in the day ($p = .0001$). It should be noted that this association might be an artifact of small-market stations having fewer and shorter early morning and mid-day newscasts compared to their counterparts in large markets. Thirdly, small market stations were significantly more likely than their large market counterparts to use VNRs a day or more after the initial feed dates ($p = .0341$).

This analysis also helps describe how all TV newsrooms use VNRs. The mean length of use ($n = 4{,}245$ station or network VNR uses) was twenty seconds, strongly suggesting "voice-over" stories where video is shown while the anchor reads copy about the story. A further "length of use" breakdown also serves to confirm frequent "voice-over" VNR usage. More than 52% of VNR video uses were for 10 to 29 seconds, strongly suggesting voice-over format. Another 29.25% were used for less than ten seconds, suggesting use as a "teaser" of a forthcoming story. The time range of 30 to 59 seconds (13.95% of uses) likely corresponds with a voice-over combined with sound bites. Less than four percentage of uses were for more than 60 seconds, the likely length of a package.

VNRs from different sources received noticeably different newsroom treatment. The three

VNRs from private companies (priceline.com on Year 2000 travel, a light manufacturing company on its new Internet site and on the latest in elevator technology) were used only 107 times, an average of fewer than 36 uses per VNR. The private company VNRs, however, were used in larger markets (mean of 40.4 market rank).

The two VNRs from the nonprofit American Academy of Pediatrics (one regarding kids and alcohol, another on circumcision) had 499 station uses, an average of 249.5 uses per VNR. The mean market rank was 61.768. The federal government VNRs, eight from the Consumer Product Safety Commission, and a Census Department piece on census techniques in far-flung Alaskan communities, were used 3,585 times, an average of more than 398 per VNR. These VNRs were particularly popular in smaller markets; the average market rank was 69.293.

These differences in VNR source and mean market rank of uses were statistically significant ($p = .0001$) by ANOVA F-test. Statistically significant differences also emerged between the VNR source and the number of days from the first satellite feed, time of day, and seconds used categories. The private company and nonprofit VNRs could sit on the shelf longer than the government ones. The private company VNRs also were used earlier in the day than those from nonprofits or the government, but the government VNRs were used for the shortest duration.

The simple dynamics of small-market TV newsrooms (small staffs, few resources, less experienced staffers) appear to make it likely that VNRs will be used more often in small markets than in large ones. That reasoning gained little support in this analysis. Large and medium markets clearly also use VNRs in significant number; 67.66 was the mean market rank for all station VNR uses ($n = 4{,}191$).

Stations in top 25 markets used these VNRs 1,009 times. Midsize TV market stations, defined as markets 26 to 100, made 2,066 uses. Small-market stations, defined as market rank 101+, used these VNRs 1,116 times. Additionally, there were 51 nonstation uses, that is uses by broadcast networks or cable networks, of the 14 VNRs.

4. Discussion

Past research has show that VNRs vary wildly in their use by broadcast newsrooms. Newscasters tend to exercise very similar judgment: either a VNR appears in dozens of markets, or disappears with hardly a trace. The results of this study confirm the agenda-building role of video news releases across all TV market sizes. To a small degree news agendas are set by producers of VNRs. It is not the newscasters alone who gather all the news that is used by a television station, but rather a process that includes the producers of VNRs. News stations have a need for news, and VNR producers who understand those needs can craft video news releases to meet them.

Understanding more about VNR use in different market sizes can help public relations professionals target messages with increased efficiency. Modifying slightly the findings of Cameron and Blount, the present study found that while stations in all markets are likely to use VNRs, small markets tend to air them for more seconds, and later in the day or even days from the initial feed. Thus these findings study show that a VNR might be a good commu-

nication tactic to reach publics in rural and less populated areas. It also might be that in these geographic areas, the message in the VNR would have more effect. According to the dependency theory of mass communication, publics in more remote areas may more attention to media messages and use the messages to help form their worldview.[29]

Knowing in which daypart a VNR is likely to be used can help practitioners make smart decisions, both for reaching target audiences, and for conducting evaluative research. The study shows that VNRs are a good tool to target demographics most likely to watch early evening news, which includes the increasingly important market of senior women. The same demographic is likely to watch morning news, which is in the daypart with the second highest percentage of airings. These daypart figures confirm some logical assumptions about VNR use. The 5 p.m. news block is a "softer" news block, a good spot for the health, consumer, and entertainment content of many VNRs. Daybreak newscasts are short-staffed and the producer could "kill time" with VNRs, even ones used the previous day. Late evening newscasts, third most likely location for VNR use, often have a health segment and a light, amusing kicker story at the end.

Regarding evaluative research, knowing when, where and what time VNRs are likely to air can help practitioners make more efficient use of air checks to determine how their VNR was used. The results of this study suggest that VNRs are most likely to be aired very soon after satellite distribution. It is probably not cost effective to collect air check tapes for more than two or three days after the VNR is distributed.

4.1. Future research

The researchers recognize that a more content-oriented approach is needed to better understand how video news releases are used. Such understanding can help public relations practitioners make better decisions about production and distribution, and help predict use that will be congruent to the communication goals of organizations.

This approach could include one or more of the following techniques: co-orientation analyses of large samples of TV news workers and PR professionals evaluating the same set of VNRs, content analyses of production values such as shot composition and natural sound associated with successful VNRs, and further secondary analyses or propriety data using VNRs with different subject matter.

4.2. Limitations of the study

A limitation of video news release research is that data about actual use are difficult to obtain. Cameron and Blount had access to air checks, and called for a replication of their study using other VNRs. However, telephone calls to persons at Medialink, West Glen, and PR Newswire revealed that their client organizations rarely pay for the added cost to conduct air checks. Other sources of data for content analysis are also difficult to obtain. For instance, while it is possible to downlink and record satellite feed of VNRs, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain tapes of newscasts that aired the VNRs. Most televisions news broadcasts do not archive tapes, and only a few have searchable archives on their web sites.

Electronic tracking methods can give accurate VNR data, but problems persist. The system can say which video was used and even how much, but can miss nuances such as how, or if, the suggested narration was rewritten. Electronic tracking cannot detect context such as surrounding stories. Like a print news release, a VNR is an uncontrolled communication. A worst case scenario would be that the footage is used from a VNR to produce a news story not favorable to the organization that produced it, something that could not be detected through electronic tracking.

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