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EVOLVING MEDIA RELATIONS BENEFIT INDUSTRY, MEDIA AND PUBLIC

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Short Description

As the general public learns about the newest events in the field smart mobility and mostly trust the traditional editorial media (newspapers, tv, radio). During the introduction phase of novelties, media plays a vital role in conveying the information from the industry to the public. Instead of creating hype, open and continuously evolving relations between the industry and media benefit both actors and allow the public to form opinions on fact-based or critical news reporting.

Main part

New Tech Project Managers' Media Relations Improve through Transparency

Concerning any novelty, fresher it is, less common knowledge there is available. On its yearly Digital News Report 2019, Reuters indicates the media industry is under the pressure from the populism, political and economic instability, combined with click-baiting and misinformation, all affecting on the trust in media. How to deliver balanced, non-bias news reporting related to new technologies? The public, users and consumers learn about the new technology, solutions and services with the help of marketing, communications, public relations, and media. Eventually, it is up to the individuals if they accept and adopt the new solutions.

New technologies are invented, designed and experimented by start-ups and RDI projects. Once the products are ready to be tested, the projects' managers need to disseminate information to reach the public. Introducing new technologies to the public requires media presence; hence the industry must evolve functional media relations. The question is, how the project managers lead this relationship-building process?

Case study of robot bus pilots in Finland, Norway and Poland

New, more sustainable transport technology emerged less than a decade ago in the form of self-driving, electric shuttles. They are marketed as a solution for urban public transportation issues by offering last-mile connectivity, e.g. better services. These robot buses have been test-driven on open streets in mixed traffic in Finland since 2016 as pilot projects, many of them deployed by Metropolia University of Applied Sciences. The qualitative case study was conducted by interviewing Finnish, Polish and Norwegian robot bus pilot project managers, with indications that the project managers saw the role of media as essential when introducing the robot buses to the public for the first time.

Transparency creates trust between actors

Perhaps the most interesting part of this research was to learn how frustrating it was for project managers to continually be sharing facts concerning the new tech and still see misinformation spreading in editorial publications. Also, the results indicated that project managers thought it was important to explain the phenomena and reasoning behind the new tech piloting, instead of boosting the new tech through hype.

After a certain point of repetition of pilots and media coverage, a saturation point seemed to be reached and robot buses had decreasing news value. Project managers were happy to see that the familiarity of the topic then seemed to produce more factual and critical media reports. Project managers felt the open, transparent and honest approach with journalists is the most favourable strategy to relationship building, as it creates understanding and trust between the actors.

Relationship management is an evolving process

The introduction phase of new tech is only the first step. The self-driving, electric vehicles in public transportation are not mature enough yet to become daily commodities, but one day they will. How to ensure the transparency between the industry and media? To anticipate those forthcoming stages, the industry-media process model was created based on the interviews of experienced robot bus pilot project managers. Using this model, project managers and media can evolve their relations beyond the introduction phase.

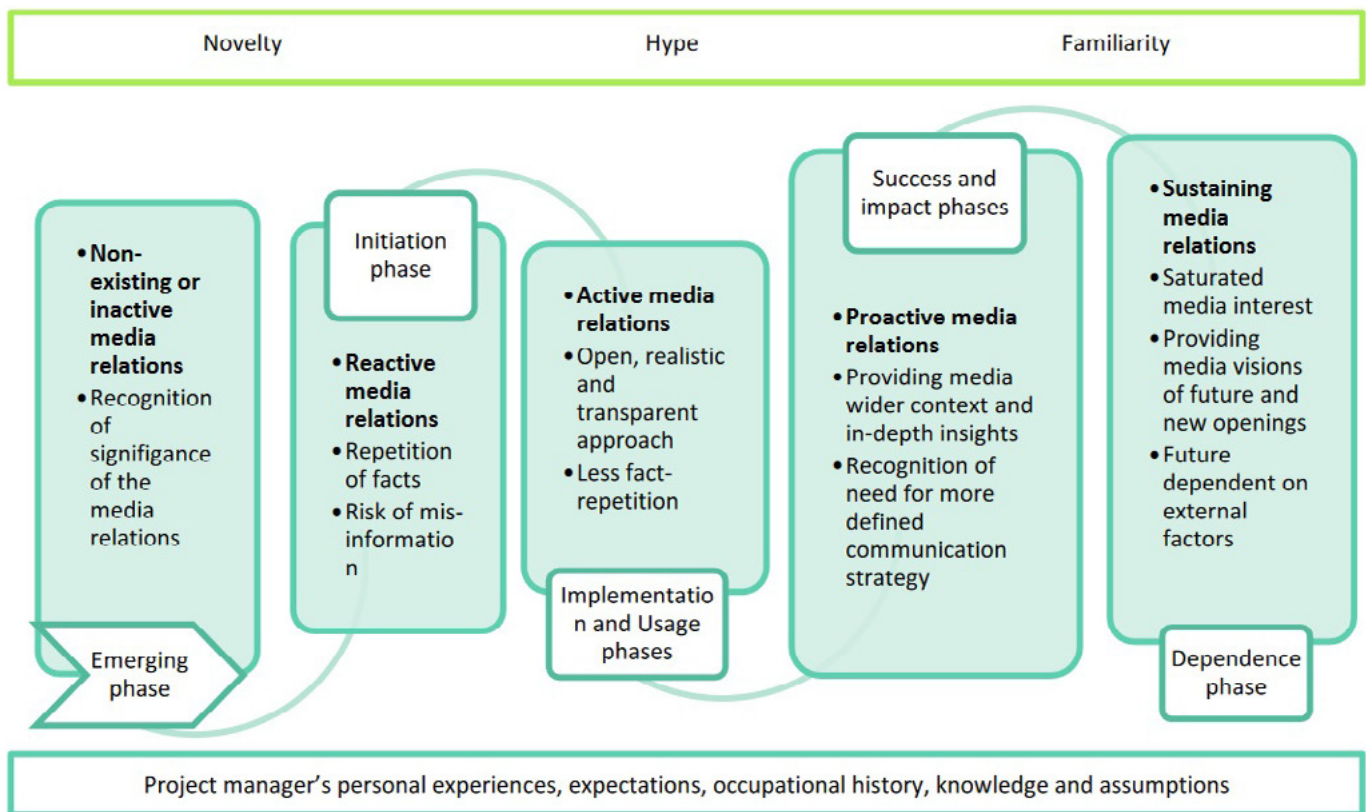


Chart 2: industry-media relationship process model.

The process model presents five phases of governing project managers' relationship with media:

- 1. Emergence of the novelty – Inactive media relations**
 - The media relations are inactive or non-existent
 - The project manager recognises the significance of media relations.
- 2. Initiation of project – reactive media relations**
 - The project starts
 - The project manager is contacted by media and replies to inquiries.
 - The repetition of facts occurs in high numbers. Misinformation may spread regardless.
- 3. Implementation and usage phases – active media relations:**
 - The project is implemented and new tech is in use
 - The project manager uses own competencies and styles of working with media
 - Need to create communication strategies
 - Sharing of the broader context with the media. Hype may occur.
- 4. Success and impact phases – proactive media relations:**
 - The project has received media coverage up to a saturation point
 - The new tech's novelty value has (locally) decreased
 - The project manager proceeds to a proactive mode: providing full context, in-depth insights or behind-the-scenes reporting possibilities.
- 5. Dependence phase – sustaining media relations**
 - The novelty becomes familiar
 - The proactive project manager keeps the relationship with media alive by providing updates.
 - Informs about the future progress of new tech or implementing it, dependent on external factors such as policymaking, investments, vehicle manufacturers and regulations.

Once the next level of actions related to the new technology begins, the news value may rise again and the relationship process cycle starts anew.

What is transferable to other cities and regions?

Best practices in media relations should be taken into consideration when entering the era where trustworthy, transparent online presence is more important than ever.

What are outcomes and conclusions?

Open and transparent communications from industry to media lead to better outcome, when media is allowed to get more familiar with the phenomena, provided by wider contexts or in-depth and follow-up stories. Industry provides the learning curve to take place instead of hype curve, which always leads to a bursting expectation bubble. The public benefits from non-bias and balanced news reporting on new technologies.

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Links

Åman Kyyrö, Milla (2020) The study Introducing Robot Buses to the Public - Project managers' views on media relations in Finland, Norway and Poland
www.theseus.fi/handle/10024/334555

The Sohjoa Baltic webpage at sohjoabaltic.eu