

Public Relations in Higher Education: The Public Relations Functions of the University of Natal, Durban from 1989-1992 with special emphasis on *NU Focus*

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Brief Background to the Study

Controversial events over the last three years have forced the University of Natal (NU) to take a close look at such issues as gender, affirmative action, academic standards, equality of opportunity, as well as other pressing matters such as financial insecurities.

NU is experiencing economic, political, social and educational crises and is being forced to address them in the politically and economically unstable climate of the country as a whole. Maintaining favourable media coverage and a positive public image is NU's most difficult and urgent task as the institution is forced to seek more and more of its funding from the private sector.

Questions and Issues Investigated

- is PR necessary in general and specifically in the context of a university?
- how PR operates in a higher education institution, concentrating on NU.
- past and present NU PR policies from 1985 onwards
- the role of NU Focus as a PR vehicle. I investigate the following:
 1. In the light of Antonio Gramsci's notion of consent and organic intellectuals, what is NU Focus' overall role as a PR exercise outside the university community?
 2. How do certain aspects of news production - newsworthiness, space and time - affect the content of NU Focus?
 3. What sort of advertising is NU Focus attracting and who are the targets of the advertising?
 4. A content analysis of NU Focus, in terms of its subject matter explores why science-related subject matter, as opposed to Commerce, Arts and Law, appears to make up the bulk of the magazine's subject content.

PUBLIC RELATIONS: THEORY OR PRACTICE?

No unifying theory of public relations (PR) exists. In each field different kinds of PR are required: for example, higher education requires a different set of practices and involving different needs in comparison to PR serving big business. PR plays a central role in strategic planning of higher education (Higgins: 1983: 25).

What do we mean by Public Relations?

According to the Public Relations Institute of South Africa: "Public relations is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain understanding between an organization and its public" (Malan and L'Estrange, 1981: 5).

PR is a broad and complex activity although its basic objective is simple: to communicate in order to achieve understanding through knowledge (Jefkins, 1982: 5). Consequently, PR exists, like it or not, and all modern organizations, because of their size and complexity, need and are concerned with PR. Good PR -- the conscious effort to inform and be informed -- provides knowledge, understanding, goodwill and a good reputation. PR exists to keep institutions alert to an ever-shifting environment of circumstance and public opinion (Cantor, 1989: 26). Especially in South Africa where the country, and hence all its institutions, is undergoing a phase of transition, this function is absolutely vital.

PR is an on-going activity, hence the word "sustained" in the definition. It must anticipate problems and eliminate causes before problems arise. It is not there to rescue an operation or to apologise for it (Malan and L'Estrange, 1981: 12). PR is essentially concerned with communication: between people, between people and organizations and within and between organizations.

Some Difficulties Faced by Public Relations

PR practitioners are visibly pivoted between the institutions they represent and their critics. They face antagonism from many elements - government, educators, intellectuals, many media people, and even many of the 'practical' people in their own organizations. In fact, it is their position 'in the middle', where no one is ever completely loved by either side, that could account for the unfavourable treatment the profession sometimes receives (Lesly 1982: 11).

To plan a programme or campaign, practitioners must know the kind of publics with which they are dealing (Grunig 1983: 28). It has long been assumed that if 'people are out there', they can be reached with messages. This view is being complicated by the growing sophistication of the audience, the great increase in the number of messages and media aimed at people, and their reduced tendency to read and to pay attention. It is almost impossible to reverse a trend of public opinion through the communications efforts alone (Lesly 1982: 12).

Any organization has many publics which it must reach and win over. The same approach will not work for all of them but it must be consistent enough so that the organization does not appear to suffer from a split personality (Higgins, 1983:25).

Publics develop because of situations or issues they face, not because of attitudes or personalities. As the situations or issues change, so do the publics. Thus PR programs cannot be set in concrete, or soon they will be aimed at publics that no longer exist (Grunig:1983:31).

Pratt (1985:16), writing in general on the Third World situation, argues that PR principles and practices in general which are acceptable in the West, cannot be instantly applied to developing nations. He suggests that socio-economic and political systems define the structural role of the practitioner, and that makes PR's role a function of the social system. Most socio-political systems in developing nations perpetuate the institutional *status quo*, so that the region's mass media have considerable difficulty charting a course significantly different from that of the government. Since the mass media are largely government-owned and owe their survival to it they are required to support it and its programmes.

Thus, the system will require that for PR practitioners to be socially responsible, they must be team-players, in accordance with the dictates of the government. PR thus becomes a conduit for communicating development news and for nurturing a development-orientated norm among audiences (Pratt:1985:15). However, this is a conspicuous example of PR being used for propaganda activity and is one of the ways in which the image of the profession has become tainted.

South Africa has a complex blend of Third World elements and First World commerce, making the situation different and a lot more complex than other nations classified as Third World. Certain electronic media is government-owned but the print media is privately owned. The Government is supported by significant bloc of the media through necessity and not force (Louw, 1991). One could suggest, therefore, that, in South Africa, these different patterns of ownership would use and reflect different public relations practices as well.

PUBLIC RELATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

General Background

The modern university, despite being relatively autonomous from Government, is still, nevertheless, partly subject to its authority and to a greater or lesser degree dependent on it for financial support.

As a result, a tension exists between the university and the Government. To counteract government control, academics in Western universities developed claims of university autonomy and academic freedom derived from legal and customary precedents.

Over the years, the powers of government have grown dramatically and the

university is being subjected to constraints imposed by party politics for the promotion of national policies. There is no reason to believe that this will differ under post-apartheid governments.

Universities established in former colonial territories experience an added set of problems. Different societies are at dramatically different levels of economic development. Natural resources are unevenly distributed. Thus, the needs of these societies vary immensely and, with them, the demands that a society is justified in placing on its educational institutions.

Priorities in a university will vary according to the economic situation of the society in which it is located. Besides economic factors, political and ideological factors also affect the relationship between the government and the university; especially the degree of compatibility between the perceptions of the government and the perceptions of the various social classes as to what the educational needs of the society are.

In a society that is neither democratic nor homogenous, consensus is conspicuously absent and conflict is endemic (Thompson in Van der Merwe and Welsh 1977:280-1).

Some Problems Facing Modern Universities:

Cutbacks in Financial Subsidization

A university needs a clearly defined sense of self and image. Higgens (1983:25) suggests that this is becoming increasingly important to a university's development in the area of fund-raising. Simply invoking *Alma Mater* is likely still to draw gifts from alumni, but other potential donors, for example corporate donors, need much more persuasive reasons. Corporate donors look for a well-managed institution whose identity and purpose fit with the corporation's own identity. For example, WITS University is geared towards business and commerce because of the Pretoria - Witwatersrand - Vereeniging area's mining-capital orientation. In this way the corporation can feel that its own interests are being served through its sponsorship of that institution.

Here one could outline two broad points of view opposing the status of the contemporary South African university:

- from the point of view of commerce and Government, higher education institutions do not enjoy a reputation for good management of resources. Commerce generally see higher education as extravagant and unbusinesslike. Universities are sometimes regarded as a luxury that society could well do without (Tomaselli 1986:1).
- From a post-apartheid point of view:

The Western ideal of a liberal education is being seriously questioned in many quarters in South Africa. It is being challenged on two main counts: for its tendency to elitism and

on its relevance to the present day needs of society. To put it bluntly: What is the use of a liberal education if people are poor, starving and oppressed? (Hartshorne 1987:3).

In mid-1987 the Government identified universities, particularly English-language campuses, as sites of revolution (ibid). It warned that a failure to curb "campus unrest" would result in punitive cuts in state subsidies. The universities rejected this and tempted the State's retaliation. Consequently, university fees rose by a massive 21% per annum, putting considerable strain on the university's ability to survive.

Building a Reputable Public Image

In attempting to retain an image of the university as 'responsible', public relations officers are trying to build an image of what universities are not (Tomaselli 1986:1).

The academy is becoming increasingly dependent on business grants and for this reason it is necessary to present an image of the university as being beneficial to capital to an often hostile business community. Universities are contradictory institutions which relate to society in contradictory and confusing ways (Tomaselli, 1986). English-language universities are loosely administrated, each department a virtual independent entity in terms of theoretical position, action, course orientation etc.

Because the public image of a university is a fragmented one, it becomes an exceptionally difficult task for the PR officer to present a positive, whole image to the public. 'What the public wants' - the normal public relations guideline - is simply not an issue in any faculty. Contradictions mirror our divided society. Different sections of university are concerned with different needs, publics and futures. Tomaselli (1986) further argues that PR officers are always at pains to project reassuring, unthreatening images of the university.

Tomaselli (1986) gives two reasons why academics are reluctant to cooperate with PR officers: firstly, they feel public relations people have no sense of what they are doing and secondly, they frown on too much personal publicity.

The bottom line is that there is no single public profile of the university in South Africa because universities here mean different things to different people. Thus universities cannot be 'sold' to the public in the usual, commercial sense. This is the problem for PR officers trained in commercial business PR. Those tactics cannot be applied in higher education because the aims and needs of education are different.

Tomaselli (1986) concluded that:

Public relations will never be able to present a clear image of the university while it tries to define the university in technicist terms and produce an image which can be sold like any other package. If they consider themselves educators rather than

salesmen then they may be able to come to grips with the image of the university. Whether this can be done in the face of the state's objectification of the university as 'the enemy' is, of course, the big question.

Conditions within which university PR operated following President de Klerk's reforms in the post-apartheid era, have changed dramatically, however. Now the question was not government repression, but a bankrupt fiscus and the militant demands for 'peoples' universities.

Attracting Donors: to Market or not to Market?

The organizational or philosophical culture within universities has historically been staid and reserved rather than innovative and entrepreneurial. Marketing under these conditions was generally eschewed as being too commercial or tolerated as a necessary evil. This is changing. There has been a commensurate drive to a market (student and community) orientation as American universities came to realise that they exist because of, and for, the benefit of *students*, and not the administrators, faculty, and staff (Ryans and Shanklin 1986: 94). In South Africa, such a course needs to be adopted out of necessity to compete with other organizations in society for funding and survival.

Attracting Media Coverage as part of a Marketing Venture

Fast (1981: 3) suggests that educational institutions usually fail to get good media coverage. Other rivals for media coverage are sports, politics, entertainment, big business, religion and employment, and they are formidable opponents. Private enterprise has greater latitude in the types of products it can develop and promote. A university is permitted to market only one product - education:

Limited funds require us to subsidize only the essentials, and an active public relations effort frequently ranks somewhere between 'nice, but incidental' and 'totally unnecessary'. Universities don't have money and innumerable public information specialists as do private enterprise (ibid).

Fast (1987: 7) writes further that many educators feel uncomfortable with promotions. Their primary mission is to provide solid research and sound instruction at low cost. Unfortunately, this mission is seldom newsworthy when competing with political scandal, plane crashes, movie stars' sex appeal, and rugby matches.

Demonstrating its Usefulness

PR's task is to prove that it can be more active than reactive, that it can provide for the long-term and not just the short one, and that it is as important before as after a crisis (Birkhead 1981: 18).

In the early 1980s American educational institutions were facing serious

financial difficulties due to an economic recession. At that time Birkhead wrote that:

Higher education is in a period of retrenchment in terms of student enrolment and in the financial operation of its myriad institutions across the country. The causes of this situation are both demographic and economic, but the consequences are manifest in a certain climate on campuses for adjustment and compromise of the traditional balance of goals. The university is tilting toward a form of consumerism in education, a catering to demand for the purpose of maintaining demand. The university is sensitive to student ambitions and desires as never before, and those wants are being shaped by practical considerations in the light of the generally uncertain economic future (ibid).

This is the scenario that South African universities faced after the late '80s. One of the ways in which change is being facilitated in the NU community is through NU Focus magazine, to be examined later.

What role has PR played over the years at and how and why did it lead to the formulation of an effort such as the NU Focus?

PART II

The Public Relations Functions of the NU Public Affairs Division. A Brief History: 1985 - 1989

- Why a Public Affairs Department rather than a PR Department?
- 1985 - The First Public Relations Evaluation
- 1987 - The Second Public Relations Evaluation
- Publication History - 1985-1989
- Campaign History - 1985-1989
- The New Public Relations Efforts: 1989 - 1992
 - The Publications
 - The Campaigns

Why a Public Affairs Department rather than a PR Department?

According to Cantor (1989), public affairs is connected with government. Therefore, since NU is partly dependent on the government for support, it has a Public Affairs, rather than a PR department. Cantor writes that the objective of the director of Public Affairs (or government relations) is: "To maintain open communications with government agencies, legislators, and individuals whose actions may impact on the company and to communicate the company's policies fully and fairly" (1989:305).

The basic function of a Public Affairs department, then, is to maintain two-way communication between the University and legislative, governmental, and regulatory

bodies and individuals. It also analyzes and interprets economic and political changes affecting the operation of the University. It is responsible for developing, establishing, and implementing present and future plans, policies, and programmes to enhance the University's position with government and regulatory agencies, and for directing and coordinating the company's plans to achieve its legislative objectives (Cantor 1989:305-6).

Two evaluations were undertaken to gauge NU's PR policies.

1985 - The First Public Relations Evaluation

In 1985, a committee set up by the Principal found the PR functions of NU unsatisfactory. This was due to growth in the scale of NU's operations, frequent changes in PR leadership, insufficient personnel and resources to meet performance expectations, and a lack of clearly defined objectives and policy (Report 1985; Higgins 1983; Fast 1981).

In early days, when staff and student numbers were small, internal communications were informal and effective. However, the effects of growth and diversification eroded this old style and comfortable approach. It was felt by the committee that some of the internal notices and publications were doing a good job but others lacked coordination and purpose. It was realised that if a good internal policy was to be achieved then a clear policy to meet these perceived needs must be formulated (Report 1985:7-8).

On the subject of external communication, the Committee identified most closely with PR, the main purpose of which was to bring matters of importance to NU into view of the public. It was noted that effective external communication required the cooperation of the media and that this pivoted around two concepts: paid publicity, and news, which is free (Report 1985:8).

An important point was that what may be considered newsworthy to NU, may not be considered so by the media and the public (Fast 1981:7). Cost effective publicity depends therefore on the extent to which academic writings may be packaged as news. It was found that with some notable exceptions, the majority of the University's academics pay little attention to the news value of their work. Getting academics to produce newsworthy copy can be time-consuming and frustrating (Report: 1985:8).

The committee decided that policy was a management matter and that PR policy was the responsibility of the Principal who had the authority to carry it out (Report 1985:3).

The committee established the objectives for a future PR effort:

- the university must be aware of its image in its own eyes as well as in those of the public. These two views must be brought together.
- internal communication between staff, students and administration must be promoted.

- external communication between NU and the wider public must also be promoted.
- a defined set of service functions must be provided (Report, 1985: 3).

These objectives are standard PR goals.

The Committee decided that the success of PR depends on clarity of statement and soundness of mandate. The organizational structure and the quality of the personnel in the PR office was also of importance (Report 1985:11).

It was hoped that the improvements suggested by the Report would achieve a steady improvement in patron perception of the University and a consequent increase in the level of donations. It was also hoped that this would bring about a steady improvement in the quality of staff and student intake and finally, an improved set of service functions (Report 1985:12).

Despite the Report, Dirk Kemp revealed that in 1985 no conscious strategy existed, although the Mission Statement was a plan of sorts (Interview 23/1/92).

1987 - The Second Public Relations Evaluation:

A survey evaluation was commissioned by NU in August 1986 to explore ways of promoting communication between the University and its immediate environment of former students, parents, donors and other participants in University life (Möller et al 1987:2).

In South Africa the debate on the role of tertiary education institutions was charged with a sense of urgency (Möller et al 1987; Keenan 1981; File 1986). The entire education system was seen to be in crisis. Tertiary education was caught up in conflicting demands and pressures emanating from many sections (Möller et al 1987; Tomaselli 1986). The reasons listed in the survey regarding communication problems were numerous, some of which I elaborate on here:

- NU's mailing lists were hopelessly out-dated. NU was in danger of losing contact with large sections of its community due to a combination of residential mobility in the community and the University's inability to keep its address list up to date (Möller et al 1987: 7).
- fee-payers and company donors were found to have very little access to NU communications. Gaps existed in respondents' knowledge of NU policy and suggested that general information attractively packaged might serve a useful purpose in the community. It was discovered that people wanted to be better informed of the direction the University intended to take (Möller et al 1987: 47-50).
- what emerged from the survey was an ill-defined, albeit positive, picture of NU. Some thought NU non-elitist, while others did not. Past students and individual donors tended to project slightly more favourable associations than fee-payers and company donors. These areas of uncertainty in the image profile were cause for concern. The public was poorly informed about NU's

activities and initiatives in areas considered vital for the future of tertiary education (Möller et al 1987:29-35).

On the subject of NU's involvement in public affairs, a majority saw NU as non-controversial or lacking in courage in its stand on public issues. Only a few respondents agreed that the University was a "leader in the reform debate", or that it "maintains the right political balance".

Many saw NU negatively. Fee payers were less likely to approve of NU's involvement in public affairs - because it rendered the University too controversial and politically unbalanced - while individual donors were more likely to see NU as a leader of reform (Möller et al 1987:30).

- There was very little, and not much favourable, media coverage of the Durban campus. Some said that NU got biased coverage which did not reflect the full spectrum of its activities. Others saw academics and students as "apathetic" and the campus as "insular", dealing specifically with KwaNatal. It did not, therefore, project the image of being a national university.

Negative media coverage remembered by respondents was dominated by student activities. An implicit or explicit political dimension underlay most of their negative memories (Möller et al 1987:39-42).

- NU's campaigns for funds were aimed largely at KwaZulu/Natal Indaba constituency. This community is not rich enough to support the ever-growing needs of NU to ensure its survival (Möller et al 1987:24; Tomaselli 1991).

The survey offered the following conclusions:

- a perceived need existed to actively seek to reconcile First and Third World standards of education
- all sections of the wider community served by NU, including the black community, wished to be kept informed of progress in the area of educational development and reform.
- in relation to its size and financial resources NU was a solid achiever. This was a source of pride and empathy which needed to be publicly communicated (Möller et al 1987:52-6).

Publication History - 1985-1989

Past publications of the Durban campus' PR efforts included: NU Digest, Campus Events, NU News, NU Chronicle, Convocation News, and Alumni Affairs. Even in this six year period, The Report pointed out that the existing publications needed overhauling, and some publications were either revamped or cancelled. This was also necessary because it was becoming obvious that the publications were inefficient and not adequately fulfilling their communication roles.

NU News, a glossy news magazine, was "justifiably cancelled ... [being] an incredibly boring and expensive magazine using archaic layout and design" and NU Chronicle was revamped in terms of design, scope and target readership (Tomaselli and Louw 1988). Kemp said that the problem with the "notices" publications - Campus Events for example - was that they were perceived to be scruffy and haphazard (Interview 23/1/92).

Campaign History - 1985-1989

PR targets relevant publics. A conscious and tailor-made effort must be made to shape perceptions of those publics. A general effort to reach everybody is not sufficient. Each public is different and requires a different approach.

According to Tomaselli and Louw (1988), the PR campaigns that were undertaken between 1985 and 1989 tended to assume a definition of the served "community" as the "business community" only. This approach worked well to raise money from the white businesses but ignored groups, communities and other organizations which were not businesses. These other communities constituted by far the greatest population in Natal and unless NU obtained their support, it would find itself losing legitimacy amongst the very constituencies which could conceivably take over power in the future.

Tomaselli and Louw (1988:2) suggested that future campaigns also be aimed at the poorer sections of our population. It was simply not possible to target the same campaigns at recipients belonging to both dominant and dominated groups (see Higgins 1983: 25).

THE NEW PUBLIC RELATIONS EFFORTS: 1989-1992

The Publications

From 1989 on, the various publications put out by Public Affairs were either cancelled or revamped because they were haphazard and not "hitting the mark" (Interview with Kemp 23/1/92).

Other publications launched 1989 were streamlined and more efficient: NU Partners, started in mid-1990, was aimed at NU donors as well as with establishing credibility with potential donors. This publication was also considered a recognition document for those who donated funds.

NU Airmail, started in November 1990, aimed at putting the NU on the international map. It carries NU news overseas to other universities and academics, business people, private foundations, government offices, all as potential overseas donors.

NU Focus replaced NU Chronicle, a newsprint tabloid. A new format - that of a magazine - ensured it a longer 'shelf-life'. The magazine's content deals with problems in various fields and what academia is doing to help solve them.

According to Kemp, these publications have helped to lay the groundwork in reawakening interest, support, enthusiasm and pride amongst alumni and business people (Interview 23/1/92).

The Campaigns

Amongst Professor J Leatt's initiatives in 1991 was the idea of developing a comprehensive strategic 5 year plan for NU (NU Info, October 1991).

Leatt also cited the intention of achieving the University's 1989 Mission Statement as a reason for the campaign. He said that a plan which includes physical, financial and academic realities is vitally important if the University's Mission Statement is not simply to gather dust (NU Info, October 1991).

The subsequent campaign was split into two phases: the first being short-term and concerned with the immediate problem of financial aid. This was to be followed by a report-back on projected areas of need, priorities, and how the first phase was doing. The second phase is relevant to the key-decision makers and exploring the potential for growth. All the universities in fact are 'in the same boat - fishing in the same pond' for aid. Thus it is absolutely essential that other avenues of resources are found to ensure the survival of the University.

According to Kemp, the potential for growth is perceived to lie in the alumni (Interview 23/1/92). In 1992 only 2% of alumni were contributing, therefore, the potential in this area is the greatest. Moves have already been made in this direction using indirect methods and a low-key introduction to the idea of individual donations (see NU Focus Summer 1992: 41).

Kemp made the following suggestions as to how internal communications could be improved:

- it was important that NU recognised that PR was necessary because the University is a service-orientated institution and therefore the Public Affairs department must not be excluded from the public planning processes. I add here in support of this statement, Cantor's (1989:299) view:

... that even the greatest professionals in public relations are only as good as their management allows them to be. If they are not privy to the short - or long-range goals of the company; if they do not sit in on the strategic planning committees; if they do not have an opportunity to give their input, then management is indeed wasting a most valuable human resource.

- a "faculty contact" to liaise between faculties and Public Affairs was needed.
- NU needs a strategic planning process - a framework and a mandate that will be endorsed by the wider community.
- clearly defined goals and conclusions for PR activities were needed: what to achieve and how to go about it.

PART III

NU FOCUS - WINTER 1990 to WINTER 1992

- NU Focus, the Organic Intellectual and Public Relations
 - Popularizing "Traditional" Knowledge through Public Relations
 - The Question of Reassurance

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 - NU Focus Overview
-

NU Focus, the Organic Intellectual and Public Relations

Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci argues that intellectuals are the group most responsible for social stability and change: "they sustain, modify and alter the modes of thinking and the behaviour of the masses" (Femia 1981:130). For Gramsci, 'intellectuals' are not a distinct social class: all people are intellectuals in the sense of having an intellect and using it, but not all are intellectuals by social function (Nowell-Smith and Hoare 1971:3).

Gramsci made a distinction between 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectuals, writing that the former were such people as writers, philosophers, artists, academics and so on. They considered themselves to be "true intellectuals" in a social class of their own (Gramsci 1971:9). The term 'organic intellectual' describes individuals who are thinkers, strategists, ideologues and policy-makers. They are organically linked to the emerging class or sub-classes whose interests they express. They communicate directly to members of that class or sub-class, rather than to a wider audience. It is the task of the organic intellectual to bridge the gap between economic interests and political and ideological realities and to translate abstract needs into real social needs (Bozzoli 1981:10).

Organic intellectuals perform their tasks during particular crucial periods such as crisis and uncertainty. The unique feature of those organic intellectuals lies in the fact that they are not mere propagandists for their class, nor even simply the creators of its symbols and ideologies in these periods. They emerge as an essential part of its existence, consciousness and realisation as a class. Organic intellectuals

are ideological craftspeople whose skills reside in their ability to assess the balance of economic and political forces with which that particular class has to cope, to discover the nature of its consciousness as a class or section of a class and to translate its objective problems and needs into symbolic and political terms (ibid: 11).

Popularizing "Traditional" Knowledge through Public Relations

The purpose of PR is to facilitate communication between an institution and its publics: it acts in an intermediary capacity, working to popularise needs and changes. NU Focus is an example of the way in which NU Public Affairs has chosen to communicate to its publics by popularising knowledge which would otherwise be inaccessible to them.

It precisely in crisis periods such as that now facing NU that organic intellectuals are most manifest. NU Focus has an annual column - Honorary Graduates - which is a good illustration of how certain organic ('non-academic') intellectuals are recognised and rewarded for their ideas and humanitarian contributions. They act as publicity conduits for NU.

The University traditionally produces 'traditional' (academic) intellectuals, who couch their work in complex and sometimes obscure jargon. To the laypersons, this information is boring, often inaccessible and therefore useless to their needs or interests. Thus, in order that NU be seen to be benefiting the non-university communities, this work must sometimes translate its academic jargon into a popular form. For example, NU Focus's scientific and technician orientated articles become accessible to its readers in an easier-to-understand form by the use of simplified diagrams and ordinary, everyday English language.

Thus, NU Focus provides a bridge between technician information ('traditional or academic' knowledge) and the non-university publics by 'popularising' information i.e. rewriting into an easier-to-grasp form. By doing so, this information can be absorbed into popular common sense, which, at the same time, can be extended to a wider audience. The reasons for doing this are essentially two-fold: firstly, to legitimise the activities of the University in the changing milieu of 'traditional' to 'appropriate' or 'peoples' education; and secondly, to entice funding from the target audiences (corporate donors etc).

Overall, then, NU Focus fulfils the following functions:

1. To inform the target publics of NU's achievements
2. To build a positive image of NU both locally and abroad
3. To attract funding for both the magazine and the University
4. To popularize transition and change

5. To reassure the various publics that academic standards, social stability and growth are being maintained.

The Question of Reassurance

To take up the last point on the above list, there is more to NU Focus than its overt functions: that at a subtextual level it plays a role of reassurance, which is crucial in the uncertain and often confusing transitional changes that NU and the rest of the country is undergoing. For example, NU Focus has two columns called Focus on Excellence (regular) and Honorary Graduates (yearly), where academic work of high calibre and outstanding contributions to society are recognised. Thus, in this way, NU Focus reassures especially its feepayers, donors and advertisers that despite the chaos being inflicted on the rest of society, the University is still maintaining academic excellence, research and growth. According to Gillian Rennie, acting editor of NU Focus, this is not one of NU Focus's main reasons for existence, although the Winter 1992 (Vol.3 No.3) issue was about the University and was an attempt to reassure people that it still knows what it is doing (Interview with the author: 10/9/92).

NU Focus - the Magazine

NU Focus is a glossy, intended to be of "broader interest", with a wider mailing list (40 000+). It is sponsored by advertising, the University, and NUDF. The magazine was designed as a PR effort to open up new constituencies outside of the immediate constituency. Graham Howe - a member of the NU Focus editorial committee and editor of Indicator South Africa - said that it is geared around a series of campaigns - schematic foci of the personal engagements of the University in various fields. This is aimed at bringing together the seemingly disparate works of various departments (Interview 6/2/92).

Who are NU Focus's Target Publics?

NU Focus is mailed as widely as possible to a range of stake holders, groups NU considers its partners: students, alumni, parents (feepayers), donors, advertisers, community leaders, schools et cetera. The magazine also has a mail list called "Next of Kin", which are people who, at some stage, have had links with the University and have chosen to retain them through NU Focus. (Rennie interview 10/9/92).

Simply put, NU Focus aims to communicate with these publics to inform them of what the University is doing and to make them feel good about NU. Rennie remarked that they were under no illusions that PR is a positive image-building exercise rather than a critical one, so they want the readers, especially the alumni, to get a positive feeling about the University (Interview 10/9/92).

NU Focus considers that the main need of these target publics is to be informed of NU's activities and achievements and to show that it is not afraid to enter into 'tricky' areas such as the issue of Housing and Development (Summer 1991 Vol.2 No.1). By this NU can show that it is practically involved in other peoples' needs. Rennie remarked that NU Focus's readers are fairly affluent people who do not have basic material needs. In fact, one could go so far as to say that they do not need NU Focus: if one considers the amount of printed matter that passes the average person's desk or through the postbox, it is just another publication. That is why NU Focus is trying to prove to these readers that they need to know what the University is doing and that therefore the magazine is worth reading. Very likely, NU is now a completely different place to when past students studied there and they need to know why and how it has changed (Interview 10/9/92).

NU Focus was also designed to bridge the gap between business and the 'community'. On the surface, NU Focus's penetration is widespread; wealthy graduates and fee-payers are being informed about the University's service to the poor, the sick, the environment etc. Tomaselli (November 1991), however, contends that the magazine is not read by the poor who are often the subjects of the articles. Neither is it read by current Parliamentary or extra-parliamentary decision-makers. He is of the opinion that NU Focus needs to communicate beyond its present profile: that it must aim at those coalitions which could form the future government and not just at white business giants. Also, that it must aim potential fundraising ventures for the University at the Reef business area, which is the economic heartland of the country.

It is important that NU realise that the poor communities are not just there for NU's benefit - it must reciprocate by making available to them the results of its research through publications appropriate to their situations. Some other kind of publication would be needed to convey this information in an appropriate form to these groups, since it does not fall within NU Focus's ambit to do so.

Media Coverage: A Necessary Evil?

One of the tasks of PR is acquiring good media coverage for the University so that the public is informed about its benefit to the community. The problem, however, is that these achievements are often not considered newsworthy. Mainstream newspapers tend to ignore the University unless it becomes involved in some sort of political controversy.

The same concerns NU Focus: it carries important information about the University and its contribution to society's development but it seldom, if at all, reaches the local newspapers. However, Tomaselli (October 7 1991) suggests that the concept of PR success goes beyond simply counting the number of column centimetres of articles penned by NU academics which appear in newspapers:

This indicator is not a measure of public relations strategy, audience reception or impact - which are not the central issues - but rather of the degree to which one particular, and in my view insufficient, strategy has been successful. Measuring column centimetres only quantifies the degree to which one (important but not sufficient) mode

of publicising the University and disseminating research findings is successful.

This statement is echoed by Graham Howe: "Some NU Focus material will find its way into the national media but this is certainly not the major goal of the publication" (Interview 6/2/92).

Media Penetration - A Brief look at NU's Media Publicity

According to Tomaselli (October 7, 1991), NU's media penetration appeared mainly geared to generating an image within the declining "Indaba constituency", a point independently made by Moller previously. Concentration appeared to be on the white Natal business sector and the University's alumni.

Tomaselli asserted that although the Indaba was an important constituency, it is only one of several such constituencies of support which NU should cultivate. Although effort is being made by Public Affairs to widen this media thrust into other wealthy constituencies across the country and internationally, Tomaselli argued for a much greater and more consistent effort on broader front towards this end.

What to Report?

News is a social institution and a cultural discourse which exists and has meaning only in relation to other institutions and discourses operating at the same time. It cannot be understood in isolation from them, and the people involved in making the news have to fit their activities into a complex social network (Hartley 1982:8-9).

In newspaper production, certain institutional imperatives regulate news quests, and some of these apply similarly to the production of magazines as well: issues such as newsworthiness, space and time (Rock 1973:66).

Newsworthiness

The achievements of NU are, for the most part, unreported by the mainstream media and thus not directly experienced by the general public. NU Focus works to 'fill people in' on what is happening and to render otherwise remote happenings observable and meaningful (see Molotch and Lester 1973:118).

The work of promoting occurrences to the status of public events springs from the event needs of those doing the promoting (Molotch and Lester 1973:121). As a PR, NU Focus has specific aims: as well as informing its target publics of University achievements, the magazine is also a vehicle for attracting funding, not only for the

magazine itself, through advertising, but essentially for the University's continuing existence.

Paul Rock (1973:65) writes that news is held to be distinguished by its objective facticity. The readership of a newspaper is taken to be capable of recognising and demanding accounts of such facts. However, the public's interpretative procedures tend to be inaccessible to reporters, therefore the staff of the newspaper become a surrogate for the unreachable public. Thus while much news becomes what the office has itself decided to treat as news, 'newsworthiness' is still regarded as an independent quality of autonomous events.

The content analysis below suggests that NU Focus's staff decides what will be covered i.e. what they consider 'newsworthy' about NU's activities. *The analysis shows that science-related topics are covered more often than the Humanities or Social Sciences.*

Space

Policies affecting the layout of a newspaper pre-determine what can be reported. They map out a rough system of priorities, decide proportions that certain reports will occupy in the total presentation and limit the entire volume of events which can evoke a journalistic reaction. It is evident that the way in which newspapers allot space is itself based on some initial definition of the absolute and relative importance of different areas (Rock, 1973:67). As was suggested above, science-related areas are covered more often than other areas, which is an indication where priority has been assigned.

Time

General planning of each issue of NU Focus takes place six months in advance and specific planning takes three months. This limits the coverage of unexpected topical issues. For example, the campus conflict which occurred at the end of March through April 1992 over Knowledge Mdlalose was only covered in the Winter 1992 issue (Vol.3 No. 3).

Rennie said that in a case such as this, when NU Focus is unable to respond quickly, special issues of NU Info covering the issue in more depth is sent out because it can be printed within four days, whereas NU Focus takes three weeks (Interview 10/9/92).

Advertising in NU Focus

Advertising constructs the audience in certain ways: one of which is by targeting the audience it wants to reach, which can be narrowly or widely defined. Where advertising is concerned, the public has a double articulation: the target public

are 'sold' to the advertisers by the magazine, at the same time the magazine is 'sold' to the publics.

The process becomes self-reinforcing because the magazine 'sells' the publics they wish to reach to the advertisers; the advertisers pay to advertise in it; advertisers then become interested in maintaining those publics and the editors of the magazine make sure that they continue writing for those publics to ensure that the advertisers stay with the magazine. This process creates a media identity, which becomes very difficult to break out of. This identity may or may not square with the different publics targeted.

To Advertise or not to Advertise - What is the Purpose?

According to Rennie, NU Focus aims at attracting 'elite' advertising because corporations have the message that the magazine wants to convey, that of superior or elite quality and educated thinking minds (Interview 10/9/92).

Advertisers are largely attracted to NU Focus because the readership is educated, fairly affluent (indicated by readership survey - Summer 1992) and thus presumed to realise quality when they see it. In addition, NU Focus is enlightening people about good, practical social upliftment and the advertisers wish to ally themselves to that (Interview with the author: 10/9/92).

Advertising can also be used to reassure readers and popularize issues. These are often subtextual functions and are not immediately apparent on a superficial level. For example, the increase in "green" advertising in NU Focus by large companies: the issue of making the thinking, educated and affluent publics aware of the grave problems the environment is facing is being popularised (made to appear as common sense) by the advertising carried out by large companies. This is beneficial both to the environment and the company, with emphasis on the latter because it puts the company in a positive light and is good for business.

Secondly, it reassures readers that the companies are still in business and that if they have money to advertise 'things must still be alright'. The advertising level in NU Focus is different from normal mainstream magazines: it is not commercial advertising but rather corporate or public service advertisements.

The companies that advertise in NU Focus are mainly science and technology giants.

Content Analysis of *NU Focus* - Winter 1990 to Winter 1992

Part One

A broad content analysis of nine issues of NU Focus published from its inception - Winter 1990 to Winter 1992 - reveals a definite bias towards the sciences. Howe pointed out that there was also a pro-Pietermaritzburg bias. He said this was due to the operations base being located there. He felt that the entire University should be

represented (Interview 6/2/92). Rennie, however, said that more research in the science-related fields is being carried out on the Pietermaritzburg campus than on the Durban campus, thus generating more interest, and this warranted more focus (Interview 10/9/92).

The title on the first line in the Table below is the issues' lead. The title below it is the focus of the rest of the issue. The asterisks indicate the frequency of science-related features.

Winter 1990 Vol.1 No.1 - Education (Humanities)	Water Research (science) *
Spring 1990 Vol.1 No.2 - Legal Aid (Humanities)	Microbiology (science) *
Summer 1991 Vol.2 No.1 - Urban Development (Science) *	Agriculture (science) *
Autumn 1991 Vol.2 No.2 - Health Crisis (Science) *	Engineering (science) *
Winter 1991 Vol.2 No.3 - Geology (Science) *	Education (humanities)
Spring 1991 Vol.2 No.4 - University Life (Various)	
Summer 1992 Vol.3 No.1 - Religion (Humanities)	
Autumn 1992 Vol.3 No.2 - Environment (Science) *	Drama (Humanities)
Winter 1992 Vol.3 No.3 - Economics (Commerce)	The University (politics)

This analysis indicates that science-based issues came up eight times out of sixteen foci i.e. 50% of the entire nine issues focus was on science-related disciplines. Rennie said that although there is a conscious effort to balance the disciplines, science-related coverage tends to dominate, but not through any conscious bias. The reason Rennie put forward was that there is more research and practical activity being undertaken in the science-related fields *which are considered useful to society* (my emphasis) (Interview 10/9/92). However, this is in itself an unwarranted value

judgement which reflects the technicist ideology of advanced capitalism which sees the Humanities and Social Sciences in a pejorative light.

When asked about the need for more Commerce, Humanities and Social Science-related articles, Rennie outlined two practical considerations which limit the gathering of material from other disciplines: firstly, the staff of NU Focus is very small and it is physically unable to cover everything that is happening in all the disciplines. Secondly, NU Focus also needs to be *informed* about what is happening (Interview 10/9/92). This implies that academics in Humanities disciplines need to play a far more active role in ensuring recognition of the high calibre work they are doing. This would involve taking a far more active interest in the publication.

The common sense of advanced capitalism assumes that science and technology are the 'building blocks' of our modern way of life. But it is becoming increasingly apparent that the human factor is being left out of the equation. NU Focus needs to actively cover more on the Humanities and Social Sciences because, and in agreement with Lesly (1982: 9), "The human climate is now the determining factor in the future of every organization, institution and nation", and South Africa is no exception. This also ties in with Tomaselli's argument about the PR department's emphasis on a technicist image of the University (Tomaselli 1986: 3).

Content Analysis of *NU Focus* - Part Two

Highlighting a Criticism of the Magazine - an emphasis on science-related articles.

Content

The articles are written with the magazine's varied publics in mind: at a conceptually and linguistically more 'common-sensical' level than standard academic writing, with the use of much white space and good black/white and colour photography. Thus they are designed to appeal to and to inform people in all fields of the University's achievements in its wide variety of disciplines.

NU Focus's Use of Dominant Discourse - Consenting to the Norm

When Gramsci speaks of consent, he refers to a *psychological* state, involving some kind of acceptance - not necessarily explicit - of the socio-political order or of certain vital aspects of that order. His conception of consent is purely descriptive, referring to an empirical, if not directly observable, fact. Thus a hegemonic order need not incorporate liberal institutions and practices; indeed, it may be totalitarian in the strictest sense. To Gramsci, the contemporary liberal assumption that a people without the opportunity to express opposition or dissent cannot truly be said to consent would seem most curious (Femia: 1981: 87-8).

According to Gramsci (1971: 38), the reasons people conform or consent can be grouped into three broad categories:

- Conformity through coercion or fear of sanctions - acquiescence under duress.
- Habitual pursuement of certain goals in certain ways in response to external stimuli - unreflecting participation in an established form of activity.
- Conformity arising from some degree of conscious attachment to or agreement with certain core elements of the society.

Group two corresponds with Parkin's first meaning system - *the dominant system*: this presents what might be called the 'official' version of class relations. It promotes endorsement of the existing inequality, and leads to a response among members of the subordinate class that can be described by either as *deferential*, or as *aspirational*. That is, a 'dominant' definition of the situation leads people to accept the existing distribution of jobs, power, wealth, etc. Either they simply defer to 'the way things are', or they aspire to an individual share of the available rewards (Hartley and Fiske: 1979:104).

Although there weren't any questions which facilitated political (in the wide sense) criticism in the Spring 1991 issue (45) of NU Focus, David Robbins indicated that people offered comments that the questions did not cater for. Despite the fact that they were not printed, it didn't appear that the readership survey carried any substantial *political* criticisms of the magazine's agenda. This might indicate that, for the most part, readers accept the discourse in which the magazine is couched as well as the science-emphasised areas of interest.

Evidence for this is given by the percentage figures in the survey: out of 11 areas of coverage, 10 had figures of over 50% wanting the coverage to remain the same; with one area, the political coverage, being 47.8% (Summer 1992: 47).

NU Focus makes use of a variety of subdiscourses: a dominant capitalist/technicist discourse which supports corporate businesses and First World ideals; the discourse of popular or common sense used by organic intellectuals, which 'translates' the discourse of traditional intellectuals (academic jargon) into a widely-available form. All these discourses explain the ways in which PR facilitates attitude change towards a 'New South Africa' among NU's essentially conservative target publics.

Thus, if we seek to understand the news we will need to take account of two major determinants of what it means: firstly, the language in which it is encoded; and secondly, the social forces which determine how its messages are both produced and 'read' (Hartley 1982:14).

Molotch and Lester write that when one reads the newspaper as a catalogue of the important happenings of the day, it is to accept as reality the political work by which events are constituted by those who happen the currently hold power (1973:133-4). This would appear to be the same case where NU Focus is concerned.

Stuart Hall (1981:134) writes that we say 'dominant' (meaning system) because there exists a pattern of 'preferred readings' and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalised.

In speaking of *dominant meanings* we are not talking about a one-sided process which governs how all events will be signified: it consists of the 'work' required to enforce, win plausibility for and command as legitimate a *decoding* of the event

within the limit of dominant definitions in which it has been connotatively signified (ibid: 135).

Further, there is no necessary correspondence between the encoder's message and the decoder's interpretation or understanding of it (Hall 1981: 131). Decoding is not a mechanical process, rather it is a political (in the wide sense) process i.e. an active process. Most people tend to accept the dominant encoding i.e. interpret it as the encoder or communicator intended. They do this by accepting, for the most part, that what they see or read is 'trustworthy': "... the images conveyed by the media have ... become so sophisticated and persuasive that they now organise our experiences and understanding in a crucially significant way" (Gillian Dyer quoted by Lodziak 1986: 104).

By concentrating on science-related and technicist information articles, the NU Focus is reinforcing a technicist view of the way the world ought to be experienced, a view that reinforces and is supported by corporate discourses.

NU Focus Overview

NU Focus is a young, evolving magazine and with its circulation of 40 000+, it is its own best publicity agent. It is not yet self-sufficient but it is growing due an increasing attraction of advertising - 25% of the magazine at the moment.

The NU Focus committee is attempting to expand the mailing list to include a range of community, labour and political groups in the opposition fold. There is also communication with white and black schools throughout the province.

As for fundraising for the University, Howe said that it would be viable to look to PWV area for funding but first it would be necessary to look at the University's own backyard - to make sure it has its bases covered in Natal where it is likely to elicit strong support (Interview 6/2/92).

NU has had to struggle to put itself on the map, nationally and internationally. But the issue that has achieved this is the violence in the area, and this is not a good climate for investment and sponsorship.

Conclusion

Traditionally, the university has always been the domain of the elite, in terms of superior education and availability of resources. In recent years, there has been a trend of upward mobility from the working classes into this rarefied domain. Increasingly, people now attending NU are drawn more and more from the borderline between the middle-class and the working-class. Only in extremely exceptional cases will members of the lumpenproletariat enter university (Eric Louw 15/9/92).

The political and economic crisis that South Africa now faces has further complicated the already precarious position in which the University now finds itself. NU is being

forced to make a choice between two potentially volatile paths: to maintain itself as an elite institution in order to ensure its academic status and existence through the attraction of capital; or to transform itself into a polytechnic with a lower academic standard and wider class reach.

The former is the *educationally* correct path because it will not alienate the elite, thereby ensuring continued funding; it will also ensure that true tertiary education will continue to exist. The latter is the *politically* correct path because in order not to alienate the subaltern classes, it would be necessary to alienate the elite. The consequence of this would be an absence of an important source of funding: corporate business.

NU Focus was originally intended as a publication which would inform its target publics of what it was doing as well as create a positive image and 'good feeling' for its readers. This has provided the legitimation for its existence. This is, in fact, how the editorial committee continues to see its role. However, because of the acute financial crisis the University is facing due to the current economic recession, political instability and cutbacks in government educational funding, it is conceivable that the magazine is evolving into a vehicle for attracting funding to ensure the continued existence of the University.

Furthermore, PR has been adding to the confusion by trying to conflate the image of an elite institution with the image of a technicist polytechnic. The two cannot be conflated; they have different objectives, different academic levels and a different class reach. Only once NU has taken a decision on the future path, can PR do a proper job of successfully marketing the University for a specific purpose, audience and place in society.

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Graham Howe - Editor of Indicator S.A. and NU Focus editorial committee member.

Eric Louw - Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Cultural and Media Studies University of Natal, Durban.

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