

The interplay of Public Relations and Business Journalism in Regional Media in Odisha

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Abstract:

In India, business journalism and public relations witnessed significant growth with the market-driven economy after the economic liberalisation. There has been a considerable rise of business journalists and public relations professionals. Both share a mutually dependent relationship for their success. Business journalists and public relations professionals interact regularly and significantly influence business news coverage by the media. The present study attempts to understand the mutual interaction between business journalism and public relations professionals and how it shapes business news reporting in Odisha media from a source-media transaction perspective. The study adopted a qualitative, more specifically interview, and research method to have a deeper understanding of the issue from the perspectives of the business reporters and public relations executives. The study finds that business news gets prominence in regional news media in Odisha and is regularly covered. Public relations managers have better influence over business journalism in Odisha. The study also finds that advertisement managers of the news organisations also place a significant role in business news coverage in Odisha's local media. This exploratory study contributes to the knowledge regarding journalism and public relations from a regional perspective.

Keywords: Business Journalism, Public Relations, Odia Newspapers, Business News, Regional Public Relations.

Introduction:

Business and the economy significantly influence our day-to-day lives and livelihood in this globalised world. Business journalism is the branch of journalism that follows, records, and interprets economic activities and related data to make business and financial information accessible to common people in society. It also analyses and reports policies and actions by the government that impact business and the economy.

In today's capitalist society, business journalism serves three vital functions. Business journalists transmit and interpret news about events and development happening every day in the market to update the investors, business managers, various consumers, and the public about the economy and potential opportunities. They help enhance the transparency in the market economy by scrutinising different players in the market and their actions, highlighting the impact of various decisions and strategies related to business and the economy. Business journalism also creates a platform for building and mobilising opinions about the market and economy (Peter Kjaer & Slaatta, 2007).

With the rise of globalised economies, business and economic news coverage have received dominance in media increasingly. In India, business news constitutes an integral part of the mainstream news media. It received a boost in 1991 with the liberalisation of the Economy in India. Many specialised publications focusing on business came up, and general interest in news media started to give more space to the news related to the economy and businesses.

With increasing coverage of business news in media, various business organisations made efforts to represent themselves to the public, resulting in the growth of Public Relations. According to Murphy (2013), "Public Relations have become intertwined ever since with business journalism" (p. 21).

In the early twentieth century, modern public relations practice in India has its origin in Pre-Independence Times. It got professionalised during the first two decades after independence. Like business journalism, public relations gained prominence after the liberalisation of the Indian economy. The entry of various global business organisations to the Indian market and the rise of competition facilitated the growth of public relations in the country (Jethwaney, 2015).

Ghosh (1991) presents a comprehensive overview of the growth of business journalism in India after independence.

"Post- Independence, the Economic Weekly (now known as Economic and Political Weekly) was established in 1949. The Start of Planned Development during fifties facilitated the growth of business journalism in India. The year 1961 is an important year in the history of financial and economic news reporting in the country. This year, two leading business newspapers the Economic Times, owned by Bennett Coleman and the Financial Express, owned by Ramnath Goenka were born almost simultaneously starting a new era in financial and economic journalism of the country". (Ghosh, 1991, p. 72)

In Odisha, business news also gets prominent space in all the leading news outlets. Though there is hardly any specialised regional business news outlet in the Odia language, Odia news publications regularly cover economic and business news. It is a regular section in most of the newspapers and TV Channels.

On the other hand, public relations mainly was restricted to government organisations and few large industrial houses in Odisha. With the beginning of the twenty-first century, when several big industrial players started to set up their operations in the state, public relations services received huge demand. These industries used public relations to win people's confidence by sharing various benefits of their industrial projects. This paved the way for the growth of the Public Relations Industry in Odisha. Some of the big organisations. Presently, most large organisations have full-fledged public relations wings/departments. Smaller

organisations use independent consultants and public relations firms for their public relations needs. About four national-level public relations firms have set up their offices in the State.

The primary purpose of this study is to understand how business journalism and the public relations profession influence each other. This paper attempts to highlight important issues affecting business news coverage in regional media and present an understanding of the production process of business news in locally published newspapers and the professional association between business journalists and public relations professionals.

An overview of Business Journalism& Public Relations in Odisha

Odisha has a robust media ecosystem with a dominant presence of Odia language newspapers and television channels. The state has recently witnessed digital news platforms because of increasing internet penetration. For advertisement, the State Government has recognised 86 dailies, 61 weeklies, and other periodicals in Odia language. With a combined circulation of about 27.7 million, 16 newspapers are recognised as big newspapers. Similarly, there are about 11 television channels that broadcast news.

Though the history of the Odia press is more than 150 years old (Chatterjee, 2013), business journalism in Odia language newspapers had its roots during the 1990s. The regional media started to recognise it as a separate beat. While the history of print media is much older than that of electronic media, the foundation of business journalism was laid in electronic media. It was started during the mid-1980s with a business bulletin in Doordarshan by leading Odia daily the Dharitri. In the 1990s, when the national newspapers regularly covered business news after the liberalisation of the Indian economy, major Odia dailies such as the Sambad, the Prajatantra, the Dharitri devoted special sections and pages for business and financial news. Other newspapers also followed them later. During this time, Odia also witnessed the beginning of specialised business media with the publication of Bazaar. A fortnightly Corporate Odisha was also launched in 2009. However, both the newspapers could not sustain.

Business journalism in Odisha rose to importance during the advent of the 21st century, with several prominent corporate organisations and multinationals entering the Odisha market, mainly to set up mineral-based industries. To reach their stakeholders, these corporate entities used public relations and advertising tools, which in turn helped the growth of business news coverage. Several national-level business media also strengthened their base in Odisha during this time.

During this time, public relations practices became more prominent as these corporate organisations adopted public relations and communication practices to mobilise public opinion to support their projects/industries and reach out to various stakeholders.

Conceptual Framework:

News production results from interaction and negotiation between journalists and the source. The interaction involves both struggle and conflict and cooperation and partnership (Hout & Jacobs, 2008). According to Gans (2004) Selection of news is “essentially composed of two processes: one determines the availability of news and relates journalists to sources; the other determines the suitability of news, which ties journalists to audiences” (p.81). News reporters and news sources need to have mutual access to convert information to the news. “That

access is differentially distributed, depending in part on the social distance between sources and journalists, and even more so on their respective power”(Gans, 2004, p. 81).

Ericson et al. (1989) argue that News is an outcome of the transaction between news reporters and their sources. “The Reality of news is embedded in the nature and type of social and cultural relations that develop between journalists and their sources, and in the politics of knowledge that emerges on each specific Newsbeat”(Ericson et al., 1989, p. 377). The scholars put forward that many sources not only influence the news production process but also shape the news content and format. According to Cook(1998), there is always a negotiation between the journalists and their sources to decide the newsworthiness of information. He argues that while the sources have advantages in the news-making process, the reporters have more control over the news’s content, format, and presentation. This brings the two groups – journalists and sources – to conflicting situations. At the same time, the journalist depends upon their sources to gather various information to make the news. The sources depend upon the journalists to get their information transmitted as news in the media. Therefore, the journalists and their sources are dependent on each other for their mutual success.

Analysing the interaction between corporate organisations and the media, Ericson et al. (1989) suggest four different strategies adopted by the sources to transact with media. The strategies adopted by corporate organisations, as sources, to interact with journalists are Publicity, Censorship, Confidence, and Secrecy. Publicity strategy is used when the corporate attempts to draw attention or circulate information openly. Corporates adopt censorship strategy by affecting the news production process, influencing the final news. In this strategy, corporate sources make an effort to keep some information hidden from the public and disseminate selective information. The Confidence strategy is adopted when corporate organisations attempt to generate publicity by releasing sensitive information to select journalists. Secrecy is about keeping certain information private Ericson et al.(1989).

In the context of this study, public relations managers are considered as sources and business journalists as news reporters. They interact and negotiate with each other in the production of business news. The study applies Ericson et al.(1989) journalist-source interaction concept to understand business journalism in regional media of Odisha.

Literature Review:

Various scholars have suggested different definitions of business journalism. Most of the definitions agree that business journalism is concerned with reporting news and opinion about business operations and economic activities in media. It is concerned with tracking, recording, analysing, and interpreting various economic, business, and financial activities in society. Business journalism also covers news and opinion on activities and operations of business organisations, their performance, policies that influence business and economic activities(Roush, 2016). “Business Journalism is not a narrow and dry recitation of stock quotes and company earnings; it includes broader stories about the national economy and how the economic trends and policies affect the citizen” (Aggarwal, 2006, p. 240). Ahuja & Hiteshi(2016)define business journalism as “The activity of collecting and presenting news and commentary concerned with business and economy (p.90).”

The literature also agrees about the importance of business journalism, like various other beats of journalism. (Roush, 2009) posits “Business journalism in its role as a watchdog on companies and regulators can be credited for uncovering illegal and unethical practices that have caused investors to lose millions of dollars and workers to lose their jobs’ (p. 227).” According to Tambini (2008), business journalism informs the public about the policies and activities of private and government organisations and sensitises the investors, public and various other stakeholders. It educates the mass about economic issues, financial data, policies and activities of business entities.

Hayes (2013) divides business journalism into three broad sub-branches: Business, Economic and Financial. The author posits:

“The business journalist reports on economic change in a nation as well as reporting about major players such as CEOs, brokers, bankers, and other important individuals in the business world. Economic journalists cover a more specific type of story within the business, such as indicators of inflation, unemployment, interest rates, and consumer spending. Experts will forecast what is likely to happen to an economy from the indicators, such as recession or expansion. Economic journalists cover these predictions as well. Financial journalists tend to focus on banking, treasuries, currencies, and the financial systems of a nation. But as with most professions, drawing a definite line between these types of reporting is near impossible. Many business journalists cover all three.” (p. 60)

In their study, Van Hout & Jacobs (2008) argue that institutional force has considerable influence over news production, which leads to routines of news access and reliance on ‘pre-formulated’ sources or press releases.

Davis (2000) posits that a relatively small exclusive group – news reporters, public relations managers, and media consumers - constantly interact among themselves in business journalism.

Discussing the relationship between the source and journalists, Cook (1998) comments, “Each side relies on the other in the negotiation of newsworthiness, and neither fully dominates, because officials and reporters alike hail from at least partially independent institutions that command important and unique resources (p.105).

In their empirical study, Grafström & Pallas (2007) find that “business news items are edited by both parties, but that this process is subordinated to common routines, rituals, and norms supporting the production of the news rather than negotiations of specific content” (p.231-232).

From the literature, it is evident that Business Journalism plays an important role in society and that public relations significantly influence it. Though various scholars have studied the relationship between Business Journalism and Public Relations, there is hardly any study that focuses on Indian business news reporting and public relations. This paper attempts to expand knowledge in these areas by studying the role of business journalists and public relations executives in Odisha.

Research Objectives & Questions:

The study aim to present an overview of the interaction between business journalism and public relations professionals in Odisha to shape business news. This paper attempts to answer the following research questions:

How do business journalism and the public relations profession influence each other?

What are the major factors affecting business news coverage in regional media?

What are the strategies used by Public Relations Executives while dealing with business journalists in Odisha?

Research Methodology:

The study, being exploratory in nature, adopted qualitative research techniques to gather information and understand the subject. It is based on empirical information provided by business journalists and public relations executives in Odisha. The study uses the interview method to answer the research questions. Interviews are considered as one of the fundamental research methods. This is a widely used research technique and “provide information that cannot be obtained any other way” (Berger, 2016, p. 282). This method is known to provide more insightful information in social science research and is widely used by social scientists.

As part of the study, interviews were conducted with 17 participants. Of them, six interview participants were public relations practitioners, eight were business reporters, two were media educators, and one was a news editor. Among public relations practitioners, who participated in the interview, four were working in corporate organisations, one was in a public relations firm, and one was an independent practitioner. Among the business news reporters, four worked in print media, and two were from electronic media. All the interview participants were selected through purposive sampling methods. The average duration of the interview was 24 minutes. The interviews were recorded, mainly in the Odia language, and were selectively transcribed/translated for analysis.

The information gathered from the interviews was grouped into three categories for analysis and answering the research questions. The first researcher transcribed the data and prepared the grouped three categories, as per the research questions. The second researcher further validated this. Any differences in categorisation were sorted out through discussion and mutual agreement. The content analysis method was adopted to derive insights from the qualitative data.

Key Findings

Discussion with all the interview participants focused on three broad areas: the mutual influence of business journalists and public relations professionals, issues affecting business journalism, and how public relations professionals deal with journalists. The key findings are presented in this section.

The mutual influence of business journalists and public relations professionals:

Based on the responses from the interview and FGD participants, it was found that Business Journalists and Public Relations professionals share a mutually supportive relationship for their success. As one senior business reporter summarises the general nature of the relationship:

In Odisha media, business news is a regular section in almost all newspapers and TV channels. Business reporters need business news regularly, and for them, Public Relations professionals are the primary source. On the other hand, Public Relations professionals need coverage of their company or client in media. Therefore, they have to have a good relationship with business reporters to publish their press releases.

For journalists, public relations executives are the first and, in most cases, the only line of contact to access any information from the company. Many journalists do not have access to top management, and to get any information about the company or industry, they depend upon the public relations representatives. Public relations professionals have multiple channels of contact in media. Besides business journalists, public relations executives also have a good relationship with advertisement executives and the management of the media. A senior public relations executive explains:

I do build and nurture a good relationship with business journalists to get my content published in the newspapers. However, in Odisha media, the advertisement department enjoys a significant degree of influence on business news coverage. Promotional press releases need sanction from the advertisement departments to get it covered in the media, in most newspapers and TV channels. The business reporters often ask us to request their advertisement team to make their job easier.

The public relations executives revealed that they have to contact the advertisement department first to invite the media representative to cover their press conference or event. “Without the consent of the advertisement department, it is tough to get the journalist from the media to cover our press event. If you have a very, very strong relationship with the business reporter or news editor, you may avoid the advertisement department”, said a public relations professional. If the company has a good business relationship with the media, it becomes easier for the business journalists to cover the organisation. “Press releases of the companies which give good advertisements to our newspapers are given priority. We also think twice while writing any negative news about them,” informed a business reporter. One of the Media Educator provides further explanation as:

Public Relations representatives have the upper hand in business news reporting in Odisha. They, as sources, always try to influence the content and format of the news. Also, they have a greater say because of the advertisement relationship they develop with the media. Since Odisha is a very small market with few advertisers, newspapers give priority to companies that release regular advertisements to them. After all, it is a business.

Factors affecting business journalism

The interview participants also highlighted several factors that affect business news reporting in Odisha. The participants’ responses revealed that lack of financial and economic knowledge is a major factor that affects the quality of business journalism in Odisha. “Business news reporting needs special skill. The reporters need to have the skill to comprehend the languages of economy and business. But many of the business reporters can hardly understand the budget statement or a financial result of an organisation,” said the news editor who participated in the study. The responses from the business journalists further corroborate this. Since Manufacturing industries dominate Odisha’s economic landscape, especially mining and metal producers, the absence of technical knowledge is a significant

deterrent for many business reporters. They have to depend upon the public relations representative to understand the technical aspects. One of the media educators summarises as:

In the changing environment, business journalism needs constant knowledge up-gradation. But there is hardly any scope for training for the business reporters. None of the media schools in Odisha train their students on the fundamental financial and economic aspects required for business reporting. Overall this affects the quality of business news in Odisha. Therefore one can find many business news as a reproduction of press releases.

It was also found that most of the business news covered in Odisha media is mainly from a national perspective. As one of the business reporters said, "In terms of business, Odisha is not a happening place. There are very few listed business houses in Odisha. So sourcing business news from Odisha is tough. So we pick stories from business dailies to translate the same for my newspaper. With the online version of all the business dailies, our job has become easier". Besides national business dailies, agency sources like Press Trust of India are also preferred. For local businesses news, press releases are the major source. If the local business event is highly important, the business journalists file their own stories instead of reproducing the press release. For local business news, the reporters contact the public relations departments of various companies to gather information. "Therefore, one can find that most newspapers do not mention the source of the news or give byline to the reporter in business stories. This is because the business news in Odisha is a mere reproduction of English national press or press releases," commented media educator. The significant activities of a business reporter in Odisha, as said by a business journalist, are "to attend press meets/events, rewrite the press releases, translate business news from national newspapers and make a business news". Lack of adequate reporters to cover business news is also a significant challenge for business news reporting in Odisha. "In most of the news organisations in Odisha, the business beat is handled by one or two persons. They have to source news and make the business page/section of the media. In such a situation, there is hardly any scope and time for making an exclusive news story," justifies a business reporter.

Strategies used by public relations professionals to deal with journalists:

As given by Ericson et al. (1989), the study explores the strategies used by public relations professionals to transact with journalists. From the responses from the interview participants, it was found that the public relations representatives used all four strategies for interacting with business journalists.

Publicity: Business organisations regularly circulate press releases or information among business journalists. The press releases are promotional, and organisations try to influence public opinion by publishing them in the media. "We regularly send press releases, mostly on our CSR activities, to generate publicity for my organisation. We share such information across all media houses and follow up for coverage," commented a press release.

Censorship: Public Relations professionals are also restrictive in disseminating information to journalists, especially when negative things happen. They try to limit journalists' access to information and reveal what they feel safe to circulate. "We are not secretive; we reveal information to media even in case of negative development. However, we circulate only limited information and try to influence the journalist to cover it less prominently". This is further confirmed by a business reporter who said, "Companies are always guarded and don't

share the complete story. They filter information and disseminate information that is safe for them. In such scenario making business news becomes difficult”.

Confidentiality: All public relations professionals enjoy friendly relationships with one to two journalists. When they need news coverage of strategic importance, they contact their respective confidant business reporters. “If we require to share a piece of very sensitive but strategic information, we trust our friends in media,” informed one of the public relations executives.

Secrecy: In some cases, public relations representatives avoid engaging with the media or sharing any information. This happens in case of controversial or negative development that can affect the company’s reputation. “In case of a negative incident, it is difficult to gather information from the companies. Their public relations representatives do not share any information. They also try to influence us through advertisement department and other means for not covering the news” expressed one of the business journalists.

To sum up, one of the media educators explains:

Public Relations representatives use all their means to protect the interest of their client or organisation. Their position as a source for business reporters tilts the mutual influence in their favour. However, many business journalists have done good work and reported excellent stories, despite all attempts by the companies.

Discussion:

The study highlights various critical issues in business journalism and the relationship between business journalism and public relations in Odisha. It finds that business journalism, though given importance by the media in Odisha, is dominated by a small group of people, as seen by (Davis, 2000). They are the business journalists, advertisement managers, public relations professionals and, to some extent, the management of the media.

Though business journalists and public relations professionals are mutually dependent upon each other for their own interest, the relationship favours the latter more. The study reveals that public relations influence the making, content, and format of business news. However, they depend on the business journalists, who control the final news. This is in accordance with the findings of Ericson et al. (1989). This answers the first research question.

One of the study’s significant findings is that business journalism in Odisha is at a very preliminary stage and needs much improvement. Lack of adequate skilled business journalists, the inadequate scope for capacity development, and the poorly manned business news desk in Odisha newspapers affect the overall quality of business news reporting in Odisha. In most media, the advertisement department significantly influences business news coverage, which is not a good sign. This answers the second research question.

On the third research question, the study finds that public relations executives adopt all four strategies to deal with media, as suggested by Ericson et al. (1989). They use all these strategies as per the needs and benefits of their organisation or clients.

Conclusion:

This exploratory study contributes to the knowledge regarding journalism and public relations from a regional perspective. It provides insights about the transaction between these two closely related professions and can help expand knowledge about the same.

The study finds that business journalism in the regional media of Odisha needs further strengthening and professionalisation to play the role of watchdog for society. Strengthening business journalism can also help minimise the influence of the advertisement department over business news coverage. The media organisations need to facilitate skill building for their business journalists to improve the quality of financial and economic news reporting in Odia media. The Business Page or sections of media in Odisha should not be an extension of their advertisement departments.

Limitation:

This exploratory study throws light on the practice of business journalism and public relations in Odisha. Still, it may have the following limitations:

1. The study focuses on business journalists and public relations executives. Coverage of general readers could have provided a more comprehensive perspective
2. Most of the participants in the study were from big media organisations and business entities. Perspective from smaller organisations may provide additional information
3. Possibilities of the effect of the interviewer in the interviews process.
4. Probability of guinea pig effect in interviews.
5. Further Scope of Research:
6. This exploratory study provides a broad overview of the interaction between business journalism & public relations. Still, further research can be undertaken in the following areas:
7. Business journalism in Odisha from the perspectives of the readers/viewers
8. Challenges faced by smaller newspapers
9. Role of advertisement team in business news reporting in regional media in Odisha
10. Specific Constraints faced by business journalists in Odisha's vernacular media

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