

Fake News? A Survey on Video News Releases and their Implications on Journalistic Ethics, Independence and Credibility of Broadcast News

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The traditional lines between journalism and public relations are now intertwined and public relations practitioners have an influential role on the content consumers see every day in newspapers and on news broadcasts. This survey looked at video news releases and their implications about journalists' ethics, integrity, independence and credibility. 533 participants from three different populations (average viewers, communication college students, and journalists) responded to a 54-question survey that employed two predictors (i) level of experience and (ii) years of journalism experience. The results indicated that average viewers found the use of video news releases (VNRs) more unethical than journalists and communication students, although experienced journalists believed VNR use is having an impact on journalistic independence in news. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: VNR, public relations, news, journalistic independence

The influence of public relations on the function of the news media is one that merits further research than what has already been conducted (Curtin & Rhodenbaugh, 2001; Davis, 2000; Jain & Winner, 2013; Lee & Hong, 2012). Video news releases are just one of the many media tools that public relations professionals are using to get their message included in newscasts (Kioussis et al., 2006; Len-Ríos et al., 2009; Lewis, Williams & Franklin, 2008). The issue came to a head for the FCC after a video news release paid for by the Bush administration in January 2004 aired in totality or at least a portion of a VNR on 40 local television stations in 33 markets around the country (Uebelherr, 2004). The VNR featured people paid to pose as journalists praising the benefits of the 2003 White House-backed Medicare law, which offered to help elderly Americans pay for their prescription medicines. The videos ended with the voice of a woman saying, "In Washington, I'm Karen Ryan reporting."

In April 2005, the FCC called for a review of the use of video news releases over the issue of the nondisclosure of attribution. Commissioners unanimously clarified rules applying to broadcasters, saying they must disclose to the viewer "the nature, source, and sponsorship" of video news releases, but they did not specify what form the disclosure must take (Ahrens, 2005; Hughes, 2006). In a public notice to broadcasters, the FCC also reminded

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station owners that the maximum fine for each violation of nondisclosure of sponsored items was \$32,500 (Ahrens, 2005; Hughes, 2006).

It did not take long for media watchdog groups to start their own queries into the practice of VNR use. The Center for Media and Democracy engaged in a ten-month investigation and found that 77 television stations aired 36 video news releases in that time span. It also identified 98 separate instances where VNRs or related satellite interviews were aired without disclosure to viewers that the footage shown by the station was provided by third parties (Farsetta & Price, 2006).

The practice by public relations practitioners, government, pharmaceutical companies, corporations, educational institutions, etc., of providing video news releases is not a new one in the public relations field. The problem for the TV news industry is not that these video news stories are supplied for them. Stations can legitimately use all or portions of the video for free, but they are bound only by their journalistic codes of ethics to disclose if they got it from a source other than their employees (Ahrens, 2005; McFarland, 2005). The other current problem is that because of station's shrinking budgets and bigger news holes, producers are confusing the audience when they air produced VNRs within the normal news content and do not attribute who supplied the content (Ahrens, 2005; McFarland, 2005).

Fake news is not limited exclusively to broadcast television. Internet websites are the new home for these specifically targeted audio and video messages. They are targeted to a variety of audiences through web syndication, YouTube, social media, strategic placements in broadcast, cable, and site-based media in retail outlets, hospitals, and airplanes. Some clients even opt for "guaranteed placement," in which PR firms and production houses pay media channels outright to carry what they call "branded journalism" (Sourcewatch, 2008). The question is that if people are confusing these video news releases with independently produced news, what are the implications for perceived journalistic ethics, integrity, independence and credibility of news?

Advocates for media literacy say strides are being made, but non-attribution in print and broadcast still exist. To what extent communications sources outside the newsroom influence the news making process remains an important question within our changing media environment. Now with the government and the broadcast industry under fire for their use of video news releases, the results of this study will indicate how three different populations think the news industry is doing when it comes to the use of VNRs and how their use impacts how we feel about them.

Literature Review

A video news release is a client-sponsored video that presents a controlled message using a news angle, broadcast style writing, and production practices (Aronson, Spetner, & Ames, 2007; Tewksbury, Jensen & Coe, 2011). A VNR is also referred to as an electronic press release or an electronic press kit (EPK), and it is generally regarded as the television form of the printed press release (Machill, Beiler & Schmutz, 2006). Harmon and White (2001) found that VNRs promoting health and safety topics were aired the most by local broadcast stations and that VNRs are commonly used unedited by small understaffed regional television stations that have limited budgets for news production. However, they are also disseminated

to networks, such as FOX, and its affiliates through a video feed service (Barstow & Stein, 2005). Cable operator CNN has a similar feed service, which it uses to distribute releases to 750 stations in the United States and Canada (Barstow & Stein, 2005).

Production of VNRs is a sizable industry. One of its largest players, Medialink Worldwide Inc., has about 200 employees, with offices in New York and London. It produces and distributes about 1,000 video news releases a year, most commissioned by major corporations (Medialink, 2009). The list of other major corporations that distribute VNRs worldwide is fairly lengthy and it includes giants such as WestGlen Communications, DWJ, D S Simon Productions, KEF Media Associates, Multivu, etc. There are also hundreds of VNRs released each year by smaller companies, educational institutions like colleges, political groups, and non-profit organizations who have a message that they want to share with a targeted audience.

Journalistic Concepts

Critics of VNR use are concerned that it may jeopardize the profession and how the general public views journalists, and their ethics, integrity, independence, and credibility (Aiello & Proffitt, 2008; Broadus, Harmon & Mounts, 2011; Connolly-Ahern, Grantham & Cabrera-Baukus, 2010; Lewis & Zhong, 2013). These concepts are the foundations of the profession and what its founders, watchdog groups, and aspiring journalists purport the profession to be at its highest levels.

The issue of journalistic ethics is at the heart of the VNR debate. A journalist's ethical background and training helps him make judgments about particular situations that can impact many people. For example, he must weigh many news-making decisions on a daily basis that could mean the difference in how a person's reputation is reported.

Viewers and readers alike also want to know that they get their news information from a source that has a certain level of integrity. Not every news organization is believed to be honest all the time for a variety of reasons. Some people may perceive a loss of integrity if a station gives too much time to a certain politician or to an issue that is not treated objectively. When several high-profile reporting mistakes occur that bring embarrassment to one media organization, it can affect the integrity of all media whether they are associated with what happened or not.

On the other hand, it is hard for any broadcast or newspaper outlet to be independent of economic restraints. In the current market, we are seeing layoffs, furloughs and stations combining news sources to still produce the same amount of newscast time effectively and efficiently with fewer people (Gold & James, 2008). This decline in manpower also means an increase in the material used from sources other than a station's own generated material. Those outside sources usually come in the form of VNRs supplied by public relations professionals, advertisers, and politicians who have a vested interest in spreading their message through the media.

The credibility of a journalist basically means how much someone trusts in his reporting skills and his ability to gather all the right information to give a full sense of the story (Tong, 2014). Certain names of media organizations bring to mind different levels of credibility based on their past reporting practices and accuracy ratings.

All the above mentioned concepts, journalistic ethics, integrity, independence, and credibility are possible areas that VNRs may have a direct impact and they will be investigated in this project.

Regarding ethics, one's gender, education, family, social and personal experiences, and religious background may all have an influence in their judgment of ethics. We wonder that, compared to the average individual, a student journalist, who is receiving an education on ethical decision making and a working journalist, who are making these decision on a daily basis, will have the same perception on VNR use and their implications. News is a profession that encounters ethical dilemmas on a daily basis including conflict of interests, live coverage of breaking news, accuracy issues, juvenile coverage, and influence from the advertising and sales departments (Hanson, 2002).

VNRs are viewed as a growing ethical problem because stations' shrinking budgets and bigger news holes are making the use of VNRs more attractive to newsroom executives. However, the more experience an individual has with public relations generated material; the more likely he is to identify it as such. Most people have seen VNRs, but they may not recognize them as prepackaged material produced by public relations professionals. The reason is because it has the same production values as a typical broadcast news package that airs within the boundaries of a 30-minute daily newscast. However, we assume that the more training and the more experience that an industry professional has with evaluating VNRs, the more he will be able to determine when they are being used unethically. If the individual newsroom employee knows the standards set forth by his professional organizations and its organization, he will know what action to take when the decision is made to use it in a newscast. Therefore the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis

H1: The more industry experience a journalist has, the more likely the individual perceives VNR use to be unethical.

Similarly, newsroom employees are knowledgeable about how they should treat public relations material. They are aware of all the outside influences because they are aware of all the different forms available for them to use. Whether it is a press release or a video news release, journalists are charged with checking the facts and labeling their sources. It is the veteran journalist who knows that if he does not face every story with the knowledge that he will stay true to the core mission of the basis of journalism and its professional codes, there will be a loss of journalistic integrity that so many organizations are trying to restore.

H2: As an individual's industry experience increases, the more likely the individual believes that VNR use will negatively affect journalistic integrity.

While journalistic independence may be one of the guiding principles at the heart of the role as truth seekers, it also serves as an ethical compass (Rodgers, 2011; Singer, 2010; Steele, 1987). The concept can tell us where we can find some balance when it comes to the influences of our own self interest, internal and external competition, and deadline pressures. The principle of independence can also guide journalists in their responsibility to the public.

It is public relations practitioners who provide the numerous video news releases (VNRs) and press releases that flood a newsroom via fax machines, emails, radio actuality lines, and regional and national satellite news feeds (Machill, Beiler, & Schmutz, 2006). This type of public relations material is not going away anytime soon because of the market value it adds for the hospital or company. For example, a story called "Same Day Teeth" about a quicker way of doing lower-jaw dental implants was put out by the Mayo Clinic news service. The news service was started in 2000, and its weekly Medical Edge stories go out to 130 TV stations in the U.S. and Canada. That one story resulted in 175 calls, 23 scheduled appointments, and downstream revenue estimated at \$345,000 (Lieberman, 2007). The Mayo Clinic's media relations manager, Lee Aase, noted that 8.6 million people watched the December 2001 Medical Edge stories. The value was greater than ten times the cost of producing the shows (Lieberman, 2007).

Professionals or companies know that these types of pitches by health care companies, corporations, and government entities are just one way they can supplement their local station's income. While, they are aware of what giving in to the influence of others means, broadcasters also know it infringes on their effort to be an independent media organization.

H3: As an individual's industry experience increases, the more likely the individual believes that VNR use lowers journalistic independence.

Since the mid 1990's, the topic of credibility for journalists has been a big one; not only because of the popularity of television, but, also due to the increased use of the Internet as an information source (Curtin, 1999). The Internet and its accessibility to information has opened up plenty of discussion concerning the sources of a story and the credibility of the experts people are quoting.

With the airing of any type of news content comes responsibility. Thus broadcasting anything that is questionable without accuracy, expert sources, or proper attribution to contributing sources can detract from a journalist's credibility. With the speed of publishing and getting items to air, there is an increasing pressure to get the story out quickly while also making sure it is correct.

The decision to air a video news release can be a big decision these days for news directors because of all the attention it has brought to the credibility of news stations that use them without attribution or run them "as is." Following the Karen Ryan Medicare incident and the attention the *New York Times* brought to VNRs, now numerous bloggers, websites, and watchdog groups assess their own media colleagues and rate how journalists are impacting the credibility factor for viewers and readers.

When we assume that even the most experienced journalist can vouch for the accuracy of images that neither he nor his staff produced, it becomes a path of assumption that can threaten professional credibility with colleagues, peers, and the audience (Adrine, 2002).

H4: The more industry experience an individual has, the more likely that individual believes that VNR use affects a station's credibility.

Method

This study employed a survey to assess how people feel about the perception of video news releases and how they are used in local news broadcasts. The 54-question survey was administered through the web-based survey research engine Survey Monkey to collect data. The survey included an explanation of a VNR along with a website link to an example on www.youtube.com so a participant could view one in its entirety. Besides demographic data, the survey questions focused on journalists and their ethics, integrity, professionalism, independence, credibility, commercialization. Not all data are reported here as those related to professionalism and commercializations are reported elsewhere.

Procedures and Materials

The participants were emailed an invitation as part of the Survey Monkey software that included the link to the survey and asked to willingly participate. For the study, 584 people from three different populations were recruited through directed emails and invitations. The three populations are communication students, news professionals, and average news viewers. Communication college students were recruited from four universities in the southeast. Average viewers were recruited through churches. Professional broadcasters were recruited by the principal investigator through a list of active media at television stations and media organizations. All participants were told that the survey would take approximately 5-7 minutes.

Of the total of 584 participants, 51 were excluded from the sample because at least 10 items for two dependent variables were not answered resulting in 91 per cent of participants who completed the survey. Included in the analysis were a total of 114 journalists, 108 college students, and 311 average viewers willingly participated in the study.

More females (60 per cent) than males (40 per cent) took part in the survey. Participants' ages were reported as ages 19-25 (39 per cent), 26-35 (18 per cent), 36-50 (27 per cent), 51-60 (12 per cent), and 61 and over (3 per cent). In terms of ethnicity, the majority of the participants were White/Caucasian (88.7 per cent), with Black/African-American (8.3 per cent) being the second largest group, and others made up the rest of the sample. In terms of political views, participants indicated they were very conservative (14.6); moderately conservative (40.9 per cent); middle of the road (24.6 per cent); moderately liberal (15.6 per cent); and very liberal (4.3 per cent). In other words, this sample resembled a normal one.

The focus on the three different populations was to illustrate the difference in levels of exposure and understanding of the concepts that have an impact on journalists. For example, the average viewer may watch television for hours daily but may never think of the implications of the many issues such as ethics, integrity, independence, and credibility. The communication student may be more aware of those same issues because of the in-class training, courses, and internships he may take, but is more likely to believe that the news professional who deals with decisions each day will have the most experience in evaluating how the use of video news releases can have an impact on one's career.

Measurement

In relation to the use of video news releases and their impact on journalistic ethics, integrity, independence and credibility, at least four statements on a five-point Likert scale

were designed to measure each concept. The number 5 indicated that they “strongly agree” and the number 1 indicated that they “strongly disagree.” The scale was designed by the researcher to measure the perceptions an individual has of the impact of VNR use on the six journalistic concepts analyzed in this study.

To measure journalistic ethics, five statements were designed to measure respondents’ agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. These questions included “It is unethical for video news releases to be included in news content,” “It is acceptable for commercial messages to be included in news content if they are labeled with words on the television screen,” “It is unethical for a television news organization to air video news releases without them being labeled as such,” “It is unethical for a television news organization to air video news releases without oral attribution,” and “Television stations are sacrificing their ethics by using video news releases.” Reliability tests indicated a Cronbach’s alpha of .754. The five items were therefore summed, and an index was created for analysis.

To measure journalistic integrity, six statements were designed to measure respondents’ agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. These questions included: “Broadcasters jeopardize their individual integrity if they use any form of a video news release,” “Broadcasters are running the chance of damaging the integrity of their profession by using video news releases,” “Local television stations may use portions of a video news release to help tell a story,” “Broadcasters are being lazy if they use a video news release to supplement the content in their newscast,” “Broadcasters are deceiving the audience when they pass off video news releases as their own,” and “A VNR is okay to use if the narration is replaced by a tv station reporter.” Reliability tests indicated a Cronbach’s alpha of .790. The six items were therefore summed, and an index was created for analysis.

To measure journalistic independence, five statements included: “Journalists who use video news releases may be sacrificing their independence for corporate interests,” “By using video news releases, journalists allow others to make content decisions for them,” “I believe if a video news release provides information that helps solve a problem, it does not jeopardize the station’s independence,” “I believe local television stations are under a lot of pressure to put out video content supplied by the government,” and “The use of video news releases can serve the viewers’ interests.” Reliability tests indicated a Cronbach’s alpha of .711. The five items were therefore summed, and an index was created for analysis.

To measure credibility, four statements were designed to measure respondents’ agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. These questions included: “If a television news program includes a story with footage not produced by the news organization, it should be labeled with words on the television screen,” “If a television news program includes a story with footage not produced by the news organization, it should be attributed to orally by the anchors and news reporters,” “I would trust a local television station more if producers used words on the television screen to label video not produced by the news organization,” and “I would trust a local television station more if anchors and reporters used oral attribution to bring attention to stories not produced by the news organization.” Reliability tests indicated a Cronbach’s alpha of .745. The four items were therefore summed, and an index was created for analysis. The original scale had more items, but after running reliability tests, a few items were eliminated to achieve higher reliability.

Table 1. Level of experience: Means and standard deviations for the dependent variables

	Level of experience			F	p	ϵ^2
	JN	STU	AV			
Ethics	3.32 (.71)	3.14 (.56)	3.37 (.66)	4.90	.01	.02
Integrity	3.04 (.76)	3.00 (.57)	3.12 (.60)	1.76	.174	.01
Independence	2.76 (.72)	3.08 (.51)	3.19 (.57)	21.76	.001	.08
Credibility	3.38 (.77)	3.50 (.63)	3.50 (.60)	1.59	.205	.01

Note. JN = Journalist, STU = College Communication Student, AV = Average Viewer, F = Variance between subjects, p = significance $p < .01$, ϵ^2 = power, Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

Table 2. Years of experience: Means and standard deviations for the dependent variables

	Years of experience			F	p	ϵ^2
	JN	STU	AV			
Ethics	3.31 (.67)	3.29 (.63)	3.33 (.72)	.00	.904	.00
Integrity	3.09 (.60)	3.06 (.60)	3.02 (.79)	.47	.628	.002
Independence	3.17 (.55)	2.93 (.55)	2.69 (.76)	24.99	.001	.09
Credibility	3.50 (.61)	3.36 (.69)	3.46 (.78)	.99	.373	.004

Note. JN = Journalist, STU = College Communication Student, AV = Average Viewer, F = Variance between subjects, p = significance $p < .01$, ϵ^2 = power, Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the more industry experience an individual has, the more likely the individual perceives VNR use to be unethical. First, with the level of experience as a predictor, results indicated a person's level of industry experience had a significant effect on ethics, $F(2, 530) = 4.90$, $p < .01$, $\epsilon^2 = .02$. Post hoc Bonferroni tests indicated that the subsample average viewers ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.66$) perceived VNR use to be more unethical than students ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.56$) do. However, there was no other group difference. Based on the number of self-reported years in journalism, there was no significant effect on ethics, $F(2, 530) = .00$, $p < .904$, $\epsilon^2 = .00$. Hence, H1 was not supported and partial results indicated an opposite direction of the prediction; whereas, average viewers perceive the use of VNRs to be more unethical than college students and journalists.

No support was found for Hypothesis 2. It predicted that as an individual's industry experience increases, the more likely the individual believes that VNR use will negatively affect journalistic integrity. First, with the level of experience as a predictor, results indicated there was no significant impact on journalistic integrity, $F(2, 530) = 1.76$, $p < .174$, $\epsilon^2 = .01$. On the other hand, based on their number of years in journalism, a person's experience did not have a significant effect on integrity, $F(2, 530) = .47$, $p < .628$, $\epsilon^2 = .002$. There was no group difference with either predictor.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that the more industry experience an individual has, the more likely the individual believes that improper VNR use lowers journalistic independence. First, with the level of experience as a predictor, results indicated a significant effect on journalistic independence, $F(2, 530) = 21.76$, $p < .001$, $\epsilon^2 = .08$. Post hoc Bonferroni tests indicated that the subsamples communication college students ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.51$) and average viewers ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.57$) perceived VNR use to have more of an impact on

journalist independence than journalists ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 0.72$). For a person's self-reported journalism experience, results also indicated a significant effect on journalistic independence, $F(2, 530) = 24.99$, $p < .001$, $\epsilon^2 = .09$. Post hoc Bonferroni tests indicated that journalists ($M = 3.17$, $SD = .55$) are more in favor of the belief that VNR use lowers journalistic independence than students ($M = 2.93$, $SD = .55$) and average viewers ($M = 2.69$, $SD = .76$). Hence, H3 was partially supported. While the journalists compared to the other populations in this study do not perceive VNR use to lower journalistic independence as much, when years of experience are added as a predictor, they do view it as a concern.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that the more industry experience an individual has, the more likely an individual believes that VNR use negatively affects a station's credibility. The first predictor of level of experience did not indicate a significant effect on a station's credibility, $F(2, 530) = 1.59$, $p < .205$, $\epsilon^2 = .01$. With the predictor of a journalist's years of experience, there was also not a significant effect on credibility, $F(2, 530) = .99$, $p < .373$, $\epsilon^2 = .004$. No group difference was reported in the population subsamples. Hence, no support was found for H4.

Conclusions

The desire to learn more about how different people perceive the use of video news releases in broadcast news served as the motivation for this research. The majority of previous research relating to the impact of public relations on news content (Curtin & Rhodenbaugh, 2001; Davis, 2000; Harmon & White, 2001; Jain & Winner, 2013; Lee & Hong, 2012; Lieberman, 2007; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Sourcewatch, 2008; Turk, 1986) discusses how many times stories written and produced by public relations specialists appear in newspapers or in a television newscast. The survey employed in this study attempted to analyze how people perceived the impact of VNR use on concepts of journalistic ethics, integrity, independence, and credibility.

In general, the differing levels of experience for this study indicated that average viewers do not have differing views from college students and journalists when it comes to the founding concepts they believe journalists should have. In analyzing the concepts of integrity and credibility, no significant difference was found in the groups. However, when it comes to ethics and journalistic independence, there are some significant differences in how the different populations perceive the concepts.

Since the results showed that average viewers perceive VNR use to be more unethical than college students and journalists, we may conclude that more ethical training may be necessary in our college journalism programs. It seems that the amount of VNRs that are available to a newsroom through satellite feeds, network affiliations, and Internet downloads may have also jaded journalists' judgments and may be such a common influence that without constant reminders by the stations, journalists may not view them as a different form than other local, network, or cable news stories. The results could also indicate that journalists feel they attribute VNRs the way they were trained whether in the classroom or on-the-job. Therefore, they may feel they have no ethical dilemmas to consider.

For the concepts of journalistic independence, the level of experience and years of experience proved to be interesting. The average viewers and college students viewed VNR use to have a greater effect on journalistic independence. Then when a journalist's

years of experience were analyzed, it was the journalists who felt that VNRs were having an impact. From these results, we can conclude that journalists who had dealt with these situations more and understood the implications more had stronger perceptions than students and average viewers of how government and corporations can impact a newsroom's content.

There were obvious limitations in this study. The researcher did not clearly differentiate the concepts of integrity, independence, and credibility and they could possibly be considered similar by the participants. Future studies should look into more direct measures for each concept to ensure that participants generally understand the difference.

Other limitations include the need to assess other predictors of the dependent variables that were gathered and not gathered in the survey data. Future studies, for example, can use a composite measure of a person's ethical background to see if it's a better predictor of their perceptions of VNR use on the journalistic concepts studied here.

Also, more predictors not included in this study can be analyzed that might give a better assessment of why average viewers, communication college students, and journalists perceive journalists the way they do. Exposure to other forms of media such as the Internet, newspapers, magazines, etc., might also reveal how or if greater exposure to news, in general, influences perceptions of VNR usage. In general, an analysis including more variables and additional statistical tests might reveal why the hypotheses proposed here were not supported and had some mixed results.

This study was an initial step to spur more interest into this area of research and to add to our understanding of what people think of the impact of VNRs on the concepts journalists are believed to possess. As our media world continues to expand, the extent of the influence of a press release, a VNR, and a PR specialist can be viewed as limitless.

Hence, this is an area of study that merits further research to study the impact of how it impacts young and veteran journalists.

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