

Professional Standards Advisory PS-13 (October 2009)

USE OF VIDEO NEWS RELEASES AS A PUBLIC RELATIONS TOOL

All PRSA members pledge adherence to the Society's Member Code of Ethics. As issues arise relating to the practice of public relations, the Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS) is charged with providing guidance on such issues within the framework of the Code provisions. The PRSA Board of Directors then announces these guidelines through this series of professional standards advisories. The PRSA Member Code of Ethics may be found online at www.prsa.org.

ISSUE: This Professional Standards Advisory (PSA) concerns the distribution of Video News Releases (VNRs) to broadcast and cross-platform media such as newspaper websites in addition to portals such as YouTube and CNN's iReport.com without clearly identifying the source of the material, i.e., who produced and paid for it. Materials packaged as news stories, background footage commonly referred to as B-roll and clips are considered to be VNRs in this discussion. Additionally, there have been issues in the past with VNRs that featured former broadcast journalists or voice-over talent who announced that they were "reporting live" from the location where the piece supposedly originated. Compounding the problem, television stations that use some or all of a VNR and networks that feed the material to affiliate stations may remove the source identification or label.

BACKGROUND: A VNR is simply a news release that has been converted into a video format and is often distributed digitally. VNRs have been valuable public relations tools for almost 40 years. They are used by public relations professionals practicing in almost all areas. VNRs were widely scrutinized when they were distributed by government agencies during George W. Bush's two terms (2001 – 2009). Though VNRs have been produced by government agencies during administrations led by both political parties, they were brought to the attention of both Congress and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as a result of studies released by the Center for Media and Democracy, one in 2005 and a second in 2006. The studies and scrutiny that followed treated VNRs equally, whether they were fully narrated or packaged as news stories, or offered as B-roll with un-narrated footage or interview clips, even when the material was edited by networks or television stations to report entirely different stories that, in several instances, were negative.

Judy Phair, APR, Fellow PRSA and 2005 chairwoman of the Public Relations Society of America, testified before the FCC to defend VNRs as legitimate public relations tools and to advocate that existing rules and regulations, along with "vigorous self-regulation by all of those involved at every level in the production, dissemination and use of prepackaged materials" would result in "full disclosure." Phair supported her testimony with the PRSA Member Code of Ethics and two Professional Standards Advisories, one addressing Front Groups and another focusing on Disclosure by Expert Commentators and Professional Spokespersons of Payments or Financial Interests. PRSA's Statement on VNRs completed the submission.

The FCC had issued a VNR Advisory earlier in 2005, telling television stations that they had to disclose the sources of VNRs produced by government or corporations whenever they broadcast the material on public airwaves. But the FCC did not clarify the form of disclosure required. Around the same time, the watchdog General Accounting Office (GAO) reported that the "Bush administration had violated the law by using federal money to produce propaganda." The FCC sent enforcement letters to more than 70 television stations, networks and cable operators in 2006 and 2007, often citing the broadcasters' use of clips from VNRs to produce critical or alternative stories. In 2008, the Writers Guild of America, West (WGAW) urged the FCC to "end the use" of VNRs.

In addition to PRSA, the National Association of Broadcast Communicators (NABC), Radio and Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) and Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) have taken positions on this issue. While SPJ characterizes use of VNRs as "professional laziness" and "plagiarism," RTNDA has argued that disclosure is not required because VNRs are no different than written news releases. Those producing and distributing VNRs do not have agreements with media regarding use of the material. VNRs are provided free but could possibly be viewed as having a minimal cost to media due to the fees paid for network feed subscription services. Current regulations do require that sources of VNRs featuring political or controversial subjects be disclosed.

RTNDA and NABC have expressed concerns about the FCC intruding into newsroom decision making and interfering with First Amendment Rights. Including SPJ, all four organizations include provisions in their codes that suggest full disclosure. Codes for NABC at <http://www.broadcastcommunicators.org/#> and RTNDA at http://www.rtdna.org/pages/media_items/code-of-ethics-and-professional-conduct48.php most specifically relate to VNRs. SPJ advises journalists to "Identify sources whenever feasible" in its code, found at <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>.

As web-based and cross-platform media become more prevalent, opportunities for VNR use are also likely to expand, along with increased visibility come more occasions for scrutiny by the FCC, Congress and interest groups. As PRSA commented in its 2005 testimony to the FCC, "In a free society, almost any subject matter could be deemed controversial or political in nature by some individual or special interest organization." Public relations professionals are urged to make full disclosure of sources in all VNRs and accompanying material, and to include contact information.

RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE PRSA CODE: At least three Code provisions and six professional values relate to this issue. They are:

Code Provisions

Free Flow of Information. Protecting and advancing the free flow of accurate and truthful information is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society. The intent is to maintain the integrity of relationships with the media, government officials and the public.

Disclosure of Information. Open communication fosters informed decision making in a democratic society. The intent is to build trust with the public by releasing all information needed for responsible decision making. A member shall be honest and accurate in all communications and reveal the sponsors for causes and interests represented.

Enhancing the Profession. Work to strengthen the public's trust in the profession. The intent is to build respect and credibility with the public for the profession of public relations.

Professional Values

Advocacy. We serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts and viewpoints to aid informed public debate.

Honesty. We adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of those we represent and in communicating with the public.

Expertise. We build mutual understanding, credibility and relationships among a wide array of institutions and audiences.

Independence. We are accountable for our actions.

Loyalty. We are faithful to those we represent while honoring our obligation to serve the public interest.

Fairness. We deal fairly with clients, employers, competitors, peers, vendors, the media and the general public. We support the right of free expression.

RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES:

- Fully disclose who produced and paid for the VNR and include contact information in both digital material and the accompanying script. Clearly label the VNR, associated scripts, tips and suggestions.
- Avoid using the word, "reporting," in VNRs.
- Encourage television stations, networks, feed subscription services, cross-platform media and other venues to clearly identify the VNR source. Also encourage them to label bites, interviews and other footage that they may take from the VNR material to use in alternative or even negative reports.

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