

FOCUS ON VIDEO NEWS RELEASES (VNRs)

OBJECTIVES

- » Students will learn to identify Video News Releases (VNRs), which are produced by PR firms.
- » Students will think critically about VNRs within the context of the ethics of journalism.

DEFINITIONS

- » **PUBLIC RELATIONS:** Efforts to establish and maintain a company's image with the public.
- » **VIDEO NEWS RELEASE (VNR):** A ready-made, pre-packaged story—produced in broadcast news style—that is distributed by a PR firm to news stations across the country. These stories are created for clients and are produced by former journalists who are now PR professionals.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- » Surveys show that the public most trusts their local news team to tell them what is happening in the world, but local news departments are increasingly facing severe budgetary cutbacks which impact their ability to produce newsworthy reporting. Many local TV stations use VNRs as stories.
- » The public relations industry employs over 200,000 people and collects millions of dollars every year from clients ranging from wealthy individuals and corporations to government agencies.
- » The public relations industry is owned by the advertising industry and its mission is to influence public opinion, news information, and public policy on behalf of its clients.
- » By some estimates, as much as 50% of the information we think of as news originated from a PR company.

ACTIVITY

1. Go to www.prnewswire.com. (PR Newswire is a national news service that distributes multimedia press releases over the Internet.) Click on "Multimedia News," then click on "Video News."
2. Here you will find a list of recent VNRs distributed by PR Newswire. The icons to the right of each news release indicate the format (audio, video and/or print) in which the news release is available. Click on the camera icon and watch/review 10-20 VNRs. For each VNR, answer the following questions:
 - a. What observations can you make about this particular VNR? What do you notice? What stands out to you?
 - b. Who is paying for the VNR? (e.g. Six Flags, Cingular Wireless, Dirt Devil, etc.) How do you know?
 - c. What 'news' event has been constructed in this VNR?
 - d. What techniques has the company used in constructing their event to make it 'newsworthy'?
3. Tape local and national news over the course of several days. Try to identify the use of video news release footage. Bring your tape to class to explain why you think footage is from a VNR.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does anyone in your family watch the nightly news? What other news sources do you and your family members have?
2. Video news releases are created for a company (or the government), produced by a PR firm, aired on a news program, and absorbed by the public. Who has the greatest responsibility to tell us that VNRs are regularly used – the company (or government), PR firm, or journalists?
3. Is a VNR a valid news source? What makes a VNR different from a news report done by journalists?
4. The U.S. government sends out VNRs to news stations in the same way that companies do. Consider that the free press in the U.S. originated as part of the system of checks and balances on government power, and respond to this practice. (See the Barstow/Stein NY Times article below.)
5. Most critics of VNRs believe that the TV stations should either not use them or, if they do, they should label them on-air, identifying who provided and paid for them. “Not labeling fake news produced by the government or corporations,” says John Stauber, executive director of the Center for Media and Democracy, “constitutes news fraud, plagiarism, and violates the most basic ethical standards of journalism.” Respond to this statement.
6. What role does public relations play in democracy?

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» *Video News Releases Find News Airtime*

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