

Comparison of Media Relations Strategies in the Digital and Traditional Era

<http://dx.doi.org/10.25008/jkiski.v10i2.1265>

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Submitted: June 27, 2025, **Revised:** November 10, 2025, **Accepted:** December 3, 2025
Accredited by Kemristekdikti No. 152/E/KPT/2023 until Vol 12(1) in 2027

Abstract - The rapid evolution of the media landscape over the past few decades has fundamentally transformed media relations practices, creating a clear distinction between traditional and digital approaches. Traditional methods, such as press conferences and face-to-face journalist engagement, have proven effective in building trust and producing in-depth, analytical coverage. In contrast, digital platforms offer speed and wide reach through tools such as WhatsApp and email but often sacrifice relationship quality and message depth. While prior studies have examined both approaches separately, few have provided an integrated comparison within the context of a large-scale corporate event. This study addresses that research gap by evaluating how combining traditional and digital strategies can enhance organizational visibility, credibility, and media coverage. The research applies Two-Way Symmetrical Communication and Excellence Theory to assess how reciprocal dialogue and strategic communication contribute to the effectiveness of media relations. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study explored the MarkPlus Conference 2024 as a case study. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with six journalists (three from print media and three from digital platforms) and the Corporate Communication Team. Analysis was conducted by categorizing results based on media type, identifying advantages and limitations, and triangulating with secondary data to ensure validity. The findings reveal that traditional approaches are more effective in building personal relationships and generating credible, in-depth coverage but demand higher resource investment. Digital strategies enable faster information distribution but struggle to maintain long-term relationships. This research provides new insights by demonstrating that integrating both approaches creates complementary advantages, supporting more effective media engagement in today's dynamic communication environment.

Keywords: Media Relations; Digital Communication Effectiveness; Digital Media; Two-Way Symmetrical Communication; Integrated Public Relations Approach

Introduction

In the last few decades, changes in the media landscape have had a major impact on media relations practices. Media relations itself is an important part of public relations strategy (Audina & Aruman, 2018, Carney, 2019). This process, as explained by Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2018), is an

effort to build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and the mass media. This relationship plays a strategic role in ensuring effective communication, building a positive reputation, and increasing the credibility of the organization in the eyes of the public (Jefkins, 2016; Carney, 2019).

In the past, media relations relied heavily on traditional approaches. Organizations more often used methods such as distributing printed press releases, press conferences, and direct interactions with journalists. However, with the advancement of digital technology, this approach has undergone a transformation. Social media, data-based digital platforms, and online communication channels are now new alternatives that open up greater opportunities to reach a wider audience (Grunig, 2020; Johnston, 2021; Yang & Liu, 2024). However, this digital approach also poses its own challenges, especially in terms of faster communication management and the need for complex data analytics.

One real example of the application of media relations can be seen in organizing a major event such as the MarkPlus Conference. As the largest marketing conference in Asia, this event discusses various future marketing trends and important issues in the business world. In supporting the success of the event, MCorp as the organizer adopted various media relations strategies, including distributing press releases via WhatsApp blast, email blast, and collaboration with media partners. These efforts aim to increase the visibility of the event while getting positive coverage from the media (MCorp Corporate Communication Team, 2024).

In organizing The 18th MarkPlus Conference 2024: Think, Feel, Act – Transform Now, MCorp distributed 11 press releases to 242 journalists from 80 media outlets, of which 35 were official partners. This strategy resulted in 102 online articles containing positive coverage of the event (MCorp Corporate Communication Team, 2024). However, compared to the previous year, the number of media coverage decreased from 150 articles in 2023 to 102 articles in 2024, although the press release distribution strategy was still carried out intensively.

This fact raises several important questions. Is the traditional media relations approach such as press release distribution still relevant in the digital era? To what extent can digital channels such as social media increase the effectiveness of media relations strategies? In addition, the quality and depth of coverage are also of concern. Is the positive coverage produced able to have a real impact on the image of the organization?

This study has the novelty of comparing traditional and digital media relations strategies directly in one specific context, namely the implementation of The 18th MarkPlus Conference 2024. Different from previous studies that tend to discuss both approaches separately, this study integrates the perspectives of Two-Way Symmetrical Communication and Excellence Theory to evaluate the effectiveness of media relations in the digital era. In addition, this study also involves the perspectives of practitioners and journalists from print and digital media, thus providing a more complete two-way empirical picture. The results of this study are expected to provide practical contributions for companies in designing more adaptive and integrated media relations strategies, in accordance with the demands of media developments and increasingly diverse journalist preferences.

In this context, a comparison between traditional and digital media relations strategies is important to do. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of both approaches, especially in increasing media coverage, building a positive image, and supporting the success of major events such as the MarkPlus Conference. With a better understanding, the results of the study are expected to provide guidance for companies in integrating more effective media relations strategies in the future.

Media relations research has extensively discussed the effectiveness of traditional and digital approaches separately (Grunig, 2020; Johnston, 2021). Few studies have compared these two strategies in a specific context, such as a major event, to evaluate their effectiveness holistically. The MarkPlus Conference 2024 provides a unique case to understand how traditional and digital strategies can be integrated or enhanced.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on a range of theoretical approaches from various disciplines to understand the changes in media relations strategies in the digital and traditional eras (Seitel, 2020; Smith, 2021). Two-Way Symmetrical Communication, a concept from public relations, highlights the importance of balanced two-way communication for building mutually beneficial relationships with the media.

Media Ecology, a perspective from communication studies, looks at how the shift to digital platforms affects patterns of interaction and information distribution. Diffusion of Innovations, a theory from sociology, explains how new technologies affect media adaptation. Excellence Theory, a concept from organizational studies, evaluates the effectiveness of media relations approaches in achieving organizational goals.

Two-Way Symmetrical Communication (TWSC) emphasizes the importance of providing reciprocal and balanced information between organizations and the media, the information is accurate and responsive (Kim & Krishna, 2017). The goal is to build a mutually beneficial relationship (Grunig & Grunig, 2000; Grunig, 2020).

Reciprocal information is possible through digital media. In the context of digital media, this two-way interaction can strengthen relationships and trust (Lee & Seltzer, 2018). Ruiz-Incertis & Tuñón-Navarro (2024) stated that trust is a solid foundation in media relations. Through TWSC, opportunities are opened to improve the quality of news reporting and strengthen the organization's reputation (Men & Stacks, 2014; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

As an illustration, during the 2018 Hajj, the Saudi government used Twitter to interact directly with the media and the public as an application of the Two-Way Symmetrical Communication approach (Grunig & Grunig, 2000; Alsulaiman & Rentner, 2024). This approach encourages a deeper understanding of journalists' audiences, providing access to accurate data (Sadi & Álvarez-Nobell, 2024).

Unlike traditional media, digital media utilizes the interactivity of social media to create an equal dialogue between organizations and journalists. Meanwhile, traditional media such as newspapers or television broadcasts are more limited in this approach due to the nature of communication which tends to be one-way (Esposito et al., 2024).

In the context of media relations, the shift from traditional to digital platforms changes the way information is delivered, processed, and received by audiences (McLuhan, 1964). Digital media, with its speed and wide reach, creates new opportunities to convey messages but also presents challenges related to the quality, depth, and credibility of information (Johnston, 2021). However, traditional media still plays an important role in creating two-way communication, such as through opinion columns, interviews, or interactive programs (McLuhan, 1964). Thus, the Two-Way Symmetrical Communication approach integrates the potential of traditional and digital media to create a more inclusive and adaptive communication ecosystem.

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003) explains the process of adoption of new technologies by individuals or groups, including the media. In media relations, this theory helps understand how journalists and media organizations adopt digital tools, such as distributing press releases via email or WhatsApp, as an alternative to traditional methods such as press conferences.

Meanwhile, Excellence Theory is used to evaluate the effectiveness of media relations strategies in achieving organizational goals (Grunig, 2020). This theory emphasizes that effective media relations depend on the distribution of relevant, strategic, and in-depth information.

These theories complement each other providing a holistic understanding of media relations strategies in the digital and traditional eras. Two-Way Symmetrical Communication highlights balanced interactions, while Media Ecology explains the influence of technology on communication patterns. The Diffusion of Innovation Theory describes the media's adaptation to new technologies, and the Excellence Theory provides a framework for evaluating the success of media relations strategies in supporting organizational goals. By integrating these four perspectives, this study is able to analyze the effectiveness of traditional and digital approaches in the context of media relations.

Material and Methodology

The approach used in this study is descriptive qualitative through the exploration of digital and traditional (print) media relations strategies implemented by the MarkPlus Conference 2024. This approach allows researchers to gain an understanding of the practices, challenges, and outcomes of these strategies (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2018).

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with Head and members of the Corporate Communication Team responsible for media relations for the MarkPlus Conference 2024 event. The

researcher also interviewed six journalists involved in covering the event; three print journalists and three digital media journalists.

Then the data was analyzed through several stages. First, categorization was carried out. At this stage, data from interviews and reports were grouped based on media type (traditional vs. digital) and relevant aspects such as press release distribution, journalist response, coverage quality, and cost effectiveness (McLuhan, 1964; Rogers, 2003; Johnston, 2021).

Second, from the categorization, a comparison is made to identify the advantages and disadvantages of traditional and digital approaches (Grunig, 2020). The next step is triangulation. At this stage, the findings from primary data are compared with secondary data to increase the validity of the research results (Rogers, 2003; Yang & Liu, 2024). The last step is an evaluation of media relations strategy practices which include information distribution methods, journalist responses (Johnston, 2021), coverage quality (Grunig, 2020), and costs (Cutlip et al., 2018).

Result and Discussion

Effectiveness of Traditional Media Strategies

The results of the study show that traditional media relations strategies, such as press conferences and face-to-face meetings with journalists, have great power in building close and trusting relationships. Through this approach, journalists have the opportunity to dig deeper into information, resulting in more credible and analytical coverage. In addition, if, for example, due to being busy, public relations practitioners take a long time to respond to journalists' questions (Interview with print journalist, Dwi).

Print media emphasizes strict editorial review to maintain credibility, which often results in detailed and high-quality articles, and prioritizes relationship building and exclusive access (journalist source, Dwi). Both groups highlighted problems with the promotional tone of press releases. Print journalists prefer detailed insights, while digital journalists need interesting content that is in line with digital trends.

In the context of the MarkPlus 2024 Conference, this traditional strategy has a positive impact, especially in terms of the quality of coverage produced. Journalists still highly value press conferences because they can directly clarify information provided by sources. They can ask more in-depth questions (journalist sources, Dwi) so that they can get better and more accurate journalistic coverage (Waters, et al., 2020).

However, one of the significant obstacles in traditional approaches such as press conferences is the high operational costs and complex logistical needs, such as providing a special room and direct access to sources during the event (Cutlip et al., 2018; MCorp Corporate Communications Team, 2024).

In addition, print journalists often want additional data and exclusive interviews to strengthen the quality of their articles. Unfortunately, the limited space in print media means that the number of articles that can be published is smaller, even though the content has better depth and relevance to certain reader segments (Interviews with Journalists, 2024).

Two-Way Symmetrical Communication

The concept of Two-Way Symmetrical Communication emphasizes the importance of equal reciprocal and balanced dialogue between organizations and the media to build mutually beneficial relationships (Grunig & Grunig, 2000). In the context of Print Media Journalists, effectiveness can be seen from the tendency of print journalists to want direct interaction, such as press conferences and exclusive interviews, in order to obtain in-depth information.

Recent research shows that intense two-way communication through face-to-face meetings encourages the birth of more credible and analytical news, while increasing long-term trust between journalists and organizations (Ruiz-Incertis & Tuñón-Navarro, 2024). This was seen at the MarkPlus Conference 2024, where print journalists showed a positive response thanks to the relationships that had been established personally (MCorp, 2024).

Furthermore, Lee and Seltzer (2018) emphasized that forms of personal interaction such as direct interviews strengthen perceived relationship quality, which is difficult to achieve with only one-way digital communication. The superiority of print media in building personal relationships is in line

with this principle, where traditional structures such as face-to-face create a deeper and more contextual communication ecosystem (McLuhan, 1964).

Recent research by Esposito et al. (2024) show that traditional media-based interactions such as newspapers or magazines play an important role in creating reflective spaces and more substantial narratives, in contrast to digital characters that tend to be fast-paced. At the MarkPlus Conference 2024, print journalists' need for additional data, exclusivity, and access to sources illustrates how the traditional media ecosystem still provides space for in-depth analysis.

Effectiveness of Digital Media Strategy

A digital-based strategy provides a more practical solution to quickly disseminate information to various media. Digital media, although efficient, can sacrifice depth for speed, content adaptability, and visual appeal to meet online audience expectations (Interview with digital journalists). Digital journalists value content adaptability, speed, and visual appeal to meet online audience expectations

By utilizing platforms such as WhatsApp Blast and email, companies can reach hundreds of journalists at once. For example, at the MarkPlus 2024 Conference, a press release was successfully sent to 242 journalists, which then resulted in 102 online articles (MCorp Corporate Communications Team, 2024). However, the response rate was only 42%, indicating that this mass approach sometimes attracts less media attention than more personal interactions.

Digital media often considers press releases to be too generic and tend to be filled with promotional content. Digital journalists look for more unique and relevant information for online audiences, such as infographics or other visual elements.

Articles in digital media are often shallow because they pursue the speed of publication, so they lack depth in their analysis (Johnston, 2021). Meanwhile, traditional media still has the advantage in building corporate credibility through a more rigorous editorial process.

The resulting articles have a touch of quality that creates a positive perception among certain audiences. In contrast, digital media offers a wide reach with very fast distribution, although sometimes at the expense of quality and depth of content (Grunig, 2020; McLuhan, 1964).

In the Two-Way Symmetrical Communication framework (Grunig & Grunig, 2000), the relationship between organizations and journalists should ideally be dialogic, equal, and reciprocal. However, in current digital media practices, the effectiveness of TWSC is still a challenge.

Ruiz-Incertis and Tuñón-Navarro's (2024) study shows that although digital platforms such as social media can facilitate two-way communication, in the context of mass press release distribution via WhatsApp or email, the interactions that occur tend to be one-way and impersonal.

This is reflected in the finding that only 42% of digital journalists responded to the MarkPlus Conference 2024 press release (MCorp, 2024). Digital strategies do accelerate the distribution of information, but tend to sacrifice the personal relationship aspect that is the foundation of TWSC. Research by Lee and Seltzer (2018) also emphasizes that without proactive efforts to build personal interactions, digital communication is easily trapped in transactional patterns, not long-term, mutually beneficial relationships.

Digital media as a communication environment that forms fast, flexible, and visual social interaction patterns (McLuhan, 1964; Esposito et al., 2024). Digital Media Journalists show high effectiveness in utilizing the advantages of the digital environment, such as the need for visual content, infographics, and interesting headlines that can be published immediately.

A study by Muindi, B. (2018) emphasized that the digital media environment encourages journalists to focus on speed, visual appeal, and virality, although it often reduces the depth and accuracy of reporting. This is in accordance with the conditions at the 2024 MarkPlus Conference, where digital journalists were able to produce 102 articles in a short time, but the quality of the analysis was often criticized (MCorp, 2024).

According to Rogers (2003), innovation adoption occurs when new technology is perceived to provide relative advantages, is compatible with user needs, and is easily accessible. In this case, Digital Media Journalists show effectiveness in adopting platforms such as WhatsApp Blast and email because they are considered to increase the efficiency of information distribution. However, recent research by Alsulaiman and Rentner (2024) emphasizes that the success of communication innovation depends not only on the adoption of technology, but also on how the innovation is combined with a

relational approach that strengthens trust. This means that although digital journalists are effective in terms of fast distribution, there is still a gap in building deeper relationships through digital channels.

Print Media Journalists show that even though digital tools are increasingly widespread, traditional media still maintains its effectiveness because it provides values that cannot be completely replaced, such as depth of analysis and credibility.

A study by Alsulaiman and Rentner (2024) confirms that in strategic communication situations, the combination of digital innovation and traditional approaches actually increases the effectiveness of messages, especially in the context of large events such as conferences.

In this case, direct engagement with print journalists as part of the media that is slower to adapt to digital innovation, still makes a significant contribution to the quality of media output.

Table 1. Comparison of Traditional and Digital Media Relations Strategies in the Context of MarkPlus Conference 2024

Aspect	Print Media Journalists	Digital Media Journalists	Source
Distribution Method	Press releases are shared through direct interactions, including press conferences and personal meetings, fostering closer communication.	Press releases are distributed in bulk via WhatsApp Blast and email, focusing on speed and wide reach.	MCorp Corporate Communication Team (2024)
Journalist Response Rate	Print media journalists, especially from partner outlets, tend to respond more positively due to pre-established relationships and trust.	Only 42% of 242 digital journalists responded, reflecting that bulk distribution is less engaging for them.	MCorp Corporate Communication Team (2024)
Number of Articles	Print media contributes fewer articles due to limited publication space but provides deeper, more analytical coverage.	Digital media generated 102 articles online, but this number declined compared to 150 articles in the previous year.	MCorp Corporate Communication Team (2024)
Feedback on Content	Print journalists feel press releases often lack depth and specificity. They prefer additional data or exclusive interviews to enrich their stories.	Digital journalists often criticize press releases for being too promotional. They seek unique, trend-relevant stories suitable for online audiences.	Interviews with Journalists, 2024
Content Preference	Print journalists value detailed data, exclusive interviews, and strategic insights tailored to their audience.	Digital journalists prefer concise content, strong visual elements like infographics, and catchy headlines to engage online readers.	Interviews with Journalists, 2024
Facilities for Media	Print journalists need facilities such as dedicated workspaces, stable Wi-Fi, and access to key speakers during events to complete their coverage efficiently.	Digital journalists are more flexible and rely on quick access to digital resources, such as high-resolution images and video materials.	Interviews with Journalists, 2024
Speed of Response	Responses from print media are slower, as they require time for interviews, writing, and editorial	Digital media responds faster, processing press releases into online articles within hours.	MCorp Corporate Communication Team (2024); Interviews with

Aspect	Print Media Journalists	Digital Media Journalists	Source
	reviews before publishing.	However, this often comes at the expense of depth.	Journalists, 2024
Credibility	Print media is perceived as more credible due to stringent editorial processes, ensuring higher-quality articles.	Digital media faces challenges in maintaining credibility, as quick turnaround times may compromise accuracy and depth.	Interviews with Journalists, 2024
Editorial Approach	Print media articles typically undergo multiple editorial reviews, ensuring relevance and quality before publication.	Digital media editorial processes are simpler, prioritizing speed to meet online reader demands.	Interviews with Journalists, 2024
Personal Interaction	Print journalists value direct relationships with PR teams, enabling them to explore stories in greater depth. This fosters long-term trust.	Digital journalists rarely have direct interaction with PR teams. Communication is often limited to receiving press releases without follow-up.	Interviews with Journalists, 2024
Cost Efficiency	Traditional methods involve higher costs due to press conference arrangements, printed materials, and physical logistics.	Digital methods are more cost-effective, relying on online platforms to disseminate information without physical expenses.	MCorp Corporate Communication Team (2024)

A digital-based strategy provides a more practical solution to quickly disseminate information to various media. Digital media, although efficient, can sacrifice depth for speed, content adaptability, and visual appeal to meet online audience expectations (Interview with digital journalists). Digital journalists value content adaptability, speed, and visual appeal to meet online audience expectations (Pérez-Seijo & Silva-Rodríguez, 2024)

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Digital media often considers press releases to be too generic and tend to be filled with promotional content. Digital journalists look for more unique and relevant information for online audiences, such as infographics or other visual elements. This means journalists and organizations are trying to adapt to new work routines, norms and values in a context-sensitive way when producing content for social media.

Articles in digital media are often shallow because they pursue the speed of publication, so they lack depth in their analysis (Johnston, 2021). Meanwhile, traditional media still has the advantage in building corporate credibility through a more rigorous editorial process.

The resulting articles have a touch of quality that creates a positive perception among certain audiences. In contrast, digital media offers a wide reach with very fast distribution, although sometimes at the expense of quality and depth of content (Grunig, 2020; McLuhan, 1964).

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Comparison and Challenges

Both approaches have their own advantages and disadvantages. Traditional media excels at building personal relationships with journalists, which ultimately builds trust in the organization. However, this approach often requires a large investment of time and money. This is in contrast to the digital approach. According to the MCorp Corporate Communications Team, digital strategies have the advantage of being able to distribute information more quickly and efficiently. However, as journalists admit, they often lack the personal, important element in the context of long-term relationships (Grunig, 2020).

That is why it is not uncommon for print journalists to ask for additional time to conduct interviews or additional data so that they can produce a complete and interesting story (print journalists). This situation is different from digital journalists who prefer concise information supported by visual appeal.

These two different perspectives challenge public relations practitioners to find ways that can meet the needs of print and digital journalists. Public relations practitioners are challenged to adjust content that meets each need so that their media relations strategy is effective (Interview with Journalists, 2024).

Recommendations for Integrated Strategy

The advantages and disadvantages of each strategy, public relations practitioners or companies are challenged to be able to strategically integrate content for print or traditional media and digital media. In this context, press conferences can be used to build interpersonal relationships with print journalists, while digital platforms are used to reach a wider audience efficiently. Press release content must also be adjusted, such as providing in-depth data for print media and attractive visuals for digital media (McLuhan, 1964; Rogers, 2003).

This strategy supports the principle of Two-Way Symmetrical Communication (Grunig, 2020) which prioritizes mutually beneficial communication between companies and journalists. With this strategy, companies can disseminate information and build sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships with various types of media (Grunig, 2020).

Conclusions

The analysis and discussion provide an overview that print (traditional) and digital media have complementary roles in building a company's image and credibility. Print media offers advantages in creating in-depth and analytical content, while digital media excels in the speed and reach of information. However, maintaining the relevance and quality of content remains a major challenge, especially in the digital era.

The synergy of these two approaches, as applied at the MarkPlus Conference 2024, has produced the expected results. On the one hand, digital strategies expand the distribution of information, on the other hand, traditional approaches strengthen trust through direct interaction with the media.

The implication is that companies need to design an adaptive media relations strategy. The strategy is to combine traditional and digital approaches. In the context of building relationships, personalization in media relations, packaging content that suits journalists' needs, and utilizing digital analytics are important elements that need to be considered.

The right strategy allows companies to increase visibility, while at the same time contributing to building long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with the media and audiences. The next impact is strengthening the company's image and credibility in the future.

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