

Panel discussion: *Managing the PR function in a 24hr news society***Sir John Tusa, Chairman, Wigmore Hall Trust****Angela Phillips, Journalist and senior lecturer, Goldsmiths College****Anna Vinegrad, Independent PR consultant (former Head of Visual Arts and Culture, Idea Generation)****Vanessa Thorpe, Arts and media correspondent, The Observer**

(Charlotte Higgins, who was listed as a panelist, had to pull out at short notice)

[Sir John Tusa](#) is Chairman of the University of the Arts, London, and is a well-known broadcaster who was Managing Director of the BBC World Service: he was also Managing Director of the Barbican Centre and is now the Chairman of the Wigmore Hall Trust. John started the discussion by offering several observations about effective communications, which are relevant both to the old or 'heritage' or 'legacy' media and the new media. The principles for operating in communications haven't changed, but how to implement those principles are different. The principles that remain relevant are:

1. Keep control of your message: don't be bullied into talking and responding or reacting when you don't want to, or when the time is wrong to do that. If other people are pressuring you and that's why you are responding, then you have almost certainly lost control of the message.
2. Linked to this, there must be consistency between the external message of the organisation and the internal one. It is amazing how many organisations don't see the message as being a continuum from deep inside the organisation to as far outside the organisation as possible. There cannot be two messages – you can't say something to the world outside which the people who work with and for you don't recognise or may actually deny. If you're own people are denying or contradicting the message, you're in big trouble. It suggests that the message being peddled to the outside world is wrong.
3. Be positive, be on the front foot. You can always tell defensive PR: sometimes of course you have to be defensive. But there is still too much 'frightened' PR – a reaction based on fear of what someone might say before they've even said it. They might not say it, or if they do, it might not be true. If so, it can be harmful to be defensive about something that has originated from elsewhere and which might be so inaccurate as to not be worthy of being so defensive about. An aspect of controlling your message is to be on the front foot and get your message out: apart from anything else, if you're not getting your message out there, there's a vacuum, so either people know nothing about what's going on, or if you're an interesting enough organisation, they will make things up. The rule at the Barbican and the BBC regarding internal communications was that if you weren't telling people what was going on, the rumour mill would take over.
4. Don't kid yourself about the strength or the weakness of your own message. You have to be very honest with yourself and your organisation. You've got to be able to trust the person who you work to and with: John himself never had a PR person in

the room with him when he was being interviewed. If you cannot trust the person at the top to tell their story about the organisation then you've got the wrong person at the top.

5. Use simple language and avoid trite clichés. Avoid phrases like 'leading edge' and 'cutting edge' and 'world class' – it's like 'speak your weight' writing and says nothing useful about your organisation. English is a good language: Anglo Saxon words and phrases are very effective – avoid the Latin ones, the German ones, the American ones.

[Anna Vinegrad](#) – an independent PR consultant, who worked recently as Associate Director and Head of Visual Arts and Culture at Idea Generation, the arts and culture specialist PR agency – spoke next.

She started by saying that she'd felt a bit like a rabbit trapped in headlights with all the information from the morning's session, as she thinks she is a bit of a luddite where new media is concerned. The media landscape has changed and is changing: and there is more competition, fewer journalists, less print space. But at the same time, the expansion of the online realm has given us more opportunities to reach new audiences in a new ways. But it does add new layers to the work that we do, and we have to think about how we can meet all these extra expectations, how to cover all the bases. Social media is now a central part of the marketing mix. One question is, where does it fit in our roles? Is it marketing, is it PR? It's essential, definitely – we need it for building our communities. It's very labour intensive, and most of us don't really understand that much about it. The only way to learn is to participate, we need just to do it. It is very experimental and there is no guarantee that what we do this year is going to work next year.

Using social media to do things that we couldn't do by other means is one thing to bear in mind – rather than putting out the same messages through social media. One example of this is the RSC's and Mudlark's *Such Tweet Sorrow*, producing *Romeo and Juliet* on Twitter. For that, there was an offline stunt to push the online story – a tweeting a balcony at the Shakespeare's Head pub in Carnaby Street where Romeo and Juliet kicked off tweeting. It got 5000 followers – Juliet herself had 5000 followers very quickly. For the East Festival they did the online publicity: the digital director and creative director suggested creating a 'twike' – a Twitter activated bike that went round all the venues for the festival. This tied in with the Mayor of London's big push on cycling.

It's not often that things go very viral. Antony Gormley's *One & Other* on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, which Idea Generation worked on, went viral. There were 240 people on the plinth, 24 hours a day for 100 days. The Facebook group was 4000 strong, which helped generate stories when there wasn't that much to say before the plinth got started and they were trying to keep momentum going. The Guardian picked up on the Facebook page very quickly: people were talking about what they would do if they were on the plinth. There were 160,000 tweets, 33,000 messages on the website, 8.8 million website hits from 800,000 people. At the same time, it was fed by offline means – print, broadcast and so on nationally and

regionally (there were 1600 regional pieces). It required all the conventional 'old media' press and media relations skills.

There is still a real belief that nothing beats a really meaty piece of print coverage, and that is what we all strive for. The press and publicity function doesn't really change depending on the platform: we need to approach each platform in a broadly similar way. You need to understand the nature of the media outlet you are approaching: you need to read the papers, even have the publication open in front of you when you are pitching to a journalist. The ideal is an integrated multi-platform approach to each project – according to resources of course, being realistic about what is possible, but not putting all your eggs in one basket. Try to get a spread of coverage across all sectors – national, regional, consumer, trade, broadcast, listings, online and social media. Know what your objectives are with your campaign – selling tickets, raising awareness, driving footfall, building new audiences? Make sure that the social media activity complements the offline activity.

The content is key – finding a story, looking for themes and trades, how it works with the news agenda. And images are still absolutely crucial: they work across every media. The Format International Photography Festival have got amazing coverage: two weeks ago in the *Times Saturday Review* there was a big double-page spread. They'd had to work really hard to get that story – the journalist was in New York shadowing a street photographer. The images used had been selected by different street photographers, who had each written a small piece about each photograph – so the piece had taken a lot of work and a lot of coordination. Sometimes you have to go that extra mile and put that extra creativity in to get those big pieces, to make it particularly interesting and fresh to that publication.

So imagery is essential: if you've got a new production coming up, that can be difficult, but you can use old ones in an imaginative way or create new images such as montage images, or use illustrations e.g. from costume designers. Film can work when there aren't static images: this was used by the Wellcome Collection for their *Things* exhibition. This was an exhibition where people had to contribute things no bigger than their head, and it was pulled together at short notice and lasted twenty days. The public had to be aware that they were being invited to do this in the first place, but of course there were no images before there was an exhibition. So a film was made, asking ten 'tent pole' people to make a film – like Jon Snow, Jo Brand, Alan Yentob and Janet Street Porter all bringing the thing they were going to loan to the exhibition and talking about them on film. This was then posted online and it started to generate the coverage. Radio was really important in getting people to bring their thing to the exhibition. In general, it is a really important medium that is often under-valued. Audiences are growing for radio and they are often captive audiences: there are good opportunities for pushing your story through radio.

So, an integrated multi-platform approach to a project is important; make sure social media complements offline activity; ideally aim for a spread across all sectors.

Vanessa Thorpe began in local papers before moving on to write for the *Independent* and for the last eleven years has been Arts and Media Correspondent for *The Observer*.

Vanessa introduced herself as a Sunday journalist: in theory that means they have a much more relaxed attitude to writing stories and breaking news. This is not so true anymore and they're still essentially the same beast as daily papers, especially as they've integrated with *The Guardian* and because of the advent of technology. So what's changed or changing in PR and the press? Press has a different objective to the PR sector, but that relationship is being changed by technology. Deadlines are the things that are really changing. Although a Sunday journalist, Vanessa has to tweet professionally – in fact, the first time she tweeted was up on the plinth – she was one of the only print journalists to be on the plinth. She also blogs when she's asked to. So it has changed, and it's no longer a three or four day lead-in. Of course, the big distinction about arts journalism in the paper is between features and news. But this distinction is murky even internally as everyone switches about, giving them different lead times. The waters get even muddier when you start to talk about critics. She'll often get a call which is for a feature piece, which it's not really her place to decide on though she might be happy to end up writing it, or she might be asked to go and see an exhibition and she'll have to redirect the call to a critic. Those are the basics and they haven't changed even though deadlines have. As discussed earlier, what counts as the distinction between the two media, old and new? The new could be described as authentic: blogging and tweeting have to be authentic because they are so personal and immediate, whereas print media means giving a thought-over and influenced report on an event. The distinctions aren't exact. Arguably, the Sunday papers can still be a bit more tangential in their coverage of things, and if PRs go to Sunday papers with something that didn't get covered in the daily reports of an event, it is often something a Sunday journalist can work

The addictive nature of Facebook and Twitter has been discussed, and how they can lead to a type of extremism that's even beyond tabloid reaction, because people try to put something extreme on Facebook to get a reaction. When you first sign up, there is a big welcome and rush, and then you constantly search for that same level of reaction, so you get pushed into making more indiscreet announcements about you or your organisation. We may see the same kind of pressures coming to bear on the so-called new authentic media, with a drive to get the audience, as there are on the traditional print media.

On *In Our Time* (on Radio 4) recently it was suggested that we only reached the late iron age during the industrial revolution and that we're now in the early stages of the technological or electronic age. The newspaper industry has been feeling that, and that's something everyone should be aware of when they contact the papers. The technology is there but the ability to respond to it has been over-ridden by the fact that there are so few traditional journalists now. So journalists are juggling a ridiculous amount of information: the local papers might even have bigger staff than the nationals. Email and phone is constant, so that's why calls are not always returned, and journalists are often out of the office by the nature of the job. There's no training for journalists in new media – most of it is done on the wing. There is the culture of 'amateurism' – which is sometimes looked down on by traditional

journalists, but the *Guardian/Observer* see it as part of the new interactive way of reaching out to the readers and even being on the same footing as them. But Alan Rusbriger's (editor) view is that the opinion of a member of the public who has just seen a play is as valid as a critic's, which is not always a popular view, especially at a time when a lot of journalists are being laid off. (Though some of those find work on arts websites.)

Knowing your contact/contact media is essential: someone trying to get in touch with a journalist should for instance know if they don't work Mondays because they're a Tuesday-Saturday journalist, or that that person can't run a story that's been covered the day before by the daily paper. Reminders are useful, given the number of emails journalists they get.

The power relationship between PRs and journalists doesn't really change, even with the world of bloggers and so on: in print media, the journalists still do essentially have the power. They themselves are always trying to fight to get into the paper, and arts journalists always have a problem in the newsroom of getting a story heard, for instance if they put forward a story about cuts to the arts, the response would be, what about cuts to education, what about cuts to the health service. Arts journalists are also relied upon to provide 'colour' which is fine up to a point, but they can't just be there to write about light stuff and gossip. It's also worth bearing in mind that journalists are not on the same team as us – they are not necessarily banging the drum for the arts, they do have a responsibility to point out problems or mistakes.

In terms of the future and the new media that has emerged or is emerging, at the end of the day, it will be about what form of media or coverage generates income and makes money for someone.

[Angela Phillips](#) was the last to speak: she has been a journalist for over thirty years and is now a senior lecturer on the MA in Journalism at Goldsmiths College. She has done her own research into how the roles of journalists are changing.

Angela is part of the Leverhulme research project at Goldsmiths and they've been looking at the impact of new media on journalism: some of the research that Angela has done bears out a lot of what Vanessa was saying especially about volume of work and number of staff. They're looking at it on various different levels, though they haven't specifically been looking at arts journalism, but a lot of it is still relevant. The first thing is to get everything in perspective: most people are getting their news from the 'old' media – newspapers, radio, television. New media is still a small part of the mix in this country, no matter what anyone says. Looking at Facebook, though, it is in the top three of things that people go to when they are online. But when people talk about news on Facebook, they are mostly talking about links to the old media.

The most important thing that arts organisations' PR departments have is their relationship with the arts journalists in big media – that hasn't changed. The big organisations will probably still get along fine. But smaller organisations don't automatically get their email picked up, and that is a growing problem, as the research shows that journalists are overwhelmed. The features editor of the

Independent spoke to the Goldsmiths students recently, and she said she was getting a thousand emails a day. So it's really important for people sending the emails and trying to contact journalists to try to imagine that inbox and the volume at the other end. Make sure you are sending your email to the right inbox. Ensure that your lists are up-to-date: in the example of the Independent journalist, one of the reasons she got so many emails was because she was getting emails to do with her previous jobs in that organisation. Journalists are dealing with this by looking for the names they know and the organisations they know – the ones they know are worth listening to.

This is of course a problem for new or small arts organisations. The research seems to show that journalists are using fewer sources than ever before and also borrowing sources a lot, so cannibalisation is going on. (One story going round at the moment is that there was a Daily Mail front page story that was just lifted from an American paper.) The research with NGOs showed that they were finding it harder and harder to speak to journalists at all: they are trying to get round this by producing their own material. It is likely that if they produce really good journalism on their site (say stories about ActionAid working in Africa) then journalists are going to use it. This may not be a good tactic for arts organisations. Small organisations have to think about what audiences want, and playing the part of a journalist is not what they want: they will see through it quickly as PR, when what they want is independent comment. When they are trying to decide what do with their time and money they are looking for recommendations from friends (Facebook is important), but also independent critics – not PR disguised as journalism.

So, one thing to try for smaller organisations is the journalism food chain, which not enough people are aware of. The big nationals are the big fish, and they gobble up the little fish of local newspapers. They look at the better of the blogs too, and pick up stories from those. So don't ignore the small fish – get stories in there. Start looking for the new operations online: the UK is behind the US in terms of these listings and local sites. However, sites such as (in London) spoonfed.co.uk and londonist.com are some of the biggest alternative listings organisations. So pick out the better local blogs – they'll give you exclusive coverage and by their own efforts get your story out through Twitter and Facebook. You can also do joint projects with the new starters: because they have no budget they'll be happy to have a link to an arts organisation's page on their site in return for something similar from the organisation. As small as these start up sites might be, they have to remain independent, as independent reporting and comment is what the public are looking for.

However good an arts organisations relationship is with a site or a journalist or a paper, that site etc. is still obliged to report even negative stories: any aggressive or disappointed reaction from the arts organisation is likely to kill the relationship completely. Also, many PRs are rude to student journalist: all PRs should be nice to student journalists, because they may end up being important contacts on big papers – and then the boot will be on the other foot. Again, it's about the ecology and the food chain.