

THE SSORTR CONTENT MANAGEMENT TOOL
AS A COMPASS
FOR THE ALUMNI MAGAZINE EDITOR

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to develop a content management tool that can assist college and university alumni magazine editors in discerning the types of stories that resonate with the various audiences their publications serve. This tool is designed to help editors and administrators make public relations decisions with their university's largest print communications vehicle. The SSORTR tool seeks to assess any university magazine feature story on six factors and produce scores that will help editors better determine content mix. To test SSORTR, alumni magazine editors were asked to independently use the tool to rate a group of 10 stories from past issues of a public Midwestern university's alumni publication. The results were promising in that there was consensus in how editors rated the majority of factors, and there were relatively few scoring disparities. As university resources and budgets continue to tighten, editors will face increasing competition for a shrinking news/feature hole in their publications as well as pressure to show the value of the investment in their magazines. To be able to demonstrate, for example, that articles with particular SSORTR score are popular with readers or lead to certain reader actions would be tremendously advantageous in making difficult decisions about content and in effectively designing the magazine's overall communications strategy.

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INTRODUCTION

Connecting with Alumni Audiences: The Importance of the University Magazine

Colleges and universities are increasingly dependent on private donations to supplement dwindling income from government and other public sources. For public universities in particular, contributions from donors are often the only source of discretionary or unrestricted funds (Leslie & Ramey, 1988).

For this reason, higher education institutions are seeking to better understand the factors that affect alumni giving. Fundraising suffers from insufficient theoretical and applied research as it has historically been regarded with disdain by the academy (Parsons & Wethington, 1996). However, researchers are beginning to develop theories or adapt them from other disciplines to study the motivations and factors that lead alumni to make contributions.

Most of the research in this area has focused on demographic variables as predictors of giving. Several studies have explored the relationship between alumni giving and factors such as gender, age, income, degree, geography, academic achievement, and/or student satisfaction (Okunade, 1994; Bruggink & Siddiqui, 1995; Cunningham & Cohi-Ficano, 2002; Hunter, 1999). Researchers also developed a charitable giving life-cycle hypothesis that has its roots in economic theory and stipulates that as age increases, so does consumer spending and thus charitable giving. Several studies tested this hypothesis with conflicting results (Olson, 2001).

Finally, a number of researchers assessed the correlation between alumni attitudes and perceptions of the university and alumni willingness to donate. This literature shows

that the best nondemographic predictors of alumni giving appear to be emotional attachment or a positive attitude toward the institution and participation/involvement with the institution (events, reunions, etc). Brittingham and Pezzullo (1990) suggest that additional research is needed on the formation of alumni donor attitudes – when they form and how much postgraduate activities influence those attitudes.

Three studies in particular merit further exploration in helping universities understand how to best build or maintain emotional attachment/positive attitudes among alumni. Drawing from the organizational behavior theory of organizational identification (OID), defined as “perceived oneness with an organization” and the sense of its success and failures as one’s own, Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) study measured individual levels of OID among alumni of a religious college. Their findings indicate that alumni identification with the college, their understanding of its mission and needs, and their holding its reputation in high esteem is critical to alumni support. Peltier, Schibrowsky, and Schultz (2002) adapted a social marketing model to determine the steps in relationship building between a university and its alumni. The model embodies an exchange-oriented relationship, and the authors contend that long-term marketing approaches are needed to build alumni-university relationships over time. Their attitudinal study of alumni at a large university found that communication with the university and perceived quality of the university all increased donor involvement. Tsao and Coll (2005) also found that the more alumni are in communication with their alma mater and its faculty, the higher the intent to give.

The OID study confirms that alumni understanding of the university’s mission, goals and needs and their positive evaluation of its reputation are correlated with alumni

support (Mael & Ashforth, 2002). The social marketing construct of relationship building suggests that ongoing long-term communication with alumni is a factor in converting them from prospects to donors (Peltier et al, 2002). Brittingham and Pezzullo, in their review of alumni giving research, conclude that the “best predictors of alumni giving are an emotional attachment to the school, participation in alumni events, and participation in and donation to other voluntary and religious groups” (1990, p. 57).

None of these studies specifically operationalized the communications process or tried to measure the impact of communications on alumni perceptions, participation or giving. Additional research is needed to examine the role and impact of public relations and ongoing communications with alumni and their perceptions and involvement with the institution. Research is also needed to explore the specific impact of the university magazine on alumni and donor engagement. Readership surveys and focus groups can help editors determine the stories their audiences read. If readership segments identify the stories that had a positive impact on them, how do editors assess the characteristics of those stories? A tool is needed to help editors evaluate content and strive for the mix that is right for their publication.

The purpose of this research is to develop a content management tool that can assist college and university alumni magazine editors in discerning the types of stories that resonate with the various audiences their publications serve. This tool is also designed to assist editors and administrators in making public relations decisions with the university’s largest print communications vehicle.

Developing a Content Management Tool for Alumni Magazine Editors

The alumni magazine is the single largest vehicle for widespread alumni communication at most colleges and universities. There are various models ranging from magazines that are produced by an independent alumni association to those produced by the university itself. Frequencies most commonly range from yearly to quarterly.

Alumni or university magazine (terms used here interchangeably) editors are often under pressure from various departments to communicate a variety of messages to their audiences – from promoting new academic programs to explicit fundraising asks. Some of the challenge is to find the appropriate communications vehicle (department newsletter, annual report, direct mail appeal) for the proposed content. However, when the university magazine is the largest single vehicle delivered to its external constituencies, there will continue to be competition for space in that publication.

Due to university needs for private dollars and the lack of information about how communication efforts best support alumni giving, the pressure on magazine editors is often greatest from the fundraising or development office. Kelly's study on the encroachment of fundraising on the public relations function in nonprofits outlined the challenge:

...the survival and success of charitable organizations depends on managing environmental interdependencies with multiple publics, not just donors. Subordination of the public relations function through fundraising encroachment causes undue attention on donors at the expense of other strategically important publics.... (Kelly, 1994, p. 3)

Further, this encroachment may lead to a reluctance - in this case on the part of the university magazine - to take on serious issues or cover controversial subjects, feeling pressure to avoid those issues in the interest of positive donor relations (Kelly, 1991).

At the crux of the issue is the role of the university magazine, and the assumptions and beliefs about its public relations responsibility. Some argue that its sole job is to promote the university, its successes and its needs to alumni and other external audiences. Other agree, but say advancing the interests of the university is best accomplished by gaining reader trust through stories that support the goals and mission less explicitly. Robert Bliwise, award-winning *Duke* magazine editor, in a critique of an alumni magazine writes,

Start earning reader trust by shifting the tone and by covering real stories. It's our job to be the reader advocate. People are really turned off by giving stories. Some are even offended by it in a magazine, but not where they expect it in a letter or annual report. They're smart enough to distinguish between the two. People hate self-promotion and see right through it. It's a waste of the publication and a bad investment by the school because they're not drawing the reader in. If they don't believe that, show them other schools with publications with credibility and integrity that are rolling in the money. (*Duke* magazine did a cover story on the lacrosse scandal and had a banner fundraising year.)

(Bliwise, personal communication, March 2007)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Applying Public Relations Theory to the Place of the University Magazine

Bliwise is suggesting a move away from press agency/public information and toward a two-way symmetric public relations model, as defined by Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations and as adapted by Kelly (1995) to four models of fundraising. Press agency, the earliest form of public relations, is the model characterized by one-way propaganda. The second model, public information, is still one-way but holds truth to be important. The third model of two-way asymmetrical public relations is characterized by scientific persuasion and incorporates audience feedback and evaluation of attitudes.

The two-way symmetrical model is a two-way communications model between groups that leads to mutual understanding. This last model uses research not only to shape messages but to change organizational behavior and response when it is "in disharmony with important publics" (Kelly, 1995, p.107). A number of scholars advocate the two-way symmetrical model as the normative and most ethical, effective model for which organizations should strive: "It is a model that organizations can use but often do not use because an authoritarian dominant coalition sees the approach as a threat to its power...practitioners of the two-way symmetrical model are not completely altruistic; they also want to defend the interests of their employers – they have mixed motives" (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002, p.307). While this model may be preferred among the

four, Grunig and Hunt (1984) acknowledge there will be times that the other models provide the best options as there are conditions under which the two-way model will not work or be appropriate. To that end, Grunig later posited a “cultivation strategies” model as an heir to the earlier four models and, in particular, to the two-way symmetrical communications model. The cultivation strategies model, while the strategies can still be classified as either symmetrical or asymmetrical, acknowledge specific strategies that can be used to cultivate relationships with a given public (Grunig, 2006).

Many scholars have argued for an alternative to the four models of public relations, positing concepts they contend are more reflective of how public relations truly functions. Cancel et al (1997) assert that public relations practitioners actually function along a contingency continuum with pure advocacy at one extreme and pure accommodation at the other. “Not only does the role public relations practitioners serve range from pure advocate to pure accommodator, but communications acts reflecting both extremes can actually occur simultaneously when dealing with one public” (Cancel et al, 1997, p. 37). Contingency theorists contend that the two-way symmetrical theory is simplistic to fully capture how public relations is practiced, while the contingency continuum is dynamic. Contingency scholars contend that the complexity of public relations work is best represented by “a continuum of stance, not by a limited set of models of excellence” that places public relations practice “in boxes” (Pang et al, 2007).

Scholars of Grunig’s four models suggest the contingency theory is an elaboration of the symmetrical model, though Reber and Cameron write: “While we agree the contingency theory as developed by Cameron complements and develops concepts central to Grunig’s two-way symmetrical model, we believe the dynamic nature of the

continuum and the specific contingencies make a unique contribution to public relations theory and therefore bear further development” (2003, p. 434).

The contingency theory outlines internal and external factors that can affect the place of an organization on the continuum in its public relations practice at any given time (Reber & Cameron, 2003). Cancel et al (1997) identified 87 distinct variables that can affect the degree of accommodation undertaken by public relations professionals. Reber and Cameron (2003) later operationalized and tested contingency concepts among public relations practitioners in an attempt to measure limits to accommodation. They found that respondents strongly concurred that public relations is a bridge-building profession. However, many practitioners provided insights into specific times that such a bridge (two-way dialogue) becomes difficult or impossible with a particular public. Further, the two-way symmetrical model posited by Grunig calls for the organization to engage in dialogue with the public even when a particular public is “morally repugnant,” which contingency theorists argue could lead to unethical decisions and behavior (Pang et al, 2007). Jin and Cameron (2006) developed a scaled index to assist public relations practitioners in measuring their organization’s willingness to make accommodations in various communications situations. Studies by Cameron, Cropp and Reber (2001) tested six proscriptions to accommodation: (1) moral conviction of an organization, (2) countermanding demands by multiple publics, (3) regulatory constraints, (4) pressure from management, (5) jurisdictional issues, and (6) legal constraints. The only proscription among their sample that was not supported was that of management pressure. However, in a higher education environment, the public relations stance might largely be driven by that proscription – specifically, the funding mechanism for and

oversight of the university alumni magazine, the influence of the administration, and by the history of the university and its place on the contingency continuum at a given point in time. This is particularly evident during a public relations crisis, such as the Duke University lacrosse scandal referenced by Robert Bliwise. Contingency theorists have sought ways to apply the theory to real world public relations crises. Cameron's work in conflict positioning and conflict stance frames how organizations prepare for and handle a crisis along the contingency continuum and how those internal and external factors lead to the organization's conflict stances with its various publics (Cameron, Pang and Jin, 2007). One factor - the power and control of what Cameron et al (2007) call the "dominant coalition in the public relations decision-making process" - is perhaps most influential in determining the stances of colleges and universities. For higher education institutions, that "dominant coalition" is most often administrators or trustees who are responding to fears and threats associated with audiences and stakeholder groups such as alumni, parents, students, faculty, donors and/or taxpayers. The university's public relations stances and conflict positioning are likely to have a direct impact on content mix and space allocation decisions in the university magazine; further, the institution's public relations stance on a given issue is likely to determine if and how that issue is covered.

Bogart (2004, p. 43) notes that an editor's role is to balance what he or she knows "to be important against what readers find interesting." This is especially true for university magazine editors who are balancing the needs of the institution with the need to have its audiences read and engage with the publication. Aspects of the four models - or points on the continuum of advocacy to accommodation -- will play out on the pages of university magazines. Some - consciously or not - will employ a public information or

even press agency approach, using most or all of feature magazine space for content that is explicitly promotional and based on pure advocacy. Others will take an approach to content with a mix of both issue stories and promotional items, or strive toward a two-way model and accommodation of various publics. Therefore, in the case of the university magazine, it is possible to use the four public relations models as an initial framework and employ the more dynamic and complex contingency theory to provide a tool to help editors can think about their content and their public relations role.



Ongoing communication with alumni and their positive evaluation of the institution are factors correlated with alumni affinity and support in the literature, but how does the university magazine best achieve that? How does the magazine account for its various audiences? How does the magazine balance what its administrators ask of it – be that advocacy or acts of accommodation? Readership surveys and focus groups can help editors determine the type of stories their audiences want to read. If readership segments identify the stories that had a positive impact on them, how do editors assess the characteristics of those stories? A tool is needed to help editors evaluate content and strive for the mix that is right for their publication.

Operationalizing the Continuum: The SSORTR Approach to Content Management

This study will test a new content management tool developed to assist magazine editors and their staffs. This tool was influenced by the four-item scales developed by Grunig et al (2002) to characterize the four public relations models. The scales are

adapted in Table I with one-way models on the left, two-way models on the right and the contingency theory continuum along-side:

Table i:

Advocacy 	Press Agency Convince a reporter to publicize your organization Get your organization's name into the media Keep bad publicity out of the media Get maximum publicity for a staged event	Two-Way Asymmetrical Get public to behave as your organization wants Use attitude theory in a campaign Manipulate publics scientifically Persuade a public that your organization is right on an issue	 Accommodation
	Public Information Provide objective information about your organization Understand the news values of journalists Prepare news stories that reporters will use Perform as journalists inside your organization	Two-Way Symmetrical Determine how publics react to the organization Negotiate with an activist group Use theories of conflict resolution in dealing with publics Help management to understand the opinion of particular publics	

Adapted from Grunig, Grunig & Dozier (2002) and Cancel et al (1997)

Adjusting the characteristics in the four models of public relations and the contingency theory for a higher education communications environment, the development of this tool was shaped by Kelly's work on adapting the four models to fundraising. Kelly defined the press agency model of fundraising as propaganda for a cause, while the public information model of fundraising seeks to disseminate needs information (Kelly, 1995). In her two-way asymmetrical model of fundraising, the purpose is to scientifically persuade giving. The two-way symmetrical model seeks to reach mutual understanding and use "formative research to balance the needs of the charitable organization and its donor publics...its practice is based on principles of

negotiation, compromise and conflict resolution” (Kelly, 1995, p. 109). Kelly’s adaptation of Grunig’s work to fundraising is important in translating the models’ characteristics to a higher education environment, where public relations and communications can be influenced or even driven by fundraising needs and the desire for increased donor and alumni support.

This new tool seeks to assess any university magazine feature story on six factors and produce scores that will help editors better determine content mix. Those scores will indicate tendencies toward one-way (advocacy) or two-way models (accommodation) of public relations by assessing, for example, if the news hook for a story is internally or externally driven or whether the tone and language is promotional or impartial/autonomous. If a readership focus group identifies the strongest and most read stories of the last few issues, for example, this tool will allow editors to go back and assess the stories and their characteristics using the content management tool scores.

The development of the factors also was influenced both by the newspaper content quality literature and by two sets of readership experience studies. This tool draws on both Bogart’s (2004) and Gladney’s (1996) efforts toward methods of operationalizing factors of content quality. Gladney identified 18 standards of newspaper quality abstracted from the literature and asked both readers and editors to rank their importance. Among the standards were “editorial independence – freedom from outside pressure by political interest groups and economic forces,” “editorial courage – willingness to fight against wrong,” and “impartiality – fairness in gathering and reporting the news” (Gladney, 1996). Bogart (2004) contends that a newspaper’s editorial quality is reflective of a number of distinct factors that cannot be reduced to a sole

characteristic. He cites a number of efforts and studies that attempted to measure quality both among reporters and editors and among audiences. In 1977, Bogart conducted a mail survey of editors asking them to rate the importance of seven attributes of content quality – the top was “accuracy,” followed by “impartiality in reporting,” “investigative enterprise,” “specialized staff skills,” and last was “literary style.” He further asked editors to rate each of 23 other characteristics on a scale. The top ranked included “high ratio of staff-written copy to wire service and feature service copy” and “high ratio of news interpretation and backgrounders to spot news reports” (Bogart, 2004).

The Readership Institute’s newspaper content reader satisfaction study used a multi-dimensional approach to measuring newspaper content. Researchers measured characteristics such as theme, origin/source, geographic focus, news style, visual complexity, and treatment (Media Management Center, 2001). A magazine readership experience study conducted by the Media Management Center, ASME and the Magazine Publishers of America used both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys to explore how readers engage with a publication with a specific interest in how those experiences influence both readership and the impact of advertising. The study identified 39 experiences and associated descriptors that describe magazine readers’ engagement with a magazine – both what motivates readership and what inhibits it (Media Management Center, 2003). While neither the magazine readership experience studies nor the newspaper content quality measures are directly applicable to higher education, their various measures and attributes were considered in the development of the SSORTR tool’s factor and its scales, which are designed specifically for editors of a university magazine.

The SSORTR tool's six factors are designed to measure the following:

Subject – this factor examines whether the primary subject or subject matter of a story is internal or external. For purposes of this research, administrators, faculty and staff are defined as internal, while students, alumni, donors and others not employed by the university are external.

Source – this factor examines the majority of sources in a story or the primary sources. For purposes of this research, administrators, faculty and staff are defined as internal sources, while students, alumni, donors and others not employed by the university are external.

Origin – this factor measures the news origin or news hook for the story and if it is internally or externally generated. For purposes of this research, a story about a new academic program would be of internal origin. A story about a national trend that is localized would be of external origin.

Relevance – this factor examines the audience for the story. Is this story of interest primarily to internal or external audiences? Or both?

Tone – this factor measures whether the tone and language of the story is promotional or autonomous/impartial.

Reflection of Mission – this factor assesses the degree to which the story explicitly focuses on a goal or mission area of the university or if it does so indirectly (autonomous).

Due to the inability to measure such factors in a nominal way, the tool was developed as an interval scale. The first four factors (subject, source, origin and relevance) are measured on a 1 to 5 scale with 1 being internal and 5 being external. The last two factors (tone and reflection of mission) are measured on a 1 to 5 scale with 1 being promotional and 5 being autonomous. There is a possible total score of 30. Lower scores (1-14) will indicate a one-way press agency/public information model (advocacy), while higher scores (16-30) will indicate a two-way model (accommodation). Depending

on the specific factors of most importance to editors, scores can be evaluated against Grunig's four models and continuum of advocacy to accommodation as posited by Cameron.

Preparing to Test the SSORTR Tool: Methods and Approaches from Content Analysis

In developing a testing method for the SSORTR content management tool, it became clear that multiple editors would be needed to test the tool to evaluate its effectiveness. The testing method therefore borrows heavily from traditional content analyses where multiple coders are used.

Similar content analysis procedures were undertaken by Gold and Simmons (1965) to compare news selection patterns among daily newspapers in Iowa. Day and Golan (2005) conducted a content analysis of the editorial pages of *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* to assess source and content diversity. Hynds (1990) studied the changes in editorial content (specifically issue prominence) in three newspapers over 30 years using content analysis, while the influence of letters to the editor on news content was studied using content analysis in an examination of 10 newspapers (Pritchard and Berkowitz, 1991). Rice and Paster (1990) used content analysis to assess the adequacy of the coverage of university libraries in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

However, unlike many content coding studies, the SSORTR tool's ratings categories are not mutually exclusive but ask the coder to use his or her judgment or interpretation of the story in coding. Coder training is traditionally a critical element in any content analysis project, as described by Wimmer & Dominick (2006). But in the

case of this tool, coders are also end-users who must be able to make use of the tool without formal training. Therefore instructions and definitions for SSORTR must be clear and concise. The SSORTR must serve as both the tool and the standardized sheet for coding.

The tool employs interval scales to rate a story's attributes. This study seeks to examine the level of consensus among a group of magazine editors on each factor of each case and to identify factor categories that elicited disparate ratings. For example, different editors may rate a story a 4 or a 5 on its tone – there is not a right or wrong answer. That said, an editor rating a 1 and another rating a 5 on that factor could cause concern that the factor category either needs refining or was not understood - or both.

To test the SSORTR tool, communications professionals who work with their alumni or university magazines will be provided the tool with its coding definitions embedded. The researcher seeks to ensure a geographically diverse group as well as to diversity among the size and scope of the types of magazines (i.e., public, private, religious). Editors will be asked to independently use the tool to rate a group of 10 stories from past issues of a public Midwestern university's alumni publication. This pilot study will use feature stories of at least 500 words or more. The researcher will select a range of stories whose total scores should vary from advocacy to accommodation. The ratings for all 10 stories by all editor coders will be entered and compared. Inter-rater reliability as defined by Salkind (2003) will be calculated for each. However, that percentage of agreement only reflects the number of exact agreements divided by the number of possible agreements and doesn't reflect consensus. Therefore, the median, mode, deviation from the mean and the standard deviation (SD) will also be computed for each

factor and for the total score on each story. In addition, the researcher will attempt to identify consensus by isolating outlying ratings.

In an initial pre-test of SSORTR among five editors at a Midwestern university, there were a total of 10 scores for each of the six factors (subject, source, origin, relevance, tone and reflection of mission) for percent agreement, deviation from the mean, mode, median and standard deviation. Ninety-five percent of the ratings were within 1.5 standard deviations, and 85 percent of scores were disparate by one standard deviation or less. Any major disparities in coding consensus among editors appear to have occurred when some editors mistakenly coded student subjects and sources as internal rather than external. There was also a lack of clarity in a couple of cases about the factor of origin. Additional clarification on how to code for those factors since has been added. Eight of the 10 stories had total score disparities of 9 rating points (of 30) or fewer, which indicated general consensus on the overall type of story among the five independent editors. Refined instructions should assist in sharpening the tool's usability.

This tool for university magazines was designed for and tested on only feature stories. It does not take into account sections like campus news briefs, alumni class notes, short profiles, research or other types of news briefs. Though its scales and factors were influenced by the research and tools developed by those measuring newspaper content quality, SSORTR's are designed for use by higher education publications editors and would not necessarily translate to other disciplines or communications vehicles.

Despite those limitations, a refined iteration of the SSORTR tool (see Appendix I) may be useful to university editors in determining the best uses for their feature news holes. For example, magazine editors who know that they need to be using a public

information or a heavier advocacy approach in their publication could use a future version of this tool to assess their feature content and determine the content mix. Additionally, magazines that have conducted reader surveys or readership research can use the tool to assess the articles that generated reader reaction/responses, be those negative or favorable.

TESTING THE SSORTR TOOL

Testing SSORTR: Participants and Articles

The researcher recruited alumni magazine editors nationally using the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) listserv for publications and magazine editors at higher education institutions. A total of 21 editors volunteered to test the SSORTR pilot. They were each mailed a packet of 10 feature articles, 10 copies of the SSORTR survey tool with instructions and a cover letter explaining the project. The stories were selected by the researcher to represent a range of scores, predicting some of the articles selected would be scored as primarily advocacy stories (one-way) and others as accommodation (two-way), while still others might be closer to the middle of the spectrum.

Of the 21 editors who volunteered, 16 completed and returned the materials for a response rate of 77 percent. It is important to note that the editors testing the SSORTR

tool represented a diverse range of universities and colleges. Although they were given the option of anonymity for these purposes, none asked that their schools not be identified in this project. Of the 16, 10 hail from private institutions and six from public. Of the 10 privates, two are religious institutions, one is single-sex and one is a specialty professional institution (osteopathic college). Of the publics, one is a specialty professional institution (health sciences). Of the 16, eight are located in urban settings, five in rural settings, and three in suburban settings. Editors at the following institutions participated: A.T. Still University, Boise State University, Duke Divinity School - Duke University, The George Washington University, Marquette University, Juniata College, Linfield College, Marshall University, Mount Holyoke College, Northern Kentucky University, Shippensburg University, Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, The University of Texas at Austin, University of Nevada-Reno, and the University of Portland.

Results and Analysis

Each editor was assigned a letter code for purposes of data entry. Editors' scores for the six SSORTR factors were entered for all 10 feature stories and a total score was computed. For each factor, the following were assessed among the editors' scores: score average, percentage agreement, median, mode, deviation from the mean and standard deviation. These statistical assessments were also performed on the total score. In addition, the researcher identified for each factor scores that were within one (1) ranking

either side of the mode. Those that were outside that established range of within one (1) of the mode were noted as “outliers.” This term is not used here in the formal statistical sense but rather only to define scores outside the range established as outlined above. For the total score, that range was established as within two (2) points of the mode. Also for the total score, an overall range of the total score is noted.

Each story and its scores will be discussed below in order of deviation from the mean of the total score. The first, “A Friend Next Door,” is a feature about a donor to the university who was being honored for her philanthropic commitment. The consensus was that subject and source of the story was external, but most of the other factors were scored as internal/promotional. The total score ranged from 12 to 19, which places it in the middle to slightly within the one-way/advocacy scoring range. This feature was selected because the researcher believed it would challenge the editors to closely follow the SSORTR instructions – scoring some factors as external and others as internal. This story was one that the researcher predicted would be read as internally focused, especially on the latter four factors.

Table ii:

Article: Friend Next Door							
Coder	Subject	Source	Origin	Relevance	Tone	Reflection of Mission	Total score
A	4	5	1	2	2	1	15
B	5	5	1	3	1	1	16

C	2	2	2	2	2	2	12
D	5	5	2	2	2	2	18
E	5	4	2	4	1	2	18
F	5	3	1	1	2	4	16
G	5	5	1	1	1	1	14
H	5	5	1	1	1	3	16
J	5	5	2	1	1	2	16
K	5	2	1	3	1	1	13
L	4	5	1	2	2	3	17
M	4	2	2	4	1	2	15
N	5	5	2	1	2	4	19
P	5	2	1	1	1	4	14
Q	5	3	2	3	3	2	18
R	3	4	2	2	1	1	13
S	5	5	1	3	1	1	16
Average	4.52	3.94	1.47	2.11	1.4	2.11	15.64
% Agreement	70	52	52	35	58	35	29
Median	5	5	1	2	1	2	16
Mode	5	5	1	1	1	1	16
Deviation from mean	0.66	1.13	0.49	0.85	0.55	0.87	1.59
Standard deviation	0.87	1.29	0.51	1.05	0.62	1.11	1.99
Total score range:							12 to 19
# replies out of range*	2	6	0	6	1	5	3

The feature, “Waiting Still,” is the story of a student who went missing on a university-related trip and has never been found. The researcher predicted this story would score highly on the accommodation side. It was included in this test because its original inclusion in the university magazine had caused discussion among both the magazine staff and university leadership. This story showed higher percentage agreement on many of the factors – and fewer outliers – than “A Friend Next Door.” All the total

scores were in the 20s, with the range of 21-27. These scores place it squarely in the two-way/accommodation range.

Table iii:

Article: Waiting Still							
Coder	Subject	Source	Origin	Relevance	Tone	Reflection of Mission	Total score
A	5	5	4	3	4	5	26
B	5	3	3	3	4	3	21
C	5	4	4	3	5	5	26
D	5	4	4	3	3	4	23
E	5	3.5	5	3	4	5	25.5
F	5	3	4	3	5	5	25
G	5	4	4	3	5	5	26
H	5	5	1	3	3	5	22
J	5	5	4	3	5	5	27
K	5	5	3	3	4	5	25
L	5	5	3	3	4	1	21
M	3	4	4	3	5	3	22
N	5	5	3	3	5	5	26
P	5	4	3	5	5	5	27
Q	4	4	4	3	5	4	24
R	4	4	4	3	5	5	25
S	5	3	2	3	5	4	22
Average	4.76	4.14	3.47	3.11	4.47	4.35	24.32
% Agreement	82	47	52	94	58	65	24
Median	5	4	4	3	5	5	25
Mode	5	4	4	3	5	5	26
Deviation from mean	0.38	0.60	0.74	0.22	0.62	0.83	1.79
Standard deviation	0.56	0.74	0.94	0.48	0.71	1.11	2.06
						Total score range:	21 to 27

# replies out of range*	1	0	2	1	2	3	6
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“Behind the Camera” is a feature about alumni who are in the film and television-making industry. It had very few outliers and a total score range of 21-30, placing it high on the two-way/accommodation side of the SSORTR scale. The researcher included this feature as it was predicted to be rated as primarily autonomous with a heavy external focus. Most of the subjects were external with the exception of a faculty member.

Table iv:

Article: Behind the Camera							
Coder	Subject	Source	Origin	Relevance	Tone	Reflection of Mission	Total score
A	3	4	4	3	4	3	21
B	5	5	5	5	5	5	30
C	4	4	4	4	4	4	24
D	5	5	5	3	4	5	27
E	4	3	5	5	5	4	26
F	5	4	5	3	5	5	27
G	4	4	4	3	5	5	25
H	4	4	5	3	4	4	24
J	5	5	5	4	5	3	27
K	5	5	4	3	5	5	27
L	3	3	4	3	5	3	21
M	5	5	4	4	5	5	28
N	4	4	5	4	4	5	26
P	4	3	3	3	4	4	21
Q	4	4	4	3	4	4	23
R	4	4	4	4	4	5	25
S	4	4	4	3	3	4	22
Average							
	4.23	4.11	4.35	3.53	4.41	4.29	24.94

% Agreement	52	52	52	58	47	47	23
Median	4	4	4	3	4	4	25
Mode	4	4	4	3	4	5	27
Deviation from mean	0.53	0.52	0.53	0.62	0.55	0.66	2.18
Standard deviation	0.66	0.69	0.60	0.72	0.61	0.77	2.68

Total score range: 21 to 30

# replies out of range*	0	0	0	2	0	3	7
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The feature, “On a Mission,” is a story profiling alumni in military service and those serving in the Peacecorps. This story also had few outliers and strong agreement on several factors. The total score range was 21-30, placing it in the two-way/accommodation area of the SSORTR range. The researcher selected this story predicting it would score highly on the two-way/accommodation scale for all factors. Its subject matter and sources were nearly all external.

Table v:

Article: On A Mission							
Coder	Subject	Source	Origin	Relevance	Tone	Reflection of Mission	Total score
A	4	4	4	3	4	5	24
B	5	5	5	4	5	5	29
C	4	5	5	4	4	4	26
D	5	5	5	3	4	4	26
E	5	5	5	5	5	5	30
F	3	4	5	3	5	5	25
G	5	5	4	3	5	5	27
H	4	4	4	2	3	4	21
J	5	5	5	3	4	5	27

K	5	5	3	3	5	5	26
L	5	5	5	3	5	4	27
M	5	4	5	4	4	3	25
N	5	5	2	3	4	2	21
P	5	5	5	3	4	5	27
Q	4	4	4	4	3	3	22
R	5	5	5	3	5	5	28
S	4	5	2	3	4	3	21
Average	4.58	4.70	4.29	3.29	4.29	4.23	25.41
% Agreement	65	70	58	65	47	52	24
Median	5	5	5	3	4	5	26
Mode	5	5	5	3	4	5	27
Deviation from mean	0.53	0.41	0.83	0.53	0.58	0.81	2.22
Standard deviation	0.61	0.47	1.04	0.68	0.68	0.97	2.78
Total score range:							21 to 30
# replies out of range*	1	0	3	1	0	4	6

“A Students’ Chancellor” is a lengthy profile of the university’s new chancellor. It had strong agreement on a number of factors and few outliers. The total score range of 6-17 – with most scores ranging from 8-12 - placed it in the one-way/advocacy range. The researcher selected this story predicting it would score heavily on the one-way/advocacy side.

Table vi:

Article: A Students' Chancellor							
Coder	Subject	Source	Origin	Relevance	Tone	Reflection of Mission	Total score

A	1	1	1	1	2	2	8
B	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
C	2	2	1	2	2	2	11
D	1	1	1	2	5	5	15
E	1	1	1	2	1	2	8
F	1	2	1	2	5	5	16
G	1	1	1	3	3	1	10
H	1	1	1	3	1	2	9
J	1	1	1	2	2	2	9
K	1	1	1	3	3	2	11
L	1	2	3	3	4	4	17
M	1	2	1	3	2	1	10
N	1	1	1	1	1	2	7
P	1	1	1	1	1	2	7
Q	1	2	1	3	3	2	12
R	1	1	1	3	3	1	10
S	1	1	1	2	2	2	9
Average	1.058	1.29	1.11	2.17	2.41	2.23	10.29
% Agreement	94	70	94	41	29	58	17
Median	1	1	1	2	2	2	10
Mode	1	1	1	3	2	2	10
Deviation from mean	0.11	0.41	0.22	0.67	1.07	0.85	2.38
Standard deviation	0.24	0.46	0.48	0.81	1.32	1.25	3.15
Total score range:							6 to 17
# replies out of range*	0	0	1	4	3	3	4

The story, “One Historian’s Final Chapter,” is an article about the passing of a former chancellor and university president who was an historian by training. The story had been included because the researcher predicted it would get low SSORTR scores, mostly along the one-way/advocacy range. While there was agreement on some factors, there was some scoring disparity on the source factor. The individuals interviewed for the

story were a range of internal and external people who'd known the subject, so it is possible that led to some disparity in scoring. The story's total range was 7-21 with most scores falling between 10-14, which would place the article in middle but primarily in the one-way/advocacy range.

Table vii:

Article: One Historian's Final Chapter							
Coder	Subject	Source	Origin	Relevance	Tone	Reflection of Mission	Total score
A	1	3	1	2	2	3	12
B	1	1	1	2	1	1	7
C	2	1	3	2	3	2	13
D	1	1	1	3	5	4	15
E	1	5	1	4	5	5	21
F	1	1	1	1	4	5	13
G	1	3	1	1	3	3	12
H	1	2	1	2	1	1	8
J	1	2	1	1	2	3	10
K	1	1	1	3	3	3	12
L	1	3	2	2	3	2	13
M	1	2	2	3	2	3	13
N	2	5	1	1	5	5	19
P	1	4	1	1	1	4	12
Q	1	2	2	2	4	3	14
R	1	1	1	2	2	2	9
S	1	1	1	2	2	2	9
Average	1.11	2.23	1.29	2	2.82	3	12.47
% Agreement	88	35	76	47	29	35	23
Median	1	2	1	2	3	3	12
Mode	1	1	1	2	2	3	12
Deviation from mean	0.20	1.12	0.44	0.58	1.12	0.94	2.49
Standard deviation	0.33	1.39	0.58	0.86	1.38	1.27	3.59

Total score 7 to

						range:	21
# replies out of range*	0	6	1	1	5	5	7

The feature, “The Long Reach of Caring Students,” put the spotlight on a number of student outreach and service projects. Due to the range of students and faculty in the story, editors did not always agree on the rankings of subject and source factors. Students are defined in this project as external, but because the story was about students but yet also about external community projects, editors showed disparity in their origin factor rankings as well as their reflection of mission ranking. The total scores ranged from 10-24 with most falling between 13 to 17, putting it in the middle between advocacy and accommodation. The researcher selected this story predicting the scoring might be challenging for the editors as some factors could be scored low and others high. This reinforces the usefulness of not only examining an article’s total score but assessing specific SSORTR factor scores.

Table viii:

Article: Long Reach of Caring Students							
Coder	Subject	Source	Origin	Relevance	Tone	Reflection of Mission	Total score
A	2	2	1	4	3	3	15
B	4	3	3	4	2	1	17
C	3	2	3	3	2	2	15
D	4	4	4	3	2	4	21
E	3	3	5	4	2	2	19
F	3	3	1	3	4	2	16
G	3	2	4	3	2	2	16

H	4	4	2	3	2	4	19
J	3	3	3	3	2	2	16
K	4	4	4	3	5	4	24
L	4	3	3	4	4	5	23
M	4	2	2	3	1	2	14
N	2	4	1	2	1	2	12
P	4	3	3	3	3	2	18
Q	3	3	2	3	2	2	15
R	1	2	2	3	2	2	12
S	1	1	2	3	2	1	10
Average	3.05	2.82	2.64	3.17	2.41	2.47	16.58
% Agreement	41	41	29	70	58	58	18
Median	3	3	3	3	2	2	16
Mode	4	3	3	3	2	2	15
Deviation from mean	0.77	0.69	0.96	0.38	0.81	0.89	2.92
Standard deviation	1.02	0.88	1.16	0.52	1.06	1.12	3.79
Total score range:							10 to 24
# replies out of range*	4	1	0	0	3	3	8

The “Gender Shift” feature highlighted the changing demographics in higher education focusing on women being in the majority in the undergraduate programs both nationally and at the university producing the magazine. The researcher included this story because it was predicted to score highly in the two-way/accommodation range due to its subject matter and external news hook. The story featured a range of students, faculty and outside experts, and therefore editors did not show strong consensus in scoring the subject factor. There was also disparity on the origin factor perhaps attributable to the article being both about an internal university issue and a national trend. While there were relatively few outliers – two factors at a high of 4 - the overall

total range stretched from 13 to 24. However, most totals ranged from 18-22, placing it in the two-way/accommodation range.

Table ix:

Article: Gender Shift							
Coder	Subject	Source	Origin	Relevance	Tone	Reflection of Mission	Total score
A	1	2	3	2	4	2	14
B	3	3	5	4	4	4	23
C	3	2	2	2	3	3	15
D	5	3	1	3	4	5	21
E	2	2	1	3	4	4	16
F	3	1	5	2	5	3	19
G	3	2	4	3	5	3	20
H	4	2	5	3	4	3	21
J	4	2	4	3	3	4	20
K	5	2	4	3	4	4	22
L	4	4	5	3	5	3	24
M	4	4	4	3	4	4	23
N	3	3	3	3	2	3	17
P	2	1	4	1	3	2	13
Q	5	2	3	3	4	3	20
R	2	3	1	3	3	2	14
S	2	4	3	3	2	2	16
Average	3.23	2.47	3.35	2.76	3.70	3.17	18.70
% Agreement	29	47	29	70	47	41	17
Median	3	2	4	3	4	3	20
Mode	3	2	4	3	4	3	20
Deviation from mean	0.98	0.78	1.15	0.47	0.73	0.69	3.05
Standard deviation	1.20	0.94	1.41	0.66	0.91	0.88	3.53
Total score range:							13 to 24
# replies out of range*	4	3	4	1	2	1	10

“Scholarships: Where the Smart Money Is” is a feature spotlighting students who are benefiting from scholarships and the donors of those funds. The researcher selected this story predicting it would score primarily on the one-way/advocacy side of the scale due to its tone. While most editors agreed the reflection of mission and tones scores were internal/promotional, there was not significant agreement on many of the other factors. The subjects and sources of the story were a mix of students, administrators and donors. The result was a wide range of total scores ranging from 7 to 30. Most totals range from 11-15, placing it on the one-way/advocacy to the middle of the SSORTR range.

Table x:

Article: Scholarships - Where the Smart Money Is							
Coder	Subject	Source	Origin	Relevance	Tone	Reflection of Mission	Total score
A	3	5	1	2	2	1	14
B	5	5	5	5	5	5	30
C	2	2	2	2	1	2	11
D	5	5	5	5	1	1	22
E	3	5	1	2	1	1	13
F	5	2	1	1	2	2	13
G	1	2	1	1	1	1	7
H	4	4	3	3	3	2	19
J	5	5	2	3	1	2	18
K	5	5	1	3	2	1	17
L	4	4	1	2	1	1	13
M	4	2	2	3	1	1	13
N	3	4	1	1	1	2	12
P	1	4	1	4	1	1	12

Q	3	3	3	3	2	2	16
R	2	3	2	3	2	1	13
S	3	3	1	4	1	1	13
Average	3.41	3.70	1.94	2.76	1.64	1.58	15.05
% Agreement	29	35	52	35	58	58	35
Median	3	4	1	3	1	1	13
Mode	3	5	1	3	1	1	13
Deviation from mean	1.14	1.05	0.99	0.98	0.76	0.69	3.72
Standard deviation	1.37	1.21	1.34	1.25	1.05	1.00	5.16
						Total score range:	7 to 30
# replies out of range*	6	7	4	5	2	1	7

The feature “Seeking Home, Finding Hope,” is about a faculty member’s community-based program that empowers immigrant refugee women to help each other acclimate and adjust to their new lives. The researcher predicted this story would score highly on the two-way/accommodation range. While there was general consensus on a number of the factors, the origin and reflection of mission factors had the most disagreement among editors. This was likely due to the program’s tie to a faculty member. The total scores ranged from 17-30, with most falling from 25-29, placing it in the two-way/accommodation range.

Table xi:

Article: Seeking Home, Finding Hope							
Coder	Subject	Source	Origin	Relevance	Tone	Reflection of Mission	Total score

A	4	4	2	4	4	4	22
B	5	5	5	5	5	5	30
C	4	4	5	4	5	5	27
D	5	5	5	3	4	4	26
E	4	4	3	2	2	2	17
F	3	3	2	3	5	3	19
G	5	4	5	3	5	4	26
H	4	4	2	3	4	4	21
J	4	5	4	3	2	4	22
K	5	5	4	3	5	5	27
L	1	1	3	3	5	5	18
M	5	5	5	5	5	5	30
N	3	4	2	4	3	3	19
P	4	4	5	3	4	3	23
Q	4	4	2	3	3	2	18
R	5	4	5	3	5	5	27
S	3	2	3	3	3	2	16
Average	4	3.94	3.64	3.35	4.05	3.82	22.82
% Agreement	41	52	41	65	47	35	18
Median	4	4	4	3	4	4	22
Mode	4	4	5	3	5	5	27
Deviation from mean	0.70	0.68	1.19	0.61	0.88	0.93	3.93
Standard deviation	1.06	1.08	1.32	0.78	1.08	1.13	4.58
Total score range:							17 to 30
# replies out of range*	1	2	8	2	4	6	10

DISCUSSION

Discussion: Further Evaluation of SSORTR as a Tool

The SSORTR tool was designed to help university alumni magazine editors better understand and determine the characteristics of their content and enable more solid decision making. With dwindling resources, the university magazine remains a critical tool – and often one of the only tangibly mailed vehicles – for connecting with alumni. The literature has shown that ongoing communication with alumni and their positive evaluation of the institution are factors correlated with alumni affinity and support, but the questions remain about how the university magazine best achieves that. How can editors use research to balance what readers want and what administrators ask? The SSORTR tool was developed to be the next step once readership surveys and focus groups determine the type of stories audiences want to read, as SSORTR assesses specific characteristics of those stories. SSORTR's factors employ the four public relations models as an initial framework and the more dynamic contingency theory to provide a tool to help editors can think about their content and their public relations role.

This initial test of SSORTR with a range of editors across the country and a range of stories demonstrated the tool's potential. The researcher had anticipated greater ranges and disparities in the last two factors of scoring (tone and reflection of mission) simply because they are more subjective in nature than the first four. However, in reviewing the

60 score assessments for each SSORTR factor, all were within 1.5 standard deviations. Those with the highest standard deviations were not in the tone or reflection of mission factors. The factor with 1.4 standard deviations was the origin factor in the story, “Gender Shift,” which featured both internal and national trends relating to demographics in higher education. The rest of the SSORTR assessment of that story placed it primarily in the two-way/accommodation range. The subject factor in the “Scholarships: Where the Smart Money Is,” had 1.37 standard deviations. As discussed, this story featured a range of students, donors and administrators, and although editors were instructed to code students as external for purposes of this project, some may have had difficulty doing so. The origin factor in “Seeking Home, Finding Hope,” had 1.32 standard deviations perhaps due to the story’s focus on a community projected launched by an internal faculty member. So these relatively few scoring disparities appear to be less of a result of a poorly defined factor category and more a reflection of the specific complexities of the feature articles. One of the benefits of SSORTR’s design allows for editors to focus on particular factor scoring in addition to the overall score, as their public relations approach dictates.

As resources and budgets continue to tighten at all higher educational institutions, editors will face increasing competition for a shrinking news/feature hole in their publications as well as pressure to show the value of the investment in their magazines. To be able to demonstrate, for example, that articles with a high subject or source factor (4+) are popular with readers - or to show that articles with overall scores in a certain range are well-read - would be tremendously advantageous both in making difficult decisions about content and in effectively designing the magazine’s overall

communications strategy. While the results of this initial testing of SSORTR show promise that this tool could be useful to university and magazine editors in quantifying the characteristics of the stories that resonate with readers, the size of this particular study doesn't allow for broader generalizations. Further testing of the SSORTR tool and its factors would help (1) further solidify the tool's usefulness and the effectiveness of the factor categories and (2) determine if these factors have an impact on the reader experience and in what way. Connecting SSORTR scores to reader surveys and focus groups would help answer important questions about what types of stories are highly read, engage alumni and call them to action. Do magazines with certain SSORTR scores (or certain scores on particular factors) generate more reader engagement than others? Additional work in this area would help refine SSORTR and shed light on how universities and their content decisions can be guided by the contingency theory and its understanding of how organizations interact with various stakeholder publics.

In addition, research is needed to determine: (1) how to best measure the impact of communications on alumni perceptions, participation or giving; (2) the impact of public relations and ongoing communications with alumni and their perceptions and involvement with the institution; and (3) the specific impact of the university magazine on alumni and donor engagement. Universities invest considerable resources in their alumni magazines, and there is tremendous opportunity to develop a body of research focused on how the magazine's power is best leveraged.

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Appendix I: The SSORTR Content Management Tool

Reader initials: _____

Article title: _____

Measures range from 1=internal to 5=external on the first four factors. Measures range from 1=promotional to 5=autonomous in the last two factors.

Factor definitions:

Subject – this factor examines whether the primary subject or subject matter of a story is internal or external. For purposes of this study, university administrators, faculty and staff are defined as internal, while students, alumni, donors and others not employed by the university are external.

Source – this factor examines the majority of sources in a story or the primary sources. For purposes of this study, administrators, faculty and staff are defined as internal sources, while students, alumni, donors and others not employed by the university are external.

Origin – this factor measures the news origin or news hook for the story and if it is internally or externally generated. For purposes of this study, a story about a new academic program would be of internal origin. A story about a national trend that is localized would be of external origin.

Relevance – this factor examines the audience for the story. Is this story primarily of interest to internal or external audiences? Or both?

Tone – this factor measures whether the tone and language of the story is promotional or autonomous/impartial.

Reflection of Mission – this factor assesses the degree to which the story explicitly focuses on a goal or mission area of the university or if it does so indirectly (autonomous).

	<i>Internal</i>				<i>External</i>	Score
Subject	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Source	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Origin	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Relevance	1	2	3	4	5	_____
	<i>Promotional</i>				<i>Autonomous</i>	
Tone	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Reflection of Mission	1	2	3	4	5	_____
					Total score	_____