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Abstract

My project examines media coverage of the activity of Somali Pirates in the past few years. In a mock case studies textbook chapter, I argue that the pirates are more organized and deliberate in how they communicate with the media and present themselves to the public than one may think. I utilize input from interviews with DC area public relations professionals to explore how the pirates might be successful in a media campaign and what PR tactics would be necessary to reach their target audience and objectives. This paper finds that groups of pirates use identifiable, smart, and consistent messaging to build awareness of their goals and pursuits, and communicate to the media through a recognizable "spokespirate" who controls these intentionally developed messages, among other PR tactics. Though there is a tongue-in-cheek tone throughout my mock chapter, the public relations techniques used by the pirates are the same as those used by large and successful organizations and corporations throughout the world, and I highlight how widespread public relations practices are whether we are aware of them or not.

Public Relations Plunder:

How Somali Pirates Have Commandeered PR Practices

Introduction

The United States' recent obsession with pirates has been widespread. A swaggering Johnny Depp commandeered the Hollywood big screen, pirate Halloween costumes flew off the shelves, pirate themed birthday parties were common, and pirate restaurants and bars cropped up across the country. The increase in real-life piracy across the globe has serendipitously coincided with this rising trend of pirates in pop culture. Despite the arguable illegality of the pirates' trade, these modern day buccaneers have not shied away from becoming part of the public's obsession with pirates. The news media started covering piracy issues and hijackings soon after they began in large numbers, especially in Somali and areas of eastern Africa where pirates have enjoyed a great deal of recent success. Since the surge in piracy off the coast of Somalia began in 2007, there have been over 5,000 unique stories published about the pirates, according to LexisNexis. The pirates' media coverage has not come by chance. With smart media relations tactics mirroring the best in the industry, Somalia's pirates have increased their public visibility and drawn attention to their other goals – raising awareness about illegal international fishing and dumping in Somali waters that have been left unprotected by the state's political disintegration and internal rebellion.

Background

In 1991 Somalia's central government crumbled to pieces and the state entered

into a civil war. Clan-based usurpers funded and armed by Ethiopia deposed the

repressive regime of Siad Barre. A constant government has not existed in Somalia

since then. United Nations peacekeepers led by the United States occupied the

country from 1992-1995 to establish order, but they were not successful. Power

exchanged hands several times over the next few years, then Ethiopian forces entered

Somalia in 2006 – there are centuries of history of conflict between the countries.

They withdrew in 2009, but violence and conflict have continued since, especially

between the government and radical Islamic groups in the south. The Transitional

Federal Government (TFG) is the current internationally recognized federal

government of Somalia, but it is too weak to govern the rebellious regions and clans

throughout the country[1].

In 2009, PBS *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* designated the continuing conflict in

Somalia as one of the year's worst humanitarian crises. The ongoing fighting

between militants and the weak government forced thousands to flee their homes. On

top of war, more than five years of drought has made living conditions harder for

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[1] Miller, Talea. "Transitional Government," *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer,* 26 Jan. 2007. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth_coverage/africa/somalia/keyplayers/transitionalgo vernment.html

citizens across the state. Joel Charny, acting president of Refugees International explains, "In a country of 9 million people, you have 3 million … displaced largely due to conflict, but now also due to drought. You just have a perfect storm in Somalia of factors that makes it very difficult for people to survive[2]. "

Somalia's frail Transitional Federal Government has struggled ineffectually to contain a complex insurgency that conflates religious extremism, political and financial opportunism, and clan interests[3]. As the map to the right shows, several different political groups control separate areas of Somalia. Each region of the country operates

Political Situation in Somalia
created by James Dahl
March 12th, 2010

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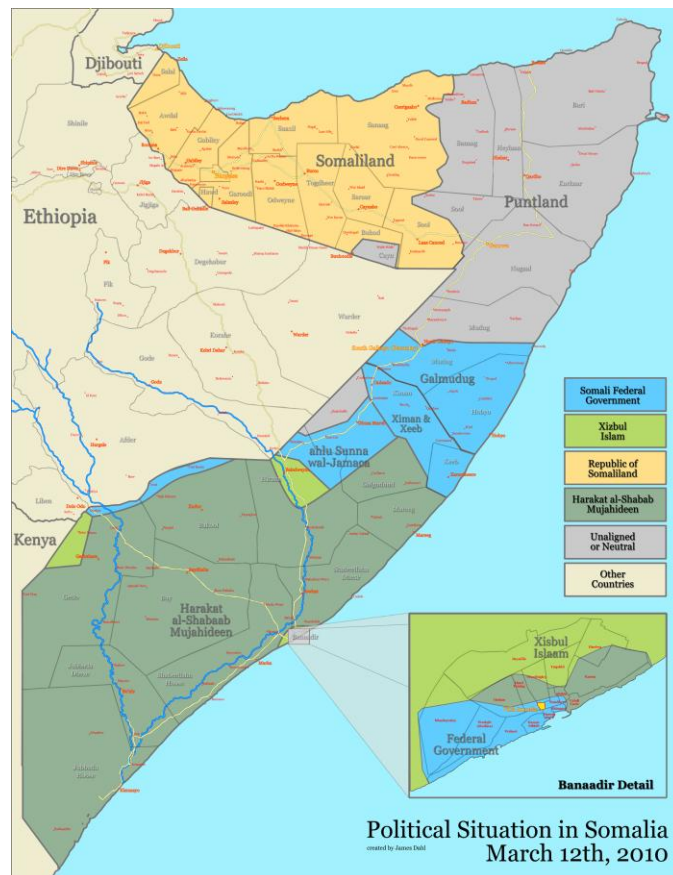
[2] Epatko, Larisa. "Somalia, Pakistan Rank Among Top Crises of 2009," *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer,* Dec. 23, 2009. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/international/july-dec09/humanitarian_12-23.html

[3] United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia. "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1853 (2008)," *United Nations*, 10 March, 2010. Pg 6.

with their own economic and governmental systems, making the overall country effectively a group of small stateless nations. This political and economic strife because of war, drought, and statelessness opened up a prospect for struggling Somalis to make a living through piracy, when other financial opportunities were not available.

Fishing is one of the industries heavily changed by the breakdown of the Somali government. Somalia has Africa's longest coastline, 3,330 km, and fishing contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to the country's economy. However, after the dissolution of the government, the absence of regulation in Somalia's fishing waters opened them up to pillaging from foreign countries. According to a 2006 United Nations report on Somalia, an estimated $300 million worth of seafood is stolen from the country's coastline each year. This take-over in fishing waters deprived Somali fishermen of their livelihood, and many abandoned their trade and became pirates instead, leading attacks on ships fishing or passing through the waters that should have been their fishing waters[4]. "The first pirate gangs emerged in the '90s to protect against foreign trawlers," says Peter Lehr, lecturer in terrorism studies at Scotland's University of St. Andrews and editor of *Violence at Sea: Piracy in the*

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[4] Tharoor, Ishaan. "How Somalia's Fishermen Became Pirates," *TIME Magazine*. 18 Apr. 2009. http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1892376,00.html

Age of Global Terrorism. The names of existing pirate fleets, such as the National

Volunteer Coastguard of Somalia or Somali Marines, are testament to the pirates'

initial motivations[5]. "Beyond illegal fishing, foreign ships have allegedly dumped

toxic and nuclear waste off Somalia's shores. A 2005 United Nations Environmental

Program report cited uranium radioactive and other hazardous deposits leading to a

rash of respiratory ailments and skin diseases breaking out in villages along the

Somali coast[6]." It is much cheaper for waste to be dumped here than disposed of

cleanly anywhere else.

All of these factors come together to ease the way toward piracy for citizens in

coastal communities in Somalia. Using small boats and high-powered guns and

ammunition, the pirates stop large, slow freight vessels traveling through the narrow

waters between Somalia and Yemen. Next the pirates board these ships and hold the

crew, cargo, and vessel for an average ransom of $300,000 to $1.5 million[7]. Many

shipping companies decide not to hire armed security guards for their vessels because

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[5] Tharoor.

[6] Tharoor.

[7] Harper, Mary. "Life in Somalia's Pirate town," *BBC*, 18 Sep. 2008.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7623329.stm

the cost of these workers is greater than the risk of being hijacked and paying a

ransom. Most companies comply with pirate demands[8].

The Tide Of Piracy: A Timeline

1991: Somalia's government collapses. The country of 10 million

people has not had a proper government since, dropping to the lowest

positions on nearly every global indicator of poverty and healthcare.

Unable to police its own capital, let alone its territorial waters, low-

level piracy flourishes.

2006: Rule is briefly restored under the Union of Islamic Courts. Its

leadership cracks down on piracy, on one occasion rescuing 14

crewmembers of the UAE-flagged MV Veesham I, in a raid using

speedboats and fighters. By the end of the year Ethiopian troops,

backed by the US, have toppled the fragile government.

2007: With chaos reigning again, piracy returns - this time on an

industrial scale. The World Food Program gives one of the earliest

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[8] Bahadur, Jay. "'I'm not a pirate, I'm the saviour of the sea,'" *The Times Online*. London,
England. 16 Apr. 2009.
http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/africa/article6100783.ece.

warnings, saying that it now fears for food supply ships bringing aid to Somalia

June 2008: With the very effectiveness of international shipping now threatened by Somali piracy, a United Nations resolution empowers navies to "enter the territorial waters of Somalia and use 'all necessary means' to repress acts of piracy and armed robbery at sea".

September 2008: Sugule Ali, a pirate commander and media spokesperson, takes control of a Ukrainian ship and discovers it holds 33 Russian T-72 tanks. That's 33 more tanks than the Somali army has. After a five-month stand-off, Ali is paid a ransom reputed to be $3 million - he says it will "cover expenses".

April 2009: After Richard Phillips, a US Captain, is freed from pirates by US snipers onboard a nearby destroyer, President Obama promises to halt piracy in the Horn of Africa. Within hours, another five ships are attacked.[9]

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[9] Tom Whipple, "The Tide of Piracy," *The Times Online*. London, England. 16 Apr. 2009. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/africa/article6100783.ece.

Recently, the pirates' demands and contact with the media have been more organized and controlled, making use of talking points and media training, communicating through a visible and transparent spokesperson, and gaining positive coverage in the media. They also appreciate strong public support in Somali coastal towns to stay in business, demonstrating solid community relations in these areas.

Research

Although we may not be able to identify solid qualitative or quantitative research employed by the pirates, it is obvious some target market research (or at least highly detailed awareness) must have occurred. The messages conveyed by the pirates in the media merge too well into the pop culture images already present in society to be random. In the western world piracy is a romanticized ideal that conjures images of swordfights, heavy eyeliner, hoop earrings, and swaggering studs like Johnny Depp. Some of the headlines covering modern pirates, like the *New York Post*'s "Yo-Ho-Whoa! Pirates Hit Cruise Ship," and "French Nab Pirates and Booty," play up this pop culture pirate obsession[10]. Although the pirates working off the coast of Somalia today did not create this pop culture trend, they are extremely aware of its benefit in creating a venue and news story hook to benefit their public relations

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[10] Nolan, Hamilton. "The Media Has Always Loved Pirates!" *The Gawker*. Nov. 19, 2008. http://gawker.com/5093363/the-media-has-always-loved-pirates.

campaign and help form the positive impressions they want the public to hold. More importantly, the pirates recognize through their research that the western image of their profession makes their story hard to resist for the media.[11] Instead of shying away from media and reporters, the pirating community has welcomed the opportunity to get their story in the news. This is evidenced by the surge in stories and featured interviews with pirates.

Planning

The United Nations has published a piracy business model along with one of their Somali Piracy yearly reports. They state eight to twelve militia are required for a basic piracy operation.[12] They must be able to stay at sea for extended periods of time, looking for hijacking opportunities, and they need at least two attack skiffs, weapons, equipment, provisions, fuel, and a supply boat. Investors (sometimes other pirates) pay these initial costs of operation. To be eligible to be a pirate, a volunteer must already have his own gun. This earns one a share in the final ransom. Additional men provide ground support if a hijacking is successful, receiving a

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[11] Shakarian, Jana. "Somali Pirates Expand Business, Trade With Terrorists," *Ascribe Newswire.* Nov. 19, 2008. *LexisNexis*. American University Lib. Dec. 7, 2008. http://www.lexisnexis.com.

[12] United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia. Pg 99.

smaller share than the pirates at sea approximately equivalent to US$15,000. They

must also have their own gun.

    After a ship is successfully hijacked and anchored, the pirates require fresh

provisions for any hostage crewmembers, and cell phones and air time to start making

ransom demands. When ransoms are received, fixed costs are paid first. These are

typically:

> • Reimbursement of supplier(s)
>
> • Financier(s) and/or investor(s): 30% of the ransom
>
> • Local elders: 5 to 10 %of the ransom (anchoring rights)
>
> • Class B shares (approx. $15,000 each): militiamen, interpreters etc.

The remaining sum — the profit — is divided between the final at-sea shareholders[13].

    This basic business model is always being updated and added to as the pirates

become more sophisticated. Peter Pham, associate professor and director of the

Nelson Institute for International and Public Affairs at James Madison University,

said in an interview, "We're seeing these criminal networks of pirates engaging in

intelligence-gathering, rationally choosing their targets, and also reacting to where the

increased patrols have come." Additionally, although Pham doesn't mention it, the

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[13] United Nations Monitoring Group on Somalia. Pg 99.

pirates' media relations skills have vastly improved and begun to take just as important a role in the business plan[14].

Goals and objectives

The goal and objective of this campaign was to change public opinion about pirates and the morality of what they do. The pirates wanted to showcase themselves as more than just swashbuckling swordfighters. The pirate of today is multifaceted as a businessman in one moment and a concerned community benefactor the next. Developing depth in the pirate character is really going to help audiences relate to the pirates they see portrayed or interviewed in the media.

Additionally, increasing economic vitality of the Somali people and pirate communities was another goal that goes hand in hand with presenting the ship raiders as community-conscious. Finally, when targeting world policing powers and other governments, the pirates aimed to change international water laws and create friendly or working relationships with other organizations and groups. Specific communications objectives for this campaign include garnering a large number of media hits in well-known publications.

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[14] Ifill, Gwen. "Modern-Day Somali Pirates Increase Attacks," *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer,* 19 Nov. 2008. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/africa/july-dec08/somalipirates_11-19.html

Target audiences

Primary

The main target audience for the pirates' campaign was the general world population, as large as it might sound. In essence this campaign wanted to reach and engage people throughout the international sphere and try to change public opinion on their pirate band.

Secondary

The campaign's secondary audience included lawmakers, Somali government officials, international regulators like the United Nations and NATO, and countries already actively engaged in the dispute in Somalia. These stakeholders had a large opportunity to determine policy leaning in favor or against the pirates, and any helpful tactics to reach out to these populations was followed up on.

Strategy

The strategy for reaching the target audiences and the goals and objectives is to get media coverage of the pirates, and help mold and shape coverage into a positive portrayal of the pirate groups. Additional media outreach strategies on issues like radioactive dumping or illegal fishing could draw more attention to the root of piracy issues. It is important to diversify the news story with new and interesting angles regularly, and attention-grabbing events are really good at creating unique media stories.

Campaign activity and Implementation

One of the largest bands of pirates appointed a spokesperson, Sugule Ali, to be their voice in the media, according to *The New York Times*. Ali granted extensive interviews with major media outlets across the globe for over a year of the pirates' most active exploits. The media was encouraged not to quote any other pirate for some time. *PR Week* notes the use of a spokesperson is "a never-before-seen level of transparency from the pirate community." [15] Ali tried to establish the pirates he represents as ordinary people, who like "normal human-being food" like spaghetti, and claims they are merely protecting their waters. "We don't consider ourselves sea bandits," he said. "We consider sea bandits those who illegally fish in our seas and dump waste in our seas and carry weapons in our seas. We are simply patrolling our seas. Think of us like a coast guard…killing is not in our plans."[16] This portrayal of the pirate as a spaghetti-lovin' "just-like-you-and-me" kind of guy, out to do good

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[15] Garcia, Tonya. "Pirates Reveal New Side With Spokesperson," *PR Week*, Oct. 6, 2008. http://www.prweekus.com/Pirates-reveal-new-side-with-spokesperson/article/118622.

[16] Gettleman, Jeffrey. "Somali Pirates Tell Their Side," *The New York Times*, Sep. 30, 2008. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/01/world/africa/01pirates.html?_r=1&hp.

like the coast guard, tries to get change the public's opinion of who pirates are and

what they do.

Ali also plays into the romanticized view of pirates, saying, "you only die

once," in reference to being surrounded by American warships.[17] Along with being

everyday people looking to help their communities, Ali wants the public to think of

pirates as brave adventurers living life to its fullest. Overall he is casting the pirate as

"noble outlaw." The idea of the honorable, romantic pirate dates back at least to 1814

with Lord Byron's "The Corsair."

By using a spokespirate to communicate with the media, the pirates

accomplish two strategic things. Ali provides a humanizing aspect to the pirates and

their illegal acts, which has arguably increased public sympathy for the group, and he

controls the message that the media receives from the pirates instead of having

multiple pirates conveying a different message when interviewed. The pirates benefit

greatly from the human face they now have in view.

Ali is also able to release information at the appropriate times, quelling rumors

and making sure the message that reaches the global media is what the pirates want

the media to know. They have well-planned comments to answer reporters' questions

about unresolved issues, holding back information that is not finalized just as a

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[17] Gettleman.

strategic campaign planned by a public relations practitioner would do. For example,

in the case of a hostage Ukrainian ship taken by pirate forces in September 2008, Ali

was asked about the amount of ransom and said, "let us not discuss that issue now

because we are still discussing with the ship owners."[18] He also refused to discuss the

ship's content, saying it was none of the pirate's business. The spokespirate

repeated himself for the *Agence France Press*, saying, "The discussions are headed

towards a positive end, but nothing has been finalized."[19] This strategy by the pirates

is extremely well played. With the goal of putting their best foot forward, they keep

incorrect information out of the press while presenting a professional front to

reporters, a key in media relations. By withholding information from the media, they

keep reporters engaged in a developing story and searching for further answers

instead of moving on to the next bit of news.

　　　　The pirates have also developed concise talking points and messaging that has

been conveyed to most pirates for instances when they may talk with a reporter. This

is another strength of the pirates' public relations efforts. A number of different

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[18] Ali, Abdulsamad and David Mugonyi. "Pirates Killed on Hijacked Ship." *The Nation (Kenya)*, Sep. 30, 2008. *LexisNexis*. American University Lib. Dec. 7, 2008. http://www.lexisnexis.com.

[19] Abdinur, Mustafa Haji. "Somali Pirates Maintain Ransom Demand." *Agence France Presse*. Oct. 2, 2008. *LexisNexis*. American University Lib. Dec. 7, 2008. http://www.lexisnexis.com.

pirates have repeated the claim of being a coastguard instead of a group of bandits in the media multiple times, as well as denying ties with Islamic extremists.[20] The widespread consensus among pirates to persistently present these topics to the media shows clear organization within the group. They have developed a message, educated their members on it, and strategically communicated it to the media.

The pirates also enjoy a welcoming environment in the coastal towns of Somalia. While public relations ground rules would claim it is necessary for organizations to live by the community's ordinances and social mores, in the case of coastal Somalia, the pirates are arguably the creators of the community culture and mores. Local police forces are underpaid but can take home some of the plundered profits if they look the other way in most instances of piracy. The towns are centered on pirating life. The industry brings in better revenues than the communities could expect to make otherwise, and flourishing pirate towns have emerged along the coastline. The pirates are widely popular for the good fortune they bring. "They wed the most beautiful girls; they are building big houses; they have new cars; new guns . . . Piracy in many ways is socially acceptable. They have become fashionable,"

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[20] Howden, Daniel. "We're Not Pirates. These are Our Waters, Not Theirs." *The Independent (London)*. Nov. 14, 2008. *LexisNexis*. American U Lib. Dec. 7, 2008. http://www.lexisnexis.com

one resident told a BBC reporter.[21] The pirates are notorious for contributing to their

communities (and throwing great parties), which has established strong community

relations that serve as a foundation for their continued operations.

Results

The pirates' media campaign was a success because of the enormous number

of stories that the media ran on the brigands. Over just a few years, thousands of

stories covered the pirates and their hijackings. In closer analysis of the stories, there

are two separable categories that are published. The first is the serious political story

that covers reasons of violence in Somali, or the next ransom the pirates are waiting

for, or the increasing presence of military vessels for increased safety, etc. The

counterpoint story is a fun-loving look at modern-day pirates, heavily drawing on

popular culture images and featuring pirate interviews or remarkable human-interest

angles. However, there is still a lot of opportunity in this PR campaign that hasn't

been fully realized.

Strengths

The main source of strength in the Pirates' public relations campaign was their

surprising mastery of communications techniques. They keep their community happy

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[21] Miller, Dan. "Why are The Somali Pirates So Successful?" *Blogcritics.org*. Nov. 18, 2008.
http://blogcritics.org/archives/2008/11/18/230835.php.

by bringing in such large revenues and supporting local businesses and development.

Indeed, one resident, as mentioned before, calls piracy a tenet of the society. The use

of a spokesperson is extremely skilled and highlights in-depth knowledge of PR

tactics as well as the inner workings of the media. Finally, the pirates are extremely

good at using romanticized images of pirates to their benefit. Additionally, they have

begun to play into the Robin Hood mold more, on top of the dedication they have

already displayed to their own communities and towns. After the recent earthquake

in Haiti, Somali pirates pledged a generous donation to help survivors and rebuilding

efforts[22]. This media announcement makes clear that the pirates intend to keep up the

"noble outlaw" image which cushions public support of their activities.

Weaknesses

The pirates' weaknesses are present in the range of other types of PR

techniques they employ. While they exhibit good media and community relations,

there is a lack of social marketing or online outreach. The pirates also set goals that

were too large (changing global public opinion on pirates) and too hard to convey to

the global audience. Both the targets and the objectives of this campaign should be

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[22] Their, Dave. "Somali Pirates Say They'll Play Robin Hood in Haiti," *AOL News*. 1 Feb. 2010. http://www.aolnews.com/world/article/somali-pirates-say-theyll-play-robin-hood-in-haiti/19340183

made more reasonable. There is no way to measure the success of the campaign

when these vital designations are so general and unable to define. This inability to

measure the campaign's results also hinders the pirates, leaving them questioning

what sort of influence they had and why.

Professionals Weigh In

This section will highlight the opinions of two Washington DC public

relations professionals about the pirate's campaign, what they should do better or

differently, and what the pirates would have to do to be contenders for a major PR

award like a Silver Anvil.

Amy Battjer is a Senior Associate at the Hatcher Group in Washington, DC.

She holds a masters degree in Public Communications from American University.

She suggested the pirates come together and form one organization instead of

several independent groups.

> The pirates could really unify themselves as an "organization" to
>
> legitimize who they are and to help continue to define themselves as
>
> the "good guys" – the Robin Hood aspect – which they've started to do
>
> by assigning a spokesperson and developing some messages. But they
>
> could continue to do so by setting in place some organizational

> structure and developing a mission statement. This could help in a full-
>
> blown image remake.

Her idea is a good one – more unity presented to the media means more control over the messages the media receives, and stronger portrayals of the pirates as Robin Hood characters. She also suggests writing op-eds about the pirates' good deeds.

Additionally, Amy argues that some tracking of the pirates' results from their media relations campaign is possible.

> We'd want the coverage to change from stories about the number of
>
> boats the pirates have held for ransom and how much money they were
>
> able to collect, to coverage about the pirates efforts to support their
>
> countrymen and the world community at large. I'd track the number
>
> and types or coverage over time to see if the type of coverage
>
> changes… I'd also look at changes in local and international politics in
>
> regards to the pirates.

She has two good suggestions for ways to monitor results, something essential to PR – first track types of stories and then track changes in policy. Both are good at identifying results of the pirates' hard work, but in the end they can't point to any change in the public's opinion, which was the primary goal of the campaign. She suggests a public opinion poll to do this, which would depend on the budget. To win

any type of award the pirates would need to develop a much more concrete and

measurable way to judge success and desired outcomes, Amy claims.

Cathy Renna is the managing partner of Renna Communications. She is a

nationally recognized media relations expert and the former spokesperson of the Gay

and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD).

Cathy feels that the pirates have looked over the benefits of visual media in

their campaign.

> These pirates are out there trying to connect with people around the
>
> world and improve their image. Their spokesman puts a human face to
>
> the pirates and shows them to be normal people – why not deepen this
>
> interpersonal connection the pirates are trying to form with a video
>
> message from the spokesman or news-like video releases highlighting
>
> some of the pirates' humanitarian work? Distribute these to the news
>
> media and online, and I'm sure the story would have some legs.

There is also definite potential for such video content to become viral online and

create a lot of additional buzz. Along with possible video capabilities that Cathy

brought up, she feels that the pirates are vastly underestimating the following they

would find online. Through social networking sites like facebook and twitter, the

pirates could build on online presence followed by thousands of people wanting to

know more about the day to day lives of these "noble outlaws." An online petition

campaign could enlist the help of citizens around the world to create limits on illegal fishing and waste dumping in Somali waters. Through an activity like this, the pirates could bolster their image as good guys while protecting the waters they set out to preserve for themselves initially. A strong online presence would benefit the pirates' visibility greatly.

Lessons Learned

Despite the tongue-in-cheek tone throughout my mock case studies chapter, the public relations techniques used by the pirates are the same as those used by large and successful organizations and corporations throughout the world. It is astounding to see how widespread public relations practices are whether we are aware of them or not.