

**FOUNDATIONS & SCOOPS.
HOW TO SURVIVE IN A MEDIA WORLD**

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Too caricatural a premise?

Typically, foundations become food for eager media interest under three groups of circumstances:

- when a foundation deliberates to put a huge amount of money into a project, whatever it is; of course the more zillions the better;
- when a prominent figure of the foundation appears to be allegedly involved in money scandals or power scheming;
- when somebody in the foundation happens to be a socialite or a star system figure.

This is most embarrassing. It is true that foundations are about money. They hardly are about power or the jet set. Other messages from and about the foundations should find their way into the newspapers or radio and tv programs.

Introduction

My short talk will be devoted to a few 'rule of thumb' remarks concerning:

- (a) the interaction between foundations and today's information media;
- (b) the specific role foundation Chief Executives may be recommended to play in the communication game.

Media communication experts write dozens of handbooks every year and organize hundreds of (very expensive) courses everywhere. They appear to know how to do *it*. Personally I am more uncertain and rather limit myself to draw a few suggestions and generalizations from my personal experience as CE of a cultural and research foundation in Italy.

Ordinarily, foundation life is not likely to give rise to what the media system assesses as exciting pieces of news, let alone 'scoops'. It is likely that our aspiration as foundation people to see our work reported in the media for the public opinion consideration may be frustrated more often than not. As a matter of fact, two different communication codes confront each other and certainly ours is not the more powerful. Nonetheless there are reasons – some of them strategic, other opportunistic - not to dismiss this struggle as just impossible to fight. Foundations need therefore to develop some kind of workable relationship with the media. As I just put it, a problem arises when the reciprocal communication codes and priorities encounter each other. It is not a matter of ethics versus greed, of reliability versus superficiality (even if sometimes it *is*), but of different ways to judge what matters and how to speak about it. It is a matter of attention spans and buzzwords, of different time values; of linguistics and semiotics. Indeed, not a minor tangle.

If you do not have exciting news concerning your work according to the media standards, the media themselves will incline to either manipulate what you offer them in order to create assumingly palatable news or ignore you. Both would clearly count as communication failures.

If you rate it strategic for your foundation to be visible in the media - and this is a crucial “if”, since media exposition is by no means inherent to the very essence of foundations - then there is a trade to be learned.

This trade starts with the practice of mediations (media-actions?). It usually takes a great deal of mediation effort to raise a genuine and ‘correct’ information media interest in foundations’ activities. Mediation work is of two kinds. One is inside the foundation and requires that your option and strategies be at any time worked out keeping in mind the need for strategic communication, particularly with the media. The other concerns the modes of your interaction with the media. Both are necessary for good results, which – in any case – are never assured. I shall try to express my ideas on both issues. A clarification: my paper will be exclusively about the relationship with more traditional media such as newspapers, magazines, or the tv. Nonetheless, some remarks may have a wider application range.

A few assumptions.

First. **Good foundation work** has always news to spread: events and ideas, more often **ideas lying behind events**.

Second. Despite coming to terms with the media is often a frustrating task, never forget that they are **a crucial resource for foundations** :

- i. **to accomplish your mission**, which varies from case to case, but inevitably has to do with the growth of the civil society and of the public opinion and social awareness;
- ii. **to exploit the media as a channel of information on and, consequently, legitimation of your mission and methods** – (not unusually with significant fund-raising implications);
- iii. **to amplify the impact of your work on wider audiences** (the public opinion at large, specific elites) you are not always able to get in touch with;
- iv. eventually; **to evaluate your performance**. We all know that it is never easy to find objective parameters to judge foundations’ performances (in the cultural field, even more so). A critical assessment of quantitative and qualitative presence in the media – and in which media - may help in the evaluation process. Moreover, we always must take very seriously – should we like it or not – the way the media portray us: comparing it with our self-perception is an indispensable exercise in assessing our communicating efficaciousness. Never underestimate the fact that the foundation public image depends at least as much on the media renderings of it as on our direct communication efforts.

Third. Conversely, **foundations can be an important resource for the media**. Today’s generalist media (especially, newspapers, radio and Internet) tend to cover any kind of social and cultural issues, some of which may fall in the field of expertise of your

foundation. Thus, a coincidence of interests sometimes occurs and foundations may be asked to play in the media the role of 'experts' on issues which are coherent with their field of operations. A role foundations should accept with caution, but that nonetheless may make interaction easier and add to your strategic communication.

Fourth. Do not put too much confidence in (internal or external) press offices. They want to be published at all costs because that is the parameter they gauge their success by and are often 'conniving' with their counterparts in the media professions (meaning that they tend to be overindulgent towards the professional vices of the media people)! More seriously, what amount of strategic work a foundation is willing to do in order to be successful with the information media **is one of the chief executive's concerns**. Your staff and press office may help, and certainly they do technically, the decision is yours.

Strategic communication

Now a few personal remarks on 'strategic communication' for foundations and the internal mediation work needed to make it successful. By 'strategic communication' I mean here a concept structured along two dimensions: first, a long-term approach; second its instrumentality to the fulfillment of the foundation mission – hopefully with the result to ignite a positive feed-back circuit. Admittedly, there many other and more complex acceptations of such phrase.

As usual, there is no general rule. It is evident that **strategic communication strategies may (ought to) vary according to time, country, sector, foundation's size, typology and scope**, and so on. A 'mature' foundation with a sound public repute is likely to rely on communication strategies which are notably different from those of a new foundation that has still to gain legitimation in its own field. A foundation working on or backing cancer research will have different communication goals and responsibilities from one managing an art museum. Local vs national/international dimension also matters.

Above all, **the traditional divide between grant-making foundations** (which are primarily concerned with letting the public opinion know how much money they have spent in which sectors, why and how) **and operative foundations** (interested in narrating their activities or spreading ideas) **may greatly impact on the choice of communication strategies**.

My job is with a cultural foundation operating in the social sciences. Thus, the following 'common sense' recommendations come from such a professional experience. As for professional reasons I enjoy the privilege to be acquainted with many different types of foundations, I hope some may also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, elsewhere.

Generally speaking, I would recommend that a finely tuned foundation communication strategy should pursue **an adequate balance between:**

- a) **corporate/content-based messages**
- b) **innovation/continuity**

c) scientific or trade-specific discourse/popularisation effort.

a) corporate/content-based messages. Any foundation has a standard core of corporate or institutional data of which to assure a correct penetration in the media. It is indeed annoying when elementary information on your foundation, such as its name, are misspelt and other similar inaccuracies appear in the newspapers or in tv. Among such basic data one would always like to see correctly reported (i) name, history, mission and values; (ii) governance; (iii) sources and destinations of resources; (iv) local/national/international positioning; (iv) role in the political/cultural arena; (v) interaction with other institutions and the public administration; (vi) people.

Content-based communication goals are possibly less standardised as they heavily depend on the foundation's field(s) of activities: (a) programs and projects; (b) organized events like conferences, exhibition, awards; (c) research or activity results; (d) contributions to specific cultural and political debates.

In your communication effort, what you are really looking for is, first, **impact**, but immediately after **legitimacy** and, then, **fuel for your corporate long-standing reputation**, all of these useful conditions for a foundation to operate successfully.

How to achieve a reasonable balance between institutional and content-based communication?

As to me, too much "institution" is as bad as too much "content". If your target audience says '*Sure, I know the So and So Foundation. It has a great reputation*' this is good, but not good enough. You also need "*Yes, it has done such-and-such things and/or made such-and-such statements*".

Conversely, public opinion should be able to easily associate any (or a reasonable amount of) important deed or project of your foundation to the foundation's name. So, you always need to put your content in an institutional context.

Incidentally, this may also imply that sometimes personal media exposure ambitions of the professional staff (chief executive included) are to be sacrificed for the sake of the institution.

Tentatively, a good recipe is: **try to achieve institutional ("brand") communication goals by means of content-based communication actions**. That is, always strive to establish a clear link between your activities and your institutional mission/values. Both may help in building up **an image of your foundation** coherent with its mission and values, and **clearly recognizable as unique** (or, at least, as strongly positioned) within your elective field of action.

(b) Innovation/continuity. Foundations are civil society actors particularly suited to carry out innovative projects. Anticipating trends in society and culture is an important, if not essential, feature of foundations' work.

It is a relatively trivial truth that a bent for innovation is also important for communication. Information media are mainly concerned with "what's new". Thus, any time your work yields what you consider an innovative outcome in your field, a good communication chance is at hand. This is one side of the coin.

The other side is that for building a solid, respected and long-lasting image of your institution **innovation should be placed into the riverbed of continuity**. Admittedly, this is essentially a matter of general strategic choices. Even though ‘continuity’ is not an asset likely to excite information media, the very fact **that your foundation may claim a long-standing expertise in a given field** with a story of progressive accumulation of knowledge and action gives more legitimacy to your innovative projects and **improves your image in the long run**. Continuously looking for and offering soi-disant “wonders” not necessarily does good, though it may gain some banner headlines on newspapers.

(c) Scientific or trade-specific discourse/popularisation effort. It is obvious that, whatever your field of expertise, the long-standing reputation of a foundation heavily depends on keeping high knowledge standards. This is particularly true of research and ‘think tank’ foundations, but easily applies to the others. Grant-making foundations should give their money only to projects which meet high standards, which implies high standards of selection and deep professional and technical expertise.

In order to spread the result of your work to wider audiences not necessarily familiar with scientific or technical languages, a major effort for popularisation is needed.

Again, the right balance between these two possibly conflicting dimensions should be a matter of considered evaluation and wit.

When you are planning your communication with the media you should, on the one hand, avoid to be too much conditioned by the social rules of the small ‘academic’ courtyard or the milieu of your trade, which is probably an audience you are able to reach through different communication channels (seminars, publications, grey literatures). On the other hand, you should not mix up popularisation with banalization. For instance, try **to resist the ‘quantitative data myth’**, largely diffused in media communication, which wants to reduce everything to a single table or diagram, if not a figure. Figures talk a lot by themselves, some times only if you make them to. If your work does include data and arguments, always remember that also arguments should be reported, though in a popularised form.

The interaction game with information media

The latter were already incursions in the realm of what I called the interaction game with the media, which is my second and shorter issue.

Once your foundation has reached an adequate balance in the beforementioned dimensions of strategic communication (by no means exhaustive), an important step towards a successful interaction with information media has been done. And here is where the tricky part begins.

Even if your strategic communication convictions are sound, interaction with the media remains a matter of pragmatics and, consequently, **a positive result is never assured**. Again, one should bear in mind that foundations and information media may contingently share some communication interests and goals, but still are – professionally speaking – worlds apart. And, above all, worlds that move at a very different pace. The reputation and the image of a foundation are long-term goals based

on long-term work. A daily newspaper, though based on long-standing cultural and professional values, dies every evening.

As said, there is plenty of professional literature that deals with the pragmatics of communication and, therefore, I do not want to get into much detail.

Let me nonetheless put forward just ten 'commandments', which I draw from my and my colleagues' experience, a sort of decalogue on how to survive in a media world and take some advantage from it:

- i. Media communication is not the last step in any event building process, that is, while preparing your event, prepare your communication.
- ii. Check your message for the news on the three balance dimensions
- iii. Try to foresee in which general communication moment and context your event is going to fall
- iv. Prepare your material carefully: it is to be neat, focused, terse
- v. Always make clear that it is a **foundation's** communication, that is, a non-profit, philanthropic organization – this is all-important
- vi. Be aware of messages you want to emerge and of those you do not want to (or that might be improperly drawn from your communication)
- vii. On the basis of the field and tone of your event, select the media and, within them, the more suitable section pages or programme
- viii. Do not force or forsake the journalist, that is, let him/her freely approach your issue according to his/her expectations, but be ready to guide him/her through its asperities
- ix. If your content is too complex, select a sub-issue which be both intriguing and representative of the whole
- x. Don't forget you can do nothing about the headlines except crossing your fingers: just be as patient as Job and take it easy.

Conclusion. The role of the foundation chief executive

The role a foundation chief executive must play in communication with information media is:

- 1) indispensable in planning;
- 2) crucial but not exhaustive in implementation.

(1) As said, communication with information media is a crucial part of the foundation's strategic communication, which in turn is a crucial part of the foundation's cultural strategies that derive from its mission and values. This imply that the chief executive should actively participate in all main phases of communication planning and the final decision on what and how to communicate is his/hers. Coherently, whatever complex the organization chart of your foundation, the press office should respond directly to the chief executive.

(2) When we come to implementation, the role of the chief executive depends on the situation. A general recommendation is that **the chief executive should primarily play**

the role of the institution spokesperson, avoiding to confuse his or her specific role with that of an ‘expert’ in the field.

If, as it often occurs, you are also an expert in the field, this may concur to communication as a secondary concern or resource and it should be played up carefully . Generally speaking, a good solution is to let your professionals speak or write on their own field of expertise, keeping for yourself the main corporate role. This particularly apply to those foundations, grant-making or operative, that work in many different fields. A chief executive who tries to appear as an ‘expert’ in any and every field does not necessarily contribute to the foundation’s reputation.

Finally: how much media exposition is good for a CE? This is a question I am unable to answer in generalizing terms. Personally, I would recommend parsimony: especially because having to do daily with the media ad the media people is distracting, time-consuming and sometimes stressful. Like gambling it becomes sometimes an all-absorbing vice – there is some kind of dark fascination about it.

It is healthier indeed for the CE to avoid the ‘*La fondation c’est moi*’ syndrome, a very bad one, in general, and particularly so when the media are concerned. Unfortunately, they seem to like it – as they generally love simplification and personalization. Do not ever forget that making a mistake with the media is frightfully easy: a word too much, a two-second too long hesitation, an involuntary innuendo. It is much better that your occasional slip does not become the foundation’s one. Again it is a matter of balance and nuances: always try to let your counterpart perceive that whilst you are the official and consequently absolutely reliable interpreter of the foundation line, at the same time the foundation, as an institution, is *more* than you.

But superpositions are sometimes inevitable and ultimately all responsibility lies with us and our face, should we like it or not. After all that’s why they pay us so much. Do they?