INTERACTIVE PUBLIC RELATIONS:

The World Wide Web and South African NGOs

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Abstract

The internet has brought about changes in how organizations view and use communication, especially in the field of public relations. Public relations practitioners working in the social responsibility or development spheres can use their organizations' web sites to build its image, to interact and consult with their different publics and stakeholders, and to set the agenda on policy issues. This could have many advantages for non-profit or non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Previous studies have revealed that most public relations practitioners were still uncertain of how to make the most of the internet. Practitioners who tried to use the internet as part of their public relations efforts often still did not use the interactive features to their fullest potential. Furthermore NGOs usually did not have many people on their staff and they were not necessarily trained to use a medium such as the internet optimally.

This study addressed the void in public relations research as far as the application of the internet is concerned. The question was asked whether NGOs in South Africa can use the interactive nature of the internet for public relations purposes to enhance their development programs. The study argued that the obvious advantages of the internet for these organizations could only be experienced if the organizations used the medium strategically and according to the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

Ten South African NGOs and their web sites were studied by means of in-depth interviews and content analyses. Qualitative research was used in order to reach an in-depth understanding of the context in which each organization operated.

It was found that problems with the organizations' web sites were in most cases a result of their views on public relations in general. Most of the NGOs in this study did not view the building of relationships and mutual understanding as the purpose of their public relations efforts. Public relations efforts were hampered by the lack of communication specialists with communication qualifications and by the merging of the public relations and marketing functions.

As a result of their asymmetrical views on the purpose of public relations most of the NGOs could also not realize the potential of the WWW for the application of two-way symmetrical purposes. This finding corresponds with the findings of other researchers that the poor quality of public relations overall led to an inadequate response to the internet as a means to practice two-way symmetrical communication.

Most of the web sites analyzed displayed a lack of interactivity and two-way symmetrical communication principles and web sites were often merely used as an information dissemination tool or instrument. The majority of the NGOs therefore under-used the unique features of the WWW and their web sites could be improved quite substantially by addressing some of the shortcomings identified in this study.

The study contributed to the body of knowledge in communication studies at a pragmatic level by making important short-term and long-term recommendations on how the shortcomings regarding the internet as well as the inadequate views on public relations could be addressed. It was proved that the internet can be applied to enhance development projects in South Africa. At a theoretical level the study stressed the similarity between symmetry and interactivity as theoretical concepts, and expanded the use of the two-way symmetrical model by applying it to the internet. It was shown that the under-utilization of the internet's most advantageous features by the NGOs studied was only a symptom of problematic presuppositions about communication and public relations.

Opsomming

Met die koms van die internet moes organisasies anders oor kommunikasie dink, veral met betrekking tot die skakel- of kommunikasie-afdeling. Skakelpraktisyns wat sosiale verantwoordelikheidstake het of in die ontwikkelingsfeer werk, kan van 'n webwerf gebruik maak om die organisasie se beeld te bou, om interaksie te hê met verskillende publieke, om belangegroepe te konsulteer asook om die agenda met betrekking tot beleidsaspekte te stel. Dit kan baie voordelig wees vir nie-winsgewende of nie-regeringsorganisasies in Suid-Afrika.

Vorige studies het bevind dat die meeste skakelpraktisyns nog onseker was oor hoe om die internet tot voordeel van die organisasie te benut. Praktisyns wat wel die internet as deel van hulle skakelaksies gebruik het, het nog nie die interaktiewe eienskappe van hierdie medium maksimaal benut nie. Gewoonlik het 'n nie-regeringsorganisasie nie 'n groot personeel nie en waarskynlik ook nie personeel wat opgelei is om 'n medium soos die internet optimaal te benut nie.

Die studie fokus op die leemte in skakelkunde navorsing oor die gebruik van die internet. Die vraag wat aangespreek is, is of Suid-Afrikaanse nie-regeringsorganisasies die interaktiewe eienskappe van die internet kan gebruik om hulle ontwikkelingswerk te bevorder. Daar is van die standpunt af uitgegaan dat voor die handliggende voordele van die internet vir hierdie organisasies slegs benut kan word indien die organsisasies die medium op 'n strategiese manier en volgens die simmetriese tweerigtingmodel van skakelwerk gebruik.

Tien Suid-Afrikaanse nie-regeringsorganisasies en hulle webwerwe is deur middel van indiepteonderhoude en inhoudsanalise bestudeer. 'n Kwalitatiewe navorsingsbenadering is gevolg om 'n indiepte begrip vir die konteks waarbinne elke organisasie funksioneer, te verkry.

Daar is bevind dat probleme met die organisasies se webwerwe meestal veroorsaak is deur hulle siening van skakelkunde in die algemeen. Die meeste organisasies wat bestudeer is, het nie die belangrikheid van die bou van verhoudings en wedersydse begrip as doelwit van skakelkunde besef nie. Hulle skakelaksies het ook gely onder 'n tekort aan opgeleide kommunikasiespesialiste en 'n vermenging van bemarking en skakelfunksies.

As gevolg van die asimmetriese siening van die doel van skakelwerk, het die meeste organisasies ook nie die potensiaal van die WWW vir simmetriese tweerigtingkommunikasie besef nie. Dit stem ooreen met bevindinge van ander navorsers, dat 'n swak gehalte van skakelwerk kan lei tot die onvoldoende gebruik van die internet vir simmetriese tweerigtingkommunikasiedoeleindes.

Die meeste webwerwe wat ondersoek is, het 'n gebrek aan interaktiwiteit en simmetriese tweerigtingkommunikasiebeginsels vertoon. Die webwerwe is dikwels slegs gebruik vir die doel van inligtingverspreiding. Die meeste van die organisasies het dus die unieke eienskappe van die WWW onderbenut en hulle webwerwe kan baie verbeter as die tekortkominge wat in die studie uitgewys is, aangespreek word.

Die studie dra op 'n pragmatiese vlak by tot die vakgebied van kommunikasiestudies deurdat belangrikte kort- en langtermynaanbevelings gemaak word om die tekortkominge met betrekking tot die gebruik van die internet, sowel as die gebrekkige sienswyse van skakelkunde aan te spreek. Die studie bewys dat die internet wel gebruik kan word om ontwikkelingsprojekte in Suid-Afrika te bevorder. Die studie beklemtoon die ooreenkoms tussen simmetrie en interaktiwiteit op 'n teorietiese vlak en brei die gebruiksmoontlikhede van die simmetriese tweerigtingmodel uit deur dit op die internet toe te pas. Die studie toon aan dat die onderbenutting van die internet se unieke eienskappe simptomaties was van die organisasies se gebrekkige voorafaannames oor kommunikasie en skakelkunde.

Preface

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Part I

Context, theory and research design

The thesis is organized into three parts:

Part one consists of four chapters and forms the background of this study. The context of the research project (Chapter 1) as well as the theoretical background (Chapters 2 & 3) is discussed. Finally the research design is motivated and explained (Chapter 4).

Part two deals with the content analyses and interviews conducted for the study.

Part three explains the conclusions reached and makes recommendations for further research.

Note that the names of the NGOs included in the study are used as they were called at the time of the study. Some of the names may have changed since the completion of the study.

Chapter 1

Interactive public relations: The South African context

1.1 Introduction

The 1990s saw the rise of the "information age" or the "information superhighway", sometimes called the Global Information Infrastructure (GII). These terms refer to instantaneous and global communication via optical fiber-wired[1] communication networks and satellites. In simple language it means that it is now possible to communicate with virtually anyone in the world via a personal computer that is linked to the communication network called the internet[2] (Herman & Chesney, 1997:106; Mowlana, 1997:217)[3].

This global communication system that links computers and computer networks across the globe has become impossible to ignore during the past few years because of its rapid growth among consumers and business. Its development is equated to progress and the advancement of civilization and has even been referred to as a communications revolution[4] (Carey, 1998:28; Atkin *et al.*, 1998:475; Bush *et al.*, 1998:17; Dicken-Garcia, 1998:19).

In 2000 there were approximately 1.82 million internet users in South Africa (4,19% of the population) and 349 million users worldwide. Almost all the large corporate companies and many smaller organizations in South Africa had Internet Presence Sites[5] on the World Wide Web[6] (CIO, 2001:1; Media Africa, 2000:1). This created a situation where individuals move from web site[7] to web site and from company to company to find exactly the information they want. Therefore new communication and persuasion tools and skills are needed in order to make optimal use of the unique characteristics of this medium, especially in areas of marketing communication and public relations (Marken, 1998a: 47,48).

As will be discussed later, public relations practitioners are still uncertain as to how to make the most of the internet. Practitioners who try to use the internet as part of their public relations efforts often still do not use the interactive features to their fullest potential. This study therefore aims to address the void in public relations research as far as the application of new communication technology is concerned. The study focuses on the interactive nature of the internet by applying the two-way symmetrical model of public relations to the web sites of ten South African NGOs. This chapter serves as a general background to the study in order to explain the focus and the context of the study. In the subsequent sections the following three aspects motivating the research are addressed:

- In the first instance, the discipline of public relations will be discussed in relation to the application of the WWW by public relations practitioners;
- In the second place, the internet and the WWW as communication media will be discussed, together with an explanation of several related concepts and their place within a postmodern era;
- Third, the developmental context in which public relations practitioners find themselves in South Africa will be explained in order to motivate the use of new media technology in a developing country.

After the discussion of these three subjects, research questions and objectives will be stated to explain the focus of this research. Most of the concepts introduced in this chapter will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

1.2 The WWW and public relations

Before the uses of the internet for public relations purposes within the context of a developing country can be explored, it is important to define what exactly is meant by the term "public relations".

1.2.1 Public relations and related fields of study

Definitions of public relations vary widely. (See Chapter 3 for the theoretical development of the public relations field, as well as the problems encountered in theoretical development.) Among public relations practitioners there are differences of opinion about terms used for and the meanings ascribed to the practitioners of the profession.

Some of the substitutions for the term *public relations officer* are, for example, *public affairs officer, public information officer, community relations officer, external affairs officer, corporate communicator, communication specialist, community liaison officer, publicity director or information officer* (Ihator, 1999:34).

One of the reasons for the different ways of referring to public relations practitioners is that many different kinds of companies, corporations, organizations and governments have public relations needs and people in their service to look after these needs. Another reason is the negative connotation linked to the term *public relations* that especially the public and sometimes the media hold. By using different names, organizations try to get away from this negative connotation.

According to Ihator (1999:3) corporations have traditionally been the source of messages and perceived to be the superior partner in the communication and relationship with society. Although some public relations practitioners have been adopting the two-way symmetrical model of Grunig and Hunt (1984)[8] which calls for a two-way flow of communication, corporate communication has historically been linked to publicity, and persuasion which are more like one-way communication. In many instances, this contributed to the negative connotation of the term *public relations.*

The public relations practitioner serves as an intermediary between the organization that he/she represents all the organization's publics (Newsom *et al.*, 1993). With this in mind public relations can be defined by the following widely-used definition of Grunig and Hunt (1984:6): "The management of communication between an organization and its publics." Hutton (1999) adds to this definition by stating that public relations refers to the "strategic" management of communication between the organization and its publics.

Chapter 3 explores a few other definitions, but the definition of Grunig and Hunt is proposed as the most widely-used definition in public relations to date and it is seen as an acceptable definition for use in this research. The most important reason is that this definition refers to the *relationship* between an organization and its publics and *not* to the marketing of products and the importance of making a profit.

Views on the meaning of and relationships between marketing communication, corporate communication and public relations differ sharply. According to some sources, such as

Russell and Lane (1996:32), marketing communication refers to the "communications components of marketing, which include public relations, advertising, personal selling, and sales promotion". Nowadays the terms *integrated marketing communication* (IMC) or *integrated communication approach* are more popular. Integrated marketing communication refers to "*the joint planning, execution, and coordination of all areas of marketing communications*" (Russell & Lane, 1996:32). It can be categorized as a marketing communications strategy that includes the integration on advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing and public relations functions (Tierney, 1993:1).

According to the definitions stated above, public relations is seen as a part of marketing communication and not something on its own. In many companies the functions of public relations and advertising have become so intertwined that the two disciplines have become indistinguishable. Often, companies' public relations efforts are focused on increasing sales or profits, and not purely on the management of relationships with publics as the quoted definition of public relations states.

Some researchers argue that it is actually only organizations such as governments, political parties and non-profit organizations, for example NGOs that still practice public relations as it was originally defined (Froneman, 1999). The use of the total communication approach, later refined as integrated marketing, caused further confusion between public relations and marketing (see Chapter 3).

However, the researchers who did the Excellence Study[9] on public relations (Grunig & Grunig 1992; Dozier *et al.*, 1995) have strong beliefs about what the relationship between marketing and public relations should be in an effective organization. Grunig (1997:291) states that both public relations and marketing are essential to organizations, but when the one is subjugated to the other, most of the value of that function is lost. The motivation for the total communication approach and later the integrated communication is mostly for the organization to "speak with one voice", but with such an approach the organization would be able to listen with just one ear.

In a preliminary study on the role of public relations in integrated marketing communication (Tierney, 1993:214) it was found that excellent public relations could not be practiced under an integrated marketing communications approach. The findings indicated that marketing subjugates the public relations function to marketing, both in structure and in power and imposes a marketing orientation on the role of public relations. Instead, the study proposes just the opposite: that all communications functions, including marketing communication, be integrated under public relations. Other researchers such as Holmes (in Tierney, 1993:14) have also suggested that marketing be a subsidiary of public relations as the broader discipline.

The Excellence Team motivates their dismissal of IMC by arguing that the marketing function represents mostly the viewpoint of customers or clients. They consider public relations as a broader discipline than marketing because public relations is responsible for developing relationships with different groups and publics. Public relations interacts not only with customers, but also with governmental agencies, the mass media and trade press, financial publics, the community, employees and their unions, suppliers and competitors, and special interest or activist groups. These researchers conclude that public relations and marketing should therefore be complementary functions, rather than integrated functions (Grunig, 1997:291; Grunig, 2000a). These functions may sometimes use similar techniques, but the fundamental difference between them lies in the different outcomes that they pursue.

While marketing goals are set to reach the financial goals of an organization, public relations works toward the managing of relationships in the complete environment in which the organization operates (Tierney, 1993:18-23).

Other researchers such as Ihator (1999:40) argue that public relations practitioners should convince managers to pull public relations communication out of the "Integrated Communication Approach" system to get more management and decision-making power, and to improve the negative connotations that the discipline has. Grunig and Grunig (1992) also propose that public relations should be a managerial function in order to achieve excellent public relations. This means that the head of public relations should be a part of the dominant coalition, or the top management of the organization, although few organizations are structured in this way (Grunig, 1997:291).

With this in mind, the term *public relations* was used in this study, as there was no clear indication in South African as well as in international literature of a universal name change for the discipline. Another reason is that the NGOs involved in this study are non-profit organizations that do not have products to sell and therefore marketing is viewed as a less important action.

1.2.2 The use of organizational web sites as a public relations tool

Organizational web sites provide a challenging opportunity for public relations practitioners to give the world a complete look at how an organization serves its customers, shareholders, and communities and to build *dialogue*[10] with its different publics (Pinkham, 1998; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Esrock & Leichty, 1998:317). Although public relations practitioners have been interested in integrating the WWW into their media programs, communication scholars and practitioners are uncertain about what this new medium has to offer and how they could use it to full capacity (Bush *et al.*, 1998:17).

Very little research on this topic has been done in South Africa.[11] Most studies were not done from a public relations perspective, but rather focused on the adoption of the medium or the feasibility of the medium in a developing country, where disparities between rich and poor created specific developmental needs (Naudé & Groenewald, 1996:63; Naudé, 1998; Groenewald & Britz, 1997). Only two studies on public relations and the internet could be found in the USA, involving activist groups and investor relations (Elliot, 1997; Schickinger, 1998). Although these studies provided valuable insights in terms of this study, their findings can not simply be accepted for application in a South African context.

The result is that the WWW is still underused as a public relations tool by many organizations and few articles have been written to help public relations practitioners take advantage of this new medium. Many articles have been written without theoretical frameworks and focused on philosophical, metaphysical and futuristic projection and as such are not of much use to the public relations discipline (Kent & Taylor, 1998:322).

Now that the position of public relations with regard to its use of the internet has been explained, it is necessary to take a closer look at the internet as communication medium in the information age. To start off this explanation, the most used concepts and their applications with regard to the information age will be discussed.

1.3 Concepts and applications in the information age

With the arrival of the Information Age several new terms have emerged. These terms are being used frequently when academics and researchers describe or examine aspects of new media.

1.3.1 Internet

The internet combines the characteristics of interpersonal and mass communication in many different applications, such as electronic mail, news groups, listservs and the World Wide Web[12] (WWW) (Anon., 1998a:1; Morris & Ogan, 1996:3; Rogers, 1986:3). No one owns the internet and no one has the specific task to control it.

Any individual or organization with internet access can create a home page on the WWW using the programming protocols according to which the internet operates. This includes the assignment of a universal resource locator (URL) which is the internet address of a particular home page. The URL must be registered to ensure that duplication does not occur. In designing the home page the hypertext transport protocol (http) must be used, which will enable the standardized transfer of email, other text, audio and video files between different computers and networks. Furthermore web documents make use of hypertext markup language (HTML) that makes it possible to link different files with each other by means of hyperlinks as described earlier (Pavlik, 1996:148).

1.3.2 Information superhighway

Information superhighway is one of the most frequently used terms in the information age, yet Pavlik (1996:136) states that no one really knows exactly what it means. The reason is that the term has been used to describe many different technologies and in the process has become so vague that some critics regard it as meaningless and even misleading. Adding to this confusion is the number of synonyms for this term, often used by the media: *information highway, data highway, data superhighway, electronic superhighway, electronic highway, info-superhighway, and national/global information infrastructure.*

The best description of the information superhighway is that it acts as a metaphor for the digital data networks covering the world. Actually there are many superhighways, as there are many different networks linked together. One of these highways is surely the internet, but other highways could refer to emerging technologies such as wireless communication or direct-broadcast satellite systems.

Samuel Morse made the first electronic information superhighway possible in 1835 with the invention of the telegraph. Today, according to some, the internet as an information superhighway is a new democratic medium that makes it possible for everyone to participate in cyberspace (Pavlik, 1996:137).

1.3.3 Cyberspace

This term became well-known after science fiction writer William Gibson used it in his novel *Neuromancer* in 1984. The word is related to the field of cybernetics, which refers to the use of technology for control and interactivity. As will be explained later, control and interactivity are central concepts in the use of new media in the information age. The term refers to any form of online communication in the web of computer networks across the globe. It is also similar to what is sometimes described as virtual reality[13] – the experience of a quasi-reality in the world of computer-mediated communication (Pavlik, 1996:136).

1.3.4 Interactivity

New communication technology such as the internet, has one outstanding feature which the so-called "old media" (newspapers, television, radio) lacked to a large degree, namely *interactivity.*

Interactivity is the capability of a communication medium to "talk back" to its user, almost like a real person participating in a conversation (Rogers, 1986:4). There are different definitions of interactivity, but the following definition makes the concept clear for initial understanding: *Interactivity* refers to the extent to which participants can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time (Steure, 1992; Rafaeli, 1988).

Face to face interpersonal communication has the highest level of interactivity, because the participants are in each other's presence and can react immediately to whatever the other one has said. When one reads a newspaper or watches a television news broadcast, the level of interactivity between the person who reads or watches, as well as the source of the messages, is almost zero.

The internet combines some of the characteristics of both interpersonal communication and mass communication and makes it possible to communicate on several levels: one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many, and few-to-few (small group communication). (See Chapter 2.)

1.3.5 Hypertext

The invention of hypertext led to the development of the WWW as we know it today. (This invention will be discussed in Chapter 2, section 2.2.) Hypertext can be defined as non-linear text or text that does not flow sequentially from start to finish. In a body of text there may be many words, phrases or pictures linked (by means of hyperlinks) to other words, phrases or pictures in the total body of text.

The notions of hypertext and hypermedia are relatively simple, but they have very far-reaching implications. It is possible for a reader to read a hypertext document in a "free-form" pattern, and creating his/her own meaning of the document or story in the process. The question can be asked how writing and authorship will change in the future when non-linear communication will be used to write, for example stories. Writers all over the world could participate in writing a story from which each reader can make his/her own way through reading it (Pavlik, 1996:134; Deuze, 1999:380-381).

1.3.6 Convergence

Technological development is not only transforming the nature and scope of communication in general, but it is also changing our views and uses of traditional mass media. In the past different media had to be used to transfer pictures, sound and data.

With technological development it became possible to use computers to transfer pictures, sound and data all at once. This can be done by means of digital technology, whereas in the past analogue technology was used for this purpose (Scholtz & Steyn, 1999:472; Herman & Chesney, 1997:106; Pavlik, 1996:132).

The combination of the capabilities of different media into one medium is called *convergence*. It means that different communication technologies are integrated into "a single technological base" to do the same things that were previously done by several different media. Communication devices such as telephones, television sets, personal computers and fax machines are converged or merged into one communication instrument – the internet (Scholtz & Steyn, 1999:472; Herman & Chesney, 1997:107).

1.3.7 Compression

By means of compression large amounts of data are condensed or compressed to achieve faster transmission or easier storage. Compression makes it possible to reduce digital information, such as video images that take a lot of space, for easier and faster transmission via telephone lines or storage on, for example a CD (Pavlik, 1996:132).

1.3.8 Digitization

This term refers to the conversion of analog information into a digital format that is computer-readable. Digitization makes it possible for audio, visual and textual information to blend in the process of convergence (Pavlik, 1996:133).

The most frequently used terms and concepts with regard to information technology in the information age have been explained in the previous sections. In the next section a more philosophical view will be taken at new media technology.

1.4 The WWW in a postmodern era

The internet came into existence because of technology, or more specifically, communication technology developments. It is important to provide some perspective on the role of technological development itself, as well as how it should be evaluated in terms of the assumptions of the postmodern era in which we live.

1.4.1 Technology/communication technology/technological determinism

Communication via the internet is made possible by the use of advanced communication technology. Much has been written on the information age and the application of communication technology for various uses. It is, however, important to reflect on what exactly technological development means and what it can and cannot do.

The following a definition of technology by Sussman (1997:18) can easily be applied to communication technology as well: "Technology is the study and conversion of the natural, the built, or the conceptual world, leading to the creation or refinement of socially useful methods, tools or products. It is the applied use of scientific principles."

Many people think of technology as only equipment or technique, but this view does not entail all there is to technology. Technology is also about former knowledge and new sets of rules and opportunities (Sussman, 1997:19). The introduction of new technology such as computers and e-mail to an office will result in several changes in the way people do their work or communicate with each other.

Atwood (1998:5-6) suggests that a distinction should be made between *technology* as a human formative process (the creation and development of technology) and *technics* as the objects or creatures of that process. Technics can be defined as *"the tools or artifacts employed in the human creative process and as the products or objects of that process"*.

This distinction makes it easier to examine the characteristics of the technics themselves. The impact of the internet and other new communication technics has caused controversy over the role of technics and technology in society. Theorists have different opinions on the effects that these technics will or could have on society.

The question that theorists battle with is whether we should fear or embrace the new electronic media, or take a more careful position between the extremes. Some concentrate on the wonderful new opportunities communication technics has brought to the world. Others see these technics as evil inventions that will lead to the end of the world (Atwood, 1998:11).

Another belief relating to these views is *technological determinism.* According to this belief, world history is the unfolding of technological achievements that go beyond political boundaries, language, religion, and local tradition. Technological determinists or technophiliacs think of technology as the initiator of events, as the driving force and cause of change (Sussman, 1997:23).

Although technology and communication technology have brought about numerous changes in society and changed human communication considerably, a technological determinist view has been rejected by several communication scholars in the past (Rogers, 1986:23; Kimble & McLoughlin, 1994:173; Rogers & Picot, 1985: 108; Reese *et al.*, 1987:676; Sussman, 1997).

According to Rogers (1986:8) it is indeed possible to ascribe many aspects of change to technology, but it should be kept in mind that it is still humans who use and develop these technologies to facilitate change. The human factor can therefore not be understated. The question of how technology can change society or the way in which humans act, is actually a question about which worldview one uses to look at reality. This brings us to the internet and modernist and postmodernist assumptions.

1.4.2 The internet: Modernist and postmodernist assumptions

According to Atwood (1998) the internet not only facilitates wonderful new communication possibilities, but many negative aspects such as pornography, fraud and internet addiction as well. We should think critically about this new communication medium as it also tells us much about the mental attitudes of the time in which we live. The internet has typical modernist characteristics as well as postmodernist characteristics. Goudzwaard (1998:1) indicates that Modernism and Postmodernism[14] are opposites of each other, but Postmodernism also functions as the completion of modernist thought.

Atwood (1998:13-15) recognizes three characteristics of Modernism that could be applied to electric technics (including communication technics such as the internet).

❖ ***Technics and the commodification of culture***

Since the Industrial Revolution goods were not produced by and for their users alone anymore. Instead, goods were manufactured in factories by machines for consumption by others. This commodification of culture gives us the illusion that we have control over our cultural artifacts by buying what we like. The truth is that those artifacts rarely represent our own worldviews.

For example, when I watch television I seldom see programs that represent my specific Christian worldview. The same happens with content on the internet. Among the vast amount of information on the internet, many different worldviews are represented. I do not have direct control over the worldviews represented in the content that I will find on the internet.

❖ ***Splitting communication and transportation***

Before the invention of the telegraph in 1844 communication and transportation were almost synonymous. To communicate with people who were geographically dispersed meant that someone had to travel to them and back, carrying messages from the one group to the other. The invention of communication media made it possible to transfer messages and information via communication technics such as newspapers, radio, television, telephones, fax machines and the internet.

It was no longer necessary to travel long distances to deliver communication messages. Unfortunately, what happened in this process was that the content of messages was often less important than the speed with which they could be delivered. Sometimes the mere fact that you could send electronic mail messages to someone on another continent within seconds is more important than what you actually have to say to this person. Often you do not really have anything to say to each other and meaningless messages cross through optic fiber worldwide.

❖ ***Reorienting space and time***

All communication technics transformed our ideas of space and time. Data can be transmitted worldwide by means of new communication technics by the speed of light. Geographical distances do not make communication impossible anymore. In South Africa we can share the birth of a baby in Canada in real time by looking at a live internet transmission. I can have a telephone conversation with someone on another continent and it would be the same as we were physically situated in the same building.

With regard to a reorientation to time, digital data do not have a very long lifetime. We will not be able to preserve computer disks filled with data for our descendants a few hundred years from now. Other artifacts could be preserved such as bricks, plastics and glass, but computer data are very vulnerable to time.

The internet is the newest of the communication technics and it displays the above-mentioned characteristics of Modernism, but it also displays the typical characteristics of Postmodernism. Atwood (1998:15-18) applies the following postmodernist characteristics to the internet.

❖ ***Amplifying the modernist worldview***

The internet amplified the modernist attributes of the commodification of culture, the reduction of communication to the transmission of data and a reorientation to space and time in the postmodernist era. Electric communication changed into a moneymaking commodity and it is bought and sold worldwide.

Internet users do not all have the same goals in mind when they surf the internet or send electronic mail hence and forth. For many the access to data and information is more important than the increasing of understanding and comprehending the meaning of life and relationships.

For many it is more important to surf the internet than to have normal conversation with family or friends.

- ***Undermining truth***

Postmodern thinking advocates that there is no absolute truth, and that everything, even the experience of reality, is relative (Goudzwaard, 1998). Our experience of reality depends on what we ourselves make of it.

The internet fits perfectly with this description. On the internet you find virtual experience in a virtual reality. It is impossible to tell what is original and what is the copy. Fabrication, fiction and fantasy cannot be distinguished from what is authentic (Atwood, 1998:16).

- ***Decontextualising information***

Information transmitted via the internet is decontextualized, which makes it difficult to interpret without misunderstandings. For example, electronic mail messages are often misunderstood because there are very few non-verbal cues and context in which the message was constructed is often not known.

Atwood (1998:16) states that "without context the meanings of words, symbols and images are detached from their users and open to arbitrary and capricious interpretation". The decontextualization of content should be viewed together with Postmodernists' views of the relativism of reality, because content without context is by definition relative. It is open to different interpretations and the receiver can decide what to make of it.

- ***Lacking an integrative framework***

There is no integrative framework for the orientation of the internet user. The internet gives access to data and more data but there is no foolproof way to evaluate the information to decide what is trustworthy and what not.

Atwood (1998:16) says that "...the means to sort out the trivial from the important, the fundamental from the peripheral – that is the recognition of significance, knowledge, and wisdom – is not a feat electrical technics can perform".

- ***The idol of access: A two-way street***

Atwood (1998:17) calls access the idol of the information age. Advocates of the internet sing the praises of access to more and more information, more than ever in human history. They see the autonomy that the internet brings as freedom of access without responsibility or concern about consequences. Goudzwaard (1998:9) also emphasises the sense of a lack of responsibility and "everything goes" in Postmodernism.

Access cannot be seen as intrinsically good in itself, because we can get access via the internet to useful information, but also to undesirable content such as pornography and private details of individuals. Access therefore functions as a two-way street: on the one hand you find the useful or good information, and on the other hand you find the undesirable or evil content.

- ***Telematics: like education, only different***

By means of telematics it is now possible to have interactive distance education via the internet where geographical distance is no longer relevant. It sounds good and it is feasible for the first time, but Atwood (1998:17) is very critical about telematic learning. He argues that telematic learning has transformed education into another decontextualized commodity. Telematic learning can never replace the traditional educational setting where knowledge is transferred interpersonally from one mind to another. Telematics could be very useful for the distribution of information, but it cannot replace face-to-face interaction.

What should we make of all these postmodern attributes of the internet? Many of these attributes have a negative ring, especially from a Christian point of view. Should we then avoid using the internet and become technophobic? Should we condemn all communication technics as evil? No, says Atwood (1998:19). All things on earth are touched by the sin of mankind and we cannot suggest that some things are evil and others good. To run away from technics is to acknowledge its power and to deny the power of Christ over God's creation.

Should we embrace communication technics for all the wonderful new possibilities that it could give us? That view, too, is not acceptable. This view is comparable to "messianic technicism" that preaches that technics, as the work of humans, can save the world. Clearly this view cannot be acceptable to Christian communication scholars.

Atwood (1998:18-20) makes a few suggestions on how the internet could be "transformed" or viewed by Christians. He suggests that the limits and potential of the internet should be evaluated critically in order to know how we can use the internet, and how it would not be useful. The mere fact that it would be possible to use the internet to achieve certain goals does not necessarily make it desirable to use the internet for that purposes. One should evaluate the use of the internet against other methods before deciding whether to use it or not.

Other suggestions made by Atwood include recognizing the capacity of the internet to open some experiences and closing off others and using the internet in moderation. It means that the more time one spends with the internet, the less time one may have for other, perhaps more useful, experiences. We should also not give the internet power over us, as there is now evidence of internet addiction that could lead to anti-social behavior.

The discussion above is not meant to be entirely negative to communication technology. It is, however, important to evaluate new media such as the internet critically from a specific worldview, in this case a Reformed Christian worldview.

In Chapter 2 the attributes of new media with special reference to the internet are discussed in more detail. These attributes and the use of the internet must be understood within the context of the views expressed above on how the internet could be evaluated within a postmodern era. Now that the new communication media and their application for public relations have been discussed briefly, the question remains as to how useful this technological innovation can be for a developing country such as South Africa. The next section will examine this question.

1.5. The development context in South Africa

1.5.1 Development and development communication

Defining what is meant by development is not an easy task. There are many definitions for the term *development,* and it has been substituted with terms such as *progress, transformation, beneficial change, liberation* and even *revolution.* As a result of the numerous problems with development efforts over the years, different views have emerged of what development means and what its focus should be:

- In the beginning (1950s-1960s) development was viewed as an economic process with emphasis on the provision of capital, production and industrialization.

- Later, during the 1960s and 1970s, a political aspect was added to the concept of development, focusing on political freedom of the citizens who should be helped by development.

- In the 1980s the satisfaction of physical and social needs became more important than it had been before.

- Since 1988 the importance of cultural differences has been realized. The United Nations declared the time from 1988 to 1997 the decade of development and culture, despite the rising popularity of the new concept of globalization (Van der Walt, 1999:10).

These latest views on cultural differences were important in order to have more successful development programs. However, it was not just cultural differences that had to be dealt with, but also differences in religious beliefs and different underlying worldviews. The latest views and emphasis on cultural differences led to the formulation of two of the most important definitions of development:

A process of providing disadvantaged people the opportunities to realize and improve their knowledge, attitude, and skill to utilize, sustain, and improve their productivity of available resources within their environment in order to improve the quality of their life and the society where they belong (Mercado, 1992:14).

The balanced unlocking of the abilities of mankind and the possibilities of the rest of the creation, according to God's will and aims for His creation, in order to enable mankind to fulfill its own culture and calling as responsible stewards in freedom in the society, in honor of God (Van der Walt, 1999:46).

The first definition (that of Mercado) can be described as a secular definition, because it does not take the religious dimension and the role of a particular worldview into account. The second definition does take these aspects into account, but it is rather vague as to what development would practically entail. However, Van der Walt (1999) argues that the reason why so many development projects have failed in Africa, is that the differences between Western and African cultures and religious worldviews have not been realized. The Western countries tried to develop Africa according to a Western model, while the important role of a particular culture and its worldview was not acknowledged.

One of the problems with the Western model of development was that the communities could not give any input on what kind of development needs they had. Usually the sponsors or the government would decide on which aspects needed to be developed and the beneficiaries did not have any voice in the planning of development projects. Several researchers emphasize the fact that local communities must be involved in the planning, implementation and management of development programs (Van der Walt, 1999; Coetzee, 1995; Soola, 1995; Linden, 1999). It is therefore important that these communities must be able to define their own needs in terms of development, from their own perspective, culture and worldview.

The realization of the importance of cultural differences and the focus on development from *inside* a particular country (e.g. by local NGOs) and not from an outside source, led to a critical review of Western development models in Third World countries. Critical questions were asked, for example: why development was necessary, for whose benefit it was needed, what should be developed, what would be the results of development and what the goals of development programs was. No easy answers have yet been found. How to create successful development programs in Third World countries remains a challenge for all concerned.

In view of the discussion above the term development is defined as follows for the purposes of this study (to include the most important aspects of development as various researchers have shown):

The aim to improve the quality of life of disadvantaged people according to their own defined needs, in order to unlock their abilities and resources and improve their productivity of available resources according to God's will and aims to enable them to fulfill their own culture, in honor of God.

In terms of the relationship between development and communication some researchers refer to a symbiotic relationship between *development* and *communication*, because development cannot succeed without the use of communication. Any development project needs to be communicated to its beneficiaries and the needs and wants of the beneficiaries need to be communicated to the initiators or facilitators of the program.

Development communication came to Africa in the 1960s and initially it was defined as "technology-based communication networks which, regardless of message and content, tended to create a suitable climate for development" (Ngugi, 1995:6). Its role was seen as facilitative to development – the means to an end called "development".

Mercado (1992:16) later expands this definition as "a subsystem of the larger system of communication, which deals with the planned use of communication resources to gain multi-sectoral support in attaining national development goals". Development communication is therefore purposive and has clear, well-defined objectives, for example to change people's attitudes, skills or behavior. Different communication media can be used for this purpose, for example interpersonal communication, radio, the internet or newspapers. However, the choice of a communication medium would of course depend on the preferences of the community to be served.

The development context in South Africa can be sketched against the background of the 1994 elections in that that can probably be regarded as the most significant historical event ever to happen in South Africa. Not only was it the first democratic election (ensuring full participation for all citizens) in the history of the country, but it also led to the first Government of National Unity and a new constitution for the country and its people. This led to the restructuring of every aspect of day to day life in South Africa, for example the application of affirmative action and representation with regard to local governments, public and private schools, public service and commercial organizations as well as the mass media. The 1994 election can be seen as the main driving force behind the major change process in South Africa at the moment.

After the 1994 elections (also called the *First Liberation*), it became a priority for the new government to develop South Africa and especially the many previously disadvantaged communities. The transition to political democracy has, however, not solved the most invidious development problems in South Africa, such as poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, inequality and environmental degradation, violence and crime[15].

In order to solve these problems, Coetzee (1995:2) argues that a *Second Liberation* was needed to focus on socioeconomic reform, reconstruction and development in South Africa. To accomplish this, the government launched the *Reconstruction and Development Program* (RDP) in 1994, focusing on land reform, housing and services, water and sanitation, energy and electrification, telecommunication, transport, the environment, nutrition, health care, social security and welfare (Coetzee, 1995:4). Despite financial constraints and other problems much developmental work has been done in terms of the original RDP.

In 1996 the separate RDP section in government was disbanded and the government created the Growth Employment and Redistribution (Gear) program which effectively replaced the old RDP. Development work within the RDP and Gear programs have been done with the help of several role players and stakeholders, for example provincial and local governments, the private sector (mainly businesses) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but with government accepting major responsibility (Coetzee, 1995:9; Van der Walt, 1999:X). Government usually works in partnerships with various NGOs to handle development programs all over the country. It was the responsibility of the NGOs to involve the beneficiaries in the development process and to give them a voice and ownership of the projects that had been planned. However, not all NGOs were aware of this need to involve their beneficiaries in the planning of development projects.

It was explained that development is a concept that is not easily defined and that many definitions do not include some of the most important aspects of development such as the importance of cultural differences, the importance of the worldview of the community or the importance of the involvement of the community in the development process. These are some of the reasons why many development programs in Africa failed or produced very little results in the past. The lack of proper development communication was also often blamed as a reason for failed development attempts. The implication is that NGOs who would want to use the internet to enhance their development efforts must be careful to use this medium in conjunction with other media that are preferred by the communities they serve. This study will show how a new medium such as the internet can be used to improve development efforts by South African NGOs.

1.5.2 NGOs and development

This study focuses on a few of the many South African NGOs involved in development work. These non-governmental organizations are run without a profit motive. This means that any money raised is used to advance the mission of the organization and not to enrich its directors or employees (Boyer, 1997:482). Unfortunately, most of these organizations work with tight budgets. Therefore resources allocated to communication and public relations are often insufficient.

However, communications and public relations are very important in these organizations' fundraising activities and service delivery. The use of marketing techniques to raise public awareness of these two areas would be very effective, but it would need more money than most NGOs have. Therefore the nonprofit sector makes the greatest possible use of "free media" (i.e. publicity) and spends very little on paid advertising (Boyer, 1997:485).

Boyer (1997:486) stresses the importance of the internet for nonprofit organizations because they can communicate internationally at relatively low cost. He argues that there is a correlation between the amount of money that an organization has and the scope of its work. If its management is done correctly, more money means more good work being done. This means that effective communication strategies can result in more financial support which, in turn, would result in more much-needed development work being done.

Nonprofit organizations have two primary sets of audiences:

- Those on the receiving end of the organization's work (the beneficiaries of the development work done);
- People and institutions (sponsors) providing the money and other forms of support that a nonprofit organization needs to do its work. These could include the following:
  - The staff of the organization;
  - The boards of directors or trustees;
  - People or groups whose attitudes or behavior the organization would like to influence;
  - Other organizations doing similar work;
  - State and local politicians;
  - The general public;
  - The media (Boyer, 1997:488).

Most of these audiences can be reached easily and cost-effectively by means of the internet. NGOs in South Africa have an umbrella body, namely The South African NGO Coalition (Sangoco) which represents more than 4000 NGOs. Not all of these NGOs have WWW presence sites, but those who do have web sites mostly use an internet service provider called *Sangonet*. Sangonet provides an affordable opportunity for South African NGOs to make use of the internet to enhance their development work.

Nonprofit organizations are often not willing or able to invest in paid advertising, because of limited financial resources (Marchand & Lavoie, 1998:34). According to researchers (Coombs, 1998; Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Heath, 1998; Marchand & Lavoie, 1998; Berthon *et al.*, 1996) the internet (or for that matter the WWW) has the potential to make the positions of the different stakeholders in the communication process more equal.

By means of a well-designed web site, such organizations can become empowered[16], by making themselves more widely heard and by being more visible and *interact* with potential sponsors, as well as the public, without spending a lot of money. WWW pages give organizations the opportunity to participate in discussion on public policy issues, especially when, for example, a "powerless" NGO wants to challenge the practices of a large corporation or government (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Coombs, 1998; Elliot, 1997:7; Holtz, 1999:xvii).

The empowering effect of the WWW is also created because it ends the two-step flow that occurs with traditional mass media messages. The result is that gatekeepers are removed and place and time are eliminated as constraints to communication. The organization is therefore closer to its publics than before and vice versa. This closeness can be described as a two-sided sword, as it could lead to the narrowing of informational and communication gaps between the organization and its publics, but, on the other hand, it could create new gaps. Knowledge gaps could evolve because of differences in accessibility in terms of aspects such as gender, income and socio-economic status (Schickinger, 1998:95). (Also see Section 1.5.3.)

According to Esrock and Leichty (1998) public relations practitioners working in the social responsibility or development spheres can use their organizations' web sites to build its image, to interact and consult with their different publics and stakeholders, and to set the agenda on policy issues. Unfortunately NGOs usually do not have many people on their staff and these people are not necessarily trained to use a medium such as the internet to its full potential. The obvious advantages of the internet for these organizations can only be experienced if the organizations use the medium strategically and according to the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. (See Chapter 3.)

Notwithstanding the fact that NGOs can benefit from using the internet, some people argue that new media technology has no place in a developing country such as South Africa. This issue will be explored in the next section.

1.5.3 Technology and development in South Africa

While South Africa was trying to erase the remains of apartheid from every sphere of life, the rest of the world "quietly" moved into the Information Age. The fact is that South Africa is focusing on internal problems and fundamental societal changes at the moment, while the changes and benefits of the Information Age mostly involve a few individuals and commercial organizations in the country. The reason is that the financial means, the infrastructure and the computer-literate people to take part in these technological developments are only available on a relatively small scale in a country where the emphasis falls on the provision of housing, running water, affordable health services and so on.

South Africa may be a blend of the so-called First and Third Worlds, but it is not an entirely information-poor society. A development problem in South Africa is the disparities that exist among the different communities. These differences are more noticeable when urban and rural areas are compared to each other. The levels of development are also not the same for the various population groups. There is still a significant difference between the white population as predominantly information-rich and the black population as generally information-poor (Groenewald & Britz, 1997).

In view of the many development needs of South Africa, as well as the scarcity of funding and infrastructure, it could possibly be argued that the government should give priority to development and upliftment, instead of spending money on becoming part of the information society. Some researchers have argued that it should be quite obvious that all possible information that is necessary for the development of the country should be made available to the information-poor (Groenewald & Britz, 1997; Anon., 1995:1). Available information through the internet can thus play an important role in the development and upliftment of the country, according to these sources.

In this regard Pavlik (1996:351) reports that telecommunications can be seen as the engine for economic and social development and that very little economic and social growth can take place without an adequate telecommunications infrastructure. He suggests that the information superhighway is very important to serve the communication needs of developing societies. It is not just important do improve communication in cities, but also in remote and rural areas. Development can thus be equated with access to and participation in the information society.

The following are examples of people who could benefit from access to information technologies especially in rural areas:

- Farmers;
- Those in natural resource industries;
- Government officials at remote outposts;
- Construction workers building railways, roads, and pipelines;
- Medical practitioners providing primary health care;
- Journalists in remote locations;
- Civil protection forces;
- Disaster relief agencies and many more who rely on fast, efficient communication to perform their work (Pavlik, 1996:351).

The situation is not that simple, as one of the most pressing problems in a developing country such as South Africa is illiteracy. In many cases it would be essential to make use of a mediator to explain the information brought through the information highway to illiterates who cannot use the technology themselves. This could increase the cost of bringing the information to people in rural areas.

Another problem is the lack of money to put the necessary infrastructure in place. To address this problem communication researchers such as Pavlik (1996) and Groenewald and Britz (1997) suggest the strategy of "leapfrogging" intermediate technologies by going directly to more advanced technologies that are more affordable. The creation of mobile satellite communication networks (MSS) is much more affordable than land-based telecommunications structures.

Experiments on the use of satellite technologies to create access to the information superhighway have already been done in countries such as South Africa (Naudé, 1999a), but this has not yet been put into general use. However, some technology experts such as Amendola *et al.* (1999:28) are critical of the concept of "leapfrogging" and have their doubts whether it could be successful in practice.

In the realization the new media technologies are tools for growth in developing countries, three mechanisms were mentioned through which these technologies could enhance development:

- Increased efficiency, defined in terms of the ratio of output to cost;
- Enhanced effectiveness, defined as the extent to which development goals are achieved;
- Greater equity, defined in terms of the distribution of development benefits throughout society (Pavlik, 1996:352).

The most important aspect to realize, however, is that the use of new media in the development of, for instance, Third World countries, is a long-term process in which several role players should be involved. It is also difficult to predict how this process will evolve, as the relevant technologies are still emerging and changing (Nulens & van Audenhove, 1999).

The South African government has committed itself to making the Information Age a reality in South Africa (Braman, 1998:74; Van Audenhove, 1999:23). The reason is the potential of technology to facilitate development and upliftment, the major aims of the Reconstruction and Development Program (Paterson, 1997:43; Van Audenhove, 1999:16;). This means that computer-mediated communication and training could be made more accessible to more communities, for example by providing telecenters countrywide, as planned by the government.

The South African government supports the assumption that "*the effective use of information enhances knowledge and is a key to the development of the human resource. Therefore, information delivery in especially the education and training arenas has become an imperative for success*" as quoted from the "Comtask report" - a communications task group set up by the deputy president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, in 1997 (Paterson, 1997:43). According to the Comtask report one of the solutions proposed is the establishment of several fully-digitized Multi-purpose Community Centers (MPCCs) to be set up to serve a variety of purposes relating to the community where they are situated (Winsbury, 1999:35).

One way to extend this infrastructure is through the availability of information via the internet at these centers, by making use of the CIDS wireless technology (Paterson, 1997:43). Conventional telephone wires and modems can in many instances not be used, because many areas in South Africa are still without any telephone lines. However, because of a lack of money and other resources, no timeframe for implementation of the proposals in the Comtask report was set.

The young are also being prepared for the new world of information technology by means of Schoolnet SA, launched by the minister of education in South Africa. Schoolnet SA is an initiative to integrate computers and the internet into education and should promote school connectivity online to provide the country with more computer-literate people, empowered for the working environment of the future. With the arrival of satellite technology in Africa the problems of expanding the telecommunication network to remote areas could be solved sooner than was expected, thereby putting Africa firmly on the grid of global communications (Dudley, 1998:3).

What is important to note, is that one of the founders of the WWW, Tim Berners-Lee (1998:3) himself, as well as other researchers (Came, 1995) has expressed the hope that information and educational material will become available free of charge. This hope was especially focused on those in the developing countries who may not have access to it in any other way. However, Berners-Lee also stresses the importance of the quality and frequent updating of that material, as well as the fact that personal interaction will not and should not disappear from the educational process.

Although communication technology could benefit most societies (Berners-Lee, 1998:3; Kruckeberg, 2000:147) some researchers have warned that the use of communication technology for development could also have the opposite effect. The people who have most need for information and education often do not have access to these technologies, because of poverty or illiteracy (Sussman, 1997:xii; Came, 1995; Nulens & van Audenhove, 1999). Relating to this warning is the so-called information gap hypothesis, which postulates that the mass media could actually increase the differences between levels of knowledge in a society instead of decreasing the gap between the information-rich and the information-poor (Severin & Tankard, 1988:286).

According to the information gap hypothesis the mass media coverage of a certain topic (more likely news on public affairs or science) could have the following effects:

- Over time, the acquisition of knowledge of a heavily-publicized topic will be faster among better-educated people than among those with less education;

- At a given point in time, there should be a higher correlation between acquisition of knowledge and education for topics getting more publicity in the media than for topics getting less publicity.

Some reasons for these effects are stated by researchers (Severin & Tankard, 1988:289; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1970):

- Differences between the communication skills of high and low socioeconomic status people;
- Differences in the amount of stored information, or previously acquired background knowledge;
- Differences in relevant social contact, such as other people who are also exposed to the same topics;
- Different levels of interest in certain news topics or information, leading to selective exposure, acceptance, and retention;
- Much of the news on public affairs and science is published in print media which is more accessible to people with higher education and socioeconomic status.

The knowledge gap hypothesis has usually been applied to the effects of traditional mass media, but it could also be applicable to new communication technologies such as the World Wide Web. Severin and Tankard (1988:294) argue that the theoretical and practical implications of new communication technologies are not necessarily the same. Theoretically new communication technologies could be used to the benefit of everyone in society. It has the potential to reduce the unit cost of education to create more learning opportunities for the members of a society.

In practice, however, it could have more benefits for the people who are already information-rich, because these technologies are expensive and people with more education will be more likely to have the ability to use these technologies to their benefit (Sussman, 1997; Nulens & van Audenhove, 1999; Olaniran, 1999). The result could be an increase of the already existing gap between the "haves" and the "have nots" in a country with a diverse population such South Africa.

Another important variable is motivation to search for information. The knowledge gap hypothesis also suggests that knowledge gaps could be narrowed when less-advantaged people are motivated to search for information on a particular subject. It seems that motivation and accessibility are two of the most important variables that could influence the success of the use of information technology for development purposes.

It is important to examine NGOs' usage of the WWW within the context of the government's view of the importance and relevance of communications technologies for the South African society. Actual development work done by NGOs will not be examined, but rather their usage of the WWW within the South African context, and also within the context of other communication resources that they might choose to use. It is important to note that the use of new communication technology should be implemented with caution, for it cannot solve all developmental problems. It could also create more problems in a society as diverse as South Africa.

The previous sections explained the need for public relations practitioners to use new media technology with its advantages and possible disadvantages. It was also stressed that NGOs in the development sector of South Africa could enhance their work by making use of the internet. These explanations lead us to the formulation of a problem statement and a general research question in the next section.

1.6 Problem statement

The problem addressed in this study is how South African NGOs with their limited resources could use the WWW to its full potential in their public relations efforts in order to benefit development projects in South Africa. This study will therefore examine the interactive nature of the WWW as an internet application together with its potential usage for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that work in the developmental sphere in South Africa.

The *general research question* posed for this study is therefore the following: **Can NGOs in South Africa use the interactive nature of the internet for public relations purposes to enhance their development programs?**

With the general research question in mind the following specific research questions were formulated.

1.7 Specific research questions

1.7.1 What are the reasons, aims and expectations of public relations practitioners with regard to their use of the WWW as a communication medium for selected NGOs in South Africa?

1.7.2 What successes, failures and problems do they experience with regard to the WWW as a communication medium?

1.7.3 What are the general characteristics of NGO web sites? What type of content is provided? How is it organized? Which functions can the content fulfil for its users?

1.7.4 What public relations model is practiced by the NGOs and why is a particular model preferred?

1.7.5 How are the characteristics of interactivity implemented in NGO web sites? Is there a correspondence between the level of interactivity and the number of hits or inquiries received via the web sites?

1.7.6 How are the principles of dialogical communication and two-way symmetrical communication implemented in these web sites and how do these principles correspond to the public relations model practiced?

1.7.7 How can these web sites be improved with regard to the features and characteristics mentioned above?

In order to answer these research questions, the following specific research objectives were formulated:

1.8 Research objectives

With regard to the research questions, the objectives of this study were to determine:

1.8.1 What the reasons, aims and expectations of public relations practitioners at selected NGOs in South Africa are with regard to their use of the WWW as a communication medium;

1.8.2 What the successes, failures and problems they experience with regard to the WWW as a communication medium are;

1.8.3 What the general characteristics and functions of NGO web sites are;

1.8.4 What public relations model is practiced by the NGOs and why a particular model is preferred;

1.8.5 How the characteristics of interactivity are implemented in NGO web sites and whether there has been a correspondence between the level of interactivity and the number of hits and inquiries via the web sites;

1.8.6 How the principles of dialogical communication and two-way symmetrical communication are implemented in these web sites and how these principles correspond to the public relations model practiced;

1.8.7 How these web sites can be improved, with regard to the features and characteristics mentioned above.

To guide the pursuit of these research objectives, I made use of certain communication theories as existing knowledge in the field of public relations research. These theories will be explained briefly in the next section. (See Chapters 2 and 3 for a detailed discussion of the theoretical background of this research.)

1.9 Theories applicable to the study

As the problem statement indicated, this study focused on the task of the public relations practitioner within certain non-governmental organizations in South Africa. Particularly their use of the WWW as a communication medium was studied. Kent and Taylor (1998) proposed dialogical communication theory as well as the well-known two-way symmetrical model of Grunig and Hunt (Grunig & Grunig, 1992) as a theoretical framework for public relations practitioners to build *dialogical relationships* through the WWW.

When the *interactive nature* of the WWW is taken into account, this model is a very useful theoretical framework to study public relations in this context. In the two-way symmetrical model, the public relations practitioner mediates the relationship between the organization and its publics. The goal is mutual understanding and *two-way communication* (dialogue) as opposed to other models of public relations where persuasion or the dissemination of information is the main goal (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:21). The relationship between two-way symmetrical communication and dialogical communication is one of process and product.

Dialogue is the product - parties view communication as a goal of the relationship and not just a means to an end. Two-way symmetrical communication refers to the organization's responsibility to create the procedural means by which *interactive dialogical communication* will become possible. Communication systems, processes and rules must be in place in order to create a dialogical relationship with the organization's publics. (These theoretical concepts are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.)

The organization's web site is thus one of the tools or structures that can be used to reach *true dialogical interaction* if designed according to five specific principles (Kent & Taylor, 1998). As mentioned before, the interactive nature of the WWW can facilitate the creation of this dialogue. *Interactivity* can be defined as the extent to which participants can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time (Steure, 1992; Rafaeli, 1988).

It is a multidimensional concept that can manifest itself in various forms (Ghose & Dou, 1998:30), however, several studies have revealed a discrepancy between the interactive capability of the medium and the actual implementation of interactivity on web sites (Ha & James, 1998:470). This means that relatively few organizational web sites were designed to create meaningful *two-way communication* between organizations and their publics and many communication researchers have indicated the need for more research in this area (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Ha & James, 1998; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Ghose & Do, 1998). (The concept of interactivity and other attributes of the internet are explained in more detail in Chapter 2.)

With the brief explanation of the theoretical backbone of the study the following central theoretical statement can be made.

1.10 Central theoretical statement

The World Wide Web as mode of communication via the internet combines the characteristics of interpersonal and mass communication needed to form a new medium that opens up new opportunities for its users. Public relations practitioners now have the opportunity to give the world a more complete look at how an organization serves its customers, shareholders and communities and to *build dialogue* with its publics.

By using a well-designed web site in which the principles of dialogue, two-way communication and interactivity are implemented, organizations can become better known and visible and participate in discussions on public policy issues. The web pages can thus be described and evaluated in terms of the principles of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

In Chapter 2 and 3 this general statement will be stratified into several specific theoretical statements.

The research method for the study is explained next to indicate how the research objectives were reached.

1.11 Research method

1.11.1 Literature study

An extensive literature study was done, concentrating on books, journal and newspaper articles, conference papers and internet resources. The literature study focused on the characteristics and uses of computer-mediated communication in general, as well as applied to public relations. A literature survey of the theoretical concepts of interactivity, dialogue and two-way symmetric communication was done to support the empirical aspect of the study. (The results of the literature study are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.)

1.11.2 *Empirical study*

The empirical part of the study concentrated on the WWW pages of ten selected non-governmental organizations in South Africa involved in development work. These NGOs were selected by means of a non-probability sample from the Human Sciences Research Council's Prodder database (program for development research).

A qualitative approach was used in two phases:

- During phase one qualitative content analyses were done on the web sites of the chosen NGOs. The emphasis was on how content and information were presented with regard to the unique features of the internet as a mass medium.

- During phase two semi-structured interviews were conducted with the relevant public relations practitioners to determine the reasons, aims, successes or failures and expectations for using an organizational web site. Questions were also asked about the organizations' culture and worldview, and their views on communication and public relations.

Data generated from the interviews and the content analyses were used for triangulation to ensure the reliability and validity of the study. Web pages analyzed were downloaded and kept for future reference (see Maxwell, 1996:75).

A qualitative approach was used because the field of study was still very new and little was known about South African NGOs' use of the WWW. A qualitative study enabled the researcher to investigate the reasons and motives behind the NGOs' uses of the WWW in order to apply the two-way symmetrical model of public relations to their use of this new communication medium.

In Chapter 4 the research methods used are explained and motivated in more detail.

1.12 Contribution

The application of the two-way symmetrical model to a new medium such as the WWW will broaden its application possibilities and make a contribution towards public relations theory. The contribution lies in the argument that the WWW on its own cannot be used to solve basic public relations problems. The study will argue that its technological features open up new possibilities for interaction and dialogue, but that a one-sided focus on technological features is not adequate for the successful integration of the WWW into public relations efforts.

The argument will be made that the WWW could be used for two-way symmetrical interaction with an organization's publics, but only if that organization holds certain presuppositions about public relations and the purpose thereof. The study will illustrate the importance of an organization's worldview in applying the WWW successfully into its public relations media mix.

Furthermore the study will illustrate that the two-way symmetrical model as a normative model of public relations is still not practiced by most organizations, inter alia because its assumptions are hard to implement in practice.

On a pragmatic level the study identified some of the unique problems of NGOs applying new communication technology in South Africa. In order to address some of these problems, the study produced some practical recommendations for NGOs to improve their public relations efforts in general, but also to make better use of their web sites in terms of their interactive features and contact with their various publics.

1.13 Conclusion

This study is important because it aims to investigate how the internet can be used within a developmental context in order to facilitate development projects done by selected NGOs. It focuses on the integration of the internet within the public relations activities of these NGOs.

This focus has the theoretical implication that the two-way symmetrical model of public relations would possibly be expanded to include a new medium such as the internet.

The purpose of Chapter 1 was to give an overview of the research as well as an outline of the topics covered in the forthcoming chapters. The reader should take note again that this research was not about development efforts by South African NGOs as such, but rather about how these NGOs used the WWW as a part of their public relations media mix. Their development work was thus not evaluated and their use of development communication was only assessed to the degree that they used the WWW to communicate about development programs.

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[1] Optical fiber is a silicon or glass medium for transmission of digital information. Optical fiber, or fiber optics has transformed modern telecommunications primarily because it has more than one thousand times the carrying capacity of conventional, twisted-pair telephone lines (Pavlik, 1996:406).

[2] The *internet* is a huge worldwide reservoir of information that is made accessible to anyone across the world through the use of computers and high-speed interconnected data links (Anon, 1998a:1). Another way to define it is as follows: " the internet is basically a gigantic network of small and large computer networks that can be used by millions of people from virtually anywhere. These users can either use relatively cheap and small computers or huge computer systems in business corporations to access electronic mail and databases" (Scholtz & Steyn, 1999:475).

According to these definitions the internet is simply a compilation of computer networks worldwide, that can be accessed from anywhere in the world, by anyone who has a computer with a connection to the internet through an internet service provider, a modem and a telephone line (Gorille, 1995; Marlow, 1996; Holtz, 1999).

There are several types of "services" available to the internet user. Users can, for example:

- send and receive *electronic mail* to and from individuals around the world;
- subscribe to *listserv* discussions of various topics;
- read messages and send comments to *news groups* used by people with an interest in a particular topic;
- make use of a ftp *(file transfer protocol)* service to download software on your computer;
- browse documents and files with text, pictures and graphics in full color, found on the *World Wide Web* (WWW) (Poynter Institute, 1998:1; Marlow, 1996:25).

[3] I decided not to write the word "internet" with a capital letter, because the term refers to a communication medium in the same way as radio, television and newspapers do.

[4] Refer to Chapter 2, Section 2.4 and 2.5 as well as Appendix A for a discussion of the implications and impact of the internet as part of an information revolution.

[5] The WWW consists of thousands of *internet presence sites (IPS),* or *web sites* as it is more often called. An IPS or a web site refers to a compilation of *web pages* filled with information

[6] Note that the terms internet and WWW are often used interchangeably, while the WWW is in fact one of the applications (or levels of communication) on the internet.

[7] See endnote 5.

[8] The two-way symmetrical model of public relations is explained in Chapter 3. It refers to public relations as an act of relationship building, where the emphasis falls on mutual understanding and trust between the organization and its publics. It can be regarded as the most ethical approach to public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 1992).

[9] One of the most elaborate research projects in public relations ever undertaken. With a research grant from the IABC (International Association for Business Communication) several researchers, for example J. Grunig, L. Grunig and D. Dozier, undertook this study in the early 1990s.

[10] Dialogical communication principles and its relation to the two-way symmetrical model of public relations are discussed in Chapter 3.

[11] The following databases were searched: Nexus, RSat, SSI, and Sabinet.

[12] The *WWW* is thus one of the divisions of the *internet,* but the terms *internet* and *WWW* are often used interchangeably, as the WWW is for many people the best-known part of the internet (Cailliau, 1995:5). Web pages are thus electronic pages of text, graphics and pictures that can be accessed by internet users searching for all kinds of information. The browsing of these web sites is usually free of charge.

[13] Virtual reality is for some the ultimate communication medium: a total sensory experience in which the user or users can interact with or create their own multidimensional universe by using a data glove, data suit, and data visor. When immersed in virtual reality, users see, feel, interact with, and manipulate a computer-generated world not necessarily related in any way to the so-called real world we all live in. Virtual reality applications have been developed for entertainment and arcade games, medicine and employee training (Pavlik, 1996:408).

[14] For a detailed discussion of the history and attributes of Postmodernism, refer to the following sources:

Docherty, T. ed. 1993. *Postmodernism: A reader.* New York: Columbia University Press. 528p.

Hassard, J. & Parker, M. eds. 1993. *Postmodernism and organizations.* London: Sage. 240p.

Bertens, H. 1995. *The idea of Postmodernism*: A history. London: Routledge. 284p.

Appleby, J., Covington, J., Hoyt, D, Latham, M. & Sneider, A. eds. 1996. *Knowledge and Postmodernism in historical perspective.* New York: Routledge. 559p.

Norris, C. 1993. *The truth about Postmodernism.* Oxford: Blackwell. 333p.

Cahoone, L.E. ed. 1996. *From Modernism to Postmodernism*: An anthology. Cambridge: Blackwell. 731.

[15] The remains of these inequalities between people serves as an indication that the mere existence of a democracy does not ensure the complete equality of all the citizens in a particular country. A democracy could bring about full political participation for all citizens of that country, but inequalities will always prevail. All people can never be exactly the same with regard to aspects such as socio-economic status, education, knowledge and power or even aspects like physical attributes such as health, physical strength and so forth.

[16] For a more detailed discussion on the internet and its potential for empowerment, refer to the following source: Elliot, C.M. 1997. Activism on the internet and its ramifications for public relations. College Park: University of Maryland. (Unpublished MA dissertation) pp28-36.

Chapter 2

Interactive characteristics of the internet and the World Wide Web

Within 30 years the internet has grown from a Cold War concept for controlling the tattered remains of a post-nuclear society to the Information Superhighway. Just as the railroads of the 19^{th} century enabled the Machine Age, and revolutionized the society of the time, the internet takes us into the Information Age, and profoundly affects the world in which we live (PBS, 1998:5).

2.1 Introduction

The study of computer-mediated communication is a relatively new and exciting field in the sphere of communication studies. This field of study has until recently been ignored by most communication researchers, while researchers from other disciplines, for instance education, management information science and library science have studied the phenomenon for the last 20 years (Morris & Ogan, 1996:1).

In the previous chapter it was explained that this research project focused on the interactive possibilities that the internet opens up for NGOs involved in development work in South Africa. Chapter 1 gave the broad context within which the research was conducted. It is important to take a closer look at the internet as medium, as well as the WWW as one of its applications. (See Chapter 1 for definitions.) Chapter 2 will logically lead to Chapter 3 where public relations as a discipline will be discussed to illustrate to what extent the WWW could benefit the practice of public relations.

In the first instance, this chapter will explain the unique characteristics of the internet and the WWW. Secondly it will give an overview of the historic development of the internet and the WWW since the 1960s. Thirdly, the differences and similarities between the internet and traditional mass media will be highlighted to illustrate how the interactive characteristics of new media have changed the media landscape. The chapter will contain a detailed discussion of interactivity in order to apply its attributes to public relations in Chapter 3. The contents of this chapter should be interpreted within the context of the discussion in Chapter 1 on the internet in a postmodern era.

2.2 The historical development of the internet and the WWW

The internet did not always carry commercial traffic. Its initial purpose was to provide a method of rapid information exchange for research, education and defence purposes. The history of the internet[1] begins in the 1960s during the cold war between the United States and the former Soviet Union (Dominick *et al.*, 2000:37). Up until then, existing communication networks were designed for point-to-point communication, with each place on the network dependent on the link before it. This meant that if one point of the network was damaged, the whole network would be useless (PBS, 1998:1). The problem that led to the idea of the internet was mainly a military one: how could United States authorities talk to each other in the aftermath of a nuclear attack?

Without some of them knowing about each other, researchers at different organizations worked on the concept that would later become the internet. The first people and organizations involved in this new idea were:

- Paul Baran at Rand Corporation in the USA;
- Licklider, Sutherland, and Taylor of Darpa (Department of Defence's Advanced Research Project Agency) in the USA;
- Roberts, Kleinrock and Merril of MIT (Massachusetts Institute for Technology) in the USA; and
- Davies and Scantlebury of NPL in the United Kingdom.

Paul Baran, one of the workers at the Rand Corporation, a military think tank in the US, conceived the idea of a new communication network. He thought of a network that was not functioning on a point-to-point base, but instead had to work more as a fishnet. He wanted a structure that could allow information to find its own way through the network, even if a part of it had been destroyed. The merit of his idea was not immediately valued, but some of the younger engineers grasped it and developed his idea further under the leadership of the Department of Defence's Advanced Research Project Agency, formed in 1957 (Arpa or Darpa, according to some sources) (PBS, 1998:2; Leiner *et al.*, 1998:2; Schickinger, 1998:70; Dominick *et al.*, 2000:37).

Another recorded description of the social interactions that could be enabled through networking was a series of memos written by J.C.R. Licklider of MIT in August 1962. As the first head of the computer research program at Darpa, he described a globally interconnected net through which everyone could access data and programs from any site. His successors at MIT as well as Darpa continued to work on this concept and in 1965 researchers from MIT connected a TX-2 computer in Massachusetts to a Q-32 computer in California with a low speed dial-up telephone line. This was the creation of the first wide-area computer network ever built. After this experiment, researchers realized it was possible for different kinds of computers to communicate with each other, using a technique called *packet switching*.

This term referred to a computer network sending messages (packets) that contained information about its route and destination so that any computer on the network would be able to know where to forward (switch) the message (packet). Packet switching proved to be the solution to the problem of data loss during emergencies. Data packets were small and if a packet should be lost, it could be sent and re-sent easily, because with many interconnected computers, packets could follow several possible paths in order to reach their destination (Schickinger, 1998:70; Dominick *et al.*, 2000:38).

One of the researchers involved in the above-mentioned experiment, Lawrence Roberts, presented a paper at an international conference in 1966 on computer networking, where he met the researchers from the UK mentioned above. They exchanged some of their ideas and Roberts went back to the USA to publish his idea of the Arpanet in 1967 (Leiner *et al.*, 1998:2). Arpanet referred to a network eventually formed in 1969 (or 1968, according to some sources – Marlow, 1996:23; Dominick *et al.*, 2000:38), connecting Stanford Research Institute, UCLA, UC Santa Barbara and the University of Utah, designed to enable scientists to share data and access remote computers.

Arpanet was an immediate success, especially the opportunity for sending and receiving electronic mail. In 1971 the network grew to 23 hosts, connecting universities and government research centers around the USA. In 1972 the Inter Networking Working Group (INWG) was formed as a standard-setting entity to govern the growing network. Vinton Cerf, who later became known as one of the "fathers of the internet", was elected the first chairman of the INWG.

In 1973 the Arpanet became an international network with connections to University College in London, England and the Royal Radar Establishment in Norway. Since 1974 it started to move away from its military and research roots, when Telenet, a commercial version of the Arpanet, was formed. Thereafter the public could also be exposed to how networked computers could be used in daily life.

In 1979 two graduate students at Duke University, Tome Truscott and Jim Ellis, and Steve Bellovin at the University of North Carolina established the first Usenet newsgroups. Users from all over the world joined in these discussion groups to exchange views about politics, religion and many more subjects. At this stage the World Wide Web, as we know it today, was not yet known.

During the time between 1982 and 1987 Bob Kahn and Vinton Cerf played a very important part in creating TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol), the common language of all internet computers. This new protocol made it possible for messages (packets) to be exchanged (switched) across different computer networks, something that had not been possible in the past (Schickinger, 1998:70). The loose collection of networks that was known as the Arpanet was seen as an "internet" and the term "internet" was first used in 1982. By 1988 the internet was an essential tool for communications, but concerns about privacy and security began to form.

New words such as "hacker", "cracker" and "electronic break-in" were created. These concerns proved to be real on November 1, 1988 when a malicious program called the "Internet Worm" temporarily disabled approximately 6 000 of 60 000 internet hosts. In response to this crisis, the computer emergency response team (Cert) was formed to address security concerns regarding the internet (PBS, 1998:3).

In South Africa the internet was introduced in the late 1980s. As in the USA, access to the main network in South Africa (Uninet) was at first limited to academic and research institutions. It was only after the lifting of sanctions in 1991 that Uninet was linked to the internet in the USA, and in 1993 the internet entered the commercial arena in South Africa (Naudé, 1999a:59; Lawrie, 1995).

In 1990 the Arpanet was decommissioned, leaving only the vast network-of-networks called the internet. At that stage there were more than 300 000 hosts worldwide. Since 1991 corporations could also use the internet as the National Science Foundation's NSFNet, the backbone of the internet, lifted its restrictions on commercial use for the internet, enabling electronic commerce to take place through the internet. In the same year, the computer programmer Mark Macahill designed "Gopher", the first point-and-click way of going through the files on the internet (PBS, 1998:4). Through using the Gopher application it was, however, not yet possible to publish pictures, graphics or sound on the internet.

Between 1989 and 1991 Tim Berners-Lee and a team of researchers from an organization called Cern (a physics-particle accelerator laboratory) in Geneva, Switzerland worked on a project to develop a simpler method to transfer information via the internet. The goal of their research was to build a hypermedia system that would make it possible to exchange information via the internet in the form of hypertext documents (Jackson, 1997:4).

Hypertext is text with pointers to other text that make it possible for the internet user to go to another document with related information and then return to the same place in the original document with ease (Marlow, 1996:26). The concept of hypertext was explained in Chapter 1 (Section 1.3.5). The Cern team developed the concept of hyperlinks using hypertext within documents to get access to related information much faster than before. Their invention was the basis for the html language used in the internet browsers of today (Cailliau, 1995:2).

The World Wide Web was formed as an exciting application of the internet through which information in the form of text, sounds, still or moving pictures and graphics can be accessed using the methods developed at Cern (Anon, 1998a:1). WWW browsers such as Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer, can thus make hypermedia[2] documents available to internet users. By using the WWW, anyone with internet access can post information in a colorful, attractive and interesting way. Using an internet browser, such as Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer an internet user can access the information. The first graphics-based Web-browser was called Mosaic and it became available in 1993 (PBS, 1998:4; Marlow, 1996:26; Dominick *et al.*, 2000:43).

According to Herman and Chesney (1997:116) the development of the WWW with browser software contributed to the sudden increase in internet activity. The WWW was a multimedia application that was much easier and more attractive to use than previous internet applications such as Gopher.

Most of internet traffic nowadays goes through the WWW: rock concerts, births, sports events and other happenings have been broadcasted live via the web. It is possible to do *cybershopping*, to order take-away meals or books or to give voter education via the web. Doctors can consult with colleagues worldwide and small and large organizations or corporations can advertise their services and promote their image through a well-designed web site. The internet has indeed grown far beyond the government and university roots and its original purpose (Marlow, 1996:23).

From the brief discussion of the history of the internet it becomes clear that there is no one place where the internet resides. It is not owned or managed by any one person or government or company. Currently a number of groups share the responsibility to coordinate the internet and to set the specifications to make it work. One of these groups is the Internet Society, a non-profit organization that promotes global connectivity. Membership of this organization is open to anyone. The Internet Society sponsors an important working group called the Internet Engineering Task Force that focuses on setting technical standards to ensure that new technology and software are compatible with the internet.

Other important organizations are the Internet Operator's Providers Services (IOPS) that handles network congestion and Network Solutions that has the task of registering internet domain names for organizations. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) is headed by Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the web, and is run jointly by the MIT Laboratory for Computer Science, the National Institute for Research in Computer Science and Automation in France, and Keio University in Japan. These organizations work together to ensure the growth and expansion of the internet (Dominick *et al.*, 2000:43).

2.3 New media characteristics

New media characteristics can be divided in two categories. The first five categories are "technological" in nature, whereas the last eight are "non-technological" in nature. Both categories are important because the more technological characteristics often lead to the other characteristics that are more "human" in nature. The unique characteristics of new media are important to keep in mind when the internet as a mass medium will be compared to more traditional mass media in Section 2.5.3.

❖ ***Inclusive/convergent/multimedia***

New media build upon and interconnect existing technologies to create more capabilities. As was mentioned in Chapter 1, multimedia or multiple media can now be used and formerly separate technologies (and the industries behind them) are blending together through the use of digital communication technologies. Familiar channels (audio, test, video and graphics) are combined to created sensory-rich information environments (Anon., 1998b:1; Anon., 1998c:3).

❖ ***Hypertext***

This concept, which is one of the most distinct features of the WWW, was already discussed in Chapter 1, Section 1.2.4. and in this chapter, Section 2.2. The implications of the use of hypertext are the following:

- One need not read documents in a prescribed order.
- Authors, styles and permissible rules of content may vary as one reads linked documents.
- Responsibility and control are diffused – as is ownership of the resulting document.
- Form and structure are easily changed, composed on demand for individuals (Anon., 1998c:2).

❖ ***Electromagnetic vs. optical***

Digital data are more easily converted to optical transmission (by means of pulses of light) which has some advantages if compared to conventional electronic transmission (using magnetic pulses). Electromagnetic systems are more fragile and are often bulkier for a given capacity, more subject to interference, and can be more easily tapped.

Optic fibres offer advantages in capacity, reliability and accuracy, compared with traditional copper wire and microwave radio technologies. However, because there is such a large base of installed copper wire in the world, it is at this stage often more economical to work with this existing technology rather than to replace it with fibre (Anon., 1998c:3). In developing countries, especially, it is seldom possible to replace copper wire on a large scale because of a lack of funds.

❖ ***Vanishing of fixed place***

Informational resources need not reside on one centralized machine anymore, but it is now possible to tie various machines together in a network linkage. Geographical separation is therefore not a problem. Software and data can be downloaded via the internet from any geographical destination (Anon., 1998c:1).

❖ ***Digital***

In Chapter 1 the meaning of digitization was explained briefly (Section 1.3.8). The characteristics of digital media opened up the following unique possibilities.

- It is possible to duplicate information infinitely without degradation of quality.
- It is possible to alter images such as graphics or photographs in ways that are far less detectable than with analog media.

- Easy retrieval, calculation or computation is possible because digital contents are inherently "machine readable".
- Digital data are frequently stored on magnetic or optical surfaces that do not have a proven permanence. Web pages do not last very long *over time*, because digital data present severe problems for archiving or long-term storage. *Time binding* is therefore a problem. Whereas paper books can last more than a millennium, floppy disks would not last much more than five years, even with careful storage. Magnetically encoded records can be swiftly destroyed with any common magnet (Anon., 1998c:1).

❖ ***Space binding and distance insensitivity***

In the previous paragraph the problem of time binding was addressed. However, space binding is one of the positive aspects of new media, because distances, no matter how far or how near, have no effect at all. Distance, therefore, makes little difference in the time, cost or speed of getting information (Anon., 1998c:1).

❖ ***Push vs. pull***

New media differ from more traditional mass media in that users are active when using new media. They request (or "pull") content that they are interested in and content are not programmed (or "pushed"), as is the case with television and the press. It seems that people prefer older media when they want to passively consume. New media are preferred when users want more control or "pull" (Anon., 1998c:3). A feature called "intelligent pull" refers to the use of software that notifies interested web site visitors when a particular web site has been updated.

However, according to Holtz (1999:77,78), an organization or business still has to push information to potential web site visitors in order to motivate them to visit its web site. Pushing can be done via traditional media such as radio, television or newspapers by providing the relevant URL and by giving more information about what can be found on the web site. It is therefore recommended that a combination of push and pull techniques be used to ensure that as many people as possible visit the web site. By combining push and pull techniques the use of traditional media and new media also becomes more integrated.

❖ ***Connective***

New media connect consumers with content in a variety of new and different ways (Anon., 1998b:1).

❖ ***Empowering***

With new media, users play a central role in determining the time, place and form of their media experience. The boundaries between media makers and consumers are blurred because consumers can produce and distribute their own messages (Anon., 1998b:1).

❖ ***Innovative***

New media are constantly in pursuit of imaginative and original media content. Users are experimenting and taking risks to be more innovative (Anon., 1998b:1).

❖ ***Personalized***

New media systems such as the internet can be instructed to customize and individualize information for each user. It means that the idea of *mass* media is changed and an environment is created where different messages are created for each member of an audience (Anon., 1998b:2). This means that a single, unique message can instantly be delivered to a particular individual (Peppers & Rogers, 1995; Fishburne & Montgomery, 1995:284; Lasica, 1998). Deuze (1999:378) proposes that the term "individualization" could also be used to indicate this feature of new media.

The concept of a mass audience therefore no longer exists in the world of new media. Electronic media such as the internet make it possible to communicate to the former mass audience in a more personal way. Audiences are now fragmented and practitioners will have to know which media to use to reach which audience (Marlow, 1996:160). (New media are compared with traditional mass media in more detail in Section 2.5.3.)

❖ ***Virtuality, virtual community***

By means of virtual reality it is possible to create a virtual community of people who are geographically dispersed. (See Chapter 1, Endnote 13.) These people can share a certain hobby or certain interests, but they could also be very different from each other (for example culturally). (See also Appendix A for a discussion of the formation of virtual communities as one of the social consequences of new media technology.)

❖ ***Interactivity***

Interactivity is one of the features that contribute to the difference between traditional mass media and new media such as the internet. (This concept was explained in Chapter 1, Section 1.2.5 and will be dealt with later in this chapter in more detail [Section 2.5.4] to compare new media to traditional mass media.)

The unique characteristics of new media changed the media landscape because it made it necessary for communication researchers to rethink their definitions of important communication concepts. These characteristics make it impossible to define communication via new media in the same way as communication via traditional mass media.

2.4 Consequences of development in the field of communication technology

2.4.1 *General framework of consequences*

With the description of the historical development of the internet in the previous section, it is important to take a look at some of the consequences brought about by these developments in the field of communication technology. Consequences of technological change are important because that is what makes technology matter. However, it is a difficult task to determine the consequences of new media technology, because it has not yet reached its final form and in a sense it is still emerging.

Consequences identified will therefore be largely speculative and dependent on a variety of critical conditions and assumptions, as Pavlik (1996:304) points out. Even with a medium as old as television, very little is known about its effect on society yet. Some consequences can only be identified with the hindsight of a historical perspective that we do not have on new media at this stage. Some of the consequences would be intended or expected and others would be unintended.

Pavlik (1996:7) identifies a general framework of consequences that can be grouped into four areas (Table 2.1):

❖ the way that communication professionals do their work;

- the nature of communication content or product;
- the structure of communication industries;
- the nature of the media audience and society at large.

The areas mentioned in Table 2.1 will be discussed briefly before other more specific consequences and predicted effects of new media technologies will also be addressed in the next sections. Pavlik (1996:7) stresses that his conceptualization of Table 2.1 is not a complete list of consequences, but that it should be seen as a broad framework for discussing these issues.

Table 2.1: Mapping the consequences of technological change

	Intended consequence	Unintended/unexpected consequence
Communication professionals	Increased efficiency Lower cost Greater speed Flexibility	Health effects Fewer jobs Internet addiction
Product	Interactivity User control Multimedia Content	Information more costly Intellectual property rights hard to define
Structure	Decentralization Virtual newsroom Telecommuting	Redefined roles Redefined organization
Society	Economic benefit Freedom	Privacy lost Pace of technological development changes faster than society's ability to cope

(Source: Adapted from Pavlik, 1996:3)

Communication professionals saw many changes in their respective fields with the coming of the internet. The fields of journalism, marketing communication and public relations were affected by new communication technologies. More information was suddenly available than ever before – with the click of a mouse. This saved time in terms of research and it expanded markets in terms of readership as well as stakeholders and publics. Some of the unintended effects were the loss of jobs and possible negative health effects as a result of spending too much time in front of a computer.

Media content (also referred to as the communication product) changed because of the unique characteristics of new media such as the internet. The aspects of interactivity and more control for users of these media will be discussed later in this chapter (Section 2.5.4). In Chapter 1 it was explained that the convergence of different media signals made it possible to develop multimedia applications in which text, graphics, moving video images and sound bites were combined. It is now possible to broadcast television programs directly via the internet and on the other hand, it is possible to browse the internet on a television screen if you have the necessary equipment.

Some of the unintended effects included the fact that information became an economical commodity that could be sold in terms of demand and supply. This made information more costly. Intellectual property rights[3] became problematic because it is often hard to determine who the original owner of content is on the internet. It is so easy to copy graphics and other information and then to present it as your own ideas that the issue of copyright has become a problem for which laws and regulations should be adapted.

Media organizations have had to reorganize themselves to adapt to the new media environment. Virtual offices were formed and many employees do not work at the office anymore, as they could get into contact with their employer from anywhere in the world. Information could be shared among employees even though they were not at the same location. Interactive conferences could be held to discuss the day's work for employees at diverse locations (Pavlik, 1996:12).

On the effect of new media on the audience or society at large we could speculate forever. The fact is that new communication technologies have opened up new ways of human interaction and it changed our perception of geographical distances. New international markets have led to economic benefit and more freedom in terms of what we previously thought would be impossible. However, as was stressed in Chapter 1 (Section 1.4.2), communication technology did not only bring about positive consequences. There are also a lot of potential dangers and negative aspects to look out for such as the loss of privacy and the danger of being isolated from society. It is also very difficult to keep up with technological development as the pace of change is so fast that few people really know what changes to expect next (Pavlik, 1996:14).

The general framework of consequences can be explained in terms of more specific consequences of new media development, including social, institutional and cultural consequences.[4]

2.5 The internet and communication theory

Peppers and Rogers (1995:116) talk about new media such as the internet as "one-to-one" media in which a personal relationship can be built with one customer at a time. They compare new media with traditional mass media in the following way: "Using the new media of the 1:1 (one-to-one) future, a marketer will be able to communicate directly with consumers, individually, rather than shouting at them in groups."

The development of new media, for example the internet and its different applications, has several theoretical implications for the communication sciences. In the first place we should reflect on the question as to why communication scholars should take note of and study the internet. In the second place it has become necessary to re-examine traditional theoretical concepts and the typology of communication that divided the communication discipline into interpersonal and mass communication. In the third place we should have a look at traditional communication theories and their applicability to new media research. We should also examine some of the new communication theories that have been formulated since research on new media began.

2.5.1 Why communication scholars should study the internet

Earlier in this chapter it was mentioned that communication scholars were at first reluctant to do research about the internet as a new communication medium. Researchers from other disciplines such as education, management information science and library science have been doing research on computer-mediated communication for the past 20 years.

The internet developed over several years in bits and pieces and it did not fit into the traditional models of print and broadcast media. (See Section 2.2.) According to Morris and Ogan (1996:2) the major constraint on doing mass communication research into the internet was therefore theoretical. In the past the study of communication was divided into interpersonal communication and mass communication. However, with the development of computer-mediated communication this distinction has proved to be problematic.

The reason is that with these new technologies the line between the various contexts began to blur. Communication mediated by technology cannot fit neatly into one of these two traditional categories. This form of communication has some unique characteristics, as well as characteristics of both interpersonal and mass communication (Rogers, 1986:3; Reardon & Rogers, 1988; Lesis, 1991:202).

The first application of the internet to be used widely was electronic mail. Electronic mail was used long before the WWW was developed as it is known today. (See the description of internet history in Section 2.2.) Electronic mail was at first compared to interpersonal communication as it had more in common with interpersonal communication than with traditional mass communication. Communication via the internet was therefore not seen as a form of mass communication at first. However, computer-mediated communication in the form of electronic mail also differed significantly from face-to-face interpersonal communication because of the lack of non-verbal communication and its asynchronic nature (Naudé, 1995:16).

The development of new computer-mediated communication technologies that combine aspects of both interpersonal communication and mass media can be seen as a challenge to communication theory (O'Sullivan, 1999). Many communication researchers are now beginning to regard the internet as a mass medium and they realize that certain fundamental questions should be asked to lead research in this regard. Questions such as the following should receive attention from communication researchers:

- What is a mass audience?
- What is a communications medium?
- How are messages mediated?
- How can computer-mediated communication affect or change the communication process?
- How can a new medium such as the internet change traditional communications applications such as journalism, marketing communication and public relations?
- What impact will a medium such as the internet have on its audience and on society as a whole?

Answers to these questions will still take some time to emerge from current research, but at least communication researchers have now begun the scientific process by acknowledging the existence of a new field of communication enquiry.

2.5.2 Communication theories applicable for the study of new media technology

Communication scholars have applied several theories to the study of new media technology since they realized the importance of research in this area. Some of the long-established theories were useful starting points. Some of these theories originated in the study of interpersonal or small group communication and others have been used for the study of mass communications.

Some relate to the nature of the medium, others focus on the audience and its acceptance and use of the medium and others concentrate on the application of new media in different communication settings, for example public relations or marketing communication (Morris & Ogan, 1996:5). There are also a few "new" theories that have emerged during the past few years, specifically for the purpose of studying new media aspects.

However, the specific research question/s asked would determine which theory would be most applicable to the research to be conducted. Some of the most used theories for new media research in the communication sciences were the following:

- ❖ The critical mass theory/Diffusions of innovations theory (Oliver *et al.*, 1985; Markus, 1987; Markus, 1990; Naudé, 1995);
- ❖ The uses and gratifications approach (Williams, 1989; Perse & Courtright, 1993; Johnsson- Smaragdi, 1998);
- ❖ Social presence and media richness theory (Rice, 1993; Rice & Case, 1983; Williams, 1987; Culnan & Markus, 1987; Valacich *et al.*, 1993; Trevino *et al.*, 1987; Schmitz & Fulk, 1991);
- ❖ Agenda setting hypothesis (Naudé, 1999b);
- ❖ Two-way symmetrical model of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent, 1998)
- ❖ Knowledge gap hypothesis (Naudé, 1999b; Severin & Tankard, 1988; Pavlik, 1996);
- ❖ A systems theory (Pavlik, 1996);
- ❖ Knowledge hierarchy (Pavlik, 1996);
- ❖ Network analysis (Williams, 1989; Williams *et al.*, 1988; Jackson, 1997);
- ❖ Public goods approach (Steinfield & Fulk, 1987);
- ❖ Social information processing model (Steinfield & Fulk, 1987; Fulk *et al.* 1987); and
- ❖ Symbolic interactionism (Steinfield & Fulk, 1987; Trevino *et al.*, 1987).

The theories listed are not meant to be exhaustive but merely to give an overview of some of the most often used theories in the communication studies discipline over the past few years. These theories cannot be discussed in detail here, but the theory used in this research, the two-way symmetrical model of public relations will be discussed in the next chapter and also applied to the use of new media technologies.

2.5.3 Computer-mediated communication: Interpersonal communication vs. traditional mass media

Some of the differences between new and traditional mass media have already been discussed earlier in this chapter. Aspects of importance are the *personalized* and *demassified* nature of new media (see Section 2.3), as well as its sometimes *asynchronic* nature. *Interactivity* is also an important characteristic of new media, especially in this research, where the focus will be on the uses of interactivity for the purposes of public relations practices (Naudé & Groenewald, 1996; Rogers, 1986; Morris & Ogan, 1996). Another aspect to keep in mind is that new media are relatively inexpensive in comparison to traditional mass media. Even the smallest business can afford to reach customers and clients by means of personal messages, worldwide (Peppers & Rogers, 1995:116).

❖ ***Asynchronic/synchronic communication***

All communication is temporally sensitive. Normally communication is synchronous, but with the help of technology it could be asynchronic as well. Asynchronic communication means that communication between participants is not necessarily simultaneous and that people can send and receive messages whenever they choose to do so. The aspect of asynchronity gives the new media user more control. Control in terms of time management is moved from the sender to the receiver, who can decide when and where to take part in the communication process (Williams *et al.*, 1988:12; Rice, 1987:109; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986:1494; Lesis, 1991:202; Rogers, 1986:6).

For the telephone there is the answering machine, for theatre there are film and video, for television there is the VCR and even for interpersonal communication there are memories. However, with the development of the internet the edges of the synchronicity continuum are stretched (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996:2).

To understand the concept of asynchronity/synchronity it is essential to examine the different levels of communication on the internet. Morris and Ogan (1996:2-3) argue that the internet can be studied as a communication medium that represent a continuum of communication levels. Each point in the traditional model of the communication process can vary from one to a few to many on the internet. Morris and Ogan (1996:4) identify the following categories of communication on this continuum:

- One-to-one asynchronous communication, such as electronic mail;
- Many-to-many asynchronous communication, such as Usenet[5], electronic bulletin boards[6], and Listservers[7]
- Synchronous communication that can be one-to-one, one-to-few, or one-to-many and that can be organized around a topic, the construction of an object, or role playing, such as MUDs[8] (Multi-User Dungeons and their various transformations in virtual reality such as MOOs, MUCKs and MUSHs), Internet Relay Chat[9] (IRC), and chat rooms on commercial services;
- Asynchronous communication characterized by the receiver's need to seek out a web site to access information, which may involve many-to-one, one-to-one, or one-to-many source-receiver relationships (for example web sites, gophers[10], and FTP[11] sites).

These different levels of communication illustrate that the internet represents a merger of opportunities for interpersonal (or point-to-point) communication, group communication, organizational and mass communication (Atkin *et al.*, 1998:478). Many individuals can initiate communication to the same web site at the same time, therefore the many-to-many scenario. It means that many points of origination and destination can coexist in cyberspace (Ha & James, 1998:459). This clearly necessitates a change in the traditional view of interpersonal and mass communication.

Communication on the internet happens at an unprecedented speed, but it can also be hampered by unprecedented delays. Messages have time stamps, accurate to one hundredth of a second. It seems that temporal overlaps and discrepancies between time zones are stretched by the internet. Therefore the aspect of synchronicity vs. asynchronity should be examined both as a process and an effect on the communication process.

❖ ***Demassificated communication***

Computer-mediated communication also differs from the traditional view of mass communication because of its *demassificated* and *personalized* nature. (This was discussed earlier in Section 2.3.) Users of these "new media" do not, in other words, regard themselves as part of a faceless mass of people being bombarded with numerous messages (Naudé & Groenewald, 1996:45). The receivers of messages can give (immediate) feedback and have control over what they do with the messages they receive (Bouwman & Jankowski, 1989:10, Weber, 1992:29; Williams *et al.*, 1988:12,13; Forrest *et al.*, 1995).

New media technologies such as the internet can be described as the opposite of traditional mass communication systems with regard to its *demassified* nature. A personalized message can be sent to each member of a group of any size and the receiver can decide when and where to read it and how to react (Rogers, 1986:5).

In *Table 2.5* (see page 57) the differences between face-to-face interpersonal communication, interactive (or computer-mediated) communication and traditional mass communication are compared. From this comparison it can be deduced that communication via the internet can sometimes be regarded as interpersonal in nature, but often it shows more similarities with traditional mass communication.

Viewed as a mass medium the internet necessitates a change in the traditional one-to-many model of mass communication, as explained earlier. The new many-to-many model of mass communication via the internet has several implications of which organizations should take note:

❖ People who have an interest in an organization, its products/services, the environment in which it operates, or the issues with which it deals can talk freely to each other in public forums worldwide. Those who feel positive about the organization can publish web sites that glorify or promote the organization or related aspects. However, those who are negative about the organization can create web sites that criticize the organization and subsequently hurt its reputation badly (Holtz, 1999:23). Environmental scanning on the internet is therefore an important activity and simultaneously daunting task for public relations departments.

- The many-to-many model of mass communication provides the receiver with more control over the content that he/she wants. In the old mass communication paradigm the motto would be "You'll get what we've got when we get it to you". In the new paradigm the audience demands "I want what I want when I want it". The sender/s can no longer create content in a linear fashion with a certain beginning and end, making judgments about its importance and relevance along the way (Holtz, 1999:28). According to this view of mass communication, audiences "pull" content that they view as relevant, rather than just passively consuming content "pushed" at them via traditional mass media. (See Section 2.3.)

- According to the new model of mass communication, Holtz (1999:31) talks about the importance of access-driven communication. It is still as important as ever to enable the audience to "pull" content from a medium that is accessible. Therefore the integration of traditional and new media is important for public relations practitioners, as it is highly unlikely that all members of a particular audience would have access to the WWW. This is especially true in a developing country such as South Africa, as a very small percentage of the population has access to the internet. (See Chapter 1, Section 1.5.)

Another implication is that the targeting of audiences by means of demographics should be approached differently under a new mass communication paradigm. Demographics will still be important, but the goal would no longer be to distribute messages to every possible member of the target audience. Instead, demographics is supposed to focus on a "market sample of one", according to Holtz (1999:34). Audience targeting should be approached on a much more individual level, enticing individuals to your web site one at a time. In the environment where individuals will "pull" the information when they need it, an organization should ensure that it is available and accessible. Furthermore, an organizational web site should enable individuals to communicate with representatives from the organization or other relevant individuals or organizations, on a one-to-one level if they should wish to do so.

In conclusion, it is important to note that communication via the internet is neither exactly the same as face-to-face communication nor the same as traditional mass communication, because of the various differences that have been specified and explained thus far (O'Sullivan, 1999). The most important distinctive characteristic of new media for the purposes of this study is interactivity, because it is the most important aspect differentiating between communication via traditional mass media and communication via new media. Interactivity also opens up much more possibilities for application in various professional fields such as public relations. (See Chapter 3.)

2.5.4 Interactive communication

The interactive nature of new communication technologies is seen as the key advantage of new media. Two-way communication between source and receiver is possible and multidirectional communication can take place between any number of sources and receivers on different levels of communication. Internet users can therefore become more active participants in the world of mediated communications (Pavlik, 1996:135). In a recent study Elliot (1997:119) found that online communication was the most symmetrical medium when compared to radio, newspapers and television.

This study leans heavily on the similarity between interactivity and two-way symmetry and this relationship will be explored in the following sections.

An interactive medium such as the internet gives the receiver more power to control the content and form of the interaction. Interactivity makes it possible for everyone on the information superhighway to act both as a receiver and as source, just as anyone with a telephone can place or receive a call. In terms of traditional mass communication where the audience or the receiver of the message could not "talk back" or control the content of the interaction, *interactivity* refers to quite a different view of (mass) communication.

Before we arrive at a definition of interactivity, it is important to compare the differences between interactive and non-interactive messages (Anderson, 1995). This comparison is illustrated in *Table 2.3*.

- Information flow is defined by the transfer of information from one point to another. Interactive messages consist of *multiple information flows* between participants, while non-interactive messages consist of *one-way flow* of information between a sender and a receiver. Interactive and non-interactive communication differ in terms of its different views on what the purpose of communication is. According to the linear or one-way model, communication is seen as the transmitting (or sending) of information (a transmission view of communication), and it is therefore a non-interactive act. On the other hand, the two-way model views communication as a ritual for sharing, participation or association between people and communication would therefore be interactive. The ritual view of communication is directed towards the representation of shared believes and *not* only toward the act of imparting information (Carey, 1989: 15-20).

Table 2.3: Attributes of interactive and non-interactive communication

Attribute	Interactive	Non-interactive
1.Information flow	Multiple information flows	One-way flow
2.Message availability	Availability-on-demand	Fixed availability
3.Feedback immediacy	Real-time feedback	Severely delayed feedback
4.Type of perception	Intelligent and responsive interaction	Exposure
5. Customizer of content	Users customize	Customized by senders

(Source: Anderson, 1995:153)

In the past communication technology such as the telegraph and the computer had been associated with the transmission view of communication, which represents a linear, non-interactive model of (mass) communication. However, with the interactive possibilities of the internet, this association is not relevant anymore. If the ritual view is applied to a web site on the internet, the web site would be seen as merely an instrument for the dissemination of news and/or knowledge or information.

However, the application of a ritual view of communication to a web site would result in a different view and subsequently a different appearance of the web site. Such a web site would be seen as portraying or confirming a particular view of the world. Visiting the web site would be a ritual or dramatic act that enables the visitor to take part in a portrayal of a dramatic picture of the world. The visitor would not only be a passive consumer or observer, but also be an actor in the process.

When the description of two-way symmetrical communication in Chapter 3 is compared to this aspect, it is clear that two-way symmetry and interactivity could be used as synonyms, as some communication researchers have already indicated (Schickinger, 1998:6; Elliot, 1997:43).

- Message availability is defined by when a message is available. Who determines when a particular message is seen or heard? Interactive messages are available when users want to access (or "pull") them that can be called availability-on-demand. Non-interactive messages have a fixed availability, because they are only available when the sender makes (or "pushes") them available.

- Immediacy of feedback is defined by the time it takes feedback to return to the original sender of a message. Interactive messages can be replied to in real-time, using the same medium the message was sent in. Non-interactive messages have severely delayed feedback. For instance, a letter to the editor could take days to reach its destination.

- Type of perception is about how users should perceive their experiences with messages. Interactive messages should be perceived as intelligent and responsive interaction because the microprocessor behind the screen can perform a variety of functions. Non-interactive messages are perceived as exposure as opposed to transaction or interaction (ritual vs. a transmission view of communication).

- Customizer of content refers to who formats, arranges or manipulates the content. Users customize the content of interactive messages by arranging or modifying its contents in different ways. The option of personalized content on the WWW (see Chapter 1, Section 1.3) is one way of customizing content. Senders customize non-interactive messages and when it refers to mass communication, the same message is sent (or "pushed") out to every person in the audience (Anderson, 1995:153-154).

From *Table 2.3* it seems that the most important aspect of interactivity is the power that it puts into the hands of the users of new media. They have more control over their media usage as well as its content than with traditional mass media. With this explanation of the differences between interactive and non-interactive messages it is possible to take a closer and more critical look at a formal definition of interactivity as well as its identified dimensions.

2.5.4.1 A definition of interactivity

As the explanation in Chapter 1 (Section 1.3.4) indicated, interactivity refers to more self-control, choice, involvement, a richer experience and resistance to influence on behalf of the receiver in a mediated environment (McQuail, 1997:144). The concept of interactivity can be defined from several perspectives, such as an interpersonal perspective which would be as follows: "the extent to which messages in a sequence relate to each other, and especially the extent to which later messages recount the relatedness of earlier messages" (Rafaeli, 1988). Other approaches to define interactivity could be artistic or mechanistic (Steure, 1992).

According to Ha and James (1998:461) these approaches to interactivity could easily lead to subjective interpretations of the nature of interactivity because of an invalid assumption in all these definitions. These definitions recognize the fact that interactivity means two-way communication, but they assume that this would be a common desire both for the communicator and the audience.

However, reasons for using the WWW may differ from person to person. For example, in most discussion groups, some members are quiet observers who never participate and others are active participants who frequently state their views. Some WWW surfers want to complete a specific task by visiting a web site, while others just like to look around to see what is available on the web.

Ha and James (1998:461) argue that the notion of mutual interest in two-way communication is unrealistic and that interactivity should rather be defined in terms of the communication needs of the communicator as well as the audience. They propose the following definition:

Interactivity refers to the extent to which the communicator and the audience respond to, or are willing to facilitate each other's communication needs.

This definition, which is used in this study, allows different levels of interactivity and a broader perspective on the concept. Sometimes the audience might want a low level of interactivity, because they just want to navigate a web site and select different options without direct contact with the organization. There are also times when the audience wants immediate response from the organization, for instance to solve a problem.

Researchers agree that interactivity can be described as a multidimensional concept, and that it can be implemented in various forms.

2.5.4.2 The dimensions of interactivity

Good choices and crafty implementation of interactivity are often the difference between successful and unsuccessful web sites (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996:2). To elaborate on this view of interactivity Ha and James (1998:461-463) distinguished five dimensions of interactivity. Two other writers, Ghose and Dou (1998) identify several functions or forms of interactivity that will be discussed in the next section.

- ***Playfulness***

  Play is seen as one of the purposes of communication and it is seen as an interlude from work. Information technology can thus be used for entertainment purposes. The WWW can enhance playfulness and entertainment value with the click of a mouse. People get excitement and psychological gratification when playing games, electronic and otherwise. Previous studies of web sites have concluded that the combination of entertainment and information is important for a web site to be evaluated as successful by its visitors.

  The presence of games on the WWW is very similar to video games and they provide a playful environment in which an audience member can communicate with himself or herself. Play could be seen as inner talk or conversation within oneself to provide pleasure for the individual. Strictly speaking, the playfulness dimension of interactivity is referring to inner communication with oneself, rather than with another person. However, Ha and James (1998) conclude that people often have the need to communicate with themselves, rather than to communicate with others.

  This self-communication need could be satisfied electronically by including games and other curiosity arousal devices on web sites. These devices qualify as interactive devices. Curiosity arousal devices can be defined as those that attract the attention of web site visitors and enhance their participation during a visit. The question and answer format (Q & A) is one example of such a device. By answering a question from the organization, site visitors can become eager to know the answer and to know whether their answers are correct.

Games on web sites must be played by rules and are usually based on visitor competence or skill to win a prize or to achieve a score.

- ***Choice***

  Choice refers to the availability of choice and unrestricted navigation in cyberspace. It is also related to playfulness, because it provides an internal emotional sense of satisfaction. When site visitors perceive the availability of choices they may feel empowered because they are able to choose from among several different alternatives. The web site visitor undertakes no obligations when going through a web site and he/she has the option of terminating the communication at any time.

  Another aspect of choice is to minimize effort in the achievement of a task. This could be achieved by providing the option of choosing a particular language when navigating a web site. The choice between text and graphic web browsers is another option that allows visitors with different web browsers to access the full content of the web site. This has the effect that site visitors will not feel disadvantaged when they do not have the latest technology to browse a web site.

  When there are different alternatives for exploring a web site, visitors are greeted with friendliness and they feel respected. When a visitor is content and feels empowered, he/she will spend more time at the web site to explore the alternatives. This could open up the opportunity to engage in dialogue with such a visitor.

- ***Connectedness***

  Hypertext in web sites can create a feeling of connectedness to the world, because it allows visitors to jump from one point in cyberspace to another, with very little effort. Connectedness refers to the ability to link to the outside wold and to broaden one's experience easily. With the skilful use of hypertext and images, visitors can interact with the content on a web site as if they were physically present in a natural environment.

  For instance, in a web site that simulates a showroom a visitor can feel virtually present and have questions answered with the click of a mouse. Organizations that provide a connected experience at their web sites fulfil the individual information needs of site visitors and build trust of consumers.

  Connectedness is achieved by means of hyperlinks. (See also Chapter 1, Section 1.3.5.) When a visitor clicks on a hyperlink another web page with related information is opened. Several different kinds of hyperlinks can be considered, for example:

  - Self/product related links (information about the organization and/or its products/services);
  - Third-party related links (information on other organizations or individuals or related products/services);
  - Links to graphic representations or photographs or slide shows;
  - Other information (any other useful information).

  Although some researchers claim that hyperlinks to third parties are valuable and provide a high sense of connectedness, others warn against such links (Kent & Taylor, 1998). (See

Chapter 3, Section 3.21.) These writers argue that a web site should be designed to preserve its visitors and not to lead them away from the web site. Therefore such links should be used with caution.

❖ ***Information collection***

Ha and James (1998:463) refer to information collection as primarily a need of the communicator. It becomes more and more important for organizations to keep databases about their customers and to adopt the practice of integrated marketing. More information about their audience can help organizations to formulate messages according to the interests and knowledge levels of the audience.

Information collection on the WWW is different from that in traditional media. Different monitoring mechanisms can be used for information collection. Monitoring mechanisms are defined as explicit means by which a web site operator can record who has visited the site. It can take on the form of admission requirements such as visitor registration, *before* admitting the user to browse the site. In another variation a request for visitor's information can also be made for viewing particular portions of a site. This can be categorized as monitoring *during* usage.

User information can also be collected automatically without the knowledge of the visitor, by means of cookie files. Cookie files are packets of data transmitted by a web server to the hard drive of a user's computer. They store the user's ID or internet address when the user logs on to the web server and provide information on the user's prior pattern of visits.

In some cases a user cannot continue a visit to a web site if he/she refuses to accept the cookie file coming from the site's server. In such a case the information collection dimension of interactivity depends on the willingness of the audience to provide information or the automatic recording of audience data.

❖ ***Reciprocal communication***

As was explained earlier, communication via traditional mass media is predominantly one-way in character, while the interactive nature of the internet allows for two-way communication. In one-way communication, one source sets the agenda, receiving little or no feedback.

A web site can therefore be seen as an invitation for visitors to do something. This is usually also referred to as a feedback loop that could begin with the web site visitor's initiation of a conversation with the organization by sending a message to the webmaster. It could also begin with the organization's provision of information and other content. The organization expects response and feedback from the web site visitors in return for this content. To motivate visitors to become involved and to encourage feedback the content must be useful to the consumer or the web site visitor.

The more reciprocal communication between the site visitor and the web site owner, the more the site can respond to the particular needs of visitors. In some cases visitors can personalize a web site on their first registration as visitors to that site. This means that a visitor will only receive information according to his/her interests. Ha and James (1998:463) refer to such dialogues between the communicator and the audience as "collaborative communication".

At the extreme end could be difficult to distinguish between the communicator and the audience, because both have the power to initiate contact and to receive messages. In a reciprocal relationship, there is an initiator who is expecting a return. Note that Grunig and Hunt (1984) say that true two-way communication does not distinguish between a sender and a receiver, because communication is not something that one party does to the other party. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.4.3.)

In true two-way symmetrical communication terms then, there could be an initiator, but it could be either the organization or the individual web site user. Therefore Grunig and Hunt suggest that communicating participants be called Person I/ Person II or Group I/Group II and not for example initiator/receiver or sender/receiver. As the reciprocal dimension of interactivity makes two-way communication possible via the internet, some researchers have proposed that the concept of symmetry and interactivity be in some way related.

Elliot (1997:3) even suggested that interactivity could be referred to as the "sister concept" of symmetry. This claim is substantiated by a comparison between Rafaeli's definition of interactivity (1988) (refer to Chapter 1, Section 1.3.4) and Grunig and Hunt's view of two-way communication (1984:26). Rafaeli noted that communication roles should be interchangeable for full interactivity to be possible. Similarly, the two-way symmetrical model allows for equality of roles between the organization and its publics. The potential for empowerment via the internet (discussed in Chapter 1, Section 1.5.2) therefore makes it more likely to have a balance in power between the organization and its publics.

The ability of the internet to simulate interpersonal communication also makes it possible to practice the two-way symmetrical model by means of the internet. The importance of interpersonal communication in the two-way symmetrical model is explained in Chapter 3 (Section 3.10). Although the authors of this model did not give consideration to computer-mediated communication, they did acknowledge the possibility of mediated two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:320; Elliot, 1997:43).

Reciprocal communication can be enhanced by the presence of response mechanisms on a web site. A response mechanism is any means through which the visitor can communicate with the web site owner. The following are a few examples of such mechanisms:

- The e-mail address of the Webmaster or customer service representative as a hyperlink;
- The provision of a toll-free telephone number;
- Order or purchase mechanisms;
- Surveys or solicitation of information from visitors;
- Other devices through which consumers could respond to the web site owner or discuss with other consumers such as chat rooms or forums in real-time.

Reciprocal communication differs from information collection, because with information collection the visitor must provide the information either unaware of it (as in unobtrusive cookie files) or they will not get access to a certain portion of the web site as in registration. In reciprocal communication, the visitor can choose to give information and will not lose anything for not providing that information (Ha & James, 1998:464).

Another important aspect of reciprocal communication is to distinguish between fully interactive communication and reactive communication that is also characterized as two-way communication. In reactive communication via, for example, the internet, one side responds to the other. But such communication remains reactive until there are a bilaterally flow of messages between participants. For true interactivity, later messages should take earlier messages into account (Rafaeli, 1988:111; Schultz, 2000:210).

This means that reciprocal communication as the highest level of interactivity can also be viewed on a continuum with reactive communication on the one far end and fully interactive communication on the other end. To illustrate this principle, Schultz (2000:211) uses the example of online communication between journalists and readers and between readers and readers. Schultz's example is applied to public relations and is displayed in *Table 2.4* (adapted from Schultz, 2000:211).

The illustration in Table *2.4* emphasizes the fact that interactive characteristics must be examined closely before it is called true interactivity. Therefore the earlier suggestion that interactivity should be viewed on a continuum is supported. Reciprocal communication, as one of the dimensions of interactivity thus also has a lower level (reactive communication) and a higher level (true interactive communication).

Table 2.4: Different levels of reciprocal communication online

	Organization to publics	Publics to publics (Public relations forums)
One-way communication	Public relations messages	Published letters/email to the editor Reader sites Citizens portrayed/quoted
Two-way/reactive communication	Letters (mail, email, fax) Polls Question and answer sections	Letters referring to other letters Online forum postings
Interactive communication	Online discussion boards/chats/forums with PROs participating	Online discussion boards Chat rooms Sequences of emails initiated by forums

2.5.4.3 Important notes on the dimensions of interactivity

Some of the dimensions of interactivity can be considered higher levels of interactivity than other levels. On the continuum of interactivity (Schultz, 2000:210) *information collection* and *reciprocal communication* are dimensions that could be classified as higher levels of interactivity because they involve direct, two-way exchange of messages between the communicator/source and the audience. (See the previous section.)

These two dimensions could also be considered *source-oriented*, because the source is usually the major benefactor of that interactivity, according to Ha and James (1998:463). However, such a view of interactivity would refer to an asymmetric view of communication. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.8.1 for a discussion of asymmetrical communication in public relations.)

The ideal would be that both the communicator and the receiver, or both Person I and Person II (to use Grunig & Hunt's suggestion), would benefit equally from the interactivity on the web site. This would constitute symmetrical communication. Organizations that function according to the two-way symmetrical model would use these forms of interactivity both to their own benefit and to the benefit of their various publics or customers. Schultz (2000:210) states that fully interactive communication (which could also be understood as higher levels of interactivity) would imply more equality of the participants and a greater symmetry of communicative power than in one-way communication.

Ha and James (1998:461-463) categorize the other three dimensions of interactivity (playfulness, choice, and connectedness) as self-communications that do not have a direct influence on the source. These dimensions are considered as audience-oriented, because the audience plays a major role in the communication process. The web site provides the device necessary for the audience members to meet their individual needs.

Organizations make use of audience-oriented dimensions of interactivity as bait to lead web site visitors to the source-oriented features of interactivity (Ha & James, 1998:464). In general most web site visitors would have more appreciation for audience-oriented interactivity than for source-oriented interactivity. The reason is that source-oriented interactivity could involve risks such as the loss of privacy or the disclosure of identity.

It would seem that audience-oriented interactivity eventually leads to source-oriented interactivity as organizations often implement these forms of interactivity to lead the web site visitors to other forms of interactivity (audience-oriented) that have more benefits for the organization. If organizations strive to function according to two-way symmetrical communication principles, they should also implement source-oriented interactivity to the benefit of their web site visitors.

Ideally, source-oriented interactivity should therefore also lead to audience-oriented interactivity where mutual trust and strong relationships can be built and where the audience could experience just as many advantages as the organization. (See Table 2.5.) However, it is expected that this is not the case in many web sites yet.

Table 2.5: Source-oriented and audience-oriented dimensions of interactivity

	Source-oriented	**Audience-oriented**
Low interactivity	Eventually also benefits the organization	Playfulness Choice Connectedness
High interactivity	Information collection Reciprocal communication	Should also benefit the audience

Ha and James (1998:470) illustrate how the levels of interactivity could fulfill the communication needs of different types of people. For self-indulgers and web surfers the playfulness and choice dimensions fulfill self-communication and entertainment needs. For task-oriented users, the connectedness dimension can fulfill information needs. For expressive users the information collection and reciprocal communication dimensions allow them to initiate communication with web site representatives or people of common interest online.

2.5.4.4 Functions and forms of interactivity

Interactivity could have different functions on an organizational web page. As mentioned earlier Ghose and Dou (1998:30-34) identified several interactive functions that were possible up until 1998, after conducting an empirical research project on this matter. They categorize five functions of interactivity: customer support, marketing research, search for more information, advertising/promotion/publicity and entertainment.

To make use of each interactive function these researchers also identified several forms of interactivity to support each interactive function. These forms of interactivity can also be categorized in terms of the dimensions of interactivity, namely playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection and reciprocal communication. The dimensions applicable to every form of interactivity will be indicated in brackets.

- ***Function 1: Customer/public support***

  This function is one of the most important functions of interactivity, especially for the development of long-term relationships between an organization and its customers or publics. Reciprocal communication is the most important dimension of interactivity applicable here.

  Applicable forms and dimensions of interactivity:

  - *Software downloading* (choice, connectedness, and playfulness if games are downloaded): Internet users can download software from a site, usually free of charge. Often the software available for downloading is meant to upgrade web visitors' previous versions. This option is fast and convenient and is one way of building long-term relationships with clients. Another approach to encourage involvement with a company is to allow web site visitors to download the company's latest advertisement from the web site to use it as a screen saver. Such a screen saver provides a constant reminder of the advertising message or of the company and what it stands for.

  - *Online problem diagnostics* (reciprocal communication): Visitors report their problem spots and this function helps to locate the problem exactly. The client is taken through a series of questions until the problem is nailed down. Where possible, "trouble shooting" suggestions are then given. There are several advantages to this function. In the first place it is not necessary for a company to maintain a complete service center. Secondly, service assistance via the internet is available around the clock. Thirdly, instructions to clients could be done by means of multimedia to make it easier for them to follow. In the fourth place, service quality is guaranteed as long as the server and the software are functioning well, because it has a better memory than a human being and it does not develop distaste for repetitive work or get tired.

  - *Electronic-form (e-form) inquiry* (reciprocal communication): Electronic forms on which visitors can type in online inquiries regarding the products, services or the firm.

  - *Order status tracking* (connectedness): visitors can track the status or whereabouts of their orders online in real time. This option makes it necessary for the company to stick to its delivery time promises and may give clients more confidence in making use of its services or products.

- *Comment* (reciprocal communication): Visitors can fill out e-forms to express their opinions about the company, products and the site.
- *Feedback* (reciprocal communication, information collection): Visitors can type in their feedback in e-forms with regard to specific questions raised by the site.
- *Online forum* (reciprocal communication): Discussions in real-time between web site visitors and representatives of the organization. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.18.)

❖ ***Function 2: Marketing research***

The interactive nature of the internet makes it possible to conduct marketing research via this medium. By doing this, organizations can collect more information on their publics or customers, who they are and what their preferences and dislikes are. The most important applicable dimensions of interactivity are reciprocal communication and information collection.

Applicable forms and dimensions of interactivity:

- *Site survey* (reciprocal communication, information collection): This refers to an electronic form survey for visitors that solicits their comments on the content and design of the site. It is usually used to reach a better understanding of clients' perceptions and evaluations of the web site. This function represents one way of establishing dialogue between web site visitors and the web site design team who can use the feedback to improve the site.
- *Product survey* (reciprocal communication, information collection): This is an electronic form survey designed for measuring customer satisfaction with the firm's offerings and service. This is yet another way to establish dialogue between clients and the company.
- *New-product proposal* (reciprocal communication): This refers to electronic forms for visitors to write about their expectations of new products and their suggestions for new products. This is a way to let web site visitor feel that the company values their opinions and therefore their self-perceptions might be positively enhanced.

❖ ***Function 3: Search for more information***

This function allows the web site visitor to search for specific information on a particular subject. It is especially valuable on very large web sites and on sites where visitors have to make important decisions, such as whether to buy a house or a car. Choice and connectedness are the most important dimensions of interactivity for this function.

Applicable forms and dimensions of interactivity:

- *Key word search* (choice, connectedness): A function that allows a visitor to determine the particular information he or she is interested in. In Chapter 1 (Section 1.3.5) it was explained that content on the WWW is non-linear. This feature of the WWW makes it crucial especially for large web sites with many pages of information to have a search function to help visitors locate the exact information they are looking for, easily. Using a search function the individual web site visitor can be provided with a personalized service, while the web site can still contain more detailed information to meet the potentially diversified information needs of other site visitors.

- *Personal-choice helper* (choice, reciprocal communication): A function that can make relatively sophisticated recommendations on consumers' choices based on their input of preferences and decision criteria. When a potential client indicates that he/she is interested in buying a product on credit (for instance a house or a car) the site can instantly calculate the required monthly payment, taking the current interest rate as well as a required deposit into account. Different buying options could also be displayed instantly. The availability of this information reduces the client's time and efforts in the prepurchasing information search phase.

- *Virtual reality display* (connectedness): A function that permits visitors to virtually "feel or experience" the product, for example driving a new car or looking around in a luxury hotel. This interactive function ensures that people participating in it are not passive recipients of persuasive messages anymore. They are active in making their purchasing decisions.

- *Dealer/branch locator* (choice): A function that allows users to determine the dealer closest to his or her residence. It works on the same basis as the key-word search discussed earlier.

Function 4: Advertising/promotion/publicity

Most organizations need some form of advertising, promotion and publicity. Commercial organizations that sell products would need all three methods and could use their web sites for this purpose. Other non-commercial organizations such as NGOs would mostly not be in a position to make use of paid advertising of their services and projects. Such organizations would make use of publicity, for instance creating public and sponsor awareness. Playfulness is an important dimension of interactivity applicable here, but other dimensions could also be applied.

Applicable forms and dimensions of interactivity:

- *Usergroup* (reciprocal communication): Cyber community for product users or clients of a company. This could serve as a forum where clients can discuss aspects related to the organization, its products or services. Nowadays some organizations also host such forums in real time. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.21 on how this should be managed.) Users can give each other advice or talk about problems that they experience. The organization should monitor these discussions closely in order to react to negative remarks or to solve problems that clients may have.

- *Electronic coupon* (playfulness, choice): This kind of coupon is distributed online and can be used in retail stores after a web site visitor has printed it. This has the advantage that the company can monitor and control the number of e-coupons in circulation. The e-coupon can be withdrawn when there are too many downloads. Furthermore, the cost of setting up an e-coupon online is negligible. People who download such a coupon are actively involved and therefore chances are better that they will actually use the coupon for real purchasing. It is also possible to estimate how many coupons will be redeemed, whereas in traditional settings it is impossible to know how many people will clip the coupons from print media to use them.

- *Online order* (choice, connectedness): An option to order products (or information or services) online. Electronic commerce via the internet has showed a steady increase over the last few years. At first people were afraid to make online orders and payments via credit cards, but nowadays security concerns have become less pressing.

- *Sweepstakes/prizes* (playfulness): Events held to attract surfers and to encourage visitor participation by special incentives. Web site visitors are invited to fill in an electronic entry form and also asked to provide some personal information. This technique can be seen as a form of advertising, but participants can also benefit from the process, because of their chances to win prizes. If competitions are held on a regular basis it could serve as a method to generate return visits to a company's web site. Return visits are very important from a public relations perspective. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.21.)

- *Multimedia shows* (playfulness, choice): QuickTime movies streamline video, and other forms of multimedia presentations, combining video, sound, music, graphics and text. Web site visitors can experience more fun and it also gives them the flexibility to activate only a part of the presentation in which they might be interested (for instance frames 3-6).

- *Push media* (choice, playfulness): Similar to TV channels. Users select to participate and receive multimedia-rich information directly to their screens on a regular basis. Users can specify the type of information that they are interested in and in so doing they can receive personalized information which still retains the interactive nature of new media.

- *Interactive job placement* (reciprocal communication): Online résumé building, personal career goal check, etc. Organizations can use this function to improve their recruiting procedure. Such a section on a web site could contain a list of vacancies, a job-search planning guide, a fit-check questionnaire which "measures" the applicant's compatibility with the organization's culture and goals. It could also contain an online resume builder that allows the user to type in relevant information for constructing a résumé. This function is highly interactive in nature and therefore users are treated on an individual basis.

❖ ***Function 5: Entertainment***

Entertainment is important in terms of the generation of return visits to a web site. Web site visitors must enjoy their visit of the site. Enjoyment could be reached by any of the other functions of interactivity as well, but entertainment is for many web site visitors one of the main reasons for visiting a web site. The most important dimension of interactivity applicable to this function is, of course, playfulness.

Applicable forms and dimensions of interactivity:

- *Electronic post card* (playfulness): Written by senders online and to be retrieved by recipients. Senders can simply type in their messages and choose from certain graphics and other settings to "build" their cards. This function works on the basis of aesthetic enjoyment and provides entertainment to visitors. It could also serve to attract more visitors to the web site.

- *Surfer postings* (reciprocal communication, playfulness, connectedness): A section for surfers to write their stories, opinions or experiences regarding the organization, its services or its products. Their comments are then published on the site in a special section. This means that clients also become content providers for the web site.

- *Games* (playfulness): Online games. Especially young people like online games because it provides escapism and emotional release. Games are often put on a web site to attract surfers to the web site. Games can be designed to feature the organization's products or services, therefore also fulfilling an advertising function.

It is important to note that new forms of interactivity on the internet will develop as technology develops. The different forms of interactivity discussed would of course, not all be applicable in every situation and for every type of organization. Organizations that market and sell their products via the internet would have different options of interactivity available to them than, for instance, NGOs doing developmental work. However, the fact remains that there are ample options available to any kind of organization to enhance the interactivity of its web site.

2.5.4.5 The implementation of interactivity

The above discussion featured some of the options that web site designers could use to increase the interactivity of their web sites. The list of features is not necessarily exhaustive as new interactive functions are constantly created. Ha and James (1998:464) emphasize that the dimensions and forms of interactivity implemented would be influenced by aspects such as the nature of the organization as well as the intended function of the web site. To know what the intended function/s of the web site are, it is important to have strategic goals for the web site. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.20.1.)

In an empirical study on the interactive features of web sites, Ghose and Dou (1998) have found that interactivity mechanisms are a significant factor affecting the attractiveness of web sites. They conclude that organizations should critically examine the degree and forms of interactivity in their web sites and improve their web sites accordingly. In their study, Ha and James (1998) found a discrepancy between the interactive capability of the WWW and the actual implementation of interactivity in most web sites.

Improvements in web site interactivity could provide two benefits. In the first place, it could lead to an organization's web site being included in a list of the best web sites, such as the Lycos top 5%. Such recognition could encourage more people to visit the web site. In the second place, a web site with more interactive mechanisms would be more appealing to those who visit the site. Those visitors are more likely to get actively involved in the organization's web communications, therefore creating dialogue and better relationships with the organization's different publics.

Ghose and Dou (1998:40-41) emphasize that it would not be possible or advisable for organizations to include every single interactive function on their web sites. Organizations should consider combinations of interactive functions that fit into their WWW communication strategy and web site goals. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.20.1 for a discussion of the necessity of a strategy and specific goals for WWW communications.)

It is because of the interactive nature of the internet that researchers refer to its potential to create dialogue, especially with regard to dialogue between the organization and its diverse publics with different interests. The outcomes of interactivity are engagement in communication and relationship building between a company and its target consumers or publics (Ha & James, 1998:459; Spalter, 1995; Fishburne & Montgomery, 1995:288). The reason for these outcomes is that with the use of this medium there are more opportunities to resolve problems, to address individual needs and to collaborate individually with each customer through true dialogue (Peppers & Rogers, 1995:121).

It is the interactive nature of the internet and the WWW that motivated me to apply the two-way symmetrical model of public relations to this research. In Chapter 3 this model is discussed and applied to the public relations practice.

The contents of this chapter on the development and characteristics of the internet and the WWW culminate in the following theoretical statement (more specific theoretical statements will be formulated in Chapter 3).

2.6 Specific theoretical statement 1

An organizational web site can be examined to determine its degree of interactivity by noting the presence of the following dimensions of interactivity:

- *Playfulness*
- *Choice*
- *Connectedness*
- *Information collection*
- *Reciprocal communication.*

In the reciprocal communication, two levels must be distinguished: reactive communication and fully interactive communication. It can be expected that organizations that function according to a two-way symmetrical model would also include more interactive devices on their web sites.

2.7 Conclusion

Whatever typology is used to categorize human communication, the fact is that the unique nature of computer-mediated communication will have a profound influence on interpersonal as well as mass communication in future. Information on a large variety of topics is available to receivers on request and this phenomenon could decrease some people's dependency on the traditional mass media or change people's patterns of media usage in some way.

Newspapers and magazines are trying to adapt to the new electronic environment by creating electronic versions published online. Most of these publications have not stopped publishing their print versions for now, but in time they might consider doing so (Marlow, 1996:160; Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996; Schultz, 2000:208). However, at the turn of the century few content providers such as online newspapers or magazines were profitable (Herman & Chesney, 1997:122; Pavlik, 1998:14-15).

Many other organizations did not know *why* they felt the need for internet presence, but they did feel pressed to get internet presence as soon as possible. They also reported that their sites were not profitable so soon after they had been designed. Yet most representatives from these organizations predicted that they would start making a profit by means of their web sites in the near future (White & Raman, 1999).

Whatever predictions one chooses to believe about the impact of the internet, it is clear that the availability of electronic information in organizational communication and other communication encounters that people may have, has already changed the environment and will continue to do so in the future.

In the next chapter the application of the internet for public relations purposes will be discussed within the theoretical framework of this study and the prediction in the following quote:

The internet is uniquely suited to developing higher levels of relationships, to establishing dynamic customer communities, and to allowing satisfied customers to become your champions by telling others in the internet community about your service. Here, the power balance shifts most visibly to the consumer.....we expect to see a rapid shakeout of the marketers who don't understand that the highest use of the internet is as a 'listening' medium (Cross & Smith, 1995:22).

However, it should be realized that in South Africa the use of the internet as a "listening medium" should be integrated with other methods of contact with publics because of its limited accessibility at this stage.

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[1] For a detailed discussion on the history of the internet, review the following source:
Leiner, B.M., Cerf, V.G., Clark, D.D., Kahn, R.E., Kleinrock, L., Lynch, D.C., Postel, J.L., Robers, L.G. & Wolff, S. 1998. *A brief history of the Internet.* [Available on internet:] http://www.isoc.org/internet-history/brief.html [Date of use: Dec. 1, 1998].

[2] Hypermedia refers to a superset of hypertext – it is any medium with pointers to other media. This is how browsers can display images, sound or animation together with ordinary text (PBS, 1998:4).

[3] Intellectual property rights refer to the rights of ownership, marketing and licensing of computer software and other information products. It includes questions of copyrights and patents (Pavlik, 1996:405).

[4] See Appendix A for more detail on the possible consequences of new media development.

[5] The system of asynchronous discussion groups on the internet (Holtz, 1999:319).

[6] A bulletin board system is also referred to as a BBS, a computer that can be reached by phone or telnet for the purpose of sharing information, exchanging messages and uploading and downloading files (Holtz, 1999:299).

[7] Services or programs that require the receiver to sign up for a service to access messages around a particular topic or topics.

[8] A MUD (multi-user dungeon) is a text-based virtual environment that provides a social environment on the internet. The structure of a MUD can allow its builders to create multiple rooms in them that can be occupied by people who visit the MUD. The metaphors used can vary from a conference facility to a medieval castle. Those who visit the MUD can interact with each other as well as the objects that have been created and placed in the various rooms (Holtz, 1999:312).

[9] IRC is a system for real-time dialogue between people on the internet. It allows individuals to establish chat rooms with names that identify the topic under discussion. Individuals "enter" the room and engage in real-time chat by typing back and forth to each other (Holtz, 1999:308).

[10] A gopher is an internet-based system for storing files in a hierarchical format. This system predates the WWW as a means of finding information made available for public retrieval. Most of the material on gopher servers is now outdated as the WWW has become the most popular application on the internet (Holtz, 1999:306).

[11] File Transfer Protocol refers to the TCP/IP protocol that enables the transfer of files from a server to a user's computer (Holtz, 1999:306).

Table 2.5: A comparison between the main characteristics of interpersonal, interactive and mass communication channels

Characteristics	Face-to-face interpersonal communication	Interactive communication via the internet	Mass communication
1. Message flow	One-to-one; one-to-few	One-to-one; many-to-many; one-to-few; one-to many; many-to-one	One-to-many
2. Source knowledge of the audience	Source has knowledge of the receiver as a single individual	Source may or may not have knowledge of the other participants	Source is a media organization with little knowledge of the receivers
3. Segmentation	High (de-massified)	High (de-massified)	Low. The same message is transmitted to everyone (massified)
4. Degree of interactivity	High	High	Low
5. Feedback	Plentiful and immediate	Somewhat limited; may either be immediate or delayed	Highly limited and delayed
6. Asynchrony	Low	Mostly high	Low, but high for some media, such as books and newspapers
7. Socio-emotional vs. task-related content	High in socio-emotional content	Low in socio-emotional content	Low in socio-emotional content
8. Nonverbal cues	Lots of nonverbal communication	Some applications provide nonverbal communication	Visual mass media provide much nonverbal cues, audio mass media do not.
9. Control of the communication flow	Potential for equal control by the participants	Potential for equal control by the participants	Little control by the receivers of the mass media
10. Privacy afforded	Low	Usually low	High

(Source: Adapted from Rogers, 1986:21 and Morris & Ogan, 1996:4)

Chapter 3

Public relations theory, the WWW and NGOs

...what will the successful (public relations) practitioner of the 21st Century look like after the dust settles? One thing practitioners must do,....is integrate traditional public relations technology with the emerging technologies, making the best possible use of all these communications tools (Ryan, 1999:31)

Technology remains what it has always been, a tool used by PR professionals to help them do their jobs....the foundations of good public relations remain the same... new technologies in public relations are not the end of the PR world as we know it (Lordan, 1999:15-17)

3.1 Introduction

As the quotations suggest, this research is not about technology for the sake of technology. The foundations of public relations are still as important as they were before. The aim of this chapter is thus to make a connection between certain theoretical assumptions and the use of technology to improve the practice of public relations in general.

According to Marlow (1996:1), public relations had a "print foundation" for most of the past 100 years. Since the 1980s, however, that has changed when practitioners began to make use of electronic media like video news releases and later on the internet as well. Marlow (1996:3) predicts that it would not be a matter of *whether* practitioners will use electronic media in the new millennium, but it would rather be a matter of *how well* they use these media.

In Chapter 1 a definition of *public relations* was given, as well as a discussion of the legitimacy of a name such as public relations compared to more recent names such as *corporate communication* or the *integrated communication approach.* This issue will therefore not be explored any further here.

It is interesting to note that the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defines public relations in terms of its many different functions: "*counseling, research, media relations, publicity, employee/member relations, community relations, public affairs, government affairs, issues management, financial relations, industry relations, development/fund raising, minority relations and multi-cultural affairs, special events and public participation, and marketing communications* (in Marlow, 1996:1).

This chapter provides the theoretical foundations of the research at hand. Different models of public relations will be discussed with the main focus on the two-way symmetrical model. The relationship between dialogical communication, two-way symmetrical communication and ethical public relations will also be highlighted. Finally this chapter examines how two-way symmetrical public relations theory can be applied to new electronic media, namely the internet and the WWW.

Certain sections in this chapter will culminate in *specific theoretical statements* that will be guiding the empirical aspects of this research. These theoretical statements should be read in conjunction with the general theoretical statement made in Chapter 1.

3.2 Theoretical development of public relations

As was explained in Chapter 1, public relations practice has many different names, tasks, definitions and connotations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:13; Pavlik, 1987:93; Ihator, 1999; Holtzhausen & Verwey, 1996). Some researchers like Hutton (1999:199) argue that by not developing a widely-accepted definition and a central organizing paradigm, the field of public relations has left itself vulnerable to:

a. Other fields that are "making inroads" into public relations' traditional domain; and

b. To critics who make up their own definitions of public relations.

Hutton (1999:199) explains that public relations suffered from an identity crisis from its beginning up until now and little progress has been made to consolidate the different definitions, dimensions and domains into a general theory of public relations. He argued that a review of textbooks and academic literature showed a number of common themes but not true convergence. Public relations has evolved over the years from "the public be fooled", to "the public be damned", to "the public be manipulated", to "the public be informed", to the public be involved or accommodated".

The above description of the different themes that have evolved in public relations over time, could be linked to Grunig and Hunt's four models of public relations (1984:21-27) that each represents a certain time slot in history (see Section 3.3.1). However, not all theorists were so negative about the field of public relations as Hutton has been. Holtzhausen and Verwey (1996) did an extensive review of theoretical literature on public relations and their results supported the existence of a general theory of public relations. They explain that this general theory was an extension of J. Grunig's general theory of public relations, and that it is general enough to provide a framework for all theoretical applications in public relations.

The work of J. Grunig and his colleagues is also acknowledged by Karlberg (1996) who welcomes the move away from instrumental research to more critical research on public relations. Karlberg explains that critical research raises important questions and concerns about the broader social, political, and economic implications of public relations. He welcomes the fact that elements of a more inclusive, ethical, and community-enhancing approach are beginning to emerge around the concepts of symmetrical communication.

Although Grunig (1992:248) concludes that two-way symmetrical public relations makes organizations more effective and also that this approach has been the most ethical approach to public relations, Karlberg (1996:271) criticizes researchers for applying two-way symmetrical theory within an asymmetrical research agenda.

The reason for his critique was that most of the research done within this model of public relations focused on how the corporate world and state agencies could be more effective at public relations. The communicative needs, constraints, or practices of citizen groups and less powerful organizations have not been studied within the context of two-way symmetry yet.

This research project is a move in the direction that Karlberg has proposed. Although the communicative behavior of ordinary citizens was not studied, the research focused on the public relations needs and practices of non-governmental organizations and how they could gain more power by using a medium such as the WWW.

The theoretical assumptions of J. Grunig formed the backbone of this research and underpin the analyses made in this thesis. This will be explained in the following sections.

3.3 Different models of public relations

The history of public relations goes back a long time. According to Grunig and Hunt (1984:15) public relations-like functions have been used as early as in the ancient times of Aristotle in approximately 1800 BC. The term *public relations* was used for the first time in 1882 (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:14) or 1897 according to other sources (Newsom *et al.*, 1993). According to most academic writers the formal history of public relations is now more or less a 100 years old (Marlow, 1996:1; Newsom *et al.*, 1993).

Through the years public relations practice went through different stages that resembled four different models of public relations, as first identified by Grunig and Hunt (1984:21). The history of public relations can be understood by studying these models. Today public relations is a diverse discipline and not all practitioners necessarily practice the most advanced model[1] – some practitioners still practice public relations according to earlier models of the discipline.

3.3.1 Historical origins of the four models

Although there had been public relations-like activities since ancient times, Grunig and Hunt (1984:15) state that the press agents in the 1850s were the first real specialists practicing public relations. The *press agentry/publicity model* had its origin during these years: 1850-1900. One of the most prominent practitioners in this era was P.T. Barnum who used the following slogan to promote his business, a circus: "There is a sucker born every minute" (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:287).

From 1900 until the 1920s another model, the *public-information model,* was also practiced in reaction to attacks from journalists on large corporations and government. These organizations hired their own journalists to write "press-handouts" explaining their actions and policies. These "in-house" journalists generally wrote the truth about their organizations, but understandably they chose to write only about the positive aspects.

One of the most prominent figures of this era was Ivy Lee who started his career as a journalist at a newspaper before moving on to a commercial organization where he fulfilled the above-mentioned function (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:288). One of Ivy Lee's famous statements regarding public relations was "The only truth is my version of the truth" (Hiebert, 1966) which effectively meant that it was impossible to tell a lie. This approach to public relations can be described as an example of epistemological relativism, which would also fit into the postmodern belief that the truth or reality is relative. This approach led public relations practitioners to twist and turn the facts as it suited their organizations. The bad connotation some people today link to public relations probably has its origins in this approach.

During World War I the *two-way asymmetrical model* developed as some practitioners based their work on the behavioral and social sciences in the 1920s. The most important historical figure in this era was Edward L. Bernays. He was a nephew of Sigmund Freud and had an interest in psychology which he applied to his work. Whereas the first two models of public relations were one-way in nature (disseminating propaganda and information to the public), the use of the behavioral and social sciences started a two-way communication era in public relations.

Practitioners used research to get information from their publics and they used this information together with theories on propaganda and persuasion to send information to their publics in a form likely to successfully change their attitudes and behavior. Bernays said that humans are manipulable and that the successful manipulation could be done by understanding the motivations of people and by using research to identify how messages should be formulated to change attitudes and behaviors in favor of the organization (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:288).

The *two-way symmetrical model* was developed much later, in the 1960s and 1970s. It is widely believed that the majority of practitioners are today still not practicing this latest model. In fact, many practitioners are only now discovering the symmetrical model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:14-21; Dozier *et al.*, 1995; Grunig, 2000b). Obviously it is impossible to verify any views in this regard.

The two-way symmetrical model of public relations cannot easily be traced to any individual historical figure. One of the reasons is that it is a relatively new model that has not been explored by many practitioners yet. Grunig and Hunt (1984:42) state that many of the historical public relations figures have defined public relations in terms of two-way symmetry, but most of them practiced another model of public relations. Some of these early definitions are the following (as cited in Grunig & Hunt, 1984:42):

Ivy Lee: "*...if the public doesn't like what you are doing, change your policies and bring them into line with what the people want..*"

Bernays: "*the public relations council serves as a consultant both in interpreting the public to his client and helping to interpret his client to the public*"

John Hill: "*It is just as important for company management to understand the problems and viewpoints of its employees, neighbors, and others as it is for these groups to understand the problems an d viewpoints of management...*"

Some PR practitioners did advocate a symmetrical model, but it was actually the PR educators that took the idea further in the 1950s to explore how the model should be practiced. The first of these educators were Scott M. Cutlip and Allen Center, who wrote a textbook that suggested a two-way symmetricalal model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:42). In the 1970s James Grunig took the idea further. He studied the idea of one-way and two-way models of communication (the direction of communication) and later included the purpose of communication as well. J. Grunig used the concepts of synchronic and diachronic communication (Thayer, 1968) to explain two approaches to public relations. According to Thayer (1968) these concepts have the following meanings:

- the purpose of synchronic communication was to "synchronize" the behavior of a public with that of the organization so that the organization can continue with whatever it wanted without interference;

- the purpose of diachronic communication was to negotiate a state of affairs that could benefit both the organization as well as its publics.

In his initial research J. Grunig identified only two models of public relations, based on synchronic and diachronic communication as explained above. He had limited success with these studies because the two models were "too gross and oversimplified" to describe the actions of public relations practice. Later Grunig concluded that the terms "synchronic" and "diachronic" were not accurate enough in describing the differences between the approaches to public relations.

He changed the terms to *asymmetrical* and *symmetrical* to explain that symmetrical communication caused balanced effects, while asymmetrical communication caused unbalanced effects. He then elaborated on the initial two models by expanding it to the four models described earlier (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:287).

Of these four models the two-way symmetrical model was the most advanced model, but not all educators teach the two-way symmetrical model and many textbooks describe the PR techniques being used in the public-information model. Many educators teach the two-way asymmetrical model, using their background in the behavioral and social sciences (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:42). The asymmetrical model lost some of its ground when research in the 1980s showed that the power of mass persuasion should be doubted seriously. According to this research understanding and not necessarily persuasion should be the goal of communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:43).

3.4 A description of the four models

In his program of research on the models of public relations, J. Grunig identifies two variables underlying the four models: *direction* and *purpose*. Direction refers to the extent to which a model is one-way or two-way. In a one-way model information is given to publics in the form of a monologue. In a two-way model information is exchanged between the organization and its publics in the form of a dialogue.

Purpose refers to whether the model is symmetrical or asymmetrical. Asymmetrical communication can be described as unbalanced because it tries to change the public and leave the organization as it is. Symmetrical communication can be described as balanced because both the organization and its publics are changed and their relationship is adjusted in the process (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:289).

In terms of the two dimensions of purpose and direction J. Grunig concludes that the first three models are asymmetrical in nature and they represent the predominant view of public relations over the years. These three models form part of a worldview that sees public relations as a way of manipulating publics for the benefit of the organization. The two-way symmetrical model is a break from this worldview and through a elaborate program of research it can be concluded that this model is the most ethical approach to public relations and ethical public relations makes organizations more effective (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:291-307).

Table 3.1 gives a summary of the four models of public relations: press agentry/publicity, public-information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical. In the next three sections (3.4.1-3.4.3) the characteristics of these models will be discussed briefly, according to the purpose of public relations, the nature of communication and communication models.

3.4.1 Purpose of public relations

The first difference between the models is in the different functions that public relations have for the organization. In the *press agentry/publicity* model the function of public relations is propaganda. Information spread about the organization is not always the complete truth, and it can be incomplete or distorted. In the *public-information model* the aim is to give information, not always to persuade the public. The public relations practitioner must function like a journalist, reporting "objective" information to the public.

In the *two-way asymmetrical* model the function of public relations is to persuade the public in a scientific way: using theory and research from the social sciences on attitudes and behavior. The public must be persuaded to agree with the views of the organization and to support the organization in whatever way may be suitable (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:21-22).

Public relations practitioners who use the *two-way symmetrical model* act as mediators between the organization and its publics. They want to reach mutual understanding and a long-term relationship[2] between the organization and its publics. Social science theory may also be applicable to this model, but the focus would more likely be on theories of communication than on theories of persuasion (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:21-22).

3.4.2 The nature of communication

According to Table 3.1 the first two models represent one-way or linear communication, while the last two models represent two-way communication. However, in this section it will be pointed out that the two-way asymmetrical model does not refer to true dialogical communication, because of its purpose to influence its receivers in a certain way.

Table 3.1: Four models of public relations

Model	Purpose	Direction	Communication model
Press agentry/ publicity	Propaganda	One-way; complete truth not essential	Source ➔ Receiver
Public-information	Dissemination of information	One-way; truth important	Source ➔ Receiver
Two-way asymmetrical	Scientific persuasion	Two-way; imbalanced effects	Source ➔ Receiver Receiver🡐Source (Feedback)
Two-way symmetrical	Mutual understanding	Two-way; balanced effects	Group➔Group Group🡐Group

(Source: adapted from Grunig & Hunt, 1984:22)

Although both are linear, there is a difference between the first two models regarding the nature of communication. In the *press agentry/publicity model* the public relations department does not always portray a complete picture of the truth, and the truth can be distorted. In the *public-information model* the truth is an important criterion for messages from the PR department.

In the *two-way asymmetrical* as well as the *two-way symmetrical models* the nature of communication is two-way, as their names suggest - communication flows from the organization to its publics and also from its publics to the organization. The nature and the purpose of communication are, however not the same in the two models. In the *asymmetrical model* there is an imbalance in favor of the organization with regard to the effects of public relations efforts. The organization wants to change the public's attitudes and behavior, but the organization itself does not change in the process. In the *symmetrical model* the purpose of communication is the building of long-term relationships.

Communication from the organization's publics in the asymmetrical model is in the form of feedback – telling the organization what the effects of its carefully planned persuasive messages were. It is not actually the same as two-way communication, therefore it is called *asymmetrical* communication. The organization uses the feedback to try to control its publics' attitudes and behavior and communication is initiated by the organization and not by its publics.

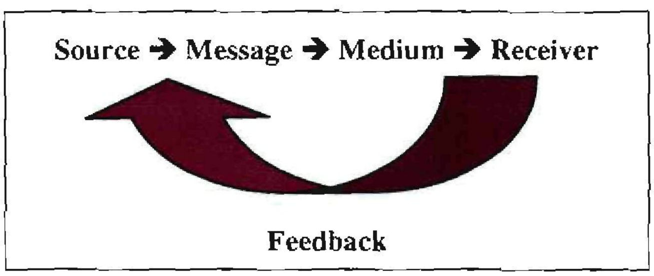
In the *symmetrical model* communication is truly two-way in nature and represents Carey's ritual view of communication that was discussed in Chapter 2 (Section 2.5.4). The nature of communication is more dialogical than monological and the public is just as likely to persuade the organization to change its attitudes and behavior as the organization is to persuade the public. Because of the equal chance and willingness to change, messages between such an organization and its publics could also be called interactive. The relationship between two-way symmetry and interactivity was already pointed out in Chapter 2 (Section 2.5.4.2). Usually both the organization and the public will change after public relations contact with the public. However, it could also happen that neither changes attitudes or behavior, but that both parties understand each other's position better. In the *symmetrical model* this would also be seen as a successful public relations effort (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:23).

The effects of this model are symmetrical, which means that both the organization and its publics will benefit from their communication efforts with each other. They use techniques like bargaining, negotiation and strategies of conflict management to change the ideas, attitudes and behaviors of the organization as well as its publics (Grunig, 1989:29).

3.4.3 Communication models and public relations models

In *Table 3.1* the different communication models that could be applied to each model are illustrated. The models were not described in full detail, because the main differences between the models are the direction of the arrows and what the communicating parties are called. The basic model of communication that virtually all communication students learn is the following model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:24):

Figure 3.1: Basic model of communication (Source: Grunig & Hunt, 1984:24)



According to Grunig and Hunt (1984:24) most communication models like the one above fit only the asymmetrical model of public relations. The directions of the arrows as well as the fact that the communication process starts with the receiver, illustrate that *"communication is something that the source does to the receiver"*.

In a symmetrical model a sender and a receiver are not distinguished. The groups or individuals that communicate change roles between sender and receiver so rapidly, that it is more appropriate to call them Person I and Person II, or Group I and Group II, as Table 3.1 suggests (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:24). Both persons or groups thus have an equal opportunity to initiate communication, at least in principle.

3.5 The public relations models in practice

The four models described in the previous sections are still practiced today by various organizations.

- The *press agentry/publicity model* is applied by organizations concentrating on media coverage in any possible way for their clients in the form of publicity or promotions. Examples are sports promotions, publicity for movies or theater and product promotions via advertising. Fortunately, practitioners using this model are more inclined towards communicating the truth, than had been the case when the model was initially formed (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:26; Grunig, 1989:29).

- The *public-information model* is currently practiced most frequently, according to Grunig and Hunt (1984:26). Government agencies usually make use of this model, as well as associations, non-profit agencies and educational organizations. The main goal of the public relations programs in these organizations is to provide their publics with information about the organizations in the form of, for example, pamphlets, magazines, films or videotapes. As with the previous model, this one is a one-way model and the information provided to the relevant publics are usually accurate, but negative information is not disseminated (Grunig, 1989:29).

  It is important to note at this stage that the organizations involved in this study fell in the above-mentioned category of organizations that usually practice public relations according to the public-information model. The main argument in this study is that the internet, as a new interactive medium of communication, provides the opportunity to use it for dialogical, symmetrical communication. The representatives of the NGOs involved in the study were questioned on their approach to public relations to determine which model of public relations they use. Their use of the internet was also studied in order to determine if they used the internet for symmetrical or asymmetrical communication. The findings are discussed in Chapter 6.

- Business firms that face fierce competition mostly use the *two-way asymmetrical model*. Most of these firms are large corporations that sell consumer products. They usually conduct research to find out, for instance, what positive opinions or perception consumers may have about their organization or product. They then advertise their products or promote their organization by emphasizing these opinions or perception (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:26; Grunig, 1989:29).

- Large firms that must provide evidence of socially responsible behavior often use the *two-way symmetrical model* of public relations. However, the Excellence Study showed that public relations people talk about this model more often than they actually practice it (Dozier *et al.*, 1995). Some examples of how this model could be applied, are:

- to invite reporters to dialogue sessions with officials of the organization;
- to invite reporters to construct their own story about the organization, instead of using a press release for the same purpose;
- to invite community leaders for dialogue sessions as part of community relations, for the community leaders to learn more about the organization and vice versa;
- to invite educators to discuss controversial public issues with company officials at a forum to reach a better understanding of each other's positions.

Now that the four models have been briefly explained we can compare them to each other in terms of how they are used in practice. Only the two-way symmetrical model is truly symmetrical in nature, as the other three models all have asymmetrical characteristics in common. According to Grunig (1989:30) the press-agentry and two-way asymmetrical models intend to persuade or manipulate and the public-information model has the same effect, although it may not initially seem like that.

The natural question to ask is how these models can contribute to organizational effectiveness in practice. In practice organizations probably use a combination of these models with different models being more prominent in different types of organizations or businesses. Many organizations use the two-way symmetrical model occasionally but according to Grunig (1989:30; Dozier *et al.*, 1995) it was seldom the dominant model practiced.

The contingency view of management gained popularity in the 1950s and originally was also applied to the use of these four models (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:43). According to this view, the model to be used would depend on the type of organization, the type of environment in which it functions and the particular situation in which the organization finds itself. Grunig and Hunt (1984:43) stress that although the two-way symmetrical model is preferred to reach excellence in public relations, it may not be the most applicable model to use in all situations. It is therefore possible for organizations to use more than one model at a time, to reach certain goals or to handle certain situations. This was originally called a contingency view of the four models.

Later J. Grunig states that further research indicated that the contingency idea did not work (Grunig, 1989:31). He explains that the models, especially the two-way symmetrical model, function as a normative theory rather than as a descriptive theory. This means that the model specifies what organizations should do, rather than explain what they actually do. It is important to note his conclusion that many organizations do not practice the models purely and that they could use different models for different situations (Grunig & Grunig, 1992: 297).

Among other findings, J. Grunig also found that the two-way models generally were not implemented without a communication manager in the public relations department. Where organizations only had technicians in their public relations department they practiced the press agentry or the public-information models. When organizations had a communication manager as top person in the public relations department, the organization was more likely to use the two-way asymmetrical or the two-way symmetrical model.

The reason for this is probably that the communication manager has the knowledge and the training to implement these models. Another reason could be the fact that he or she would also be part of the dominant coalition (a coalition of the most powerful people in the organization) of the organization. As part of the dominant coalition the communication manager could have an influence on the organizational culture and the rest of the dominant coalition could be influenced to approve of a two-way symmetrical model. In such an organization public relations would be seen as a managerial function. This means that the organization's application of models in part depends on the organizational power, organizational culture and the expertise of the top public relations executive in the organization (Grunig, 1989:31; Grunig & Grunig, 1992: 296-299,303; Dozier *et al.*, 1995).

J. Grunig's research shows that organizations used the models in two ways: in the first instance the models function as situational strategies to be used for different publics and public relations problems. The models can therefore not be seen as single organizing frameworks for all public relations actions. In the second place the practicing of these models is dependent on certain presuppositions that form part of the particular organization's ideology or worldview. An organization would therefore be likely to follow a model that corresponds with its worldview. Few organizations use the two-way symmetrical model because their worldviews of public relations do not include that model and they often do not have public relations personnel with the necessary expertise to implement and practice it.

The aspects of organizational presuppositions and worldview are discussed in Section 3.7. The description of the four models in the previous sections leads us to the following two specific theoretical statements.

3.6.1 Specific theoretical statement 2

The public relations model practiced by NGOs could be determined by examining the:

- *purpose of public relations (for example to persuade or to build relationships);*
- *the nature of communication by public relations departments (one-way or two-way communication), and*
- *the PR practitioners' view of the relevant communication model (sender/receiver; or group I/II.).*

3.6.2 Specific theoretical statement 3

The reason why an NGO practices a certain public relations model could be determined by examining:

- *the expertise of the PR department;*
- *whether the public relations manager is part of the dominant coalition of the NGOs and*
- *the organizational culture of the NGOs.*

3.7 Organizational worldviews and public relations models

Grunig and White (1992:32) maintained that an organization has a worldview[3] in the same way as individuals[4]. An organizational worldview is based on certain presuppositions that can be either more asymmetrical or more symmetrical (Grunig, 1989:32). As mentioned before, an organization would apply a public relations model that has a close resemblance to its own dominant worldview or ideology.

Grunig and White (1992:36-37) state that ideally an organizational worldview should enable organizations to solve important problems and make the organization more effective. The Excellence Study[5] proved that more symmetrical worldviews can be associated with the application of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. In turn, the use of this model led to the practice of excellent (and hence more effective) public relations. The researchers involved in the Excellence Study concluded that a worldview that could enable organizations to practice excellent public relations would have to be logical, coherent, unified and orderly. Furthermore it should be ethical to help organizations build relationships with individuals, groups or other organizations (Grunig & White, 1992:38). The Excellence Study provided researchers with a description of the differences between a symmetrical and an asymmetrical worldview as described in the following sections.

3.7.1 An asymmetrical worldview of public relations

The asymmetrical view of public relations rests on the supposed powerful effects of mass persuasion, behavioral and persuasive communication theories. Of the four public relations models discussed earlier in this chapter, the press agentry, public-information and the two-way asymmetrical models can be described as asymmetrical in nature. In these models PR practitioners try to change the behavior of their publics without compromising or changing the behavior of the organization itself.

In the press agentry model the goal of public relations is to get as much publicity as possible, in any possible way. In the public-information model journalists are instruments of public relations to spread "objective", but only favorable, information about the organization. In the two-way asymmetrical model the aim of public relations is to use persuasive messages to make the organization's publics behave in a certain way.

When an organization's management or public relations practitioners have an asymmetrical worldview they think that the organization knows best and that the public would benefit by cooperating with the organization. They argue that the public would understand and accept the organization's position if they had "the big picture". Therefore, the organization's position must be "sold" to the public (Grunig, 1989:32).

Grunig and White (1992:39-40) state that although the asymmetrical view had been the dominant view of public relations, research does not support these powerful effects of persuasion and such an approach could not be in the long-term interest of any organization. It can lead practitioners towards programs and actions that are unethical, socially irresponsible and ineffective. Sometimes these practitioners claim that they are actually doing their publics a favor by manipulating them "for their own benefit".

Before thinking that the asymmetrical worldview seems like a reasonable position, Grunig (1989:32) warns that:

Organizations often expect publics to accept strange things as a result of 'cooperation': pollution, toxic waste, drinking, smoking, guns, overthrow of governments, dangerous products, lowered salary and benefits, discrimination against women and minorities, job layoffs, dangerous manufacturing plants, risky transportation of products, higher prices, monopoly power, poor product quality, political favoritism, insider trading, use of poisonous chemicals, exposure to carcinogens, nuclear weapons, and even warfare. The list could go on and on.

Public relations policy does not exist in isolation from the organization where it is practiced and the social structure and culture of the organization do have an influence on which model of public relations will be practiced, as explained before. The cultural presuppositions of the organization most applicable to public relations concentrate on beliefs about the relationship between "the self" (meaning the organization) and "other" (meaning the different publics of an organization). In an asymmetrical worldview the following beliefs are prominent in an organization (Grunig, 1989:32-33; Grunig & White, 1992:43).

- *Internal orientation*

  Members of the organization are not objective about the organization. They do not see the organization as others see it, because they are a part of the organization and looking out from within the organization. They might therefore not realize the shortcomings of the organization.

- *Closed system*

  Information flows out of the organization and not into it. Members of the organization therefore think that they know best and do not need to get more information about, for example the viewpoints of their publics.

- *Efficiency*

  Efficiency and cost control are very important, more important than innovation. New ideas and new ways of doing things are therefore not encouraged.

- *Elitism*

  As noted above (under characteristics of a closed system) elitism refers to the belief that the organization's leaders know best, and have more knowledge than the members of their publics. It could also mean that the members of the organization view the organization as better than other organizations or relevant groups.

- *Conservatism*

  Change is not viewed in a positive way – change would be viewed as undesirable. Efforts to change the organization are seen as very negative for the organization. Things have to done like they have always been done.

- *Tradition*

  Tradition should be maintained to give stability and help the organization to keep its culture unchanged. As above – change is not encouraged and new ideas are not welcomed.

- *Central authority*

  Top management wants to control the power base in the organization. Employees should have little power and control, thus little autonomy. The organization can be viewed and managed as an autocracy. This means that employees would just have to do their work and nothing more, like good children, behaving well and not challenging authority or bringing in new ideas.

In addition to the presuppositions about the relationship between "the self and other" discussed above, certain presuppositions about the social role of public relations can also be described as asymmetrical and typical of less excellent public relations (Grunig & White, 1992:50-53).

- The first is the view of public relations as having a pragmatic social role. The presupposition is that public relations is a useful practice, adding value and it should be results-oriented. PR practice according to this view is closely related to the marketing objectives of the organization and the goal is to make as much money as possible.

- The second presupposition of the social role of public relations is that public relations has a conservative social role to play. That refers to the goal of public relations to defend and maintain the status quo in society as well as in the organization. This view corresponds closely with the views on the self and others discussed earlier, where change was opposed as well.

- The third presupposition states that public relations has a radical social role in contributing to change in the organization and in society. This worldview, as well as the conservative worldview, accepts that organizational communication can have powerful effects on society. Public relations is therefore seen as a tool that can by used in a "war" between different social groups, and it is clearly asymmetrical in nature.

- The fourth presupposition is that public relations has a neutral social role. This view corresponds with what can be called logical positivism - philosophers of science now widely reject the idea that theory, observation and interpretation can be neutral.

- The fifth presupposition is the view of public relations as a mere technical function. According to this view public relations is all about technique and nothing about theory. This view can also be associated with the press agentry and public-information models of public relations discussed earlier. It is also related to the view that public relations is a marketing, instead of a managerial function, and therefore also asymmetrical in nature.

The organizational worldview will dictate which problems are seen as important and accordingly, organizations practicing one of the three asymmetrical models of public relations, usually concentrate on aspects such as attitude and behavior change, means of persuasive communication, diffusion of innovations and the effects of media campaigns (Grunig 1989:34).

In the following section the characteristics of the asymmetrical view of public relations as described above will be compared to the symmetrical view of public relations.

3.7.2 A symmetrical worldview of public relations

The symmetrical worldview of public relations is in essence the opposite of an asymmetrical view. Symmetrical public relations is seen as a symmetrical process of compromise and negotiation. This approach sees the most important purpose of communication as being to facilitate understanding among people and organizations, publics or societies.

In the long run the organization can gain more of what they want if they also give up some of what they want. Such an organization would use research and dialogue to help manage conflict and to improve an understanding of its publics. In this process relationships with publics are built on mutual understanding. The organization, as well as its publics might be persuaded and both may change their behavior. The persuasion of only one person or system is therefore not desirable (Grunig & White, 1992:39; Grunig, 1989:38).

As was explained in the previous section the organizational culture and values are important in determining if the public relations department will function according to a symmetrical or an asymmetrical worldview. The following presuppositions about the organization and its publics are relevant to organizations operating according to a symmetrical worldview (Grunig, 1989:38-39; Grunig & White, 1992:43-44):

- *Interdependence*

  The organization cannot be isolated from the environment. There are boundaries separating the organization from its environment, but it cannot function without contact with and help from its publics or other organizations.

- *Open system*

  The organization sends information to the environment and also receives vital information from the environment. It keeps in close contact with other systems relevant to its activities, for instance the government, activist groups and similar organizations.

- *Moving equilibrium*

  Organizations act like systems, striving for a state of equilibrium or balance with other systems. In the symmetrical worldview a state of equilibrium is constantly reached as the environment changes, using cooperative and mutual adjustment. The implication is for example that an organization would employ conflict management strategies if a conflict situation arises, in order to reach a state or equilibrium with its environment.

- *Equity*

  People working for the organization are respected as human beings and given equal opportunities. Anyone may give input into the organization, regardless of education or background. Note that the principle of equity in a symmetrical organizational worldview does not mean that all employees are equal in terms of the organizational hierarchy, salary or other benefits.

- *Autonomy*

  Employees are given autonomy to influence their own behavior and to make decisions about their work. Although they are still accountable to the management of the organization they are not controlled in an authoritarian way. This ensures more work satisfaction in the organization and more cooperation outside the organization.

- *Innovation*

  New ideas and innovation from employees as well as from outside the organization are welcomed, and tradition and efficiency are less important.

- *Decentralization of management*

  In contrast to the asymmetrical worldview, power is not restricted to a few people from top management. Management are more collective and participatory and managers would rather coordinate than dictate. This approach promotes autonomy, employee satisfaction and innovation.

- *Responsibility*

  The organization and its employees must be aware of and concerned about the consequences of their behavior on others and try to minimize negative consequences for others. Although employees enjoy autonomy regarding their work, it is still within certain responsible boundaries.

- *Conflict resolution*

  Conflict resolution within the organization or between the organization and its publics should be done by negotiation, communication and compromise, rather than through tactics like force, manipulation, coercion or violence.

- *Interest-group liberalism*

  According to this approach the political system is seen as a mechanism for negotiation among interest groups. The goal is to look after the needs and interests of ordinary people against government and large corporate structures. This goal could only be reached if the organization functions as an open system, to promote contact with relevant interest groups.

There are also presuppositions on the social role of public relations as was pointed out when the asymmetrical worldview was discussed. There are three of these presuppositions in the symmetrical worldview (Grunig & White, 1992:53-55):

- The first presupposition sees public relations in an <u>idealistic social role</u>. According to this worldview public relations serves the public interest and develops mutual understanding between organizations and their publics. Public relations also contributes to informed debate about issues in society and facilitates a dialogue between organizations and their publics. The idealistic social view stipulates that a norm of reciprocity is present in society that makes it possible to practice public relations in a symmetrical fashion. The norm of reciprocity will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

- The second presupposition is of public relations in a <u>critical social role</u>. A wide range of scholars have worked on this view to document poor ethics, negative social consequences or ineffectiveness of public relations that differed from normative theories of public relations. These scholars criticize actual practices of public relations against certain standards. The two-way symmetrical model of public relations constitutes a normative theory that represents such a standard of how public relations should be practiced.

- The last presupposition is on the <u>managerial role</u> that public relations should fulfill. As was pointed out earlier, public relations is seen as a technical function in the asymmetrical worldview. The symmetrical worldview argues that public relations techniques should be used within the context of managerial theory.

The asymmetrical and symmetrical worldviews described above, as well as the different views on the social role of public relations, lead us to the following two specific theoretical statements.

3.8.1 Specific theoretical statement 4

It is expected that NGOs' choices of public relations models would be directly influenced by their organizational worldviews.

An asymmetrical worldview (characterized by an internal orientation, a closed system, efficiency, elitism, conservatism, tradition and central authority) will lead to the practicing of an asymmetrical model of public relations (press agentry, public information or two-way asymmetrical).

A symmetrical worldview (characterized by the NGOs' views on the need for interdependence, an open system, moving equilibrium, equity, autonomy, innovation, decentralization of management, responsibility, conflict resolution and interest-group liberalism) will lead to the practicing of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

3.8.2 Specific theoretical statement 5

The NGOs' views on the social role of public relations will also influence their choice of a public relations model:

The view of public relations as having an idealistic or critical social role will contribute to the practicing of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. If NGOs view public relations as a managerial function they will be more likely to practice the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

Those NGOs that view public relations as having a pragmatic, conservative, radical or a neutral social role will be more inclined to practice an asymmetrical model of public relations. If the NGOs view public relations as a mere technical function they will also be more likely to be practicing an asymmetrical model of public relations.

3.9 Conceptual themes in the two-way symmetrical model

Grunig and Grunig (1992:313) suggest that the two-way symmetrical model should be developed further by theorists and researchers as a normative theory to guide the practice of public relations. To start this process these two researchers reviewed theories of dispute resolution, negotiation, mediation and conflict management, because of the similarities in the presuppositions of these theories and the symmetrical model. In reviewing these theories, Grunig and Grunig identified seven conceptual themes in the literature that have relevance to a symmetrical theory of public relations. These themes include interdependence and relationships; conflict, struggle and shared mission; openness, trust and understanding; negotiation, collaboration and mediation; process and strategies; limitations, obstacles and effectiveness; mediated two-way symmetrical communication. (These themes are discussed in Appendix C.)

3.10 Excellence in public relations vs. excellence in management

After reviewing the two-way symmetrical model and its conceptual themes, as well as the worldview from which it originated, the broader context should also be taken into account. Grunig and White (1992) found that practicing the two-way symmetrical model would lead to excellence in public relations. It is, however, important to note that excellent public relations cannot occur in isolation. Several aspects regarding the management of the particular organization would also influence the quality of public relations, because excellence[6] in general management should be related to excellent communication management (Grunig, 1992:221).

Grunig (1992:219-249) reviews literature on excellent management and identifies twelve characteristics that appeared repeatedly. Each of these characteristics has implications for public relations and will be discussed in Appendix D, as this research did not focus directly on management aspects. The most important characteristics deal with the following topics: human resources; organic structure, intrapreneurship, symmetrical communication systems; leadership; strong, participative cultures; strategic planning; social responsibility; support for women and minorities; quality; effective operational systems and a collaborative societal culture. The first six attributes are linked to each other, meaning that it would be difficult for an organization to implement one of these, without also implementing the other five.

The literature survey that revealed these twelve characteristics of excellent management in organizations led Grunig to the conclusion that excellent public relations is "the glue that holds excellent organizations together". His conclusion was that excellent public relations is an integral part of an excellent organization and that organizational excellence provides a hospitable climate for excellent public relations. Therefore excellent public relations can help the rest of the organization to be excellent (Grunig, 1992:248).

3.11 The models as a normative or a positive theory of public relations

Sometimes public relations practitioners are skeptical about theoretical descriptions of their practice. This raises the question of normative versus positive theory and of which of the two kinds of theories the four models represent.

A normative theory defines how things should be done or how an activity should be carried out. Therefore it functions as a norm for a certain activity or process. A positive theory explains how things are actually done. Positive theory helps to understand problems, while normative theory helps to solve problems. When a researcher develops a normative theory it is not an obligation to prove that an activity is actually done in the way the theory explains. The obligation is rather to prove that the activity would be conducted better, or more effective, if it is done according to the description of the normative theory.

It is important to note that normative and positive theories can overlap in the social and behavioral sciences. Once the normative theories are developed, they are applied in practice and then they become positive theories, as they then describe what is done in reality. Research should prove that a good normative theory indeed functions in reality in the way that the theory predicted (Grunig & Grunig, 1992: 291-292).

Grunig and Grunig (1992:291-297) provide valid and reliable data to prove their view that the four models could function both as normative and as positive theories. According to these researchers each of the four models of public relations was developed as normative theories by theorists such as Ivy Lee, Edward Bernays or Scott Cutlip. After the theories had been developed as normative or abstract descriptions, they were practiced in reality.

Grunig and Grunig (1992:292-298) prove that all four models were indeed practiced in reality. However, their research shows that the two-way symmetrical model is practiced least often, because of a variety of reasons (discussed in Section 3.5).

Where it is practiced it leads to effective and excellent public relations practices. Grunig and Grunig (1992) make the conclusion that, although the models can function as positive theories, their relationship to the practice of public relations is more normative than positive. The two-way symmetrical model in particular can be used as a normative theory to reach excellence in public relations. Holtzhausen and Verwey (1996:46) add to this view by noting that their theoretical overview of public relations literature overwhelmingly supports J. Grunig's notion that the excellence model (two-way symmetrical communication) is the best way to practice public relations in contributing to organizational effectiveness.

3.12 The symmetrical worldview, ethics and dialogue

Grunig and Grunig (1992:307-308) provide evidence that the two-way symmetrical model is the most ethical approach to public relations and is also the most effective approach to reach organizational goals in the long run.

In an earlier section it was stated that an acceptable worldview for excellent public relations should be ethical in nature to promote good relationships between organizations and their publics. It was also stated that symmetrical public relations has an idealistic social role. The idealistic role refers to an ideal situation, a normative standard for ethical public relations, or a normative theory as was explained in Section 3.13. The norm of reciprocity (discussed earlier) also underlies the symmetrical worldview and inevitably makes the worldview ethical.

Ethical public relations should include ethics in the process of public relations, not in its outcomes. This means, for example, that all parties must be involved in dialogue to solve a particular problem. Then that outcome must be ethical if all parties participated in the decision making process. If ethics is defined as a process of public relations rather than an outcome, the problem of ethical relativism can be avoided. Symmetrical public relations makes it possible to have a forum for dialogue, discussion and discourse on different issues for people with different values and viewpoints (Grunig & White, 1992:57; Grunig & Grunig, 1992:308).

The view that ethics must be defined as a process of public relations rather than the outcome also relates to the dialogical principle that communication should be an end in itself. Communication is therefore not just a means to an end, but it should be one of the goals of a relationship to communicate with each other. For communication to be ethical, one party cannot dominate the communication process. To interact ethically by means of dialogue involves a cooperative, communicative relationship (Kent & Taylor, 1998:324).

Several researchers have developed ethical theories of public relations. One of these researchers who relates the idea of dialogue to ethics and symmetrical communication, is Ron Pearson, who based his doctoral thesis on the work of Jurgen Habermas (Pearson, 1989). Habermas's theory of ethics describes the ideal communication situation that is characterized by dialogue and in which participants agree on a system of rules to facilitate that dialogue. The argument is that what is right and what is wrong can only be determined through dialogue and agreement[7].

Habermas (1984) defines dialogue as follows: "*dialogue occurs when participants are able to move freely from one level of abstraction to another*". Pearson explains this definition by saying that moving to higher levels of abstraction during a public relations interaction would allow participants to raise questions that, in day-to-day communication, are part of a background consensus shared within a community of discourse. This means that participants could challenge the validity of each other's statements against more generally accepted norms. These accepted norms refer to what Pearson calls an intersubjective approach to public relations and it will be explained in the next paragraph.

Pearson (1989:122) develops a model for ethical public relations practice, making the implicit argument that the focal concept for ethical public relations is dialogue. He explains three possible approaches to public relations, of which one is ethical. The first approach could be called *objectivism* where the organization argues that it knows best and that its publics have to be educated. The second approach could be called *relativism* where the organization argues that there are no standards on which to base its actions, so in effect the organization does as it wishes and bases its actions on self-interest. The third approach is called *intersubjectivism* where what is right and what is wrong is determined by intersubjective agreement between relevant role players, taking other perspectives also into account. This third approach is regarded as the "only" ethical way of practicing public relations and it is based on dialogue between the organization and its publics and stake-holders (Pearson, 1989:122; Kent & Taylor, 1998:325).

The idea of dialogical communication (as opposed to monological communication) is not new. Pearson (1989:123) indicates that Plato already explained the concept of dialogue in his *Phaedrus* in the time of the ancient Greeks. According to Plato successful dialogue can only take place when the speakers treat each other as ends rather than means. The most important aspect of dialogical communication is the speaker's attitudes towards, and relationship with, the listener.

Important for this research is the fact that Pearson (1989:124) refers to the public relations models of Grunig and Hunt (1984) that was discussed earlier in this chapter. According to Pearson, the two-way symmetrical model in which the organization's public (social) responsibility was defined in dialogical terms such as *communication*, *negotiation* and *compromise*, could be seen as a dialogical approach to public relations. It follows then that the two-way symmetrical model is also an ethical way of practicing public relations, as dialogical communication is seen as the "only" ethical way to communicate.

As has already been stated above, the idea of dialogue refers to the attitudes of a speaker toward the listener/s but also to his/her attitudes to the self, the topic and the situation. Johannesen (1975) uses the following words to describe this quality of dialogue: honesty, concern for the other person, genuineness, open-mindedness, mutual respect, empathy, lack of pretense, non-manipulative intent and encouragement of free expression. In contrast, monologue can be described by the following words: deception, superiority, exploitation, dogmatism, insincerity, pretense, personal display, coercion, distrust and self-defensiveness.

The researchers Burleson and Kline (1979) argue that a symmetrical, balanced or dialogical relationship between participants has certain requirements:

a. Participants must have an equal chance to initiate and maintain discourse.

b. Participants must have an equal chance to make challenges, explanations, or interpretations.

c. Interaction among participants must be free of manipulations, domination, or control.

d. Participants must be equal with respect to power.

The same researchers also state that the above requirements could be linked to certain speech acts:

a. Requirement a could be linked to *communicatives* – speech acts like saying, speaking or asking.

b. Requirement b could be linked to *constatives* – speech acts like asserting, describing or explaining.

c. Requirement c could be linked to *representatives* – speech acts like admitting, confessing, concealing or denying.

d. Requirement d could be linked to *regulatives* – speech acts like commanding, forbidding, allowing or warning.

With regard to he requirements mentioned above, as well as Habermas' definition of what dialogue entails, Pearson (1989:126) states that ethical business practice could be analyzed in terms of these speech acts. Furthermore ethical communication can be operationalized as the opportunity for communicators to engage in all types of speech acts and to move the discussion toward levels of increasing abstraction or concreteness.

Pearson concludes that dialogue is a precondition for any legitimate corporate conduct that affects the publics of an organization. Therefore the goal of public relations should be to manage its communication systems in such a way that they come as close as possible to the standards deduced from the idea of dialogue. It is also important to note that ethically more developed individuals or organizations would be more inclined to use the concepts of reciprocity and symmetry to decide what is moral and what not.

The importance of dialogue in two-way symmetrical communication was stressed in the above discussion. The application of the dialogue principle to NGOs is summarized in the following specific theoretical statement.

3.13 Specific theoretical statement 6

NGOs that support the two-way symmetrical model of public relations will also support and engage in dialogue with their different publics. These NGOs will regard the WWW as an important medium to promote dialogue with its publics. Some of the characteristics of dialogical communication efforts are honesty, mutual respect, and encouragement of free expression.

NGOs that practice asymmetrical public relations will not see dialogue as an integral part of their public relations efforts. They would rather engage in monologue towards their publics. These NGOs will mostly use the WWW to embark on one-way, monological communication with its publics.

3.14 Later research: A new model of symmetry

The symmetrical model of public relations has been criticized for being unrealistic or idealistic. The critique has come from practitioners as well as theorists who argue that an organization would not hire a practitioner who did not act in their interest. Organizations would not want the practitioner to give in to all kinds of demands from their publics.

Grunig and White (1992:46-47) react to this critical evaluation of the symmetrical model and its underlying worldview by explaining that people in organizations have divided loyalties vis-à-vis to the organization and society. This could also be called *mixed motives* – the practitioners are motivated by their financial dependency on the organization on the one hand, and their moral responsibility to the publics who are dealing with the organization on the other.

The principle of mixed motives is based upon the "norm of reciprocity", referring to people's expectations that others would return their good deeds, if they do good unto others. Therefore organizations have to realize that they could gain more of what they want if they also give their publics some of what they want. The effect of reciprocity can also be stated negatively – if an organization treats a public poorly, that public would in turn treat the organization poorly as well. This means that the public would also be willing to give up some of what they want to the organization.

Reciprocity stops being applicable, however, when one actor, for instance the organization, has more power than the other, for instance the public. If there were a large enough difference in power, some critics have argued, the organization would have no motivation for reciprocity. On the other hand unequal power could be leveled if the publics would organize themselves into activist groups.

In most cultures the general norm of reciprocity is seen as good or necessary and organizations that do not function according to this norm could lose the trust and credibility of the society in which they operate. Grunig and White (1992:48) conclude, therefore, that the norm of reciprocity could be viewed as a part of the symmetrical worldview and part of excellent public relations practice.

Mixed motives in the symmetrical model also refer to the use of persuasion in public relations programs. Many critics of the two-way symmetrical model have argued that the persuasion used in the asymmetrical models is not unethical or ineffective. They argued that mutual understanding in symmetrical public relations could be reached by simultaneous persuasive attempts by the organization as well as its publics (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:310).

In reaction Grunig (1989:13) notes that symmetrical communication may include persuasion via the central route – that is, persuasion based on reasoned argument. The elaboration likelihood model suggested by Petty and Cacioppo (in Littlejohn, 1989:86) distinguishes between two routes by which persuasion can occur, namely the central route and the peripheral route. Persuasion via the central route has more long-term success and it is based on rational decisions and arguments. Persuasion via the peripheral route has more short-term effects and it is based on other non-message aspects.

As was said above, Grunig argues that persuasion through the central route could be part of symmetrical communication in public relations. However, he stresses that if the central route does not bring about the wanted attitude and behavior change, the conflicting parties should be willing to change their strategies. They could then switch to negotiation or compromise instead of persuasion (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:310).

Researchers like Murphy (1991) say that the two-way symmetrical model could be described as a mixed-motive model because practitioners applying the model use both asymmetrical and symmetrical tactics. These practitioners are not completely altruistic as they also want to look after the interests of their employers (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:320). The study by Holtzhausen and Verwey (1996) mentioned earlier also concludes that the general theory of public relations can accommodate both a symmetrical approach (excellence model) and an asymmetrical approach (persuasion model). They also acknowledge the existence of a positive mixed model which implied that organizations could use both approaches in actual practice.

Therefore a mixed-motive model describes the actions of public relations practitioners in the real world better than a pure symmetrical model. Other researchers like Hellweg (1989, in Grunig & Grunig, 1992:312) suggest that the models should be viewed on a continuum of asymmetrical and symmetrical practices. Cancel *et al.* (1997) also call for the models to be described by means of a continuum, seemingly unaware that Grunig and Grunig had already reacted to Hellweg's suggestion in 1992.

Grunig and Grunig (1992:312) acted on Hellweg's suggestion and improved the models by re-describing the four models in terms of two continua: one of craft and one of professional public relations. According to these researchers craft public relations refers to practitioners who believe that their jobs are based on the application of communication techniques. These practitioners see the purpose of public relations as getting publicity or information into the media or other channels of communication.

Professional public relations practitioners use a body of knowledge together with technique to do their jobs. They hold the view that public relations has a strategic purpose for the organization: it should help to manage conflict and to build relationships with important publics that limit the autonomy of the organization. Grunig and Grunig (1992:312) agree with some of the researchers mentioned earlier that in practice professional public relations could involve asymmetrical tactics like compliance-gaining persuasive techniques and also symmetrical tactics like problem-solving techniques. However, they predict that the most effective public relations would appear more toward the symmetrical end of the continuum than the asymmetrical end.

The two continua are illustrated in Figure 3.2 and Figure 3.3. (Source for both figures: Grunig & Grunig, 1992:312.)

Figure 3.2: Craft public relations

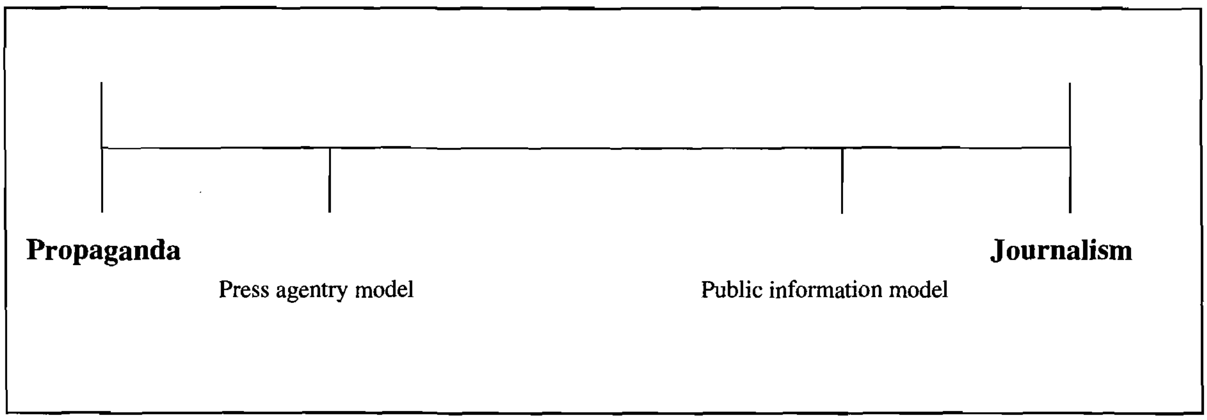
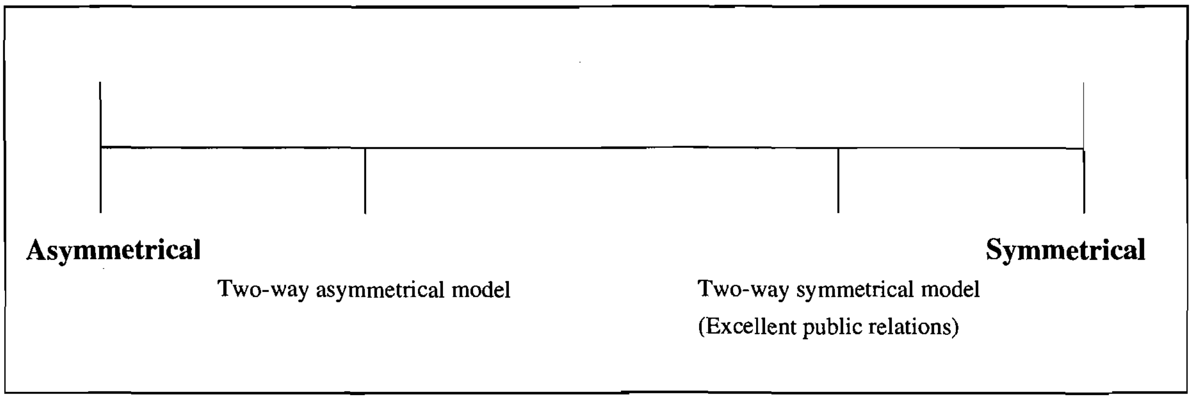


Figure 3.3: Professional public relations



Later Dozier *et al.*, Grunig and Grunig (1995) did further empirical research and elaborated on the professional public relations continuum in Figure 3.3 to illustrate the place of the mixed motive model. They suggest another way of organizing the mixed motive model on this continuum to include both asymmetrical and symmetrical practices.

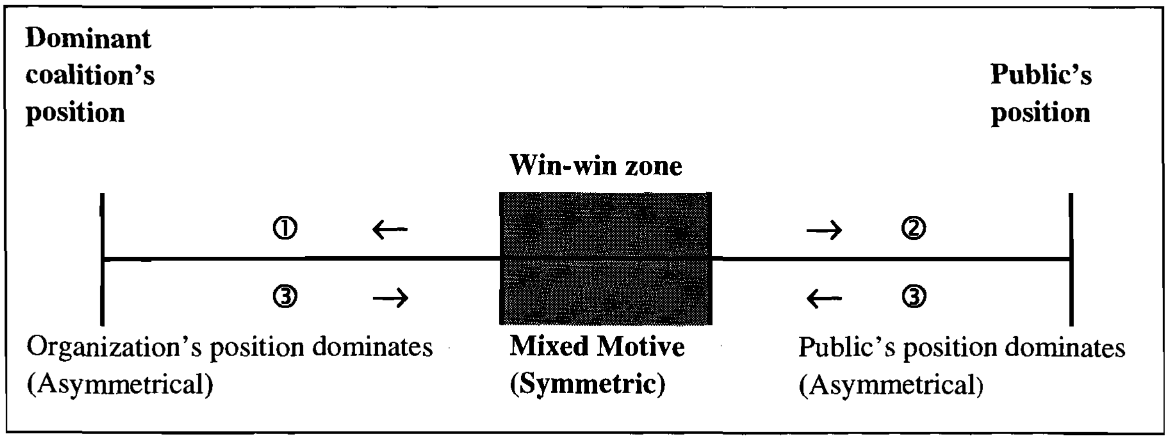
In *Figure 3.3* the area between symmetrical and asymmetrical practices is open and vague and the only suggestion made by its creators was that mixed motives would be found somewhere in between the extremes. In *Figure 3.4* Dozier *et al.* (1995:48) explain a new way of portraying the mixed motive model by providing more detail than in the previous continuum. In this model it is assumed that organizations and publics hold separate and sometimes conflicting interests. Still, negotiation and compromise permit them to find a common ground, the win-win zone.

Outside the win-win zone unsatisfactory and unstable relationships exist, with one party exploiting the other. On the left side the organization's views dominates the public's views to the public's disadvantage. On the right side the public's views dominates the organization's views, to the organization's disadvantage (these outcomes are summarized in *Table 3.2).*

The arrows in *Figure 3.4* are used to indicate the use of communication for the different outcomes indicated in *Table 3.2*. Arrow ③ indicates the most acceptable outcome, according to Dozier *et al.* (1995:49). To reach this kind of outcome, communicators or public relations practitioners will have to negotiate both with the dominant coalition and with the public to reach a position in the win-win zone. This approach is called the two-way model because it substitutes the former models of two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical practices.

This model recognizes that asymmetrical tactics are sometimes used to reach the best position for organizations within the win-win zone. However, these tactics are bounded by a symmetrical worldview that values a mutual beneficial and long-term relationship. Therefore the two-way model is essentially symmetrical (Dozier *et al.*, 1995:49). This model concentrates on relationship building as the most important purpose of public relations. However, Grunig and Huang (2000:26) maintain that the term relationships are still not defined well enough and that research should move away from the short-term effects of public relations efforts on relationships, towards a focus on long-term effects. Because of restraints in terms of time and resources, this study could not also examine the long-term effect of practicing two-way symmetrical communication on relationships.

Figure 3.4: New model of symmetry as two-way practices



(Source: Dozier *et al.*, 1995:48)

Table 3.2 Outcomes of the new model of symmetry

Type of practice	Explanation
①Pure asymmetry model	Communication used to dominate the public in order to accept the dominant coalition's position
②Pure cooperation model	Communication used to convince the dominant coalition to give in to the public's position
③Two-way model	Communication used to move public, the dominant coalition or both to an acceptable win-win zone

The latest research on the two-way symmetrical model that led to the mixed-motive model can be applied to this research by using the following specific theoretical statement.

3.15 Specific theoretical statement 7

NGOs involved in this research can be placed on a continuum in terms of how symmetrically or asymmetrically they practice public relations. Those NGOs that practice the two-way symmetrical model will not practice it in a pure form, but they will rather follow the mixed-motive model approach where persuasion may also be part of their actions. It is important to note that these NGOs will use persuasion but they would also be willing to be persuaded by their publics if disagreement arises. It is expected that they would generally strive to reach the win-win position on the symmetry/asymmetry continuum.

3.16 Predictions about PR in the 21st century

In order to have a better understanding of the benefits of the WWW for public relations, it is important to take note of some of the predictions about public relations in the 21st century. The following is a summary of the predictions made by several researchers on the opportunities for PR practitioners in the 21st century.

- The most indispensable element of relationships with customer and publics in the future will be dialogue and feedback. What do customers and clients really want? There will be a new emphasis on long-term learning relationships between organizations and their different internal and external publics. Contact with the members of those publics will be on an individual and personal level much more than in the past, made possible by the use of new media such as the World Wide Web (Peppers & Rogers, 1995:129).

- There will be increased two-way communication through ease of feedback by new communication media and a focus on more active, information-seeking publics (Fitzgerald & Spagnolia, 1999; Heath, 1998:274). It will be possible to provide customers and the media with *unfiltered* positions and self-selected information, bypassing the traditional agenda-setting process conducted by editors and producers (Fitzgerald & Spagnolia, 1999; White & Raman, 1999; Coombs, 1998:299; Freitag, 1999:38; Boehlke, 1996:18).

- Fitzgerald and Spagnolia (1999) conclude that there would be a need for practitioners with the knowledge of how to communicate instantaneously and internationally. Another need would be more multilingual practitioners and a greater sensitivity to cultural differences. This prediction is of special importance for NGOs doing development work in South Africa. During the interviews with PR officers of the chosen NGOs, they were probed on the situation in their organizations with regard to those two aspects. (See Chapter 5.)

- Increased information clutter would cause problems for PR practitioners (Fitzgerald & Spagnolia 1999).

- An important observation by Ryan (1999:31) is that new technologies will help to make good practitioners better, but they cannot help bad practitioners become better. The internet is not a magic sword that can correct organizational errors whenever it is wielded (Coombs, 1998:300).

- It would be possible to do crisis management, research and employee recruitment online (Fitzgerald & Spagnolia 1999).

- It would become common practice for PR practitioners and journalists to contact each other and send information via e-mail (Marlow, 1996:161).

- Practitioners would also become less dependent on traditional print media in the process of using more electronic media (Marlow, 1996:161; Fitzgerald & Spagnolia, 1999).

- Notwithstanding the impact of new technologies like the internet on public relations as a discipline, PR practice will still be about relationships with people. The internet makes more dialogue possible between practitioners and journalist and between practitioners and the members of their publics (Marlow, 1996:161). It is important to integrate knowledge of technology with traditional PR skills and principles in order to be successful in this new era (Ryan, 1999:31).

It is this last prediction that is of particular interest to this study. The researcher examined how dialogue and the building of relationships on the internet matched the criteria of the two-way symmetrical model for public relations. In other words, how to make use of the internet to accomplish better relationships and more dialogue.

This is especially important in the context of a developing country like South Africa, where NGOs may not have the financial means to use other, more traditional media very often. Any organization can look as good as any other organization. On the web it doesn't matter if it's a very small two-persons' organization or a large corporation – on the web, all are equal (Marken, 1995:36; Coombs, 1998; Holtz, 1999:176-177).

The contribution of the WWW and the internet to dialogue is that they provide the means for any organization to reach people around the world, no matter how financially limited the organization might be. This new electronic playing field helps to democratize public policy debate (Heath, 1998:276; Cohen, 1997).

3.17 The incorporation of the WWW in public relations

Several researchers wrote about the incorporation of the WWW in public relations efforts. Not all of them were equally optimistic about the use of the WWW for public relations purposes. These writers did not all agree on *how* exactly the WWW should be used for public relations. Some of them pointed out that it would take time to learn how to maximize the character of a new medium like the WWW, just as it took time to learn how to use radio and television to maximum effect (Pizzo, 1995:22).

3.17.1 The role of research and planning

Johnson (1997:214) is skeptical about the use of new technologies such as the WWW for public relations purposes. She states that public relations research about the use of new technologies like the WWW has been limited. She also noted that there is no organizing framework in public relations research or professional literature that merged new technologies with existing communication tools used in public relations.

She warns that the diffusion of technologies in public relations should not be externally driven – that is changing just because the technologies are there. Pizzo (1995:22) also echoes this warning. Rather, the incorporation of technologies like the WWW should be internally driven by strategic decisions like reaching new publics or achieving certain specific objectives. The researcher agrees with this view as the quotation at the beginning of this chapter stated. Technology should not just be used for the sake of technology. It should be incorporated with existing media usage and long-standing public relations principles and practices.

One of the weaknesses of many web sites is the many web sites without a clear corporate definition or goal (Marken, 1995:36). There has to be a strategic reason why you want to be on the web (Rayburn, 1995:90; Marlow, 1996:9; Pizzo, 1995:22). Holtz (1999:xvii) states that the internet should be integrated into a strategic communications plan based on clearly defined objectives.

However, in a recent study on the role of research and planning in web site development, White and Raman (1999) found that the majority of web site developers did no formal research or proper planning and evaluation of their organizations' web sites. Strategic implications were not considered and the managers who were interviewed seemed not really to know why they wanted a web presence for their organizations. In the place of formal research on what the web site should look like, they used their "gut feeling" and common sense or looked at what other organizations did with their web sites.

These findings are alarming. It is not good enough just to get onto

the bandwagon and get a web site running. Companies should first decide exactly why they want to be on the internet and what they want to accomplish by their presence in the web.

3.17.2 Involvement of PR practitioners in web site development

In a recent study (Ryan, 1999) it was found that the overwhelming majority of PR specialists in the United States were computer-literate and involved to very involved in the construction and maintaining of their companies' web sites. They also used their web skills by regularly visiting and monitoring web sites and databases created by government, scientific agencies, corporations, public relations departments and other groups and institutions, a very important part of using the internet for PR purposes (Marken, 1998a).

According to Ryan (1999:31), it is clear that PR specialists intend to learn the skills they need in order to use new technologies like the WWW. That will result in their getting more involved in web site construction and maintenance of web sites. The involvement of communication specialists is therefore being seen as a necessity by some researchers (Marlow, 1996:158; Ryan, 1999:31).

However, there is controversy in the PR world about the involvement of PR practitioners in the construction and maintaining of company web sites. Many PR practitioners and managers feel that the PR department should control or own an organization's web site. Other researchers feel that communication professionals on their own are not capable of creating web sites that use the web to its full potential and that computer information specialists and other specialists should also be involved (Marken, 1998b:28-29). Some researchers even refer to a "culture war" between public relations departments and computer specialists when it comes to the creation and management of an organizational web site (Kornegay & Grunig, 1998).

Web experts such as Marken (1995), Freitag (1999) and Holtz (1999) support a team approach to web site development and maintenance. They advise that organizations should make use of a web team, and not just a webmaster. The team should involve people from information services, marketing, engineering, advertising, public relations and customer services.

The bottom-line is that an approach of everything or nothing with regard to control is not suitable when it comes to the involvement of PR specialists in web site development. It is a new medium that necessitates the inputs of all relevant experts in an organization. Kole (1999a & 1999b) points out that information technicians should not develop web sites on their own, but that the communicative and social aspects of the medium and its content should also be considered.

The conclusion can be made that it would not be acceptable for technicians to develop an organizational web site on their own, just as it would not be acceptable for PR specialists to own and control an organization's web site. However, researchers will have different opinions on this issue.

3.17.3 Practical guidelines for implementing organizational web sites

Practical guidelines for implementing an organizational web site were identified by several researchers and include the following:

- *The speed limit keeps going up*

  Technology like the internet has brought about a change in the speed of information distribution, which has put more pressure on public relations practitioners to keep up to date with relevant news. Lordan (1999:15) calls it a *hyperspeed* process, forcing practitioners to conduct "pro-searches" and monitor information before it reaches the traditional media. The public relations practice is therefore forced to keep track of information on the internet, for it moves fast and goes far. Deadlines have become more important and the answer to the question "when?" is always "now!" (Boehlke, 1996:18).

- *Know when to apply technology and when not to apply it*

  The latest technology is not necessarily suited for every company. When considering to use the latest technology or not, first consider who the audiences are and whether they have access to technology like the internet. Also consider the company's image and the kind of business that it does: if the emphasis is on personal contact and face-to-face service, it would perhaps not be wise to include the latest communication technology in the media mix (Lordan, 1999:16; Marlow, 1996:9).

- *Online content should be constantly updated*

  Many companies do not think about the hidden costs of regularly updating their web pages, when setting it up. According to Lordan (1999:16) "nothing is older than information that is outdated and online". The continuous updating of the web site is also very important to keep visitors coming back Therefore it is important to budget for the regular maintenance of a web page, before creating it (Marken, 1995; Marlow, 1996; Stone, 1999:28; Cohen, 1997).

- *Make sure to be seen when you're online*

  When setting up a web page, it is important to put it in the places that get noticed, for example to be listed with the top search engines like Yahoo, Excite, Lycos, Infoseek, AltaVista and Hot Bot). Just as important is to create links from your web page to the web pages of other, similar companies, to increase traffic on your site (Lordan, 1999:16; Cohen, 1997).

- *Do not think of a web site in isolation*

  Synergy and integration are important. An organizational web site should not be seen as something that is functioning on its own. Therefore the web address should, for example, be mentioned in all printed materials: letters, advertisements, brochures and so forth. The reverse is also true. Visitors to the web site must have the option to ask for additional information in whatever format they choose. The web site should therefore offer access to the other components of the communication plan. The ideal situation is to use the different media as pointers to each other. This means that, for example, the web site should include references to other communications efforts, for example print media or brochures. Likewise, in print advertisements or memos or letters, reference should be made to the organizational web site (Lordan, 1999:16; Emerick, 1995; Holtz, 1999; Nelson & James, 1995:220).

❖ *Give information to reporters and editors in the way they want it*

Important to remember is that communicating with the media via the internet involves the same rules and high ethical standards that apply to more traditional media. The basic rules of quality public relations are no different in cyberspace (Strenski, 1995:35). If you want optimum media coverage it is important to know the different preferences of the media people that you send press releases to. Some reporters still prefer paper copies in the form of faxes or regular mail, and others only work off their computer screens.

It is not an option to send information in all the possible formats, because that will flood the media and alienate reporters. Also do not send junk mail, also called spamming (Lordan, 1999:17; Marlow, 1996:73-75; Rayburn, 1995:92-93). Public relations professionals should compile their own mailing lists of e-mail addresses, only sending reporters information that is newsworthy and relevant to their areas of coverage (Strenski, 1995:35).

Stone (1999:28-29) reports that many journalists have complained that many web sites still did not have a press area that would be helpful to journalists who needed background information, archives and new press releases. Cohen (1997:15) also stressed the importance of an electronic press center for journalists seeking information on a particular web site.

❖ *The home page should be interesting in order to generate return visits* (Rayburn, 1995:90).

❖ *Visually attractive web pages with lots of graphics are not always the best option*

It could take too long to download and therefore direct visitors away from your site (Marken, 1995). Interesting and useful content is important – fancy graphics without useful information will not generate return visits (Rayburn, 1995:92-93; Stone, 1999:28).

❖ *If a web site has a section where visitors can ask questions, a prompt and professional reaction from the organization is a necessity* (Marken, 1995:161; Marlow, 1996).

❖ *The principles of good standards of writing in a clear and logic manner are still as important as before* (Marken, 1995:161).

Rayburn (1995:92-93) adds to this requirement by stating that messages should be concise and to the point.

From these guidelines it is clear that the creation of an organizational web site should receive careful consideration and that it should not be implemented in a head over heels manner. It is not good enough just to have an organizational web site because everyone else has one. There are basic rules to apply and once the web site is in operation it is not the end of the process. To make the best of the web site, the guidelines discussed should be implemented.

3.17.4 Uses for organizational web sites

Many web sites only have advertising and marketing materials. Web sites could be much more of a public relations tool that brings visitors back again and again. Examples of uses for an organization's web site are the following (Marken, 1995; Marlow, 1996):

- It could provide news releases on products, product enhancements, strategic relationships and financial earnings by sending press releases via e-mail, directly to the journalists (Marlow, 1996:73; Rayburn, 1995:87-89). Even interactive press conferences can be held (Marlow, 1996:74);
- Other items that can be made available can include technical papers, user case studies and position papers;
- To have a FAQ (frequently asked questions) section, where customers can solve some of their problems. This could reduce direct calls to the organization drastically;
- To update product listings and prices daily or even hourly if you want;
- To receive orders and respond to customers via electronic mail;
- To conduct interactive forums and conferences with customers;
- To link branch offices worldwide through electronic mail, or to use an intranet (internet application only available inside an organization) for internal communications;
- Web sites could also be used for marketing and product research, therefore a web site should have an evaluation or feedback form where customers can give their impression and advice on the web site or the organization. Some companies even use interactive meetings with customers on a regular basis;
- To track issues via news wire and newspaper databases;
- For electronic clippings, to track coverage in national and international media;
- To check up on what the competition is doing;
- To recruit new employees;
- To maintain professional affiliations with similar groups or organizations;
- For technical support, to get computer questions answered;
- The web gives another platform from which to educate, inform and persuade different publics. A web site can also be a cost-effective way to give customer service and customer support (Marken, 1995:36-37);
- The use of online databases for information – quicker than going to the library.
- Non-profit organizations such as NGOs could use web site content to strengthen applications for funding, for example from government or other donor organizations (Holtz, 1999:151).

Most of these uses for organizational web sites correspond with the different forms of interactivity. (See Chapter 2, Section 2.5.4.4.) This strengthens the view that interactivity is the single most important aspect that makes the internet an important public relations medium.

3.18 Dialogical/symmetrical relationships in public relations through the use of the WWW

Besides the general guidelines for constructing an organizational web site, discussed above, some researchers referred specifically to the possibility of dialogical or symmetrical relationships through the WWW.

Johnson (1997: 213-236) acknowledges the fact that the use of interactive technology like the WWW can further two-way symmetrical communication in organizations, but she does not indicate how this could be done. She reports that public relations professional's immediate benefits from using interactive technology would be doing online research and maximizing their productivity and efficiency. The issues of dialogue and two-way symmetry are not really explored in Johnson's research.

In 1995, when the WWW was still in its infancy, Pizzo (1995:22-23) predicted it would be possible to create powerful relationships because of the interactivity of the medium. No other medium up to date has permitted the same level of interactivity than the WWW and organizations should learn how to use it to enter into a dialogue with the general public, customers and suppliers.

Other researchers also stress the possibility for dialogue and long-term relationships through the use of the WWW (Freitag, 1999; Weber, 1996; Esrock & Leichty, 1999; Cohen, 1997; Boehlke, 1996; Harden, 1996; Holtz, 1999; Kornegay & Grunig, 1998). They point out that the WWW would increase the role of the public relations practitioner as a facilitator of two-way symmetrical communication. In this facilitative role they stress the cultivation of long-term relationships with highly segmented publics and the determining of public needs, attitudes and opinions. This must take place before, during and after the design and implementation of each public relations campaign.

Kornegay and Grunig (1998) as well as Schickinger (1998:12) stress that the connection between the WWW and public relations should not only be relevant to the technician role. The WWW could also be used to enhance the managerial role of public relations, by means of what these researchers call "cyberbridging". This concept refers to the public relations practitioner's use of the WWW in order to maximize his/her influence on the dominant coalition of the organization (refer to Section 3.5) and to eventually increase organizational effectiveness. The internet can thus be used to overcome different kinds of gaps, for instance information gaps, equality gaps, time gaps and symmetry gaps[8] between the PR practitioner and the dominant coalition, or between the practitioner and the organization's publics. Some of the activities that can be employed via the WWW to accomplish *cyberbridging* is environmental scanning, issues tracking, relationship building, and electronic surveys.

Kent and Taylor (1998:323) agree that the WWW can be used for relationship building and argue that the potential of the WWW for public relations can only be realized by way of an understanding of dialogical communication theory as well as the symmetrical model of public relations. These authors explain the relationship between two-way symmetry and dialogical communication as one of *process* and *product.* As was explained in Section 3.12, Grunig (1992) argues that organizations should set up structured systems, processes and rules for two-way public relations. This means that two-way symmetrical communication must provide the necessary procedures for dialogue to take place. Dialogue is hence seen as the product, while two-way symmetrical processes and systems make dialogue possible.

The question is how the technology of the WWW can affect communicative relationships if it is accepted that relationship building is the foundation of two-way symmetrical public relations. As was explained in Chapter 1, a technological deterministic view is not acceptable. Technology in itself can neither create nor destroy relationships. It is how technology is used that can affect relationships between an organization and its publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998:324).

The WWW has proven to be a very good information dissemination tool and useful for "getting a message out". The dissemination of information should however not be confused with dialogical communication. Activities like monitoring the WWW for information that could be harmful to the organization and subsequently reacting on this information are not the same as dialogical communication. Long-term relationships between organizations and publics can be created, adapted and changed through the use of the WWW (Kent, 1998:31; Pizzo, 1995:22; Cooley, 1999:41).

The potential of the WWW is, however, still underutilized by organizations and underexamined by academics as a tool for building organizational-public relationships. The current situation is that many organizations see web presence as a necessity, but the interactive content of the web site does not receive enough attention and suitable research is also not being done (Kent & Taylor 1998:322-325; Johnson, 1997; Karlberg, 1996; Kent, 1998:31; White & Raman, 1999; Cooley, 1999; Stone, 1999:28-29; Esrock & Leichty, 1999).

In order to address these shortcomings Kent and Taylor state five important principles to apply when using the WWW for two-way symmetrical public relations purposes (1998:326-331):

❖ ***Principle one: The dialogical/feedback loop***

The interactive nature of the WWW (discussed in Chapter 2) makes a dialogical or a feedback loop a very important starting point for dialogical communication (a point also stressed by Marrelli, 1995:244). This can allow publics to pose questions, problems and concerns directly to the organization. It is, however, very important that the organization should ensure that it has the necessary resources to engage in this type of communication. Certain individuals in the organization should be designated to hande internet contacts. They should have the necessary communication skills and ought to be trained to answer questions, explain organizational policies just as professional as when using any other medium.

Equally important is that dialogical loops incorporated into web sites should be complete. This means that organizations should monitor their web sites closely, because it is not enough just to have an internet presence. The web site should be just as important as their customer service lines or other forms of contact with publics. Timely and professional response is a very important aspect of the dialogical loop.

❖ ***Principle two: The usefulness of information***

Another important aspect is the content of the organization's web site. In many cases organizations try to hide the insufficient content of their web sites behind fancy graphics and headers (Harden, 1996). The content on the web site should be useful to different kinds of publics. Therefore it is not advisable to provide only industry or user-specific information. Information of general value to all publics should also be provided as background or historical information about the organization.

The hierarchy and structure of the information should be logical and clear to web site visitors. Information should be organized in such a way that interested visitors to the web site can easily find what they are looking for. Accessibility, usefulness and the valuable information are important content principles to apply in web site creation. Web site visitors should be given the opportunity to sign up for mailing lists and discussion groups if they want to.

Other examples of content on organizational web sites could include the following: contact addresses, telephone numbers, electronic mail addresses of organizational members, external experts, shareholders and those holding valid competing/contradictory positions. Content could also include explanations of how products are produced, or services delivered, lists of ingredients, explanations of what ingredients are and of their known side effects, if applicable.

Not only the organization's interests should be promoted by using an organizational web site. Another aim of such a web site could be to address the interests, values and concerns of different publics in order to create informed partners with whom to engage in two-way symmetrical communication.

❖ ***Principle three: The generation of return visits***

Web sites that provide limited or unchanging information will not generate return visits, as they are no longer useful after one visit and therefore not conducive to dialogical communication. Sites that are updated regularly and that contain valuable information for the relevant publics appear credible and give the impression that the organization is responsible, therefore helping to create the conditions for dialogical relationships (Marrelli, 1995:248).

Content that could generate return visits include the following: frequently updated information, changing issues, special forums, new commentaries, on-line question and answer sessions, on-line experts to answer questions. Other options to consider when trying to generate return visits include formats for frequently asked questions (FAQs), easily downloadable or mailed information, technical or specialized information that can be requested by regular or electronic mail, and referral services or links to local agencies or information providers.

Important to note is that all these kinds of services or content should still be easy to use and frequently compared to specific public needs and interests.

❖ ***Principle four: The intuitiveness/ease of the interface***

As was mentioned before, an organizational web site should be easy to navigate. A table of contents is useful if well-organized and hierarchical. The relationship between graphics and text is also important to take note of. Efficiency and download speed should be taken into account, because too many graphics at the beginning of a site might annoy users who are in a hurry. Web sites should not be designed to be accessible only to users who have the latest hardware or software. An option that organizations sometimes use is to give the user the option at the beginning of the site to choose between a low graphics version and a high graphics version of the site (Spalter, 1995).

Web sites should be interesting, informative and contain valuable information to its visitors. Graphics and sounds may be useful tools, but content should take precedence over aesthetic considerations. Dialogical public relations wants to create lasting and valuable relationships with its publics and it should not be used merely as a propaganda, marketing or advertising tool.

❖ ***Principle five: The rule of conservation of visitors***

Web site designers should be careful not to include links from their sites to other useful or interesting sites without clearly marked paths for visitors to return to their sites. Once a visitor leaves a site by making use of a link, he or she may never return to the original site. Designers should also carefully consider where to place advertisements in order to avoid the loss of visitors' attention to the site itself. Visitor may be led astray by prominent and interesting-looking advertisements. Therefore an organization that wants to focus the attention on its own web site should either avoid sponsored advertising or use strategic placement to ensure that its visitors will not be distracted.

The five principles to follow when using an organizational web site for two-way symmetrical communication purposes have a direct relation to the degree of interactivity incorporated in the web site. The degree of interactivity is an important aspect when the effectiveness of an organizational web site is evaluated. Kent incorporates these five principles into three tests of web site effectiveness (1998:31-33):

❖ ***Test 1: The dialogical or feedback loop***

Kent argues that the presence of a dialogical loop is the most important reason why an organization's web site should exist. Some web site developers think that an e-mail address or a place for web site visitors to leave comments is sufficient for an effective dialogical loop. Not so, says Kent. Dialogical communication is a process of open and negotiated dialogue. It is characterized by give and take of all parties involved (Kent, 1998; Habermas, 1984; Pearson, 1989; Stewart, 1978).

As indicated at Principle 1 above, to have open channels of communication via a web site, requires a specific commitment on the part of the organization. Questions from web site visitors should be individually responded to, in a timely fashion, by a trained communication specialist. Unfortunately, according to Kent this is often not the case. He predicted that web sites with effective dialogical loops would lead to more positive interactions between an organization and its publics.

Cooley (1999:41-42) takes Kent's argument further by being more specific on how the interactive nature of the WWW could be employed for effective dialogical loops. According to her, the first step in creating an interactive environment is to provide information on aspects like investor relations, organizational programs and policies, community involvement and employee relations. This could open the door to public participation and discussion.

The next step should be the creation of a forum for comments and suggestions. This forum should be like a chat room where the visitor can enter a message and receive an immediate response from a company representative or another visitor. Such an interactive web site could function like a 24-hour, 7-day focus group.

To function optimally such a public forum needs a central monitor (who, according to Kent, 1998, should be a trained communication specialist) to initiate discussion, to persuade visitors to participate and to monitor the messages. Cooley (1999) describes the role of a central monitor as follows:

- Providing information on matters of public interest
- Listening and responding to legitimate concerns and questions
- Providing a space for interaction on issues of public interest
- Protecting the privacy of discussion participants
- Utilizing public opinion to shape organizational programs and policies.

In a survey, Cooley (1999) found that organizations in the computer and telecommunications business displayed the highest level of interactivity on their web sites. She employed the following scale to "rate" the level of interactivity of web sites:

- 25% Interactive – sites that included information on contacting the organization;
- 50% Interactive – sites that included information on contacting the organization for specific concerns;
- 75% Interactive – sites that included surveys on either the effectiveness of the web site and organizational practices or a form for entering comments;
- 100% Interactive – sites that provided a forum for online interaction or public discourse.

The presence of a dialogical/feedback loop is an important criterion for the effectiveness of an organizational web site. It is also the most important principle to keep in mind if the interactivity of a web site has to be improved.

❖ *Test 2: Return visits*

The likelihood of return visits (or come back again-ness) by *various publics* is an important element of building long-term relationships via organizational web sites (Kent, 1998:32). To obtain return visits, the first important element is the necessity of useful and timely information for a variety of publics (Esrock & Leichty, 1999; Harden, 1996:12).

Kent stresses the importance of a variety of publics in the following words: "Web sites that are not of value to an assortment of publics communicate at best an attitude of elitism, and at worst, an unconcern for a segment of their audience" (1998:32).

Kent agrees with Cooley (1999) on the usefulness of online forums and proposes that such forums could provide ongoing value to publics, aside from making the web site more interactive as was mentioned above. Other content that could promote return visits includes historical information about the organization, FAQ's, and explanations of how services or products are delivered. Information should, of course, be updated regularly (Kent, 1998:33).

❖ ***Test 3: Intuitiveness or ease of use***

If a web site is well-organized and easy to use, return visits would also be more likely to occur. Downloading time should not be too long either. Kent (1999:33) argues that most of a web site's content should be textual rather than graphical to speed up the loading process. As other writers have also noted (see Section 3.19.3) fancy graphics should not be the most important aspect of a web site. Much more important are tables of content that are well-organized and hierarchical.

For web site developers to test the ease of use of their web site, it would be valuable to do research before they go online. They could also try themselves to connect to the organization's web site, from a slow connection like a dial-up modem of 28K or slower. This could provide them with an understanding of their potential visitors' headaches when trying to look at the organizational web site.

The three tests for web site effectiveness can be applied to assess the degree to which an organization uses two-way symmetrical communication principles in its web site. These tests will also be applied in this research project to determine the degree of interactivity in the NGOs' web sites.

To apply two-way symmetrical communication principles on organizational web sites the following specific theoretical statement can be formulated, based on the discussion above.

3.19 Specific theoretical statement 8

NGO web sites can be evaluated for two-way symmetrical and dialogical communication attributes by applying the following principles:

- ❖ *the presence of a dialogical/feedback loop;*
- ❖ *the usefulness of information;*
- ❖ *the generation of return visits;*
- ❖ *the intuitiveness/ease of the interface;*
- ❖ *the conservation of visitors.*

It could be expected that NGOs who practice the two-way symmetrical model of public relations will apply more of these principles in their web sites than NGOs who practice one of the asymmetrical models of public relations.

3.20 Conclusion

It is evident that many theoretical disagreements still prevail in the field of public relations, but also that the research and theoretical contributions of James Grunig and his co-researchers are some of the most valuable in the field. Both the two-way symmetrical and the two-way asymmetrical models of public relations (as identified by these researchers) make use of research in their practices, but they use different processes to achieve different kinds of outcomes.

In the two-way symmetrical model practitioners use theories, and techniques of conflict resolution and negotiation to increase the dominant coalition's understanding of publics. In the asymmetrical model practitioners use attitude theory, persuasion and manipulation to shape public attitudes and behaviors. Both models involve two-way communication, but they are based on very different worldviews (Dozier *et al.*, 1995:46).

It is also clear that no public relations practitioner can afford not to incorporate new technologies like the internet and the WWW to enhance their public relations efforts. Very little research has however been done on the use of the internet and the WWW for public relations purposes, notwithstanding the fact that several researchers have indicated its potential to enhance two-way symmetrical communication in public relations.

This chapter explained the theoretical foundations of the research at hand. The specified theoretical statements will be applied to the empirical data in the next chapters. Before the empirical part of the research can commence, it is important to explain the research methodology used for this research.

[1] The term "model" refers to an abstraction of reality that resembles reality in part, but it cannot resemble reality in every detail. A model is a simplification of reality, used to illustrate the most important aspects of reality (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:14-21; Grunig & Grunig, 1992:286; McQuail & Windahl, 1981:2).

[2] In two later publications, Grunig and Huang (2000) and Huang (1997) described the attributes of a good relationship as including trust, understanding, credibility, behavior, mutuality of control or conflict avoidance, and ultimately the maintenance of the relationship that exist between an organization and its publics.

[3] Worldview can be defined as: "*a set of images and assumptions about the world* (Kearney, 1984:10 in Grunig & White, 1992:33).

[4] For an explanation of the connection between religion, worldview and science, see to the following source: Wolterstorff, N. 1976. *Reason within the bounds of religion.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

[5] See Chapter 1, Endnote 8.

[6] Grunig equated excellence with effectiveness, as effectiveness would lead to excellence. He points out that there are many different definitions for excellent organizations and that no single set of criteria could be used to identify every effective organization. Therefore each organization should define its own criteria for effectiveness, within the context in which it operates (1992:222-223).

[7] For a detailed discussion of the philosophical foundations of dialogical communication, see Stewart, J. 1978. Foundations of dialogic communication. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 64(2):183-201, April.

[8] A symmetry gap refers to the lack of speaker roles in other (traditional) mass media, while the internet poses the possibility to close/narrow the symmetry gap, because its publics can now have a voice and speak back (Schickinger, 1998:7).

Chapter 4

Research methodology

Positivist-orientated research is much less suitable for investigation of new media developments than either an interpretative or critical analytical stance (Jankowski, 1999:373).

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will explain the research methods and procedures used in the study. Chapter 1 already gave an overview of the qualitative research methods used, therefore this chapter will provide the finer details. (See Chapter 1, Section 1.11.) The theoretical assumptions and statements made in the previous chapter will also be applied to the research methods used. Some of these assumptions will be applied to the content analyses of NGO web sites and other assumptions will be applied to the in-depth interviews that were been conducted.

The research conducted for this study can be described as a combination of applied and basic research. It was basic in the sense that the two-way symmetrical model of public relations was developed further and expanded by applying it to new media. On the other hand, the study also represents applied research: both strategic and evaluative research techniques were included in the research design.

The nature of qualitative research, as well as the reasons why it was used, will be explained in the following section.

4.2 Qualitative research

4.2.1 Characteristics of qualitative research

Some researchers have suggested the use of qualitative research methods to study new media technology, as it is a new and developing research field (Wothring *et al.*, 1995: 273). This study has been conducted following qualitative research methods because the study of public relations and new media such as the internet is a new and unexplored field in Communication Studies. (See Chapter 1.) The study aimed to investigate this field in an in-depth manner in order to broaden the understanding of the application of new media to the practice of public relations.

Creswell (1994:1) defines qualitative research methods as "an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting." Denzin and Lincoln (1994:2) also stress the importance of a natural setting and emphasize that qualitative researchers attempt to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research includes a variety of research methods of which in-depth interviews and qualitative content analysis were used for this study. The rest of this section will highlight the most important characteristics of qualitative research and also explain how these characteristics were present in the study at hand.[1]

The use of qualitative methods forms part of the interpretive paradigm which has as its most important axiom the *understanding* of phenomena. This axiom is also referred to as *verstehen,* referring to the gaining of an empathic insight into others' attitudes (Lindlof, 1995:30; Hamilton, 1994:64; Van Vuuren *et al.*, 1999:415). The qualitative researcher has to be part of the data in order to understand the reasons and motives behind the behavior of research subjects. The researcher becomes part of the data to be involved and actively participating in the research process. Therefore the researcher tries to share experiences with the research subjects in order to be able to broaden his/her understanding of the situation at hand (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991:139; Mason, 1996:4).

In this study an understanding of the reasons and motives behind the design of NGO web pages was essential. It was not possible to understand the reasons why the web sites were designed and used in a certain manner by just doing the content analyses. Therefore in-depth interviews were also conducted where the researcher became actively involved in the research process to understand the unique context in which each NGO was operating.

In qualitative research, the research design evolves during the research process. The design can be changed as the research progresses, because it is not possible to make any predictions about the outcome of the research beforehand. The research design should therefore be flexible to accommodate new insights and better understanding of the research problem. However, the researcher still has to make sure to work systematically and to document every procedure followed (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991:139; Creswell, 1994:62; Mason, 1996:5). The process of qualitative research involves the researcher who gradually becomes part of the phenomena that he/she examines.

As so little was known about the use of new communication technologies in public relations, this was also true for this study. It was not possible to make any predictions about the research before the study was concluded. It was also not possible to formulate specific theoretical statements beforehand. A general theoretical statement was formulated, but more specific theoretical statements were formulated during the literature study. Some of these statements were changed or eventually left out of the research design, as the researcher became more familiar with the research material.

The researcher also had to make certain methodological changes during the research process in order to adapt the methodology to the context of the study. For example, initially it was envisaged that 30 NGOs would be used in the study. However, as the study progressed it became clear that due to the depth of the information that had to be obtained from each NGO, it would not be feasible. It was therefore decided to limit the study to 10 NGOs to enable the researcher to study each organization in detail within the study's time framework.

Qualitative research is ideally conducted within natural settings. For this reason the researcher tried to become part of the normal flow of events, without trying to control or manipulate the situation (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991:139). Web pages were analyzed as they appeared on the WWW without any manipulation or control measures. In addition, the interviews were conducted in the natural surroundings of the interviewees (i.e. in their offices or suitable venue) and no effort was made to control or manipulate the behavior or responses of the interviewees. Open-ended questions were asked to ensure that the interviewees were not led to certain answers.

In qualitative research, the researcher can be described as the instrument, therefore no other person could stand in the place of the researcher (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991:139; Creswell, 1994:62; Janesick, 1998:8,145; Janesick, 1994:212). In this study the researcher had to do the content analyses and conduct the interviews, as the research focused on an in-depth understanding of the theoretical assumptions and the contexts in which each NGO functioned. The researcher could adapt the analysis guidelines and certain questions during the interviews to make it applicable to each organization that was studied. It was therefore not feasible to use research assistants, as assistants normally need exact instructions in order to ensure the reliability of the research at hand.

The aim of qualitative research is not to test theory but rather to "build" or attribute to theory as it evolves from the qualitative research process. The end product of qualitative research could therefore often be a new theory or an addition to existing theory (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991:139). However, Geertz (1973:27) makes it clear that the qualitative researcher does not always begin "intellectually empty-handed", meaning that the researcher cannot disregard existing theories or theoretical ideas developed by other researchers. Although a qualitative study could therefore include theory from the start, it is important to ensure that the research process is not constrained by the theory.

The theory need not fit a particular situation perfectly in order to be useful for a qualitative research project. Rather, a theory could be adapted and elaborated on, or applied in a new situation to contribute to theory building (Cresswell, 1994:95). In this study specific theoretical statements evolved during the research process and were was not forced upon the research design beforehand. The specific theoretical statements were constantly in a process of development and only finalized when the project was completed. The aim of this study was not to test the two-way symmetrical model of public relations, but rather to apply the theory to a new context. The theory was applied as a normative model to <u>evaluate</u> and <u>understand</u> the application of new media technology in public relations in the NGO sector in South Africa.

Qualitative research has certain advantages and disadvantages. The examination of behavior in a natural setting is an advantage in comparison to the artificiality of many quantitative research designs, especially where experimental or survey research is used as research methods. In addition, qualitative research focuses on an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, especially when such a phenomenon has not previously been investigated. What is also advantageous when exploring a new research area is the fact that qualitative research methods are flexible and that the researcher can pursue new areas of interest without having to identify these issues before the research had commenced as was illustrated earlier in this section.

In terms of disadvantages, qualitative samples are often too small to allow the researcher to make generalizations beyond the sample. The external validity of qualitative data is therefore often problematic for some researchers. The qualitative researcher should also realize that qualitative research seldom has the aim to generalize its findings in the same manner as with quantitative studies. Although the data gathered might not be applicable to all other similar situations, it is still important to document the specific procedures followed carefully, in order for other researchers to follow the line of argumentation and to understand the methods of data-gathering, data-analysis and the conclusions reached.

The small number of NGOs included in the study makes it impossible to generalize the findings of this study to all NGOs in South Africa. However, by studying a small sample, it is possible to learn more about each organization and to understand the unique problems and circumstances of each NGO. A larger sample would have the possible danger or reductionism, where the focus could not be on a detailed study, but rather on a synopsis of the sample as a whole.

Another disadvantage of qualitative research is that the reliability, and hence also the validity of data, can be questioned because of the involvement of the researcher in the research setting. The researcher may observe behavior and describe it differently than another researcher would do. Therefore qualitative research is often described as "subjective" in comparison with the quantitative researcher who strives to be "objective" (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991:45-46; Mouton & Marais, 1992:155-165).

However, in qualitative research the emphasis of neutrality shifts from the researcher to the data. Rough data such as field notes, data-analysis documents, audio- and videotapes and formats for questioning are thus of much importance to the researcher as well as the readers of the research report. Internal validity is also enhanced by conducting qualitative research in natural settings, in comparison to the artificiality often found in quantitative studies (Janesick, 1994: 1994:216; Christians & Carey, 1981:360).

However, at this point the viewpoint of Kirk and Miller (1986:20) on objectivity should be noted. According to them qualitative and quantitative research methods are both striving to the highest level of objectivity possible, contrary to what was said in the previous paragraph. They base their viewpoint on stating that objectivity "is the essential basis for all good research". They define objectivity as the "simultaneous realization of as much reliability and validity as possible". The concepts of validity (more applicable to internal validity) and reliability are equally important in both qualitative and quantitative research. However, researchers would use different methods of ensuring the validity and reliability in a qualitative as opposed to a quantitative study. In this regard Kirk and Miller (1986:20) stress the importance of careful documentation of research procedures, as well as a systematic progression through certain basic phases of research.

The objective/subjective debate also has another angle. Qualitative researchers often reverse the claim that quantitative research is "objective" and qualitative research is "subjective" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:5; Atwood, 2000). They explain that by forcing a priori definitions and categories on what is to be studied is actually subjective, because the researcher forces his/her own expectations on the research design. In qualitative research the aim is to capture the individual's point of view, and to enter the lives of those to be studied, in order to come as close to the truth as possible. This approach could actually be described as objective, because it tries to capture the real meaning of behavior, instead of trying to fit the behavior onto predetermined categories and definitions.

According to Wimmer and Dominick (1991:46) there has been some friction between those who favored qualitative and those who favored quantitative methods in the mass media field as well as in other fields. However, since the 1990s many researchers have realized that both qualitative and quantitative methods are needed to understand any phenomenon. It is with this realization that the term *triangulation* was used to refer to the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods for a full understanding of a research problem. However, the term has a broader meaning, referring for example to the inclusion of multiple sources of data collection in a research project, to increase the reliability and validity of the results. By using more than one source of data it becomes possible to compensate for the limitations of one method (Du Plooy, 1995: 33; Fortner & Christians, 1981: 380-381; Janesick, 1994:215; Lindlof, 1995:238; Bloor, 1997:39).

Triangulation can be applied in several different ways in order to make up for the possibility that a qualitative researcher might be subjective. The use of triangulation can also establish a sense of trustworthiness to the research and the researcher. In this study the principles of data triangulation and methodological triangulation were applied, because several data sources were used and more than one research method was used for the examination of one research problem.

Content analysis as well as semi-structured interviews was used as research methods and several data sources were used by interviewing more than one interviewee from one organization in certain cases. It can also be said that multiple triangulation was used, because more than one method of triangulation was applied. The aim was not to generalize the findings, but rather to study the ten NGOs and their web sites to identify and understand certain trends and problems in the use of the WWW for public relations purposes. Procedures were carefully documented and are described in Sections 4.3.3 and 4.3.4. (Janesick, 1994:215; Fortner & Christians, 1981:380-381).

The content analysis of web sites in this study is compatible with research in a natural setting, because the web sites were analyzed unobtrusively, as it is available to the public on the WWW. The content or the appearance of the web sites was therefore not manipulated in an artificial situation in order to conduct the research. Although an interview could be viewed as an artificial situation, it was conducted to represent a situation as natural as possible for the interviewees.

All but one interviewee were interviewed in their offices, which constitutes natural work place surroundings. One interviewee was interviewed in a coffee shop, as she requested, because her organization had open-plan offices where she was not comfortable to be interviewed. She chose a coffee shop where she was comfortable, as she had held many other business meetings in the same coffee shop previously.

The observation of behavior in a natural setting should be described and evaluated within the context in which it occurred. Meaning cannot be determined by statistical indices, rather, meaning is formed by the contextualization of the behavior that had been studied. The very same phenomenon could have different meanings when occurring in different situations or contexts. One of the most common examples is that people usually act differently in private situations than in public situations, in the same way as they would act differently in their natural surroundings than in a laboratory setup.

The qualitative researcher should constantly be aware that phenomena usually operate in several contexts simultaneously and that exploring one context usually points to another. This means that all contexts should be taken into account when ascribing meaning or evaluating communication behavior (Christians & Carey, 1981: 363; Mason, 1996:4; Geertz, 1973:10). Geertz (1973:10) argues that the researcher is actually faced with a "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit".

These different contexts that the researcher have to explore necessitate the careful use of description and explanation during the research process. Description (or inscription) refers to describing behavior and setting down the meaning that a social action has for the actors involved. Explanation (also specification or diagnosis) refers to the explicit stating of what the description demonstrates about the society in which it was found. To reach explanation, Geertz (1973:27) argues that a distinction could be made between a *thick* description and a *thin* description of social behavior and that qualitative researchers should concentrate on thick descriptions of reality to reach the deeper meaning of behavioral acts. The symbolic nature of communication as a ritual necessitates the researcher to ensure that the full richness of meaning is dealt with during description. (See Chapter 2, Section 5.2.4.) A thin description of events would only state which behaviors were observed, whereas a thick description would go further and also interpret the meaning of those behaviors to those involved (Geertz, 1973:7; Carey, 1989:15-18).

Organizations can, for example, operate within the context of a particular management style and organizational culture. Their functioning is also influenced by sector in which they operate, in terms of their interaction with other organization or government. The political context with all its different aspects is another context to be reckoned with. The contexts in which the selected NGOs for this study operate were examined during the semi-structured interviews. It was realized that the content analyses of the web sites could not provide enough information to enable the researcher to make inferences and conclusions about the organizations.

Assumptions and conclusions based on the content analyses were therefore triangulated by means of testing them during the interviews. Questions were asked in order to understand the different contexts in which each NGO had to operate. Throughout the description in Chapters 5-14, the researcher concentrated on the provision of a thick description to encompass the richness of meaning of communication viewed as a ritual, as opposed to an act of transmission.

To maximize the comparisons in the interpretive process is another aspect that qualitative researchers should pursue to improve the quality of a particular study. In a quantitative study this would be applied by the testing of hypotheses under varying conditions. However, the maximizing of comparisons has a broader and more holistic meaning within a qualitative context. It refers to a "judicious choosing of several comparison groups, not for the purpose of testing the null hypothesis, but to improve the substance and explanatory power of our interpretations" (Christians & Carey, 1981: 366). The maximizing of comparisons also refers to generalizing within cases, or within a sample as opposed to generalizing beyond the sample (Geertz, 1973:26).

The selection of NGOs in this study was done in such a way as to maximize the comparisons that would be possible in the study. Although it was not the aim of the study to make direct comparisons between different NGOs, the selection of NGOs was done in order to include the widest variety of NGOs possible in the study. The inclusion of smaller and larger NGOs that work in a variety of development spheres would give the study a more realistic view of the reality in which these organizations operate. In the words of Christians and Carey (1981: 369): "We need all the varieties of human society – cross-cultural and historical – to set the questions properly and avoid flatness in description."

Situational and historical comparisons are often used in qualitative research, but the comparison of ideal typing is also very useful. This means that the researcher would "build" an ideal type from a literature study and then compare similar phenomena from reality to compare it to the ideal type. (Christians & Carey, 1981:369). Jankowski (1999:373) suggests this approach for research in new media technology in die Communication Studies discipline. The normative theory employed in this study could be seen as an ideal type used to compare the selected NGOs to. Furthermore the principles of two-way symmetry and interactivity that were applied to the web sites also fell in this category.

To establish sensitized concepts is another aim of qualitative research. This requirement refers to the importance of formulating categories or concepts that are meaningful and true to the people themselves, but it should also be sufficient to explain large parts of social life (Christians & Carey, 1981: 369). Concepts should be developed to describe behavior accurately. However, the process of the developing of sensitized concepts should continue throughout a research project, as repeated observation is needed to clarify an emerging concept. Sensitized concepts must be continually tested and improved and refined and cannot be finalized before the research process comes to an end.

There is therefore a definite difference between sensitized concepts and definite concepts that are used in quantitative research. In quantitative research concepts are determined and defined before the research process commences in order to act as rigid "laws" for the researcher and research subjects to abide by. In qualitative research concepts are defined to be sensitive to all indications of possible meanings that could refine their meaning. Concepts could therefore not be finalized before the research process is over.

In this study concepts were identified and initially defined loosely, in order to be able to add to and refine these concepts as the research process progressed. Concepts used during the content analyses were again tested and refined during the conducting of the semi-structured interviews. Interviewees could elaborate on their interpretations of the concepts at hand, therefore the concepts in this study could be described as sensitized to enable the researcher to study the meaning of web site utilization at different levels.

With the general characteristics of qualitative research being described, the two research methods used in this study will now be under discussion.

4.2.2 Content analysis

Most people informally draw conclusions from their observations of content, for example a television show, a film or a book. However, our informal judgement on, for example, violence on television is not always correct, because it is largely based on our own perceptions and biases. Therefore different television viewers can arrive at different conclusions after viewing the same television content.

Content analysis is a formal research tool that can be used to reach more scientific conclusions about content such as newspapers, books, advertising, or television. This research tool can be used to determine the presence of certain words, themes or concepts and to make inferences about its meaning, relationships, the writer and even the culture and time of which these are a part (Stempel & Westley, 1981; Wimmer & Dominick, 1991; Wigston, 1995). Although content analysis is often done in order to reach quantitative answers, it can also be conducted qualitatively. Qualitative content analysis differs from quantitative content analysis because of different techniques of measuring and less emphasis that is placed on frequency as the only indicator of meaning.

In his classical work on content analysis in the social sciences Holsti (1969: 5-6) describes the emphasis on frequency as the only valid tool for enumeration as a theoretical and a practical problem. The emphasis on frequency has as underlying assumption that frequency is the only valid index of, for example, concern, preoccupation, intensity, and so forth. Although the use of frequency can often provide meaningful answers to research questions, there are also other measures than can be useful. Some of these measures can be described as "more qualitative" than quantitative.

Some of the other techniques besides measuring in terms of frequency are coding in terms of the absence or presence of certain themes or symbols, also referred to as a form of contingency analysis, and the assignment of a major theme to the content analyzed. Holsti (1969:7-8) explains how different measuring techniques could lead to different results. He mentions that the important question for the researcher to ask is not: "Am I being quantitative" but rather: "What is the theoretical relevance of the measures I am using?"

In addition to theoretical relevance it is also important to use an appropriate research method for the aims and research questions that have to be answered. If the aim of a study concentrates on understanding a certain phenomenon, it would not be appropriate to use quantitative research methods, as it would probably only lead the researcher to describe the phenomenon in question.

4.2.3 Qualitative content analysis

In another classical work on content analysis in communication research, Berelson (1952: 114-128) provides the following insightful ideas to distinguish between qualitative and quantitative content analyses.

❖ ***Quasi-quantitative***

Many "qualitative" analyses should rather be described as "quasi-quantitative" because they still contain quantification only in a rough format. Frequency statements are frequently made by describing the frequency, without specific percentages or numbers. Descriptions such as the following could be used as an indication of frequency: *repeatedly, rarely, usually, never, often, emphasis,* and many others.

These statements are less precise than quantitative frequency statements in which precise numbers would be found. The implication is that the methods to reach these different kinds of frequency statements should also be different. The more precise statement would need a more careful and specific method for data collection, whilst the less precise statement would use a more impressionistic method.

Like Holsti (1969), Berelson also warns against the possibility of collecting selective evidence and overlooking important information when the method used is not very precise. This is one of the most often mentioned points of criticism against qualitative research, as will be discussed later in this section. However, the so-called less precise, "quasi-quantitative" method of data collection has a place in communication research, depending on the nature of the problem investigated and the content to be analyzed.

In this study the principles of "quasi-quantitative" were applied, because the content analyses did not make use of any method of quantification. As only ten NGOs were studied it would not be possible to use strict quantification measures. The emphasis was not on counting and measuring, but rather on studying the web site of each NGO in the sample as a whole. Exact measuring and counting were not done, as it was not the aim to make numerical comparisons among the NGOs included in the study. Each NGO was viewed as unique and functioning within a particular context.

- ***Presence-absence of content rather than frequencies***

  Qualitative content analyses frequently make use of measurement in terms of the presence or absence of content rather than more specific frequencies. This method of measurement was discussed in more detail in the previous section, as it was also one of the methods that Holsti (1969) recommended for qualitative content analysis. The content analyses in this study made use of this method to a large degree, as web sites were mostly evaluated in terms of the presence or absence of interactive devices and two-way symmetrical principles.

- ***Small/incomplete samples***

  Qualitative content analyses often use small or incomplete samples or use the full population if it is very small, for example a case study. This is also often the case with other qualitative methodologies such as interviews or case studies. With a very small sample there is no justification for precise counting or for advanced statistical analysis. As was explained earlier (Section 4.2.1) small samples lead to a problem with external validity, because generalization can usually not be made in such cases. This study used a small sample of only ten NGOs to enable the researcher to make an in-depth study of each organization.

- ***More non-content statements***

  While quantitative content analysis usually focuses strictly on the manifest content, qualitative content analysis also deals with the latent content and "read between the lines". The aim is often to make inferences about, for example, the intentions of the communicator or the effects of the content on its audience and not just the quantification of the content at hand. Another difference is that during qualitative content analysis interpretation is done as part of the analytical process, while in quantitative analysis the interpretations usually follow the analytical process.

  In this study latent content was studied to establish the worldviews of the NGOs as well as the public relations models practiced. The interpretative process was intertwined with the process of analysis, as can be seen in the next chapter.

- ***Content is a reflection of "deeper phenomena"***

  In accordance with the previous aspect, qualitative content analyses often view content as a reflection of deeper phenomena and do not concentrate as much on the content as such, as is the case with quantitative content analyses. This aspect corresponds with the fact that qualitative research deals with the deeper meaning of things, trying to use a "thick" description to convey the meaning of every level of symbolic behavior. (See Section 4.2.1.) The qualitative analyst is often more concerned with other events in society for which the particular content at hand is only or largely a "convenient indicator".

  In this study web site content was often regarded as a reflection of the worldviews and public relations models practiced by the NGOs. Statements made by interviewees during the interviews were used as triangulation measures to ensure that these "deeper phenomena" was evaluated within the context of each organization.

- ***Less formalized categories***

  In qualitative content analyses less formalized categories are usually used, because precise quantification is not the aim. In a quantitative content analysis, categories are identified and defined very precisely before the study commences. With a qualitative analysis a few categories might be identified and defined loosely, while other categories may be added and clarified as the study is in progress. (Also see the discussion of sensitized concepts in Section 4.2.1.)

This means that qualitative content analysis may seem to make use of less systematic and less precise analysis, but actually the analysis could be more precise or relevant in the end, because it is not restricted by a rigid set of categories and definitions. Interpretations are therefore usually more subtle and individualized, because the researcher "becomes part" of the content and is not estranged from the content by strict and so-called objective categories and definitions. (See Section 4.2.1 on the objective/subjective issue in qualitative research.)

In this study web site content was categorized in terms of categories identified from the guiding theoretical perspective of the study. These categories were defined broadly and they were used as guiding the analysis and not as a rigid set of rules to dictate the analysis. (See Section 4.3.3.1 for an explanation of the categories used in this study.)

❖ ***More complex themes***

Because of the characteristics mentioned so far, qualitative content analysis can deal with more complex themes than most quantitative analyses. The requirement for inter-coder reliability, measured by means of a statistical equation, makes it almost impossible to include too much complexity in a quantitative study. If a quantitative study should deal with a complex theme it would usually break the complex materials down in several components in order to produce reliable measurement. However, with qualitative studies the focus is more on the whole and the totality of impression (the *Gestalt*) than on parts of the whole.

In this study the focus was not on smaller components of the web site content as such, instead, each web site was studied as a whole, together with the information obtained from the in-depth interviews. In order to concentrate on the totality of the impression, categories were less formal and no quantification measures were applied.

The procedures for the content analyses are discussed fully in Section 4.3.3.

4.2.4 Semi-structured interviews

In-depth or intensive interviews[2] are often used in qualitative research as part of field research. Some sort of interviewing is used in nearly all qualitative projects (Lindlof, 1995:164; Mason, 1996:35; Pitout, 1995). The interview in qualitative research should not be viewed as just a list of questions to be asked. Rather, it can be called "conversation with a purpose" as it often takes on the form and feel of talk between peers. It should be loose, informal, coequal, interactive, committed, open-ended and empathic. The questions asked are merely one element of the interview, as the main purpose is dialogue.

Interviews follow many of the rules of ordinary conversation, for example a few topics are covered in depth, there are smooth transitions between subjects and people take turns speaking and listening. However, there are also some differences, for example the interviewee will be expected to talk more than the interviewer in order to provide in-depth information. If the interviewer is not satisfied with the level of depth in an answer, follow-op questions are asked to unobtrusively show the interviewee the level of depth that is required. Another difference is that the researcher keeps a record of what has been said during the interview. This could be in the form of taking notes, videotaping or tape recording (Rubin & Rubin, 1995:124,125).

It should be kept in mind that the interviewer also acts as a participant observer, because the act of communication as a ritual means much more than just the meaning of the words uttered during a conversation. The interviewer has to note the different contexts playing into a particular interview situation, and record verbal as well as non-verbal cues. At the same time the interviewer is active and also plays an active role in determining the course of conversation (Lindlof, 1995:195; Carey, 1989:15-18; Mason, 1996:38).

The interview could be unstructured or semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews differ from the unstructured interview because questions are asked from an interview schedule. The interviewer therefore does not just have a few topics to discuss, but he/she has a list of questions to conduct the interview. However, the semi-structured interview is flexible in the sense that questions do not necessarily have to be asked in the same sequence than provided on the interview schedule.

As mentioned before interviewees may be asked to explain their answers and to provide more information. The interviewee can also ask additional questions if the interview leads to a field that is not covered by the interview schedule. Questions are mostly open-ended and should be formulated carefully so as not to produce biased answers or answers that are just socially acceptable and not necessarily true. The interviewer also needs special communications skills in order to let the interviewee feel at ease and to direct the conversation without being rude or without too many interruptions (Du Plooy, 1995; Wimmer & Dominick, 1991; Babbie, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Dingwall, 1997).

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as one of the data-collection methods for this study because specific questions had to be asked for triangulation purposes and to answer to the aims set for the study. Interviews were also chosen because it was important to understand the context in which NGOs function from their own perspectives. These reasons correspond to what Lindlof (1995:167) discusses as the objectives for conducting qualitative interviews.

In this study interviewees were constantly asked to provide examples to illustrate their answers in order to make sure that they understood the questions and also to ensure that the interviewer understood their answers correctly. Interviews were tape-recorded according to the guidelines set by Rubin and Rubin (1995:125-127). The procedures followed are described in more detail in Section 4.3.4.2.

4.3 Research design

In establishing the research design emphasis was be placed on insight and understanding of the context in which the organizations operated on a broad level. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to:

- Obtain general background information on each NGO;
- Determine the public relations model practiced as well as to get an indication of the relevant organizational culture;
- Gather information on NGOs' expectations, problems and successes with regard to their web sites.

Qualitative content analysis was conducted to:

- Determine interactivity in NGOs' web sites;

- Investigate dialogical communication and signs of a two-way symmetrical model of public relations in the web sites;

Data obtained by means of these two research methods were used for triangulation to:

- Compare the public relations model/s practiced to the characteristics of the web sites and vice versa;
- Compare the assumptions of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations to characteristics of the NGOs as well as their web sites.

The specific procedures followed were carefully documented and will be described in the sections to follow.

4.3.1 Research questions, aims, theoretical statements and the research design

As each research question was derived from a specific aim, the answering of the research questions also implies the fulfilling of the aims that were set for this study. (See Chapter 1, Section 1.7.) The first three research questions provided a general background to the implementation and characteristics of the organizations' web sites. Research questions 4 - 7 are based on the theoretical backbone of the study and as such, form the core of this research. Question 8 can be seen as the outcome of this research because it deals with the findings and recommendations of the study.

The relation between the research questions, the specific theoretical statements and the research methods used is indicated in Table 4.1. The specific theoretical statements are repeated in Textbox 4.1 for easy reference.

Table 4.1: Research methods and research questions

Research questions	Methods
1. What are the reasons, aims and expectations of public relations practitioners with regard to their usage of the WWW as a communication medium for selected NGOs in South Africa?	Interview: Questions 3 –7.
2. What successes, failures and problems do they experience with regard to the WWW as a communication medium?	Interview: Questions 8 - 15.
3. What are the general characteristics of NGO web sites? What type of content is provided? How is it organized? Which functions can the content fulfil for its users?	Content analysis
4. What public relations model are practiced by the NGOs and why is a particular model preferred? **(Theoretical statements 2, 3, 4, 5, 7)**	Interview: Questions 1, 2, 16 - 25.
5. How are the characteristics of interactivity implemented in NGO web sites and how does the level of interactivity correspond to the public relations model practiced? **(Theoretical statement 1)**	Content analysis
6. How are the principles of dialogical communication and two-way symmetrical communication implemented in these web sites and how do these principles correspond to the public relations model practiced? **(Theoretical statement 6, 8)**	Content analysis
7. How can these web sites be improved with regard to the features and characteristics mentioned above?	Final chapter: Conclusions and recommendations

Text box 4.1: Specific theoretical statements

Specific theoretical statement 1

An organizational web site can be examined to determine its degree of interactivity by noting the presence of the following dimensions of interactivity:

- *Playfulness*
- *Choice*
- *Connectedness*
- *Information collection*
- *Reciprocal communication.*

Reciprocal communication can be studied on a continuum with reactive communication on the one end and fully interactive communication on the other end. It can be expected that organizations that function according to a two-way symmetrical model would also include more interactive devices on their web sites.

Specific theoretical statement 2

The public relations model practiced by NGOs could be determined by examining the:

- *purpose of public relations (for example to persuade or to build relationships);*
- *the nature of communication by public relations departments (one-way or two-way communication) and*
- *the PR practitioners' view of the relevant communication model (sender/receiver; or group I/II.).*

Specific theoretical statement 3

The reason why a NGO practices a certain public relations model could be determined by examining:

- *the expertise of the PR department;*
- *whether the public relations manager is part of the dominant coalition of the NGOs and*
- *and the organizational culture of the NGOs.*

Specific theoretical statement 4

It is expected that NGOs' choices of public relations models would be directly influenced by their organizational worldviews.

An asymmetrical worldview (characterized by an internal orientation, a closed system, efficiency, elitism, conservatism, tradition and central authority) will lead to the practicing of an asymmetrical model of public relations (press agentry, public information or two-way asymmetrical).

A symmetrical worldview (characterized by the NGOs' views on the need for interdependence, an open system, moving equilibrium, equity, autonomy, innovation, decentralization of management, responsibility, conflict resolution and interest-group liberalism) could lead to the practicing of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

Specific theoretical statement 5

The NGOs' views on the social role of public relations will also influence their choice of a public relations model:

The view of public relations as having an idealistic or a critical social role will contribute to the practicing of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. If NGOs view public relations as a managerial function they will be more likely to practice the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

Those NGOs that view public relations as having a pragmatic, conservative, radical or a neutral social role will be more inclined to practice an asymmetrical model of public relations. If the NGOs view public relations as a mere technical function they will also be more likely to be practicing an asymmetrical model of public relations.

Specific theoretical statement 6

NGOs that support the two-way symmetrical model of public relations will also support and engage in dialogue with their different publics. These NGOs will regard the WWW as an important medium to promote dialogue with its publics. Some of the characteristics of dialogical communication efforts are honesty, mutual respect, and encouragement of free expression.

NGOs that practice asymmetrical public relations will not see dialogue as an integral part of their public relations efforts. They would rather engage in monologue towards their publics. Some of the characteristics of monological communication efforts that these organizations would use, are deception, coercion and distrust. These NGOs will mostly use the WWW to embark on one-way, monological communication with its publics.

Specific theoretical statement 7

NGOs involved in this research can be placed on a continuum in terms of how symmetrically or asymmetrically they practice public relations. Those NGOs that practice the two-way symmetrical model will not practice it in a pure form, but they will rather follow the mixed-motive model approach where persuasion may also be part of their actions. It is important to note that these NGOs will use persuasion but they would also be willing to be persuaded by their publics if disagreement arises. They would generally strive to reach the win-win position on the symmetry/asymmetry continuum.

Specific theoretical statement 8

NGO web sites can be evaluated for two-way symmetrical and dialogical communication attributes by applying the following principles:

- *the presence of a dialogical/feedback loop;*
- *the usefulness of information;*
- *the generation of return visits;*
- *the intuitiveness/ease of the interface;*
- *the conservation of visitors.*

It could be expected that NGOs that practice the two-way symmetrical model of public relations will apply more of these principles in their web sites than NGOs who practice one of the asymmetrical models of public relations.

The research design provides a synchronic view on the status of public relations efforts via the WWW in the ten selected NGOs. As mentioned before, it was not possible to conduct a longitudinal study in order to provide a more diachronic view on this matter. However, the dynamic and ever-evolving feature of an organization's relationships with its various publics is herewith acknowledged. After extensive research on organization-public relationships Broom *et al.*, Casey and Ritchey (2000:17) have stated that although "relationships are the dynamic results of the exchanges and reciprocity that manifests themselves as the relationships develop and evolve,...they can be described at a given point in time."

With the research design set to fulfil the aims of the study, the next step was to identify ten NGOs in the Gauteng/North West Province area that had web pages, to use as a sample for the research.

4.3.2 Sampling

Initially the umbrella body of South African NGOs, Sangoco, was contacted for a membership list of NGOs that could be included in the sample. Sangoco was formed in 1995 to co-ordinate NGO input into the Reconstruction and Development Program. Its members work in a wide range of development fields, such as land, health, urban and rural development (Anon, 1999:1). However, the organization did not respond to any of the inquiries by the researcher.

As another option the Human Sciences Research Council's (HSRC) *Prodder online* service was consulted. The acronym *Prodder* stands for *Program for development research* and it is a Southern African information medium that collects and disseminates information on all Southern African development issues and role-players. Since 1987 Prodder has established itself as a leading Southern African information service on development, compiling and disseminating information on thousands of Southern African development-related organizations.

Its mission is to provide an appropriate, comprehensive and dynamic development information service and it uses various mediums for this purpose. One of these mediums is the Southern African Development Directory that is published biennially. The objective of this directory is to support the Southern African reconstruction and regional development process with a comprehensive overview of the activities of all the region's development role-players.

The latest development directory was published on November 30th, 1999 and it contained information on more than 5 600 development-related organizations in Southern Africa. It included government departments, semi-state organizations, research institutions, NGOs, CSI programs, bilateral and inter-governmental agencies, United Nations agencies and diplomatic missions. To ensure easy access to the information it was organized into fourteen country chapters and each entry has been listed in both a sectional index (66 categories) and an alphabetical index (HSRC, 2000:1-2).

Information covered on each entry include the following:

- Name and acronym of organization;
- Contact detail (postal and street address/telephone/fax/e-mail/WWW);
- Contact address of regional offices;
- Contact people;
- Mission statement; and

- Overview of main development activities.

For the purposes of this study the *2000 Prodder directory* was searched for NGOs with web sites on the WWW, operating in Gauteng and North West Province. From the more than 2500 NGOs operating in these areas, only fifty had web sites on the WWW. These NGOs were all operating in Gauteng, meaning that none of the NGOs operating in the North West Province made use of an organizational web site. The ten NGOs needed for this research had to be selected from these fifty organizations.

4.3.2.1 Selection criteria

As explained in the previous section, the main selection criteria applied were that elected NGOs had to have a web site on the WWW and they had to be operating in the North West or Gauteng provinces, for practical and feasibility reasons. Aspects such as the popularity of the web site or the communication quality of their web sites were not taken into account. The fifty NGOs in the sampling frame were involved in a wide variety of development activities. The list of NGOs ranged from small to relatively large organizations as well as a few international NGOs operating in Gauteng.

A non-probability sampling method was used, as this was a qualitative study. As the aim was not to compare the selected NGOs with each other, a case study approach was taken. This implied that the ten NGOs were carefully selected by hand to ensure the inclusion of the widest possible types of organizations. Therefore a selection of small and larger NGOs were made, as well as NGOs involved in a variety of development spheres. The following NGOs were selected:

- Trees for Africa (TFA)
- Family and Marriage Society of South Africa (Famsa)
- Mvula Trust
- Cancer Association of South Africa (Cansa)
- Women'sNet
- Reach and Teach*
- Diakonia*
- Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
- Project Literacy (Prolit)
- Nelson Mandela Children's Fund (NMCF)

These ten NGOs were initially contacted via e-mail to explain the research project and to determine whether they were willing to take part in the project. (See Appendix A.)

4.2.1.2 Response rate

*Two of the selected NGOs had to be taken out of the sample, as their e-mail addresses no longer existed. Their web sites were pursued to determine if any other contact information was available. In the case of Reach and Teach, the web site no longer existed and in the case of Diakonia the web site was in a foreign language. To replace these two NGOs the following two NGOs were selected.

- African Research and Educational Puppetry Program (AREPP Educational Trust)

- International Fundraising Consortium (Interfund)

The organizations that responded to the initial e-mail message were the following:

- Mvula Trust (agreed to take part)
- Famsa (agreed to take part)
- Trees for Africa (agreed to take part)
- Cansa (agreed to take part)
- Interfund (agreed to take part)
- Charles Stewart Mott Foundation (refused to take part)
- African Research and Educational Puppetry Program (AREPP Educational Trust) (refused to take part)
- Project Literacy (agreed to take part)
- Women'sNet (agreed to take part)

The NGOs that did not respond to the initial e-mail message were sent a fax similar to the e-mail message, explaining the research and asking them to respond either via fax, e-mail or telephone to indicate whether they wanted to take part in the research or not.

Those organizations that did not respond to the fax were contacted by telephone to make sure whether they wanted to take part in the research. Finally the following ten NGOs were included in the sample:

- Mvula Trust
- Famsa
- Trees for Africa
- Cansa
- Interfund
- Project Literacy
- Women'sNet
- Nelson Mandela Children's Fund
- Child in Crisis
- The Center for Development and Enterprise

After these NGOs had agreed to be part of the research, their web sites were analyzed and the organizations were contacted via telephone to make arrangements for the interviews. (More specific details on the procedures followed are given in Section 4.3.4.2.)

4.3.3 Content analysis

As was explained in Section 4.2.3 the content analysis in this study did not focus on measurement, counting and statistics, but rather on describing certain features of included web sites in order to compare the findings to particular theoretical assumptions. Web pages were subsequently not coded to generate frequency counts of items. Instead, web pages were "fractured" to rearrange them into categories that facilitate the comparison of data within and between these categories (Maxwell, 1996:78) and to sort the data into broader themes and issues, according to the nine specific theoretical statements stated.

The analysis focused *inter alia* on the characteristics of interactivity and dialogical communication, as it appeared on the different web sites of NGOs (Rafaeli, 1988; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). These two aspects formed the core of the content analysis, but other aspects were also analyzed as will be explained in the following paragraphs.

At the start of the analysis a basic framework was set up based on the applicable specific theoretical statements. Thereafter the main categories in the framework were described and broadly defined taking the theoretical background in Chapters 2 and 3 into account. To determine whether these broad categories were suitable and complete for the content analysis a pilot study was conducted on the web site of one of the NGOs that refused to take part in the research project.

Several changes were made to the category framework as several categories were added and made more specific. After the changes had been made the definitions of the categories were also adapted and a second pilot study was conducted on the web page of another NGO that had not been selected in the sample (the Planned Parenthood Association of South Africa [PPASA] [http://ppasa.org.za]).

The second pilot study proved that the categories and their definitions were sufficient for qualitative content analysis. As had been explained before, the analysis was not aimed at coding, counting and measuring content. Categories were broad and meant to classify specific aspects of the web sites into broad categories applicable to the theoretical foundation of this study.

4.3.3.1 Category guidelines for the content analysis

The category guidelines served the same purpose as a data sheet would serve in a quantitative content analysis. It was used to help the researcher to take all relevant aspects of web site content into account. However, it differed from a conventional data sheet as no codes were assigned to the different categories and their sub-categories. Furthermore categories were much broader as would be the case in a quantitative content analysis and not always mutually exclusive.

4.3.3.2 Broad definitions of categories

- **General characteristics**
  - *Use of color, readability of fonts and graphics*

  The general characteristics of web pages were described in terms of the aspects mentioned above. As it was not the aim of the study to evaluate web pages from a graphic design perspective, these aspects were merely included in the content analysis to make a general description of these web pages possible.

  Use of color refers to what and how many colors were used on the web pages for graphic representations as well as text, while the readability of fonts refers to how easy it is to read the text against the background color that was chosen. Readability also refers to the choice as well as the size of the font/s used.

- **Content categories on front page and layout of web pages**

For this category the content categories on the home page or front page of the web site were listed, as this is an indication of the layout of content in the rest of the pages. The layout of the front page was described in terms of the relationship between graphics and text and also in terms of how the page was made up (what choices/content was put where on the page). The layout of the web site was also described in terms of how the web site content was fragmented in different web pages. For example, some NGOs had a different page for each development program that they worked on, while others put all their programs on one page.

- **Type and aim/s of content**

This aspect refers to what content could be found on a web site, for example, general information, press releases, annual reports, feedback forms, grant application forms, donor detail and so on. It also refers to the apparent aim that the NGO had for including these different forms of content on the web site. The aim of the content could, for example, be to provide information, to educate, to persuade, to receive publicity or to generate reaction (two-way communication) from web site visitors. The aim for the inclusion of the different forms of content was interpreted by the researcher and afterwards triangulated by asking the same question during the semi-structured interviews.

- **Target**

Web pages of NGOs could be directed to, for example, the general public, government, other NGOs, potential donors/sponsors, international funding agencies or other international organizations. Web pages could also be used to communicate to potential beneficiaries of NGOs' development work. This aspect was investigated by means of content analysis, but during the interviews, media officers/public relations practitioners were also asked about their intended target/s for their organization's web page.

- **Functions for its users**

The functions of a particular web site refer to what web site visitors could do with the content on the web site or what uses they could have for the different forms of content provided on the web site. Web site visitors could, for example, visit a particular NGO's web site to get information on the organization, or other related information, or to get news, to make donations, to discuss important issues, to ask questions, to apply for a job, to search the web site and so forth.

- **Signs of transparency**

As organizations that practice the two-way symmetrical model of public relations usually display the characteristics of transparency and collaboration in terms of management and its publics, this aspect was included in the content analysis. Signs of transparency refer to the inclusion of annual reports, press releases, information on staff, the provision of statistics on web site usage, details of donors, sponsors and other financial aspects. In other words, the more detail an NGO provided about its operations and funding, the more transparent the NGO was viewed.

❖ **Characteristics of interactivity**

Earlier interactivity had been defined as follows: the extent to which the communicator and the audience respond to, or are willing to facilitate each other's communication needs (Ha & James, 1998:461). (See Chapter 2, Section 2.6.4.1.) This definition was explored further by the identification of five dimensions of interactivity that were used to define the level of interactivity in the web sites of NGOs. These dimensions were described in Chapter 2, Section 2.6.4.2, therefore only a short summary of each dimension will be given here.

➥ ***Choice***

Choice refers to the availability of choice and unrestricted navigation on a web site, where the web site visitor undertakes no obligations and has the option of terminating the communication at any given point in time. Web sites where the visitor has to register or pay a fee before navigating the web site could be seen as a restriction in the choice dimension of interactivity.

The dimension of choice also refers to the degree of effort needed to explore a particular web site. If a web site visitor has the option of navigating the web site in his/her choice of language or has a choice between a text/graphic version of the web site, he/she will feel empowered. This will open up more opportunities for dialogue and interaction via the web site. Therefore the more choices the web site offers, the higher the level of interactivity offered by the web site.

➥ ***Connectedness***

Hyperlinks provide a sense of connectedness to the web site visitor. The more hyperlinks included in the web site, the more the feeling of connectedness will be that web site visitors experience.

Links were described in terms of internal or external characteristics. Internal links are links within the web site. This could also include links to so-called sub-web sites that is an independent web site within another web site. An example is an international organization that provides a link to a branch in another country. While browsing the branch in for example South Africa, the logo of the "mother organization" is still on the web site and a link back to its home page is provided. Advertisements are another example of sub-web sites that could be present on a web site.

External links take the web site visitor completely out of the web site, to another web site and no link is provided to go back to the original web site. It is however, possible to use the "back" option of the browser to return to the original web site. Advertisements could be included as internal (as sub-web sites) or external links (leading away to a complete other web site) depending on how it is presented.

Both internal and external links were further categorized as follows: links to information about the organization or its services, programs or products; links to graphic representations, photographs, slide shows or show rooms and links to other unrelated information or news. Advertisements on web sites were another kind of external link that could lead visitors away from the original web site.

➥ ***Information collection***

This dimension refers to NGOs' needs to gather information about their web site visitors. It is therefore a source-oriented dimension of interactivity. Monitoring mechanisms can be categorized firstly in terms of the awareness of the visitor. The content analysis focused only on overt monitoring devices, of which web site visitors would be aware. Overt monitoring devices were categorized in terms of registration *before* browsing the web site or registration *during* the browsing at certain points in the web site. Information on covert monitoring devices was collected during the interviews. (See Section 4.3.4.)

➥ ***Reciprocal communication and the level of interactivity***

Two-way communication via the web site was the object of reciprocal communication in the content analysis. Reciprocal communication can be described on a continuum with reactive communication at the one end and true interactive or two-way communication on the other end. Examples of true interactive communication are online discussions, whether in the form of a chat room, a forum or a discussion board/news group.

Examples of reciprocal communication that reside more to the other end of the continuum (that is reactive communication) include the provision of contact information such as e-mail addresses and telephone numbers, online ordering or donation forms or surveys in the form of feedback forms.

The level of interactivity was determined by means of an adaptation of the continuum provided by Cooley (1999). (See Chapter 3, Section 3.18.) As Cooley's scale of interactivity is a quantitative measure, it could not be applied to a qualitative study such as this one. The quantitative scale was therefore transformed into a qualitative scale as follows.

25% Interactive – sites that included information on contacting the organization became the lowest point on the scale, called *limited interactivity*;

50% Interactive – sites that included information on contacting the organization for specific concerns such as ordering/donating became the second point on the scale, called *somewhat interactive*;

75% Interactive – sites that included surveys on either the effectiveness of the web site and organizational practices or a form for entering comments became the third point on the scale, called *moderate interactivity*;

100% Interactive – sites that provided a forum for online interaction or public discourse became the highest point on the scale, called *high interactivity*.

➥ ***Playfulness***

This dimension refers to the inclusion of games and other attention-grabbing arousal devices on a web site, such as the often-used question-and-answers, electronic post cards. Through games and other forms of entertainment, web site visitors can be probed to become more involved and participate more in whatever the web site offers.

Text box 4.2: Category guidelines for content analysis

General characteristics

Use of color:	Text Graphics
Readability of fonts:	Background colors Size of fonts
Graphics:	Photographs Graphic representations

❖ **Content categories on front page:**

Layout of front page:	Relationship between text and graphics Placement of text and graphics
Layout of other pages:	Fragmentation of content

❖ **Type and aim/s of content**

Type:	General information Press releases Annual reports Feedback forms Grant/donor forms Other
Aims:	Information/Education Persuasion Publicity Two-way communication

❖ **Target:**	General public Potential donors/sponsors/applicants International funding agencies/organizations Government NGOs Beneficiaries Other
❖ **Functions for its users**	Organizational information Related information Unrelated information, e.g. news Make donations Discussions Ask questions Job application Search the site Other
❖ **Signs of transparency**	Annual reports/Information on staff/ Press releases/Statistics on web site usage/ Details of donors/sponsors/finances Other

- **References to other media:** Yes/No
  Which media?

- **When was the web site last updated?**

- **Characteristics of interactivity**

Choice 1:	Restricted navigation (registration/payment)	
	Unrestricted navigation	
Choice 2:	Language choice	
Choice 3:	Text/graphic version	
	Other	
Connectedness:		
Internal links:	General links:	Org/services/programs
		Photos/graphics/slides/showroom
		Unrelated info/news
	Sub-web sites	
	Advertisements	
External links:	General links	
	Advertisements	
Information collection:		
	Overt monitoring devices:	Before browsing
		During browsing
	Covert monitoring devices	(not analyzed)
Reciprocal communication:		
	True interactive communication:	Chat room
		Forum
	Reactive communication:	E-mail address
		Telephone
		Feedback forms
		Online ordering
Playfulness:	Games	
	Post-cards	
	Questions/answers	
	Other	

- **Continuum of interactivity:**

Limited:	Contact information
Somewhat:	Contact for specific concerns
Moderate:	Surveys, feedback forms
High:	Chat room or online forum

- **Orientation of interactivity**

Audience-oriented:	Playfulness
	Choice
	Connectedness
Source-oriented:	Information collection
	Reciprocal communication

- **Functions and forms of interactivity:**

Customer support:	Software downloading Online problem diagnostics Electronic inquiry Order status tracking Comment/feedback
Marketing research:	Site survey Product/program survey New product/program proposal
Search for more information:	Key word search Personal-choice helper Virtual reality display Branch locator Electronic coupon
Advertising/promotion/publicity:	Usergroup Online order Sweepstakes/prizes Multimedia shows Job placements
Entertainment:	Electronic post cards Surfer postings Games

- **Principles of dialogical/two-way communication**

Test 1: Dialogical loop:	E-mail contact Feedback forms Forums/chat rooms Other	
Reaction on testing:	Prompt/delayed/none	
Test 2: Return visits:		
	Usefulness of information:	Different publics Logical organization Advantage of whom
	Regular updating:	"New" Special forums Commentaries Other
Test 3: Ease of use:		
	Table of contents:	Organization
	Text/graphics relationship	
	Download speed	
	Requirements for hardware/software	

❖ **Orientation of interactivity**

The orientation of interactivity as source-oriented or audience-oriented provides a further indication of the level of interactivity on NGOs' web sites. The highest level of interactivity is obtained by including both source-oriented and audience-oriented dimensions of interactivity on a web site. (See Chapter 2, Section 2.6.4.2.) The dimensions of playfulness, choice and connectedness were classified as audience-oriented, and information collection and reciprocal communication as source-oriented, according to Ha and James (1998).

After the dimension/s of interactivity on a web site had been analyzed as explained above, the main orientation of interactivity (as source or audience-oriented) was estimated.

❖ **Functions and forms of interactivity**

In Chapter 2 (Section 2.5.4.4) the following functions of interactivity were identified: customer support, marketing research, search for more information, advertising/ promotion/publicity and entertainment. For each function several forms of interactivity were also described. NGOs' web sites were analyzed to determine which functions and forms of interactivity were present.

❖ **Principles of dialogical/two-way symmetrical communication**

➡ ***Test 1: Dialogical loop***

The dialogical loop should be the most important reason for the existence of an organizational web site (Kent, 1998). Two-way or dialogical communication via an organization's web site is not possible without the existence of a dialogical/feedback loop. This aspect was analyzed by noting which mechanisms were included on the web sites, to enhance two-way communication. These mechanisms refer to those described earlier as mechanisms for reciprocal communication, whether they refer to reactive communication or true interactive communication. As mentioned before, this could include the options of feedback forms, questions via e-mail, chat rooms, live forums and so forth.

As was explained earlier it takes a specific commitment from the organization to implement a dialogical/feedback loop. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.18.) These mechanisms should therefore not only be present on the web site, but they should be maintained and monitored closely. To ascertain whether NGOs applied these guidelines, the researcher tested the dialogical/feedback loops provided on web sites. By doing this, it could be determined whether NGOs were committed to dialogue and two-way communication or not.

➡ ***Test 2: Return visits***

The two most important aspects to generate return visits to web sites were identified as *the usefulness of information* and the *frequent updating of web site content.* (See Chapter 3, Section 3.18.) The usefulness of information on NGOs' web sites was evaluated in terms of its applicability to different publics (in other words, content should not be too specific, but general or background information should also be included).

To be useful, content should also be organized logically in such a way that web site visitors can easily find what they are looking for. Content should not only be to the organization's advantage, but also to the advantage of their publics, in order to create informed partners to make two-way symmetrical communication possible.

The regular updating of a web site contributes to the generation of return visits, providing that the information on the web site is of value to the visitor. In this regard return visits could be encouraged by special forums, commentaries, online question and answer sessions and downloadable mailing lists, amongst others.

➥ ***Test 3: Ease of use***

NGOs' web sites were evaluated in terms of its ease of navigation. This aspect refers to the inclusion of a table of contents that is well organized and hierarchical. It also refers to the relationship between graphics and text that would in turn influence the download speed and efficiency. Web sites should be accessible to users with a variety of hardware and software and not just to users with the latest technology at their disposal. If users can make a choice between a low graphics and a high graphics version or between different languages, a web site was evaluated as easier to use than web sites that did not offer these choices.

❖ **References to other media**

The application of the total communication concept was discussed during the semi-structured interviews to investigate NGOs' views on this matter. However, the content analysis was used to determine if web sites made any references to other media or publications that carried content about the organizations. Most of the NGOs did not use mass media such as newspapers, television or radio often for advertising or public relations purposes. Instead, most of the NGOs published several publications (for example books, pamphlets, posters, and newsletters) themselves and the content analysis revealed references made to these publications via their web sites.

❖ **When was the web site last updated?**

The frequency of updating a web site is one of the indicators of how effectively the web site is managed. As stated earlier, it is not good enough just to have an internet presence. Web site visitors will not return to a web site if it is rarely updated. The frequency of updating a web site cannot be determined just by analyzing the web site. Therefore the content analysis only noted the last date on which web sites were updated. During the interviews, public relations practitioners were questioned on the frequency of updating.

The categories for content analysis purposes could not provide sufficient information to answer the research questions posed, therefore an additional research method was used in the form of semi-structured interviews. The combination of content analysis and semi-structured interviews was also done for triangulation purposes.

4.3.4 Interviews

4.3.4.1 The interviewing schedule

The interviews covered two main topics. In the first instance questions were asked about the NGOs' web sites to determine how the web site was managed and what successes or problems were experienced since the web sites were implemented. Secondly questions were asked about the organization itself. These questions covered the public relations function in the organization, as well as topics with regard to the organizational structure and its culture. These questions were asked to determine the organizations' approach to communication and public relations to be able to place them in terms of the four public relations models. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.3.)

Text box 4.3: Semi-structured interview schedule

1. **Do you employ a full-time media officer or public relations practitioner? If not, who is responsible for communication activities such as public relations?**

2. **If you do have a public relations department/team/practitioner, what qualification/s does he/she/they have?**

3. **When did you implement your organization's web site?**

4. **Why did you decide to put up a web site for your organization? (Reasons)**

5. **What were/are your aims for the organizational web site in general, as well as the specific content that you have included in the web site?**

6. **What were/are your expectations of the web site?**

7. **For what target groups or publics did you intend your organization's web site?**

8. **Do you monitor the visitors to your web site by means of cookie files or any other means?**

9. **What successes (if any) did you experience with the web site since it has been in operation?**

10. **What problem/s do/did you experience with regard to your organization's web site?**

11. **What failures (if any) did you experience with the web site since it has been in operation?**

12. **Who developed/created your web site (individual/team/involvement of communication specialist)?**

13. **Did you conduct any research before you implemented the web site, or since it has been in operation?**

14. How often is your web site updated? Whose responsibility is this?

15. What is your view on the relationship between your web site and other forms of communication? How do you go about to integrate your different communication media/publications, if at all?

16. What is your view on the purpose of public relations/ media work for your NGO?

17. Please describe your view of the communication process between your organization and its publics (e.g. who initiates communication, or how does it usually happen)?

18. What social role does your organization play and how does the PR/media relations department contribute to this role?

19. Please explain the structure of your organization? (Where does PR fit in/dominant coalition?)

20. How important are the following aspects in your organization's culture? For example, is the culture authoritarian or participatory/ democratic/ transparent? Illustrate with examples.

21. How important are the following aspects in your organization? Illustrate with examples.

22. How important is contact and input from other organizations/ individuals/publics for your organization? Do you react to their input by adapting? Please provide examples.

23. To what extent does your organization look after the needs and interests of ordinary people to protect them against for example government and large corporate structures? Illustrate with examples.

24. If there were disagreement or conflict between your organization and some of its publics, how would you usually go about to resolve the conflict? Give examples.

25. To what extent are the public relations practitioner/department involved in the strategic planning process?

It was possible that interviewees could answer the questions according to what they think the interviewer had wanted to hear. It was also a possibility that interviewees could try to make their organizations "look good", as some of the questions were about issues where social acceptability could play a role. To combat this, the interviewees had to illustrate most of their answers with examples. These examples could indicate if they knew what they were talking about or if they only answered to satisfy the researcher or to "look good".

The first important aspect covered by the interview was whether the organization employed a full time media officer or public relations practitioner or not. It was important to gain this knowledge from the start of the interview in order to know how to ask some of the other questions during the interview (Question 1). As the literature study revealed the importance of formal communications qualifications for the practice of excellent two-way symmetrical public relations, this issue was also pursued in the second question. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.)

In order to put the interviewee/s at ease, the easier questions were asked first. These questions dealt with issues regarding the organizational web site (Questions 3-14). The reason/s why the organizations had put up their web sites were asked, because the literature study pointed to the importance of strategic goals for the implementation of a web site. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.17.1.) Through the interview it was established if the NGOs had specific target groups for their web sites and if they had any idea of the success or lack thereof, with regard to the web site. It was important to establish whether their web sites had hits or not, because ultimately the number of hits would indicate if the web site was successful or not. It was expected that the web site that had more interactive features would also have more hits.

The literature study also revealed the importance of research prior to the implementation of a web site, as well as the importance of a team approach in the creation of the web site (See Chapter 3, Section 3.17.1.) The NGOs were therefore also probed on these issues. Their commitment to the management of the web sites were discussed in terms of the frequency of updating these web sites.

By means of question 15 it was tried to establish whether the selected NGOs integrate their web sites with other communication media or not. The integration of the WWW with other media or publications is important in promoting the web site in order to make its existence better known amongst the organization's publics. The integration of communication media could ultimately be one of the aspects that determine the success or failure of an organizational web site. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.17.3.)

Questions 16-25 dealt with the organization itself as well as its views on communication and public relations. Interviewees were questioned on the importance and the purpose of communications or public relations within their organizations. Their approach to public relations was examined in order to establish broadly what public relations model was being followed within each organization. The literature study showed that excellent public relations according to the two-way symmetrical model was more likely in organizations that follow certain excellent management principles. (See Appendix D.) Interviewees were therefore questioned on the organizational culture and the authority in their organizations.

The interviewees were also asked about the implementation of several two-way symmetrical principles within their organizations. Due to time constraints, it was not possible to include more of these principles in the interview. The structure of the organizations was discussed in order to establish whether the public relations practitioner (or the person responsible for PR functions) was part of the dominant coalition of the organization or not (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.) It was also determined to what extent the person holding this position was involved in the organization's strategic planning processes.

Furthermore the organizations' conflict resolution approach/es were discussed, as well as the organizations' views on interest-group liberalism and the social role of public relations. The organizations' functioning as an open or closed system were examined, as well as aspects such as interdependence, autonomy, innovation and the decentralization of management. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.7.)

*4.3.4.2 **Procedures followed with conducting interviews***

Interviews were conducted with the public relations practitioner or media/communications officer of the selected NGOs. Some of the NGOs did not have a communication department. In those cases the interviews were conducted either with the CEO or with the specific person responsible for the organizational web site or communication functions within the organization. Although each organization was requested to provide one interviewee, some NGOs requested to involve more than one employee in the interview. (Table 4.2 provides the list of interviewees as well as their positions within the organizations that they had represented.)

Table 4.2: Interviewees for semi-structured interviews

NGO	Person/s interviewed	Position/s
Mvula Trust	Kate Skinner	Communications manager
Famsa	Isabel Joubert Dr. Annette van Rensburg	Secretary National director
Trees for Africa	Jeunesse Park Fiona Keartland	Executive director Program manager
Cansa	Steve Lepita Belmira Rodrigues	CEO Cansa Information Service
Interfund	Helle Christiansen-Cawthraw Dumisani Hlophe	Information officer Head: Information department
Project Literacy	Yvonne Eskell-Klagsbrun	Fundraising and communications manager
Women'sNet	Sonja Boezak	Information coordinator
NMCF	Maeline Engelbrecht	Manager: International donor relations
Child in Crisis	Gert Jonker	Founder and trustee
CDE	Judith Hudson	Senior research coordinator

The interviews were mostly conducted at the offices of the NGOs, except for the interview with Women'sNet, which was conducted in a coffee shop at the request of the interviewee.

Interviews were conducted over a period of two months, at a rate of more or less two interviews per week. Interviews were thus spaced to allow the researcher to make transcriptions of the interviews directly after they had been conducted. This approach is recommended by Rubin and Rubin (1995:126) to enable the researcher to remember the context as well as other cues present during the interview.

All interviewees were very cooperative and willing to answer questions, even though the interviews on average took between 75 to 90 minutes to conduct. Every interview was tape recorded, to enable the researcher to conduct the interview without having to take extensive notes. Before tape-recording the interviews, permission from the interviewees was obtained. The researcher explained how the tape-recordings would be used.

Every interview was started by explaining the aims of the study and by indicating how the NGOs involved in the study could benefit from its findings. After this introduction, the interviews commenced, as indicated in the interview schedule. (See Text box 4.3.) As the interviews were semi-structured, interviewees were not always questioned in the same sequence.

It often happened that interviewees started to elaborate on certain questions, and by doing so automatically progressed to other questions. In such cases, the researcher did not interfere, but allowed the interviewees the freedom to explain the issue/s at hand as they wished. Interviewees were probed when their explanations were unclear, or regarded as inadequate by the researcher. They were also often asked to provide examples to illustrate or prove some of the claims made. It also happened that some interviewees did not understand some of the questions. In such cases the researcher tried to explain the question/s without influencing the interviewee's response.

Some of the questions in the interview schedule were sometimes combined, as the answers given were similar. For example, questions 4, 5 and 6 were often asked as one question, as they deal with the reasons for putting up a web site, the aims for the web site as well as the expectations of the web site. Another example is the combination of question 10 and 11 with regard to problems and failures. (See Text box 4.3.)

The interviews were conducted for triangulation purposes. To fulfil this purpose, it was necessary to include specific questions based on the prior content analysis of a web site. During the course of each content analysis the researcher came across aspects that were unclear on the web site. These issues as well as other impressions of the web sites were pursued during the interviews. For example, the researcher found that a web site was targeted at the government and other NGOs. During the interview, asking the interviewee the same question would test this finding. It was thereby ensured that the researcher's findings were not biased.

The implication is that every interview included some unique questions that were not asked in other interviews. These questions were based on a specific organization and its web site. The content analysis is discussed in Chapter 5-14 and the specific issues pursued during the interviews are indicated under the relevant headings.

4.4 Problems experienced during the empirical procedures

4.4.1 Problems during the content analyses

No major problems were experienced during the content analyses. As mentioned earlier, the content analyses categories were tested in two pilot studies and adapted to address the initial shortcomings. However, during the course of the content analyses a few minor changes were made to the category guidelines. These included the following additions:

- *Type and aim/s of content*
  Education
- *Signs of transparency*
  Information on staff
  Statistics on web site usage

The options with regard to the level of interactivity were adapted, because the percentage options used by Cooley (1999) were more compatible with a quantitative study. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.18.) The four placements on the interactivity continuum were altered as was explained in Section 4.3.3.2.

The NGOs' web sites were analyzed prior to the interviews, therefore the interviews dealt with the current versions of the web sites. However, in many cases the interviewees informed the researcher that a new, revamped version of their web sites would be online soon. This necessitated the researcher to make a decision as to which version of every organization's web site had to be included in the study and whether the new version of the web site should be analyzed as well.

The decision was made to include only the current versions of the organizations' web sites for content analyses, because it could delay the conclusion of the study if the researcher had to wait for each new web site to be implemented. However, the new versions envisaged by the interviewees were discussed during the interviews. This was done in order to determine whether the interviewees were aware of the shortcomings of their current web sites and to find out how these shortcomings would be addressed or not.

4.4.2 Problems during interviews

No major problems were experienced with the conducting of the interviews. All interviewees were willing to participate in the study and arranging specific dates and times for the interviews was not problematic. All interviewees were available at the times arranged and did not mind the interviews being tape-recorded.

The selection of the interviewee was somewhat problematic, especially in the case of those NGOs that did not have a public relations practitioner or a media officer in a communications department. In these cases the interviews were either conducted with the person responsible for communication functions, including the web site, or with the CEO of the organization also present at the time of the interview.

Another problem was that most of the interviewees were not very keen to provide specific information on their qualifications. They were mostly only prepared to explain their background in terms of previous working experience or the academic field in which they are qualified. As this was a sensitive issue, the researcher did not insist on them providing more information than they were comfortable with. However, it was determined whether the interviewees had any communication qualifications.

A few of the interviewees had problems understanding some of the questions in the interview schedule. The most problematic question was question 18, on the social role of public relations. (See Text box 4.3.) In these cases the researcher had to explain the question, trying not to influence the response of the interviewee. Questions 17 (on the communication process) and 22 (on the organization as an open system and its interdependence) were also not understood at first by some interviewees.

The interviewees without any communication qualification or background mostly had trouble understanding these questions. However, after an explanation had been offered, the interviewees were able to respond to these questions and also to provide examples to illustrate their points of view.

4.5 Conclusion

Both the content analyses and the semi-structured interviews were aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of the selected NGOs' usage of the WWW as a communication medium. Therefore none of the measuring instruments were designed to measure in terms of the counting of frequencies and statistics. The data obtained from the content analyses and interviews were handled as separate case studies and are described in Chapters 5-14.

After the description of each NGO the data were integrated with the theoretical assumptions underlying this study in order to evaluate each NGO in terms of its approach to communication and public relations in particular. The evaluation concentrated on the NGOs' application of the WWW for public relations purposes according to the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. The conclusions and recommendations reached in Chapter 15 are the results of this evaluation. It was therefore not necessary to make use of any statistical methods. It was also not the aim of the data analysis to compare the NGOs with each other. Instead, the analysis concentrated on answering the aims and research questions posed for this study, by identifying the most important trends with regard to public relations and the usage of the WWW, using the two-way symmetrical model as normative theoretical backbone.

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[1] For a detailed work on qualitative research, refer to Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. 1994. *Handbook of qualitative research.* London: Sage.

Other valuable sources on qualitative research include the following:

Miles, M.B. & Huberman, A.M. 1994. *An expanded Sourcebook: Qualitative data analysis.* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Miller, G. 1997. Introduction: Context and method in qualitative research. (*In* Miller, G. & Dingwall, R., *eds.* Context & method in qualitative research. London: Sage. p. 1-11.)

Stempel, G.H. & Westley, B.H. 1981. Research methods in mass communication. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Silverman, D. 1997. The logics of qualitative research. (*In* Miller, G. & Dingwall, R., *eds.* Context and method in qualitative research. London: Sage. p. 12-25.)

[2] See the following source for an extensive discussion of qualitative interviewing: Rubin, H.J. & Rubin, I.S. 1995. *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data.* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Part II

NGO web sites: Content analyses and interviews

In part II the web sites[1] of ten NGOs are analyzed and the results of the interviewees with representatives from these NGOs are described. The theoretical points of departure discussed in Chapter 3 are utilized throughout in order to simultaneously describe and evaluate the web sites.

The content analyses and related interviews for this study were conducted during a two-month period, from June 2000 to July 2000. The procedures followed were described in the previous chapter. For a logical organization of the information gathered during this process every NGO included in the study is discussed separately. This means that the content analysis as well as the interview with each organization is discussed before a next NGO is dealt with.

The analysis of the web sites is described in the past tense because some of the web sites have been updated and changed since the content analysis was done.

Eight of the interviews were conducted in English, and two in Afrikaans, according to the preferences of the interviewees. The interviews are paraphrased for the purposes of this discussion. However, the researcher is in the possession of the complete recorded interviews. For the English interviews the paraphrased versions include several direct quotes from the actual interviews, while the Afrikaans interviews were translated into English and no direct quotes included.

The first NGO to be studied was identified randomly, and thereafter NGOs to be analyzed were chosen according to their geographic location. Two interviews were conducted on the same day once a week. Therefore the NGOs that were in close proximity were analyzed during the same week, prior to the interviews. Interviews were spaced in order to transcribe and analyze each interview before a next interview was conducted.

It must be noted that the researcher's judgement on the public relations model associated with each NGO was based on responses from the interviewees. Because of practical and feasibility reasons the research design did not allow for the researcher to explore this topic by means of another method. However, as explained in the previous chapter, several questions were asked to try and ensure a suitable and applicable decision by the researcher.

[1] Paper copies of the front pages of each organizational web site are provided in Appendix F.

Chapter 5

Project Literacy (http://www.projectliteracy.org.za)

Content analysis on June 5th, 2000 and interview with Yvonne Eskell-Klagsbrun, the fundraising and communication manager, on June 7th, 2000

5.1 Background

5.1.1 Organizational information

At the time of the content analysis and the interview Project Literacy worked in the adult educational sector and was involved in activities such as teacher training courses in mother tongue literacy, English as second language and also courses in mathematics and accounting. The organization conducted adult basic education outreach programs to assist urban and rural communities to manage and run their literacy programs and it also ran three adult education centers that trained people from basic literacy to Grade 12. Project Literacy was based in Pretoria with regional offices in the following places/provinces: Ikageng Barnato Park, Ikageng Middelburg, Ikageng PGHS, Mpumalanga, Northern Cape, and the Western Cape.

During June/July 2000 the organization's target was defined as educationally disadvantaged adult South Africans and its mission statement was the following (HSRC, 2000):

- *To deliver a wide range of adult basic education and training programs to educationally disadvantaged adults by way of adult education centers, teacher training, curriculum development and community outreach.*

Project Literacy was described as "quite a big organization" by the interviewee, because it had approximately 70 full-time staff at its head-office in Pretoria at the time of the study. It had another 300 people working for the organization on an ad hoc basis. Project Literacy worked in four major areas, namely curriculum development, training for teachers, development in rural areas for capacity building, and three night schools were operated. Other departments in the organization included the fundraising and communication department, a clients relations department, an into-Africa desk, and a finance department.

The client relations department might seem as if it had a close resemblance to public relations, but in this case the department's role was to keep on looking for more clients from the corporate sector where staff could be trained by Project Literacy. Therefore it could be said that the client relations department had more of a selling component than a communication component. However, the fundraising and communication department was responsible for any communication materials such as brochures that the client relations department would need. The different departments in the organization cooperated on a regular basis on various projects.

The Prolit web site was implemented in 1997. The WWW was still very new to the employees of Prolit at that stage, but "everyone was talking about the web and e-mail" so the possibility of a web site was discussed at a Prolit executive meeting. Somebody from outside the organization created the web site in conjunction with the head of the fundraising and communication department. The initial web site content was taken from the latest annual report, so even though there was no content category for the annual report on the web site, the content of the annual report was published on the web site.

5.1.2 Reasons and aims for setting up a web site

According to the interviewee it was decided to pursue the idea of a web site because it was seen as a "strategic move" at the time. The initial aim was to attract donors and sponsors. "We were thinking of the little old lady that was lonely and playing on the web, would come across our web site and think: 'Oh, this is nice to give some money to'". Initially the web site was thus expected to attract donors, but this expectation changed after the organization decided to use the WWW more as an information tool. The aim was to provide basic information to the general public or people or businesses that would like to do business with Prolit. These people or businesses could find important information on the web before actually contacting the organization.

The content analysis showed that the web site carried content to support both these aims, but the persuasive appeal was stronger than the interviewee had indicated. The web site carried mainly general information about Project Literacy and its training programs. However, throughout the web site it was clear that the most important aim of the information given was to persuade potential donors to donate money to the organization. The option to donate money appeared twice on the front page (first and last option on the page) and to strengthen the persuasive appeal there was a link to a *Wish list* where the organization stipulated its specific needs in terms of sponsorship.

The link to make a donation leads the web site visitor to a page where the persuasive appeal for donations was continued. Specific amounts were asked for, given in South African rand, US dollars and British pounds. This section also contained a donation form on which donors could give the particulars of their donation. However, this form was not intended for online donations, as the donor had to print the form, fill it in and then mail it to the organization via the ordinary mail system. This was not a very convenient way to use the internet and the researcher suspected that not many people would make use of this option. It seemed as if the statement made by the interviewee (that the web site should rather be used for informational purposes) was contradicted by the strong persuasive appeal on the web site. It was concluded that the aims of the web site content was firstly to persuade and secondly to provide information.

Other content on the web site at the time of the analysis included a guest book where web site visitors could give feedback or make inquiries. This option represented a limited effort to generate two-way communication. However, as will be indicated later, this did not represent a very high level of interactive communication. Content such as press releases and annual reports did not appear on the web site.

5.1.3 General characteristics and functions of the web site

5.1.3.1 Appearance and layout

The web site had a simple design, which caught the eye immediately because of the strong colors used on a white background. A combination of graphics and photographs was found on the web site. Graphic representation was used for the NGO's logo, as well as the logos of sponsors and a map of the regional offices of Prolit. Photographs mostly depicted beneficiaries of the organization's training programs and training situations. The graphics loaded easily and were relatively fast.

The web site used predominantly red and black as colors. Fonts were mostly red, but some smaller sections were written in black or blue letters. The background color was white, therefore the red, black and sometimes blue letters were easily readable. The font size was relatively large, approximately 14pt, contributing to its readability. However, there were some sections where very small fonts (10pt) were used, for example in a text box where the story of John was told, and partnerships were explained. These small letters necessitated extra concentration from the web site visitor and could have led some visitors to skip reading it, resulting in a less positive feeling about the web site.

The following content categories were listed on the front page:

- Sponsor a learner;
- Sponsors;
- Our mission;
- Training centers;
- Training courses;
- Wish list;
- Book shop;
- Partnerships;
- Guest book;
- Sponsor a learner today, and
- Saada.

The *Sponsor a learner* category appeared twice on the front page, stressing one of the aims of the web site – to invite sponsors to donate money to the organization.

The front page also contained a map that showed the different offices and training centers of operated by Project Literacy. The layout was simple and well-organized. The Project Literacy logo was placed at the top of the front page with its slogan (*Reading is a write*) just underneath. The rest of the front page consisted of the map on the left side and the different content categories on the right side of the page. The front page was therefore like a front door, because it contained no information itself, it merely served as a gateway to the rest of the web site, by giving an indication of what could be found on the web site. The web site visitor did not have to scroll up and down the front page to find the content category that he/she was looking for, something that contributed to the ease of use of this web site.

The content on the rest of the web site was fragmented according to the content categories given on the front page. The three training centers managed by Project Literacy were described on one page (not a separate page for each center). Following the same pattern, an overview of some of the courses was given on one page. This page tended to be confusing because the information on different courses was not clearly separated and a very small font size used. Furthermore there was not an initial list of courses and a description of them. Instead, the page started with an overview of the schedule/s followed for the different courses – for some courses abbreviations were used that were only explained at the bottom of the page.

The *Bookshop* category on the front page was misleading, because it did not lead to a bookshop or even a page where books could be ordered. It merely took the web site visitor to a page where the front pages of some of the books and learning material of the organization were shown, together with a brief description of the type of content in the publications. There did not appear an option to order some of the publications, only the contact information of the publishers (Kagiso Publishers) was given. This aspect could be improved to increase the level of interactivity and the usefulness of the web site to the visitor.

5.1.3.2 Target and functions

From the content analysis, the researcher expected that the most important target group would be potential donors/sponsors, both international and local, as the amounts indicated on the web site were also indicated in foreign currencies. It was not expected that the beneficiaries of Project Literacy would be a target group for web site, as they were mostly illiterate and disadvantaged.

During the interview three target groups were mentioned. The correct assumption was made with regard to the expectation that potential donors/sponsors would be the most important target group. The general public was mentioned as a target group in order to attract individual donors, and trusts/foundations was mentioned for larger donations. The interviewee added another target group, namely human resource managers who were looking out for training for their staff. This target group could be called the beneficiaries of Prolit, but they were targeted indirectly by means of their employers.

As the type of content on the web site was limited, users could only have limited use of the Project Literacy web site. The two most important functions of the web site could be to provide information about the organization and to generate donations. However, since the donation form was not interactive, users could not actually use the web site to donate money. They could only be persuaded to do so, and then get the donation form. Thereafter they still had to either mail a check or make a direct deposit into the organization's bank account. The function of donating money was therefore not made very convenient for potential donors. This could be one of the reasons why the web site in fact did not generate many donations.

5.1.4 Successes, problems and failures

At first the web site did not attract many visits or reaction because it was listed under *Adult education*. "We found that people who searched for *Education* were actually looking for tertiary education, while people who searched in the *Adult* category were actually looking for pornography." The organization was then listed under the categories for *Training* and *Community development* that brought about more hits and enquiries.

However, the interviewee could not mention any major successes: "I can't say that we've had anything that is really worth noting." However, many academics contacted the organization for statistics and figures for research purposes after they had visited the web site. Positive feedback about the web site was received constantly (about 6-7 messages per week), saying things such as: "good work", "interesting" or "keep up the good work". These feedback messages proved that the content on the web site was being read and that people did not just stumble on to it and move on to something else. In terms of negative feedback from web site visitors, only one negative e-mail had been received, complaining about spelling errors on the web page, as well as the slogan ("Reading is a write").

Visitors were not monitored from the start. The webmaster only began to monitor the statistics of the web site two months prior to the interview. For the month of May the average visits per day were approximately twelve, with the total visits for the month about 245. It seemed that the web site did attract attention, although the organization failed to reach businesses and potential donors via the web site.

One of the problems experienced was that no formal research had been done before the web site was implemented. Instead the organization had informal talks with a few WWW technicians. No formal research had been done since the web site was in operation, because "it is quite time consuming and we do not have the manpower". However, the continuous feedback from web site visitors on the feedback form served as an indication of how people experienced the web site. "I try to keep my ear to the ground and try to keep up to date with developments in the IT field", the interviewee noted.

Another problem was experienced with the updating of the Prolit web site at the time of this study. No clear indication was given of when the web site had been updated, so the researcher concluded that it was not updated on a regular basis. The only indication of an update was the name of the organization that created the web site and the dates July 1997 – April 2000 that were shown on the front page. On the *Make a donation* page the date on which that page was created was given as March 25th, 2000. These indications of updating seemed rather recent, but the section where the specific donors were indicated was last updated in 1996. It thus seemed as if different sections of the web site were updated on different occasions and that the web site as a whole was not reviewed very often. If it were reviewed often, the donors from 1996 would either have been updated or removed from the web site.

The interviewee explained that due to lack of funds the web site was not updated on a regular basis. However, it had been updated a few times since it had been in operation. What usually happened was that they waited "for a type of crisis situation where the information on the web site is totally incorrect," before it was updated." The interviewee felt that the web site should ideally be updated at least once a year. She agreed that the sponsors listed on the web site for 1996 were extremely out of date.

The researcher's conclusion that some parts of the web site had been updated while other parts had not been updated was proved correct. The category *Sponsor a learner,* that contained the donation form, was only added to the web site later. The interviewee explained that the donation form mentioned earlier, was not created for online donations because she did not have the technical knowledge to do it. She added that she had planned to do a course where she could learn more about web site programming.

5.1.5 Integration of media

The web site was not used to integrate different communication media very well, because the only publications mentioned were on a link to a *Bookshop* (discussed earlier). The books mentioned on that page were for the use of beneficiaries who, for example, had learned to read by means of Project Literacy's training programs, or who did mathematics or accounting courses at its training centers. The books could not be ordered online. Instead, web site visitors had to phone or fax the publishers for more information. This was another example of inconvenience for the web site visitor that could negatively influence the success of the web site.

The interviewee realized that there should be a close relationship between the content on the web site and other forms of communication. "What I'd like to see is that every single publication that goes out from this organization should also be on the web. This means press releases, pamphlets, brochures and the annual report. It would be a lot more cost-effective", the interviewee remarked. The reasons why this had not been done at the time of the study were given as a lack of staff, time and knowledge.

5.2 Public relations models

Prolit had a department of fundraising and communication that handled public relations, marketing and fundraising. The department consisted of four people. One person had a PR diploma from a technicon, and another had done a course at a voice clinic, and therefore handled the switchboard. A third person had a fundraising qualification from overseas (the interviewee was very vague about this qualification). The remaining person was the head of the fundraising and communication department and had a communication qualification from IMM (Institute for Management & Marketing).

The interviewee viewed public relations or media work as "imperative for an organization like us, because it replaces an advertising budget, which we don't have. It's a form of free advertising". The interviewee said that the department's role was more a marketing function than a pure public relations function. From this statement it was clear that the PR function could not be functioning optimally.

Contact with publics was described as that Project Literacy would usually initiate the communication process with, for instance potential donors. The organization would send the potential donor an annual report and/or pay a visit to the person/organization. The Fundraising and communication department also had at least two functions every year where current donors as well as potential donors were entertained. The interviewee stressed that it was a time-consuming process to attract donors, because it could sometimes take up to a year from the initial contact until the donation was made. The communication process was described as a continuous process of contact between the organization and its potential donors. Contact with donors was mainly through the fundraising and communication department.

The interviewee said that Project Literacy played a radical, idealistic as well as a critical role when the interview was conducted. The critical role (i.e. being critical of the government) was played very successfully under the previous government. However, since 1994 the funding process had changed. Funding from overseas was now mostly going directly to government and NGOs such as Project Literacy did a lot of contract work for the government.

This had the implication that these organizations could not afford to be too critical and thereby alienate government. However, the interviewee maintained that her organization was critical of government because government was not doing enough by using the money that was given to them for specific purposes. The interviewee had the following comment on the fact that NGOs nowadays had to be careful to be too critical especially of government: "It's a pity that it has come to that, because an NGO's function is actually to correct the wrongs. It is a very difficult situation in which I believe all NGOs find themselves at the moment."

With regard to the role of the fundraising and communication department in assisting the organization to be critical, the interviewee mentioned that her department assisted the organization with this role. The fundraising and communication department would play an important role in this respect. With certain events such as Literacy Day or World Book Day the organization would make comments to the media on how things are and be critical if necessary. This criticism would also be coming from the organization's CEO, Andrew Miller. His comments would usually be edited beforehand by this department "to make it a bit softer", before it could be released to the media. The organization's CEO would also sometimes criticize government in a "below the line way", talking to government representatives directly, if the organization was not satisfied with something, instead of releasing a statement to the media.

The fundraising and communication department reported directly to the CEO, therefore the PR function in this organization can conditionally be described as being part of the dominant coalition. The interviewee mentioned that "the organization itself has a clear vision of where it is going. With regard to decision making we are democratic in the way that we listen to the market, to what is out there and obviously we had to listen to our donors as well". Internally, management met once a month and in that respect the organization was described as "pretty democratic".

Tradition was very important when the organization worked in rural areas. It would be necessary to speak to community leaders to "listen what they want and to serve them". Internally, the organization had a clear vision of where it was going and tried to stick to that. The organization was always looking for new ideas that would serve that vision, because that would not be changed easily. For instance, no department in the organization could decide on its own to change procedures. Therefore the organization could be described as well organized. The organization had certain rules and procedures and management could be flexible with regard to new ideas and proposals. However, individual staff members would not be allowed to try to change things on their own.

In terms of the centralization or decentralization of power, the interviewee stated that management was always willing to listen to new ideas. They had a quality circle meeting every six weeks where employees could come up with new ideas. The process of power and decision-making was therefore not strictly a top-down process, but ordinary employees could give their input. The important aspect was that these employees had to use the proper structures and procedures to give their input.

Contact and input from other organizations were very important to Project Literacy, because the organization worked very closely with a network of other organizations in adult education, for instance Unisa and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). It often happened that Project Literacy had to adapt to the input of other organizations. An example was the National Qualifications Board that made decisions to which Project Literacy had to adapt, in terms of curriculum development and so on.

According to the interviewee, Project Literacy would not really play a protective role for ordinary people. However, before they started with a training program in a large corporate company, they would go through certain processes such as workshops with the unions and a sensitization process to help employees understand why the training program was being implemented.

Conflict did arise sometimes, for instance with a project where Project Literacy worked in a partnership with USAid, and the Northern Province's department of education. This was a situation where USAid (from the USA) wanted certain things to be done which was not exactly what the community felt they had needed. To solve this conflict required a long-term process of negotiation where Project Literacy acted as the go-between the overseas donor organization and the rural community.

Project Literacy's view was that to implement a training project that would be successful, they had to make sure that the community was happy with that. "We can't implement something that the community do not want, because in a situation where people actually want to control their lives, you can't treat them like children". This approach sometimes led to conflict, especially with donors from overseas, who did not always understand the need for mutual understanding.

Strategic planning was usually done twice a year. There were two sets of planning, namely middle management that would have a strategic planning session, which would in turn be defined more specifically by top management. The fundraising and communication department was involved in the strategic planning process because the director of this department formed part of the dominant coalition. She reported directly to the CEO and also served on the board of directors.

Several indicators regarding transparency were absent from the web site. It was explained that the web site content was taken from the annual report; however, financial statements were not included. The most significant sign of transparency was details about sponsors, as well as details about money needed from potential donors and sponsors. Sponsors were acknowledged by means of a link to a page on which their logos and names appeared. However, this page was extremely out of date, as the sponsors for 1996 were listed on it. Similar information for the years 1997, 1998, 1999 or 2000 could not be found on the web site. There was also no indication of the amounts of money received from these sponsors.

Information about the staff of the organization, such as their names, qualifications, backgrounds and positions could be seen as another sign of transparency. However, no such information was included on the web site.

Information about the training courses presented by Project Literacy could be seen as a sign of transparency, as the specific outcomes of each course were stipulated on the web site. As said before, this page was not organized very logically and it took some effort on behalf of the web site visitor to figure it out.

The discussion so far will be helpful in determining which public relations model could be associated with Prolit. This aspect will be discussed in Section 5.5.

5.3 Interactive characteristics

5.3.1 Dimensions of interactivity on the web site

The dimensions of interactivity as they appeared on the Prolit web site were analyzed during the content analysis and will now be discussed.

❖ ***Choice***

The first aspect regarding the choice dimension dealt with restricted/unrestricted navigation of a web site. The Prolit web site scored high on this aspect as there were no efforts made to restrict navigation. The web site visitor did not have to register before browsing could continue and the information on the web site was free of charge.

As far as choices regarding language or a text/graphic version of the web site were concerned, the Prolit web site scored very low, as no such choices were being offered. However, the graphics included in the web site were not affecting the download speed to such an extent that a text version would be a necessity.

❖ ***Connectedness***

The majority of the links on the web site can be described as internal links that connected the visitor to information about the organization and its services and programs. These general links included links to textual information as well as graphic representations such as photographs, as no separate links were provided to the graphical representations. There were no sub-web sites or any links to advertisements on the web site.

The Prolit web site contained one external link to an organization named Saada (South African Antique Dealers Association). The reason for this link was the fact that Prolit was chosen as the charity to benefit from the Saada 2000 fair. When the visitor used the link to Saada he/she left the Prolit web site completely, which could be a potential problem.

However, the Saada web site also contained a link to Prolit that could make up for this potential problem.

The level of connectedness on the web site was very low, as only one external link was available. In future the organization could consider the addition of more external link to similar organizations or partners. It was, however, important to give web site visitors clues so as to lead them back to the original web site and not directing them away from the site.

- ***Information collection***

No overt monitoring devices were present on the web site. The guest book was not classified as a monitoring device, because it did not restrict navigation and it was not compulsory. The interviewee did indicate that statistics of web site hits were being held as a form of a covert monitoring device.

- ***Reciprocal communication***

On the continuum of reciprocal communication the Prolit web site contained only reactive communication that appeared on the less interactive side. The e-mail address, telephone numbers and the feedback form in the guest book link, were all examples of typical reactive communication. The donation form would also be an example of reactive communication if it were possible to donate online. However, as was explained earlier, the donation form was not interactive, but was meant to be printed, cut out and mailed to the organization. The web site contained no form of true interactive communication such as a chat room or a forum.

- ***Playfulness***

There was no indication of playfulness on the web site.

5.3.2 Level of interactivity

On the continuum for the level of interactivity the Prolit web site contained interactivity devices from three of the levels: it contained basic contact information, it contained contact information for specific concerns such as ordering or donating. It also contained a feedback form for specific information requests or comments on the web site.

It would therefore be possible to rate the web site as moderately interactive. However, the donation form that was offered on the web site was not online, and the web site also did not offer the possibility to order its books online. Because of these limitations it was decided to rate the web site as *somewhat* interactive.

5.3.3 Orientation of interactivity

The orientation of interactivity on the web site could be evaluated as mainly source oriented, because the audience oriented mechanisms of interactivity was very limited (see the discussion of playfulness, choice and connectedness earlier). The presence of source-oriented interactivity devices was much stronger (however, still limited).

5.3.4 Functions and forms of interactivity

The Prolit web site was analyzed to determine what functions and forms of interactivity it contained at the time of the study.

- ***Customer support***

  The only form of customer support on the Prolit web site was the option to send comments or feedback to the organization. Other forms of customer support such as software downloading, online problem diagnostics, or order status tracking were not offered.

- ***Marketing research***

  No examples of marketing research were found on the web site. The feedback form did not qualify as a survey questionnaire, because specific questions were not asked. The feedback form only invited comments or requests for more information.

- ***Search for more information***

  This function of interactivity was present in a very limited form on the web site. The map on the front page of the web site on which the regional offices of Prolit were indicated could be viewed as a form of a branch locator. However, this map was not an example of an interactive device, as it did not provide any links to information on the different regional offices. It merely represented a graphic representation of the distribution of regional offices and training centers in the country.

- ***Advertising/promotion/publicity***

  No examples of advertising/promotion or publicity were found on the web site. The closest example of this function of interactivity was online ordering/donating, which were not present on this web site.

- ***Entertainment***

  No forms of entertainment were offered on the Prolit web site.

5.4 Principles of dialogical/two-way communication

Appearances of dialogical or two-way communication of the Prolit web site were investigated.

- ***Test 1: Dialogical loop***

  A dialogical loop was present on the web site, in the form of reactive communication. These examples were discussed earlier and include the provision of contact information, as well as the feedback form that was present on the guest book link. There are, however, several other applications of the feedback loop that were not utilized on this web site. This can be described as one of the shortcomings of the web site.

- ***Reaction on testing***

  The researcher received a reply within one day of sending a test message. Therefore the reaction can be described as prompt.

- ***Test 2: The generation of return visits***

  The information on this web site could be useful to three different kinds of target groups: the general public, potential donors/sponsors as well as international funding agencies or organizations. The information contained on the web site was therefore not too specific, because it could be of value to different kinds of publics.

However, what usually makes information valuable to generate return visits, was the regular updating of the web site, which could not be confirmed in this instance. As was explained earlier, it seemed as if certain parts of the web site were updated and other parts were not updated. This was a limitation of the web site, for if the content was not updated often, there would be no reason to visit the web site again after the initial visit.

Other aspects that could contribute to the generation of return visits were a logical organization of content and information to the benefit of both the organization as well as the web site visitor. The web site content was organized logically, except for the one page (*Training courses*) that was discussed earlier. The web site contained content that would be mainly to the advantage of the organization, for its aim was to generate donations and sponsorships. If web site visitors had the option to donate online or to order publications online, there would had been more advantages to them as well.

- ***Ease of use***

  The Prolit web site can be described as easy to use, as the table of contents was organized logically and it was easy to navigate the web site. The relationship between graphics and text did not cause a slow download speed, therefore web site visitors did not necessarily need the latest hardware or software to get access to the web site.

5.5 Prolit: Conclusions

The Prolit web site can be described as a fairly useful web site to the benefit of the organization. It has several shortcomings, but it carries enough information that could be to the advantage of its different target groups.

Some of the most important shortcomings are the lack of interactivity (for instance online donating and ordering as well as a chat room or a live forum) and true two-way communication. However, the web site was rated as having a *somewhat* level of interactivity, a level that was better than some of the other web sites that had been analyzed.

Another serious point of criticism was the lack of come back-again-ness caused mainly by the lack of the frequent updating of the web site. Some of the pages were not organized very logically, something that should receive attention if the organization wanted to improve its web site. More specific information about the organization's regional offices and training centers would be useful, especially if it was handled as sub-web sites within the Prolit web site. More external links could also be provided.

During the interview the reasons for these shortcomings were explained. The most common problem that the organization experienced with regard to the web site was lack of time, money and manpower, as well as the lack of technical knowledge.

It seemed that the usefulness of the WWW in terms of public relations and two-way communication was not yet realized and explored by the organization. One reason could be the organization's viewpoint on the relationship between public relations and marketing. During the interview it became clear that public relations was viewed as a marketing tool and its utility was mostly seen as being to generate funds for the organization. This view was typical of a pragmatic social role played by public relations and could be classified as part of an asymmetrical presupposition about public relations. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.7.1.)

From the discussion so far it may seem as if the organization operated largely on asymmetrical presuppositions. This was not exactly true as Prolit also exhibited strong characteristics of symmetrical practices and structural aspects in favor of practicing a two-way model of public relations. In the first instance the head of the department responsible for public relations formed part of the dominant coalition and was actively involved in the strategic planning process. The critical and idealistic social roles of public relations were also viewed as important to assist the organization as an NGO playing these roles.

Secondly it seemed that the organization had an effective operational system in terms of its communication system and procedures. The organization had a strong vision of what it wanted to accomplish, but was flexible in terms of how to reach its goals. It used democratic decision making procedures to allow input from employees. It was, however, stressed that employees had to use the prescribed rules and procedures for communication.

It could also be deduced that the organization acted in a socially responsible way by defending its publics' interests. This was illustrated by the organization's role in creating mutual understanding between its beneficiaries and for example sponsors from overseas. It seemed important for the organization to understand its publics' views and to make the publics understand the work that the organization did (for example, the sensitization sessions with employees of large businesses before training can take place).

During the interview several aspects of a symmetrical worldview were displayed. Prolit was described as an organization that was interdependent with its environment and that frequently had to adapt to its environment. The organization was receptive of innovative ideas as long as it contributed to its vision. A decentralized management style was in place. Conflict resolution was done by negotiation, communication and compromise and in the process ordinary people were protected against, for instance, large donors or government.

Despite some asymmetrical characteristics it could be deduced that Prolit followed mostly a mixed-motive model of public relations. This conclusion was reached because the organization displayed several characteristics of symmetry, but it also had to make use of persuasive techniques in order to attract donors and funding. The process of persuasion was explained during the interview and the web site also had a strong persuasive appeal in terms of generating donations.

The public relations function in this organization could be improved and strengthened to the benefit of the organization if some of the asymmetrical characteristics (for example the application of public relations as a pragmatic tool to raise money) would be addressed. The utility of the WWW for two-way communication should also be realized.

Chapter 6

Trees for Africa (http://www.trees.co.za)

Content analysis on June 6^{th}, 2000, and interview with Jeunesse Park, executive director, and Fiona Keartland, program manager, on June 7^{th}, 2000

6.1 Background

6.1.1 Organizational information

At the time of the study Trees for Africa operated from its Johannesburg office and engaged in activities such as national tree distribution, the facilitation of community greening projects and the support and development of community nurseries and community and schools' permaculture projects. The organization also conducted permaculture training, workshops, nursery workshops, capacity building workshops for CBOs and greening workshops for local authorities.

Their target was defined as CBOs, educators and local authorities and their mission statement was as follows:

- *To contribute to a healthy and sustainable quality of life for all through environmental awareness and greening programs* (HSRC, 2000).

A board of directors (non-paid), the executive director and a small staff of nine full-time people ran the organization. When the interview was conducted there were an operations manager, an accountant, a program manager, someone who updated a huge database of 12 000 contact addresses, two qualified permaculturists, an urban community forester, someone who ran the Trees for homes project, and a general assistant.

The web site discussed here was set up in December 1999 by one of the employees in the organization. She had a limited knowledge of web site management and programming, but as she had most computer skills in the organization, she was asked to manage it as well.

One interviewee explained that TFA had in fact three web sites. Besides the organization's "main" web site, the Eduplant web site was a separate web site for one of the organization's programs. It referred to a very large national schools permaculture program. Someone outside the organization managed this web site, but TFA provided the content for the web site. However, on closer examination, no direct link was found between the two web sites. The only connection was the reference that was made on the Eduplant web site of TFA and its contact details (excluding its e-mail address). On the TFA web site there was also no direct link to the Eduplant web site as such, although there was information on the Eduplant project.

The third web site was described in the analysis as a sub web site that led to TFA's publications and newsletters. This web site was managed by another organization that offered to handle this aspect for TFA (Junex).

It is recommended that closer links between the three web sites be created in such a way that the web site visitor would understand the relationship between these sites and Trees for Africa. The links should be created in order to allow web site visitors to switch between these web sites without trouble.

6.1.2 Reasons and aims for setting up a web site

The main reason was to keep up with the times and as TFA was a non-profit organization, it hoped that the existence of a web site would help to raise some funds. However, one of the interviewees mentioned that the web site had not been very successful in fundraising. Another reason why a web site was set up was to network with other organizations.

One of the most important aims of the TFA web site was to provide information in such a way that web site visitors would have a very good idea of what the organization did. This information was strengthened by the use of photographs. One of the future aims for the web site was to get sponsors to pay for publicity on the TFA's web site, as the executive director did not want to give sponsors free publicity on the web site. At the time of the analysis sponsors were not listed on the web site, but they were given extensive coverage in the organization's newsletters and annual reports.

One interviewee explained the following expectations from the web site: it was expected that the different target groups for the web site would use the web site to learn more about the organization. It was especially expected that potential sponsors (such as individuals, corporate businesses, and international funding organizations) and potential beneficiaries (for instance schools) would make use of the information on the web site. Another expectation was that people who had made inquiries about the organization could be directed to the web site to save the organization the time and effort to mail "piles of paper" all over the world.

The content analysis of the TFA web site revealed that the core of the site was made up of general information about the organization, its staff members and its activities. Its content supported the informational aim for creating a web site mentioned in the previous paragraph. However, the *Getting involved* link showed another aim not mentioned by the interviewees. This link concentrated on several options that web site visitors could explore to get involved in the actions of the organization, for example:

- Gifts and products such as T-shirts and tree seeds could be ordered;
- Educational booklets and newsletters could be ordered;
- Web site visitors could apply for membership of the organization;
- The option for corporate sponsorship also appeared on this page;
- There was an option for communities to become involved in the activities of TFA; and
- There was an application form for trees from TFA.

This approach was quite different from those of some of the other NGOs, as it was not exclusively aimed at the attraction of donors. It gave a broader base for involvement that could be more successful than merely asking for donations.

The aims of networking via the web site could be hampered because none of the e-mail links on the web site was operational at the time of the analysis. However, the e-mail address did appear on the web site, therefore motivated individuals or organizations could write down the address and use it from their e-mail software to contact TFA. To have to do this just takes more effort than is necessary. This aspect could lead to less involvement from web site visitors, because not all visitors would probably be prepared to put in extra effort. Upon probing, it seemed that the interviewees were not aware of the problem with the e-mail links.

6.1.3 General characteristics and functions of the web site

6.1.3.1 Appearance and layout

The color scheme for the TFA web site was green and black. Headings were green and text was mostly black, except for links that were blue. The background color for text was white.

The choice of green was appropriate for the type of work that the organization was involved in. Text was easily readable for the most part. The use of black text against a white background contributed to readability. The font size was approximately 14pt for headings and 12pt for the rest of the text that was also easily readable. However, the site contained a few photographs with subscripts and the fonts used for the subscripts were very small (approximately 8pt). These pieces of text were not easily readable and could put strain on the eyes of web site visitors.

The same font was used throughout all the pages of the web site, except on one page (*about us*) where one paragraph (the mission statement) was written in another font. This could have been done deliberately to give more prominence to the mission statement, but it did not contribute to a consistent look for that particular page. It would, perhaps, had been a better idea to use the same font as on the rest of the page and to enhance prominence by another method such as a larger font size or the use of bold letters.

Photographs were mostly used as graphic representations. Other graphics that appeared on the web site were the organization's logo and several small green leaves and small images of green trees in strategic places to enhance the appearance of the pages. The relationship between graphics and text was well-balanced and photographs were used to give the web site visitor a better idea of the activities in which the organization engaged.

The following content links appeared on the front page:

- Home;
- About us;
- Activities and news;
- Getting involved; and
- Archives and links.

The content on the web site was organized according to the main content categories. This meant that the web site provided general information about the organization as well as about its activities. It also gave the option of getting involved in several different ways, besides asking for donations. The *Archives and links* page provided links to past happenings that had relevance to the organization such as previous years' *Arbor weeks* or *Eduplant* activities. The *Archive* option on the front page could be confusing, as it actually led to a sub web site carrying TFA publications. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to name the link according to the content.

The front page of the TFA web site differed from most other web sites insofar as the content categories were not listed vertically but horizontally, giving them less prominence as they used less space than otherwise. The front page as well as rest of the pages on the web site had a consistent look as every page had the TFA logo on the top left side and the following statement next to the logo:

South Africa's first community-based, non-government, greening organization specifically dedicated to the promotion of tree planting and environmental awareness in disadvantaged areas.

On the right side of this statement on each page appeared a small image of a tree and a link to contact the organization. However, clicking on this link only resulted in the reloading of the same page. This consistent look throughout all the web pages was a positive aspect to the web site design.

Below the logo and statement that appeared on each page, the content categories were listed horizontally on each page. These content categories served as an indication of the layout of information on the rest of the web site. Text appeared in two columns below the content categories, and in the text further links to some aspects on the other web pages were provided. The front page contained information and did not only serve as a gateway to the rest of the web site. In this regard, the TFA web site differed from some of the other web sites that had been analyzed.

Except for the front page, every other page had a content category division on the top left side, just underneath the logo and the statement discussed earlier. These content categories listed the subcategories for that particular page. This meant that the main content categories appeared on each page, as well as the sub content categories for that page. This aspect enhanced navigation of the web site, as each page contained large amounts of information. The web site visitor therefore did not have to scroll through all the contents on a page, but could merely use the links provided on top of that page.

6.1.3.2 Target and functions

The TFA web site could have different target groups. From the content analysis it was expected that the general public could be informed and involved by means of the web site. In the second place the web site could be directed at potential donors/sponsors as well as perhaps international funding agencies. In the third place the web site was also directed at the organization's potential beneficiaries, as there were options for tree applications and community involvement.

Upon pursuing this issue during the interview, it became clear that the organization did not define potential target groups for its web site. The target groups for the web site were described as "really anybody who is interested in what we are doing". This approach could also be described as a "global hit", according to one of the interviewees. Jeunesse Park expressed the wish that more of the disadvantaged communities that the organization worked with should have access to the internet.

As can be deduced from the discussion so far, the web site could fulfill several functions. Web site visitors could use the TFA web site to get information about the organization and its activities. The web site could also be used to become involved with TFA in several different ways. The online ordering option provided web site visitors with the possibility to order products or newsletters, or to become members of the organization. Potential beneficiaries could use the site to make contact with TFA in order to benefit from its activities.

On the *Getting involved* page where the online ordering options were provided, there was also an option to order trees. This option was directed at disadvantaged communities who would only have to make a small contribution towards the cost of the trees. However, the ordering form could not be used to order trees online, as it had to be printed, cut out and then faxed or mailed to TFA. This was in contrast to the online ordering form that could be used to order some of the organization's other products. This contradiction was queried during the interview. It became clear that the lack of time and technical skills was the reason why this option was not interactive.

6.1.4 Successes, problems and failures

It was not possible to know exactly what successes could be ascribed to the web site, as TFA did not monitor its web site successes or monthly hits at all. However, it was planned to add a headcounter on the web site to at least monitor the hits that the site received. It was possible that some of the organization's sponsors may have been persuaded by the web site content to donate money, but TFA had not tried to monitor this.

One interviewee explained that the organization was pleased with the reaction to the *Getting involved* page where gifts and other objects could be ordered. Most of the reaction came from people who ordered T-shirts and booklets and at least two online orders were received per month. The web site had failed to fulfil the expectations of large donations, but the executive director was still satisfied with the reaction to TFA's web site. However, a number of problems were also experienced.

The web site had been updated at irregular intervals since its inception in 1999. At the time of the study the web site contained information and publications up until 1999, and it also contained information about Arbor week 2000, as well as the trees of the year for 2000. It was therefore obvious that only parts of the web site were updated during 2000. However, the ideal would be to update the web site at least once per week, according to the interviewees. At the time of the interview it was not possible to update the web site more frequently because the employee who was responsible for the web site also had many other tasks in the organization and lack of time was a problem.

One of the problems experienced was that the person responsible for the web site did not have any formal qualifications in web management or programming. She had to manage the web site with limited knowledge and sometimes on a trial and error basis. The interviewees maintained that it would be too expensive to contract someone from outside the organization to manage the web site.

Another problem was the online ordering of T-shirts, booklets, trees and other online ordering options. It was explained that the automated order forms were not in a very user-friendly format when they reached the TFA office via e-mail. Therefore it took time and effort to decode the orders. At that stage TFA was also not in a position to offer the online payment of orders, which also caused delays in the process. Therefore people who ordered something online still had to make a deposit into the TFA bank account or mail a check to the organization before the orders could be processed. The online ordering system as it appeared on the web site was therefore not actually a true online system.

It was also problematic that no formal research could be conducted before the implementation of the web site or since. The main reason was lack of time and money. As was explained earlier, the web site did not have a specific target group. It was aimed at "everybody" and therefore it would be impossible to select a sample to interview or direct a survey to. It would also not be possible to measure the success of the web site without clear goals and a definite target group.

6.1.5 Integration of media

The interviewees felt that the TFA web site/s were not promoted well enough. One of the ways in which the site/s were promoted was through the organization's newsletters sent in hard copies to many subscribers. The web site was being promoted by means of the integration of different communication media used by the organization. The URL of the web site was printed on all newsletters, e-mail messages, letter heads and media releases that were sent out. Similarly, many of the hard-copy publications were also available online.

One shortcoming was the fact that the main content categories on the front page of the web site did not provide a direct or obvious link to the organization's publications. Its publications could be reached via two different links. In the first instance the *Getting involved* content category led to a page where newsletters and educational booklets could be ordered online. In the second instance the *Archives and links* option led to some of the other publications by TFA in conjunction with other organizations. These publications were newsletters, including *Newsleaf, Forestry for a small planet* and *Permaculture villager.* Extracts from these newsletters could be read online. These publications could be made more visible and/or reachable from the front page.

6.2 Public relations models

TFA did not employ a full-time media officer or public relations practitioner. The founder and executive director of the organization fulfilled this function at the time of the interview. She did not have any formal qualifications. However, she had been involved in corporate communication, advertising and public relations and promotions for more than twenty years. She explained the importance of PR for TFA by saying that the organization got started by means of public relations and it had grown in the ten years of its existence because of numerous successes with public relations and media campaigns.

TFA valued media relations and sent out media releases frequently. Every project that the organization was involved in was announced to the media via a media release. The interviewees explained that the reason for this active approach to media relations was the importance of spreading awareness of the organization as such, and also to spread awareness of the organization's mission. To monitor its media coverage the organization kept a cuttings book with cuttings of all the media coverage that the organization received in newspapers and other publications. This approach led me to realize the possibility that the organization applied one of the asymmetrical models of public relations. This aspect will be discussed in Section 6.5.

Public relations had a very important placement in the dominant coalition as the executive director acted as public relations practitioner. As the executive director also managed public relations, this function was "totally involved" in the strategic planning process with the board of directors. With regard to the organizational culture it was described as all of the descriptive words (authoritarian, participatory, democratic, and transparent) at different times. The executive director explained that in certain situations she had to be authoritarian in order to "get the work done". However, the culture was described as mostly very participatory, especially when dealing with outside publics such as communities asking for assistance.

All the projects of TRA were run in a very participatory, democratic and transparent fashion, according to the interviewees. The organization had to be financially transparent because it was a non-profit organization, and for instance all financial details had to be published. However, the TFA web site did not portray many signs of transparency, as annual reports, press releases and details of donors, sponsors and other financial aspects were not provided. The only sign of transparency was the inclusion of information on the organization's staff. The web site contained a photograph of all the staff members together with a brief description of each member's field of experience and tasks in the organization.

TFA was furthermore described as a very dynamic organization that could change very quickly, because it was so small. Innovation therefore played an important part in the organization's functioning. Procedures were set up to help people who were new to the organization, but they did not prevent the organization from begin innovative and "changing all the time". The organization was depicted as having a decentralized authority because it was so small and everyone worked closely together. The board of directors only met twice a year and only major decisions had to be taken to the board for approval. The day-to-day running of the organization was in the hands of its staff members.

Contact and input from other organizations were very important to the organization, as networking and collaboration were regarded highly by TFA. Because TFA was so small it had to collaborate with other organizations and sometimes to sub-contract some of its work.

TFA had to change and adapt continuously to the needs of the country, the government and disadvantaged communities. The organization started out by providing trees and greening; then it started with permaculture, which is food growing (especially at schools with the

Eduplant program). It had also set up nurseries and when the interview was conducted it had the *Trees for homes* project where a tree was planted for every new house built in certain disadvantaged communities.

The organization was often contacted by businesses to help them run parts of their corporate social responsibility programs, because many of these companies either did not know how to deal with disadvantaged communities or they just did not have the time to do it. If such a company had given money for a specific program, TFA did not view this money as a donation, as the organization provided a service to these companies.

The interviewee explained that TFA did not play a protective role, but rather saw its role as getting government to work with communities. In so doing TFA served as the link between government (especially local governments) and communities. "So rather than protecting people we try to forge partnerships and links with local government."

The organization did not have any "organized way of dealing with conflict", but every conflict situation was dealt with on its own. Some of the most frequent examples of conflict that the organization had to deal with occurred when the gardeners in some of its projects quarreled about money from food sales. These conflict situations had to be resolved, especially if a sponsor was involved, because TFA was responsible for the sponsor's money. "I couldn't tell you how we deal with it. It's just that we deal with each situation as it comes up," said one interviewee.

TFA's sponsors were one of its most important publics and communication with sponsors was described as "very good". Newsletters were used to publicize the various sponsors to the organization. Communication with the communities that were served by TFA were face to face and was also described as "very good". The process of communication with publics that could be served by the organization usually happened with a disadvantaged community that contacted TFA and asked for help. TFA would respond and served communities and "don't do anything unless the community asks for it." The only exception was the *Trees for houses* project where TFA dealt with the developer of houses and not with the community itself.

After a specific group or community had contacted the organization and if its request for help seemed to have merit, TFA would help that community to set up a proper proposal and would also help them to get a sponsor for the project. However, it was expected of communities to pay for 20% of the cost of trees, to ensure commitment on the part of the community and to ensure that the trees were looked after.

According to the executive director TFA played an important radical social role in South Africa because the organization had been "the most instrumental of any South African organization in ensuring that tree planting and greening came to the fore in South Africa. Even to the extent that TFA wrote the first *urban* forestry paper for the government". Since 1994 the organization had been involved in policy-making with the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry.

Another aspect advocated by TFA was urban agriculture through urban permaculture, as the organization did not believe in using chemicals in food growing. TFA had been "very advanced at supporting communities with urban permaculture projects". TFA had also been the first organization to set up a nursery in a township, and after that government followed with the same idea. The radical role that TFA played was enhanced by its active media campaign. Therefore the public relations activities of the organization promoted its radical role in society.

TFA also played an idealistic role because the organization "tries to get the message out to the general public that this country will be a better country if it is green". This role was also made more prominent in society by means of the organization's media campaigns. The one interviewee added that the organization had had free radio commercials done because people believed in what the organization was doing and "because the organization is credible and do stuff on the ground and not just talk about it".

In terms of a critical role it was explained that the organization did not see itself as an advocate "marching up and down in the streets". Therefore, if people contacted the organization with complaints of certain practices by local government or other institutions, these people would be advised to deal with the problem via the media.

In Section 6.5 an analysis of TFA as an organization is made to ascertain what public relations model can be associated with the organization.

6.3 Interactive characteristics

6.3.1 Dimensions of interactivity

The content analysis identified which dimensions of interactivity were used on the TFA web site.

- ***Choice***

  The TFA web site provided a high level of choice with regard to unrestricted navigation of the web site. Web site visitors did not have to register or pay a fee before they could explore the web site. They also had the option of terminating the navigation at any given point in time. With regard to choices between different languages and a text/graphic version of the web site, the site provided no choices. The TFA web site was available in English only, and only one version of the web site (that is, text with graphics) was available. The last aspect was not much of a problem, because the download speed was not too slow, as the graphics did not affect the download speed much.

- ***Connectedness***

  Most of the links on the web site could be described as internal links to information about the organization, its activities and its programs. Although photographs appeared on many of the web pages, there were no links to them and the web site visitor had to view the photographs together with the rest of the content on a particular page.

  The link to the newsletters of the organization represented an example of a sub web site, as this web site was hosted by another organization, called Junex, yet TFA's logo appeared on every page. These links therefore did not lead web site visitors away from the original web site entirely.

  Two external links were present on the web site. The first was the link to Amazon.com that was mentioned earlier. (See Section 6.1.5.) When the web site visitor chose this link, he/she was led entirely out of the TFA web site. Another external link was the link to the Forestry program of the Food and agriculture organization of the United Nations (FAO) that also led visitors away from the web site.

  The TFA web site did not contain any links to advertisements.

- ***Information collection***

  The web site did not contain any overt monitoring devices such as registration before or during navigation.

- ***Reciprocal communication***

  The TFA web site contained only reactive communication and no examples of true interactive communication. The provision of contact details such as a telephone number, fax number and an e-mail address is typical of reactive communication. In the same category is an online ordering option that was also provided on this web site. Note, however, that the links to the e-mail address of the TFA were not operational at the time of the content analysis.

- ***Playfulness***

  No indication of playfulness was found on the web site, as no devices such as games, post-cards or question/answers were provided.

6.3.2 Level of interactivity

The web site contained contact information as well as an online ordering option, meaning that two levels of interactivity were present. With this in mind the web site could be rated on a *somewhat* level of interactivity. However, the e-mail links were not operational and the option for ordering trees was not online, therefore the TFA web site was rated as having a *limited* level of interactivity.

6.3.3 Orientation of interactivity

The orientation of interactivity devices on this web site could be described as more or less in the middle between source-orientated and audience-oriented. This was because very limited levels of interactivity from both orientations were found on the web site. With regard to audience orientation, a limited level of choice and connectedness was present. With regard to source orientation only reactive communication as a form of reciprocal communication was present on the web site.

6.3.4 Functions and forms of interactivity

The following functions and forms of interactivity were present on the TFA web site:

- ***Customer support***

  No form of customer support was found on the TFA web site as interactive devices such as online problem diagnostics, electronic inquiry, or order status tracking were not available. The provision of the organization's e-mail address and icons that should enable the web site visitor to send e-mail from the web site, could be seen as a limited form of customer support. However, as was explained earlier, none of these devices was operational at the time of this analysis.

- ***Marketing research***

  No form of marketing research by means of interactive devices could be found on the web site.

- ***Search for more information***

  As there was no search option or other similar options on the TFA web site, the *search for more information* option was also not available on the web site.

- ***Advertising/promotion/publicity***

  One example of advertising/promotion/publicity was found on the web site in the form of the online ordering option that web site visitors could use to order T-shirts, sweaters, newsletters, booklets and tree seeds. If taken further, people wearing the TFA T-shirts were promoting the organization, as the TFA logo was printed on the t-shirts as well as the sweaters.

  The option for ordering trees could also be seen as a form of advertising/promotion/ publicity, but as was mentioned earlier this ordering form could not be used online, making it less likely to be used.

❖ ***Entertainment***

No form of entertainment was provided on the web site.

6.4 Principles of dialogical/two-way communication

The principles of two-way communication employed on the TFA web site was identified by means of content analysis:

❖ ***Test 1: Dialogical loop***

The web site had a dialogical loop in the form of reciprocal communication. This included contact information, and the option to order online. However, the dialogical loop was not fully operational in its current limited state, as not all the ordering options were online, and because the e-mail links were not operational. This in itself could be a serious shortcoming of the web site. Furthermore, the dialogical loop could be expanded much more if the organization should make use of some other, more interactive devices to enhance interactivity.

❖ ***Reaction on testing***

The executive director replied to the researcher's test message within one day, therefore the reaction could be described as prompt.

❖ ***Test 2: The generation of return visits***

This test is all about the usefulness of information on a web site, as well as the frequent updating of web site content. The content on the TFA web site could be described as useful to different target groups, as pointed out earlier in this analysis. The general public, as well as potential donors and potential beneficiaries, could make use of the information on the web site. General background information was provided, for instance the history of the organization and details of the organization's staff. More specific information was also provided, such as information about the organization's activities, awards and publications.

The information was organized logically by means of main content categories as well as sub-categories on each page. The web site content could be described as being to the advantage to the organization, as well as its publics (especially its potential beneficiaries).

Unfortunately the generation of return visits was not encouraged, because the web site was not updated frequently. This could be a drawback for the success of the web site, because web site visitors would not return if they realized that the content was not updated frequently. This could have a negative effect on, for instance the ordering of booklets and other gifts, as well as to the generation on online donations.

❖ ***Test 3: Ease of use:***

The TFA web site could be described as fairly easy to use. Contributing factors were the logical organization of its content, the limited requirements for hardware/software and a fairly quick download time because of the text/graphics relationship.

6.5 TFA: Conclusions

The TFA web site was a good example of an attractive and useful web site that could have many advantages for the organization. One of its positive aspects was the inclusion of useful information that was logically organized and easy to use. Another outstanding characteristic was the fact that web site visitors could become involved with the organization in several ways and not just by donating money. It also seemed that the organization had more success with this approach than other NGOs that only asked for donations.

However, the web site could have much more impact if some of its serious shortcomings were addressed. The criticism against the TFA web site was the under-use of the unique characteristics of the internet. Its low level of interactivity and therefore also its minimum utilization of dialogical communication devices were the most important shortcomings of this web site. The organization could also consider the inclusion of, for instance, its annual reports as well as its press releases, to enhance its image with regard to transparency. Attention should also be given to the lack of frequent updating of the web site. Even if the web site was only updated on a monthly basis it could attract more visitors to the web site.

Another serious problem was the dialogical loop that was not operational at the time of the analysis and the fact that the "web site manager" was not even aware of this problem. This illustrated the lack of proper management of the web site, in contrast to the commitment that is needed from an organization when it decides to put up a web site. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.18.)

In terms of the organization of content, one recommendation that could encourage more web site visitors to browse the publications of the organization, was that a separate link for *Publications* should be created. At the time of the analysis publications could be found under *Archives & links* content category, giving no indication that it also included information on some of the organization's publications.

The most important reason for these shortcomings was a lack of time, technical knowledge and money.

From the interview it was clear that TFA did have specific reasons for setting up a web site, for instance to raise funds and to network with other organizations. However, the target group for the web site was not very narrowly defined as the web site content was described as a "global hit", directed at "everybody that has access to the WWW". The lack of a clear target group for the web site could be a potential problem because it made it almost impossible to determine the success of the web site.

It seemed that the potential of the WWW in terms of interactivity and dialogical communication was not fully realized on the one hand, and also under-used because of technical and time constraints. The importance of public relations was well realized and the organization made use of several public relations techniques through other media. In fact, it seemed that Trees for Africa concentrated on the creation of publicity to disseminate information to its publics.

This aspect led to the conclusion that the organization made use of a mixture between the press agentry/publicity model and the public information model of public relations, as defined by Grunig and Hunt (1984:21-27). (See Chapter 3, Section 3.4.) It was clear that the organization tried to get as much publicity as possible in order to make people aware of its existence as well as the importance of its mission. However, the organization had a high credibility among media institutions and other organizations and it used the truth to obtain its goals.

In Chapter 3 (Section 3.5) it was explained that non-profit organizations usually make use of the public information model to disseminate information to its relevant publics. This proved to be true for TFA, with the difference that the organization made use of publicity to spread information. It also had to make use of persuasion frequently in order to attract donors or to persuade government or other agencies to engage in collaboration with TFA. However, the organization also displayed many characteristics of symmetrical communication that would enable the organization to follow a symmetrical model of public relations.

Some of these characteristics were its emphasis on networking and collaboration with other organizations, government and also local government. The fact that the organization tried to get local government to collaborate with communities was also an example of a symmetrical worldview. TFA did not always initiate communication with its publics, as most of its beneficiaries usually contacted the organization first, after which the organization and the beneficiary worked together to obtain a set goal.

Another aspect conducive to a symmetrical approach was that the organization was innovative and constantly adapting to input from its environment. The public relations function formed part of the dominant coalition and was very involved in the strategic planning process. The organization also functioned according to a decentralized authority in a participative organizational culture.

If the organization should place less emphasis on publicity and more emphasis on two-way communication and mutual understanding with its publics, it would perhaps also realize the potential of the WWW to assist this approach. However, in this case study the web site did not contribute towards a two-way symmetrical approach to public relations.

Chapter 7

Famsa (http://home.global.co.za/~famsa/)

Content analysis on June 10th, 2000 and interview with Isabel Joubert, secretary, and Dr. Annette van Rensburg, national director on June 12th, 2000

7.1 Background

7.1.1 Organizational information

FAMSA
Family and Marriage Society of S.A.

When this study was conducted Famsa (the Family and Marriage society of South Africa) functioned from its head office in Kempton Park and several regional offices in different parts of the country. Most of the regional offices were autonomous and had to manage their own day-to-day affairs. Famsa engaged in community project development services and provided counseling, educational and employee support services. The organization was also involved in training and capacity-building courses.

The organization's target was defined as individuals, families, professionals, members of the community and organizations and at the time of the study its mission statement was as follows (HSRC, 2000):

- *To empower people to build, reconstruct and maintain sound relationships in the family, in marriage and in communities.*

It is important to note that this study examined the web site of the Famsa head office and could therefore not make conclusions on any of the regional offices.

The national head-office consisted of four people: the national director, a secretary, a receptionist and a treasurer. The head-office did not conduct "normal" Famsa activities such as counseling, development programs and so forth. The structure of Famsa was as follows: the board of management was on top, having most power in the organization. Below the board of management was the national office of Famsa (where the interview was conducted). The national office was managed by its own management committee that consisted of some of the members of the board of management as well as other people from the community.

Below the national office and its management committee was the executive committee that was made up from representatives from each province in the country. This committee usually met biennially. Famsa branches/societies countrywide resided under the executive committee. The lowest level of the organizational hierarchy was the developing Famsa societies or branches that referred to new Famsa branches that were not fully autonomous yet. They still needed to refer some of their day-to-day decisions to the national director for approval.

The decision to create a web site was discussed by the executive committee of Famsa and the order was given to the national director to take steps to create and set up a web site in 1998. The web site was created and had been sponsored and put online by an outside person.

7.1.2 Reasons and aims for setting up a web site

The interviewees explained that the main reason for putting up the web site was to market Famsa's services in order to inform more people about the organization and what it stood for. The only aim for the web site was to create more awareness of Famsa as an organization and to make it known via a new medium, the internet. The content on the web site was not directed at fund-raising as each branch of Famsa handled its own fund-raising. The interviewees had expected that more people in South Africa would know what Famsa was and what services it had to offer, and the expectation was not necessarily to draw more clients for Famsa's services.

The content analysis showed that the only type of content on the web site was general information, supporting the organization's aim to inform people about the organization and its services. The web site did not make any real efforts to generate feedback or two-way communication with web site visitors. The link to the webmaster was not considered as a true effort to obtain feedback, as the webmaster was not part of the organization. Therefore the feedback obtained would not go directly to the organization.

7.1.3 General characteristics and functions of the web site

7.1.3.1 Appearance and layout

No distinctive color scheme emerged on the web site. The web site did not contain many pages, but it seemed that the colors green (the color of the logo) and black were used most often. However, there was also text in red and blue. A map on the front page had each province filled with another color, bringing in more colors.

Text on the web site was easily readable as colored fonts (black, red, blue) were mostly used against a white background. On some of the pages Famsa's logo appeared as a watermark on the page and therefore served as background to the text. On the watermarked pages the smaller fonts were not very easily readable, especially those written in black.

Unfortunately the font sizes differed vastly on these pages, from very large to relatively small (approximately 12pt). This was not always easy to read, as it was disproportionate to the size of the computer screen, and it took more effort on the part of the reader. It also did not make a good impression, as it seemed that large fonts had to make up for a lack of content on this web site. The larger fonts were usually in dark green, making them somewhat more readable.

The only graphic material on the web site was the organization's logo that appeared on every page as well as a map of South Africa on the front page. The size of the logo was, however, problematic as it was very large on all the pages except on the front-page where it was approximately a third of the page (a page was seen as the size of the computer screen). The problem with the large logo on the other pages was that it was so large that it did not fit on the page and the web site visitor had to scroll down to see the rest of the logo as well as the information contained on that page. This was inconvenient for visitors and it did not leave a good impression. An organization's logo should have a prominent place on its web site and on other communication media, but it should not *overpower* the page as a whole.

The layout of the front page could be examined on the attached copy in Appendix E. As can be seen, the front page was made up of three parts: the Famsa logo on the left, content categories in the middle and a map of South Africa on the right. On the bottom of the page was a small counter which counted the researcher as visitor number 60, since April 1999. The web site had obviously not been visited very often during the past year, which was to be expected if the shortcomings of the web site are noted.

The following content categories appeared on the front page:

- Vision;
- Mission;
- What is Famsa;
- Priority issues;
- Famsa societies;
- Famsa summerised (sic);
- Webmaster; and
- Select your region.

The front page did not contain any information in itself, and served as a gateway to enter the rest of the web site. The map was linked to the different South African provinces in order to provide a web site visitor the choice to link to his/her province. However, the links provided very limited information: it only listed the Famsa offices and its contact information (telephone number) in a particular province.

The rest of the web site was organized according to the content categories mentioned earlier. The limited content that the web site carried was a serious shortcoming. The first two content categories (*Vision* as well as *Mission*) were self-evident. The following two options (*What is Famsa, Priority issues*) gave a very broad description of what Famsa was and what programs it carried out. These programs could each have its own link with a much more detailed description to give the visitor a better idea of what Famsa did and to provide more useful information.

The remaining content links were of little use, as *Famsa societies* linked to a complete list of all Famsa offices, therefore providing the same information as the map on the front page. The *Famsa summerised* (sic) link contained no new information at all. It was only a compilation of everything else that could be found on the web site. The *Webmaster* link provided an option to send e-mail to the webmaster and as such it is the only interactive function on the entire web site.

7.1.3.2 Target and functions

From the content analysis there was no clear indication of who the target group for the web site could be. Two possible target groups for the web site could be the general public, as well as beneficiaries of the organization. Beneficiaries were the people who made use of Famsa's services. It is also possible that no consideration was given to a specific target when the web site was designed. However, during the interview the target group for the web site was described as the general public. This is a very broad and vague description and the web site content should instead be providing more specialized information for a variety of identified target groups.

As a result of the limited content, the only function that the Famsa web site could have for its visitors was to provide general organizational information as well as countrywide contact information.

7.1.4 Successes, problems and failures

The Famsa web site at the time of the analysis could be described as dormant and a very limited asset to the organization. The interviewees could not relate any examples of successes with regard to the Famsa web site since its inception. No feedback or inquiries had been received after the launching of the web site. One interviewee said that she had not had a look at the web site for the past year or so. She did not even know if it was still in operation. The interviewees did not know whether the Famsa web site had been listed on any search engines to make it easy to find by potential web site visitors.

According to the interviewees the URL was repeatedly given to the representatives of the different Famsa branches countrywide, but no feedback was ever received. Special pamphlets were printed that had the same content as the web site and the Famsa representatives received a number of pamphlets for distribution in their own areas. Unfortunately the interviewees did not realized that the URL or the e-mail address of the national head-office was not printed on the pamphlets. This meant that there was no way that a receiver of such a pamphlet could link the contents of the pamphlet to the newly launched web site. The pamphlets therefore had no effect on the promotion of the web site.

No monitoring of web site visitors was done, except for the counting of visitors by means of a visitor counter on the web site. The reasons were stated as a lack of funds to pay a computer expert to do this, and the lack of technical knowledge to handle the monitoring by one of the Famsa employees. The web site had never been updated since its inception in 1998 and no research had been done beforehand or after the launch of the web site. The reasons were stated as a lack of time, a lack of technical knowledge and a lack of money and manpower.

Despite these obvious problems with regard to the web site, the interviewees were quite satisfied with the web site and stated that they did not experience problems in managing the web site. According to one interviewee, the only problem was to get the appearance and the content of the web site to the satisfaction of the national director when it was created. The web site creator had to make several changes to the content and appearance of the web site before it was ready to go online. One interviewee stated categorically that no other problems were experienced, as no complaints about the web site had been heard.

However, the fact is that no feedback was received because the web site had not been visited frequently. This was as a result of feeble promotional efforts and a lack of comprehension of the importance of communication and public relations functions on the part of the head office staff.

7.1.5 Integration of media

The Famsa URL and e-mail address appeared on the letter heads of the organization, as well as on the list of addresses of Famsa branches that was often distributed to other organizations and individuals. As was mentioned earlier, the pamphlets used by Famsa did not carry this information and during the interview it seemed that posters also did not carry the URL and the e-mail address. According to the interviewees the only other publication that Famsa published was the annual report.

On examination it seemed that only the e-mail address appeared in the previous annual report and *not* the URL of the web site. It was therefore deduced that Famsa viewed its web site as something that functioned separately from its other publications and that no real efforts had been made to promote the web site via hard copy publications at the time of the study. The fact that the web site did not contain any publications also meant that the potential of the web site to distribute publications on a global scale was not realized.

According to the interviewees Famsa had frequent contact with national as well as regional mass media, for example radio, television and newspapers, especially for the organization's comments on topics concerning the family. However, it was clear that the web site was not seen as part of this process, for instance to post some of these commentaries or to put press releases on the web site.

7.2 Public relations models

A full-time media officer or public relations practitioner was not employed, as the manpower and financial resources were not available. The Famsa head office employed only four people and the communication functions were shared among them. None of the employees at this organization had any communication or public relations qualifications. Their qualifications ranged from nothing to post-graduate degrees in social work.

From the interview it was clear that the organization did not value public relations efforts or media work. It seemed that few or no efforts were made to build the image of the organization nationally, and the dormant status of the web site also illustrated this point. Contact and collaboration did exist between Famsa and other organizations (mentioned later), but an integrated public relations function did not exist.

The communication process between Famsa and its publics varied according to the specific public that was involved. Beneficiaries who wanted help from the organization usually initiated communication with Famsa. However, as the head-office was not involved in therapy directly, this type of contact was not common. The organization was frequently contacted by the media to comment on issues or to give advice. However, when it came to policy issues and fundraising, Famsa had to initiate the communication process.

According to the interviewees, Famsa played a radical role by being represented on and being very active on governmental policy-formulating committees. It also played an idealistic role in the sense that it worked towards improving different aspects regarding family life and marriage. A critical role was also played by the organization because it frequently commented on policies and related issues. However, as a public relations function was virtually non-existent at national level, it could not contribute to these three roles.

Famsa branches countrywide were autonomous. They handled their own decision-making and finances, fund-raising, as well as their own programs on a day to day basis. Every branch had its own constitution that stemmed from the national Famsa constitution. The national director at the national head-office represented Famsa as a whole at other organizations and institutions such as the Welfare Council, government, other NGOs and so forth.

The interviewees described Famsa's organizational culture as more participatory/transparent than authoritarian, because the national director could not make any decisions without first consulting the board of management or the executive committee that had representatives from Famsa branches in every province.

Famsa was described as open to innovation and change, and not stuck in traditional practices, as it had to adjust to the changing society in South Africa. The example was given of involving black people in the organization and its board of management after the political situation changed in 1994. The one interviewee stated that Famsa had a decentralized authority because the different branches were autonomous. The national director could not take decisions for these branches. Its own executive committee managed every branch.

The interviewees at first maintained that Famsa usually did not have to adapt to input and contact from other organizations or individuals, because Famsa usually led the way and other organizations followed. After probing they gave several examples of Famsa adapting to its environment. One of these examples was the declining of funding which had the effect that more effort had to be put into fund-raising. Another example was the changes to the board of management that previously was all white.

Some of the organizations with whom Famsa interacted regularly were the NPA (National program of action), CRC (Committee on the rights of the child), Nacoss (National coalition of social services), and ICMIR (International committee for marital and interpersonal relationships). As these organizations operated both nationally and internationally, it would be advantageous for Famsa to utilize its web site to promote and facilitate these contacts. However, Famsa did not recognize this potential at the time of the interview.

The work done by Famsa at grassroots level was described in a certain sense as looking after the needs and interests of ordinary people, because many of the Famsa programs were aimed at empowering people. Empowering people could help them to help and defend themselves, if it was necessary. One example was teachers who were trained by Famsa to spot the signs of child molestation. These teachers in turn trained other teachers and in the process several individuals were empowered and protected.

According to one of the interviewees there had not been any conflict between a branch of Famsa and the national head-office yet. If this should happen in the future, the procedure to resolve the conflict would be to let the management committee of that specific branch negotiate with the management committee of the national head-office. Individuals in the organization would not resolve the conflict situation.

Should conflict arise between the national head office and another organization, for instance another NGO, either the head-office's management committee or the board of management would handle the situation. The aim would be to resolve the conflict by means of negotiation.

The interviewees said that no formal strategic planning was done in the organization and that planning was mostly done on an ad hoc base from time to time. The meeting of the executive committee biennially handled some planning for the organization as a whole. Other planning was usually done by the national director and then taken to head-office's management committee for approval.

Although it seemed that Famsa operated as a transparent organization, no signs of transparency were found on the web site. This meant that the web site contained no annual reports, press releases, details about donors or sponsors and also no detail about its staff.

7.3 Interactive characteristics

7.3.1 Dimensions of interactivity

As mentioned earlier the web site carried very little content and almost no sign of interactive features was found.

- ***Choice***

  The first aspect that the choice dimension refers to is the unrestricted navigation of a web site. In this regard the web site rated high, as there was no restrictions on navigation. The visitor did not have to register either before, or during the navigation and he/she did not have to undertake any obligations whatsoever.

  The second aspect of the choice dimension referred to choices that the web site visitor could make, for example with regard to language or a particular version of the web site. No such choices were available on the Famsa web site. However, as the web site did not contain many graphics, one could argue that the choice for a text or a graphic version of the web site would be irrelevant. On the other hand, it could be argued that Famsa served different language groups, therefore a language choice could add to the choice dimension of interactivity. At the time of the analysis the web site was available only in English.

- ***Connectedness***

  Links on the Famsa web site were limited. Most of the links appeared on the front page and could be described as internal links to information about the organization and its services. However, as mentioned earlier, this information was rather vague and limited.

  The only other links were to the e-mail address at its head office in Kempton Park, and two external links that appeared on every other page on the web site. The external links were linking to a web site called *Family Life Center*, i.e. the Johannesburg Famsa branch. This was seen as an external link because it took the web site visitor completely out of the main Famsa web site and the connection between *Family Life Center* and Famsa was not clear and had to be clarified during the interview.

  The other external link was to a web site that gave information about trauma intervention by Famsa. However, this web site seemed to have been removed or relocated, as it was not possible to gain access to it on several occasions. There were no links to photographs, slides or advertisements and the only graphic links were the links from the South African map discussed earlier.

  It could be argued that an organization such as Famsa with regional offices all over the country could make good use of internal links to their different offices. This would be an example of sub-web sites within the main Famsa web site.

- ***Information collection***

  No overt monitoring devices were found on the web site. The only indication of a monitoring device was the counter on the front page that was discussed earlier. Covert monitoring devices were also not used (as explained earlier).

- ***Reciprocal communication***

  Examples of reciprocal communication were limited. There was no true interactive communication present on the web site. The only reciprocal communication via the web site was the provision of e-mail addresses, telephone numbers and physical addresses, all examples of mere reactive communication.

- ***Playfulness***

  None of the content of the Famsa web site was directed at the playfulness dimension of interactivity.

7.3.2 Level of interactivity

The Famsa web site would score very low on the interactivity continuum, as the only indication of interactivity or two-way communication on the web site was the contact information that was provided. In terms of the scale for interactivity, the web site can be described as having only a *limited* level of interactivity when it was analyzed. This was a confirmation of previous research that concluded that organizations were still under-utilizing the interactive possibilities of the WWW.

7.3.3 Orientation of interactivity

The orientation of interactivity on the Famsa web site can be described as mainly source-oriented, as the provision of contact information (reactive, reciprocal communication) was the only clear indication of interactivity on the web site. Some of the other dimensions of interactive communication were only present on a very limited scale, for instance connectedness and choice.

7.3.4 Functions and forms of interactivity

As a result of the limited interactivity of the web site, the organization did not use many of the functions of interactivity.

- ***Customer support***

  The only form of customer support on the Famsa web site was the invitation from the web master for feedback. However, this does not qualify as true interactive communication, because there was not a specific form for the web site visitor to fill in, and the feedback via e-mail went directly to the webmaster, who was not attached to the organization.

- ***Marketing research***

  The marketing research function of interactivity was not present on the web site.

- ***Search for more information***

  Forms of interactivity such as a key word search, personal-choice helper or a virtual reality display were not present on the web site. The map with the different provinces that a web site visitor could use to detect the branches of Famsa in his/her vicinity could be described as a form of a branch locator.

- ***Advertising/promotion/publicity***

  No forms of advertising/promotion or publicity were present on the web site.

❖ ***Entertainment***

No forms of entertainment could be found on the web site.

7.4 Principles of dialogical/two-way communication

As the organization did not realize the importance of public relations in general, it also did not realize the potential of the WWW in this regard. Therefore most of the basic principles of two-way communication were absent from the web site.

❖ ***Test 1: Dialogical loop***

A limited version of a dialogical loop was present on the web site, in the form of a link to the e-mail address of the organizational head office, as well as a link to the e-mail address of the webmaster.

❖ ***Reaction on testing***

Reaction was delayed, as it took Famsa four days to reply to the testing e-mail message.

❖ ***Test 2: The generation of return visits***

The web site was not rated very highly in terms of this test, as it carried extremely limited information, which could have a limited usefulness to its target as it did not define a clear target group. The content of the web site was also not organized very logically as some aspects were repeated with certain links (Famsa summarized and Famsa societies), presumably to make up for a lack of content.

The generation of return visits was also not promoted by the regular updating of the web site, as there was no indication of updating whatsoever. There was nothing in the web site that would motivate a first-time visitor to visit the web site again in the future.

The web site in its current form could not really be to the advantage of either its presumed target or the organization itself. It had to be re-designed to be able to function to the advantage of both the organization as well as its different publics.

❖ ***Ease of use***

The table of contents on the front page of the web site was easy to use, but it was not organized very well, because of the repetition of information at some links (as described before). Other than this point of critique, the web site was easy to use, as the relationship between text and graphics did not cause a slow download speed. It was therefore not necessary for visitors to have the latest hardware or software to be able to get access to the web site.

7.5 Famsa: Conclusions

It should be reiterated that this study involved the Famsa head-office and not any of its branches or societies. Famsa differs from an organization such as Cansa, because Famsa's branches are autonomous and each one registers as an independent NGO. The implication is that the conclusions made about the Famsa head-office may not be applicable to any of its other branches. Therefore the reader should keep in mind that every reference to Famsa refers to its head-office only.

The Famsa web site was a typical example of how an organizational web site should not be managed. The web site had been set up two years previously and it had been dormant ever since. In the first instance the web site itself showed many shortcomings. It was not attractive, its content was not well organized and it contained very little useful information. Furthermore it contained almost no interactive characteristics and two-way communication could not even be a possibility via the web site. It also seemed as a typical example of a web site that was only set up because *you have to have a web presence* – that is presence for the sake of presence.

The web site was not managed at all, and had not been managed since it had been set up. The interviewees did not even know if the web site was still in operation. The result was that the web site did not provide the organization with any positive results at all. In the two years it had been in operation, it could only draw 61 hits. The interviewees did not know whether the web site was listed with any search engines and Famsa did not promote the web site in any significant way.

The reason for this situation was mostly due to the fact that an outside person designed the web site, free of charge, and that the organization did not have the technical knowledge or the money and manpower to manage the web site. More importantly, the organization did not realize the importance of public relations or communication functions in the organization for internal, as well as external communication. The potential of a web site for two-way communication was therefore also not recognized. It seemed as if Famsa was only concerned with day-to-day survival and that strategic, long-term planning with regard to communication was not done.

It was therefore expected that Famsa as an organization would not practice the two-way symmetrical model of public relations (if a judgment on that had to be made based on the characteristics of the web site).

However, apart from the fact that the communication function in the organization needed improvement, Famsa displayed some characteristics that would be compatible with a two-way symmetrical approach to public relations. The organization had a decentralized authority with regard to its several autonomous offices, which meant that employees at other offices would have autonomy and responsibility in doing their work. Famsa was also an innovative organization, not clinging to traditional ways of doing things.

Although the interviewees maintained that Famsa was rarely involved in conflict situations, she could relate procedures for handling conflict if it would appear. However, their explanation of these procedures was not specific enough to determine without doubt whether it would be applicable to a two-way symmetrical approach. The interviewees could not describe an example of a conflict situation in which these procedures had been used in the past.

Famsa did interact with several other organizations at the time of the study and received input from them. However, a trace of elitism was detected when the one interviewee declared that Famsa usually led the way and that it did not have to adapt to its environment. When probed, she corrected this impression by giving examples of how the organization had adapted during the past few years.

The critical and idealistic social roles played by Famsa would also be compatible with a two-way symmetrical model of public relations. However, at the time of the interview these roles were not supported by a strong communication function in the organization. Apart from its annual report and a few pamphlets from time to time, the organization did not publish any other material to support its different social roles in society.

In assessing the approach followed with regard to public relations, the organization gave the impression of having an internal orientation, which was an example of an asymmetrical worldview. It seemed that the employees could not be objective about the organization and that they could not see the organization as others saw it. It was evident that especially the interviewees were very happy with the organization as it is, and that they did not even care about the fact that the web site was in such a dormant, unmanaged state.

Famsa was therefore evaluated as following mostly a public-information model of public relations, but with no clear strategic goals or efforts. From time to time the organization would seek publicity, moving to a press-agentry/publicity model of public relations when it had a specific event coming up. However, none of these two models were consciously followed, as no definite thought was given to the communication aspect in the organization.

With this background, it would perhaps be better for Famsa to remove the web site until it has its "house in order" with regard to communication and public relations.

Chapter 8

The Mvula Trust (http://www.mvula.co.za)

Content analysis on June 11th, 2000 and interview with Kate Skinner, communication manager, on June 12th, 2000

8.1 Background

8.1.1 Organizational information

The Mvula Trust was founded in August 1993 with funding from the Development Bank of Southern Africa, the Independent Development Trust and the European Union through the Kagiso Trust. The Mvula Trust operated from its head office in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, with regional offices in Durban, East London, Kokstad, Matubatuba, Nelspruit and Pietersburg.

The organization rendered service to approximately a million rural South Africans who did not have access to either water or sanitation previously. During 1995 Mvula Trust signed a formal agreement of co-operation with the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry to work on its Community Water Supply and Sanitation Program. Mvula Trust's work was presented at the UNDP/World Bank Community Water Supply and Sanitation Conference in Washington during 1998 as one of six case studies of the most innovative and outstanding examples of best practice in the world (Mvula Trust, 2000).

The organization's target was defined as rural and peri-urban communities. Its mission statement was as follows (HSRC, 2000):

- *To improve the health and welfare of poor and disadvantaged South Africans in rural and peri-urban communities by increasing access to safe and sustainable water and sanitation services;*
- *To support the development of good practice in the sector by testing and advocating sustainable models for cost-effective delivery and management.*

The organization consisted of eight regional offices and its head-office. At the head-office the following departments were operational: a policy unit, communication department, a human resources department and an executive director.

The initial web site was implemented in 1997, but after it had not been updated for quite a long time, it was re-designed and re-launched in 1999. The first web site was first set up by a number of students who had connections with the organization. It was a very cheap and effective way for them to help the organization and the organization accepted the offer, thereby also helping the students to acquire some more IT skills. "Mvula is quite into that idea of... rather than taking a commercial option, if you could use students or other NGOs then the organization would rather take the non-commercial option," according to the interviewee, Kate Skinner.

The current web site was re-designed by a small, black-owned outside company. The choice of this company fitted in with Mvula's view that NGOs should help other NGOs or smaller businesses and that the organization should not necessarily make use of some of the huge internet companies.

8.1.2 Reasons and aims for setting up a web site

The interviewee was not employed by Mvula at the time when the first web site was launched. However, she speculated on the reason/s why a web site was implemented at that stage: "Probably the reason was that Mvula has always liked to see themselves as a cutting-edge kind of organization or NGO and liked to be very up to date in terms of the latest technology". Another reason for initially putting up a web site could have been the fact that the organization had a lot of international contacts and that the web site would provide a very effective way of communication with funders and other international organizations.

According to the interviewee things had changed when the second web site was re-launched. By then "it had become quite critical to have a web site, because a lot of NGOs were on the web and we had contact with international organizations". Another reason was the fact that in South Africa more and more people were getting access to the web and using it to gather information. It was expected to ease contact and communication with especially international NGOs and other organizations. However, the aim was also to make contact and to communicate with South African NGOs, local governments and other stakeholders. Expectations of the web site were described as to draw funders, to ease networking and to advocate Mvula's development approach.

The interviewee was probed on the reason why the web site did not ask for donations and funding as several other NGO web sites did. She responded that Mvula's approach had always been to approach a potential funder with a specific project proposal around a particular program. Afterwards the potential funder can be directed to the web site for more information about the organization.

The communication department within Mvula was planning to re-design the web site again a month or two after the interview because of problems with the current web site. (See Section 8.1.4.) She stressed that an important future aim for the web site was that it should be updated on a weekly basis.

Most of the content on the Mvula Trust web site could be described as general information with the aim to provide information. Some of the information was provided in the form of conference papers, policy documents and newsletters. No signs of persuasive messages were found on the web site and there were also no requests for donations such as can be found on many other NGO web sites. The information on the web site could also not be described as publicity-directed, as press releases did not appear on the web site.

Another type of content that appeared on the web site was the request for feedback via a feedback form. The aim of this type of content could be to generate two-way communication between the organization and its web site visitors and to make contact with individuals and organizations, as it was one of the aims of the web site.

8.1.3 General characteristics and functions of the web site

8.1.3.1 Appearance and layout

The main colors used on the Mvula Trust web site were blue and yellow. The graphics border described later, as well as a few photographs, added a few other colors. The background color for the main content categories that were listed on the left side of each page was dark blue, and the background of the organization's logo was the same color. The background to the logo was presented as a "moving background", giving the impression of running water. The background color used for text on the rest of the web site was a light yellow. The consistent use of these two background colors added unity and simplicity to the design of the web site.

Fonts were easily readable because black against a light yellow background was used. The font size was approximately 12pt with headings in bold and slightly larger. Fonts used were kept consistent throughout the web site, except on the feedback form where another font type was used. This did not matter, as this was seen as a specific form and not as ordinary text like on the other web pages.

Graphics were not used extensively, the only instance being the organization's logo and the colorful border on top of each page. In addition to these graphics a few photographs were also used. These photographs were not used to depict work but showed happy faces of presumably the beneficiaries of the trust's work. Other graphics that had a low profile on the web site, were the logos of the funders of the trust that were listed in one of the main content categories. This limited usage of graphics and photographs contributed to a fast downloading speed of the web site. However, the web site could have been more colorful and attractive and also given web site visitors a better idea of the organization's work if graphic representations had been used more extensively.

The Mvula Trust web site had a very simple and effective layout. The Mvula logo appeared on the top left side of the front page, with the main content categories (named above) just below. The rest of the front page (approximately two thirds of the page) was filled with a photograph of a laughing black boy. Above the photograph, the following statement appeared: *Supporting water and sanitation development*. The front page did not contain any information in itself, and therefore served as a gateway to the rest of the web site.

The following content categories appeared on the front page:

- About Mvula;
- People;
- Funders;
- Work of Mvula;
- Documents;
- Publications;
- Links;
- Contact us; and
- Feedback.

It was interesting to note the distinction that was made between *Documents* and *Publications*. The *Documents* option referred to specific documents such as conference papers or policy documents produced by the organization. The *Publications* option referred to regular newsletters of Mvula, like *Maru A Pula* (Promise of rain) and *Diary*.

Another interesting distinction on the web site was made between the *contact us* and *feedback* options, as these two options were often combined on other web sites. The first option linked to a list of contact persons at the different Mvula offices and it included their contact information (e-mail link, telephone and fax numbers). The feedback category took the web site visitor to a feedback form with specific questions. There was some duplication between the *People* option and the *Contact us* option, as the first option listed the people working at Mvula, with their telephone numbers, and the second option did the same. The difference was that the *People* category not only listed employees of Mvula, but also gave information about the organization's board of directors.

The layout of the rest of the web site was done according to the main content categories on the front page. Every page had a consistent look, with the Mvula logo and main content categories on the left, and a colorful graphic border on top, with the slogan *Supporting water and sanitation development* below the border. Each page also had a list of sub-categories, on top of the content of that page.

In the first instance the consistent look of each page contributed to the ease of use of the web site, because the web site visitor had a point of reference on each page. It also contributed to the Mvula logo as well as what the organization stood for being promoted. Secondly the sub-categories on each page made the web site easier to navigate, as some pages carried a large amount of content. Web site visitors therefore did not have to scroll down each page to reach the specific information they needed. They could merely click on the applicable sub-category and they would reach the specific part of the page in which they were interested.

8.1.3.2 Target and functions

The content analysis revealed that the web site could be directed towards different target groups, for example the general public or towards potential beneficiaries who could have a need for the services of the organization. It was presumed that very few of the potential beneficiaries of the Mvula Trust would have access to the internet and the WWW. The web site could also have been directed toward potential sponsors/donors and international funding organizations or similar NGOs. At the same time, it could be directed towards the government in order to make government aware of the organization with the aim to ensure future contracts with government. The interviewee added that policy-makers (especially policy-makers within the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, as well as policy-makers in local government) and consultants who worked on policy issues were two other important target groups for the Mvula Trust web site.

She explained that a target group for the future would be local government. The Mvula web site should be linked to local governments, because "constitutionally and legislatively local government has to take over water and sanitation delivery". "We at Mvula, being a major implementing agent, have to make local government aware that we exist, of what we do, our development approach and we also find ourselves fighting amongst an enormous amount of people that are all marketing themselves to local government. So we really see the web as a major component of our huge marketing drive to local government."

The interviewee mentioned that she was aware of the fact that many of the rural municipalities did not have access to the web yet, but that she was convinced that that would change over time. Therefore local governments were seen as a future target group for communication via the web site.

The Mvula Trust web site could fulfil several functions for its visitors. The web site could be used to gain general information about the organization, its programs, donors and publications. Visitors could, ideally, also use the search function to search for documents. The search function was unfortunately not operational at the time of this analysis. The web site could be used to contact the organization or specific staff members, and also to send feedback or inquiries to the organization. Furthermore web site visitors could use the site to link to other similar organizations using the *links* option as one of the main content categories on the front page of the web site.

8.1.4 Successes, problems and failures

Successes were described by the interviewee as minor. She explained that after the web site had been revamped in 1999 she had received many positive remarks about it, especially from within the organization. The web site also attracted more than the usual number of hits, especially just after it was re-launched. The interviewee explained that she and the communication administrator had a lot of energy and enthusiasm for the web site after it was re-designed and re-launched in 1999.

However, they experienced problems with the company that managed the web. "Because of the incredible frustration with just trying to get tiny things done we did lose a lot of energy." Regarding the day-to-day management of the web site the interviewee stressed that they had "huge problems" just to get the site updated. "It would take us days of nagging and pleading to get that done. All we should have to do is to make one phone call and it should be updated within the same day." This frustration caused a lack of proper updating of the web site. Since then only the contact details of employees had been updated and the regular newsletters were put on the web site. Nothing else has been updated since 1999.

A problem was also experienced with the search engine of the web site: "Our search engine is completely useless, hopeless and it does not work most of the time." Furthermore the interviewee felt that the web site did not have a good enough look in terms of creativity and graphics. According to her the design of the web site was also not very innovative with regard to the organization of content.

The interviewee added that Mvula was in the process of terminating that contract and trying to find another small to medium company with NGO links to manage the web site in the future. The new company should be more experienced and have a better track record for service to avoid the same problems.

The interviewee complained about the low number of hits that the Mvula web site attracted – between 10-12 hits per day.[1] She stressed that the company who managed the web site was asked to ensure that the web site was listed on all major search engines. However, she admitted that one of the reasons for the "low" number of hits could be the fact that the web site was not updated on a regular frequency for quite some time.

In term of monitoring mechanisms the organization used a hits counter on the front page of the web site. Covert monitoring mechanisms were not employed. No formal research was conducted among potential target groups of the web site before or after it had been implemented. However, research was conducted in a more informal way by having discussions with several people and divisions within the organization.

[1] Although this was described as a low amount of hits, it was more than some of the other NGO web sites involved in the study could attract at the time of the analysis.

8.1.5 Integration of media

It seemed that Mvula Trust integrated traditional media with its web site, as the web site contained a number of publications that were also published in hard copy. Examples are important documents produced by the organization, such as conference papers that had been presented at international conferences and policy documents. Other publications on the web site included a newsletter, as well as a water and sanitation diary for 1999 and 2000.

The interviewee mentioned that after the current web site was re-designed by a new company, it would be a priority to make sure that the different publications of the organization all carry the web site's URL, as well as e-mail contact information. This was already done in the sense that many of the pamphlets and posters produced by Mvula carried information about its web site. However, she felt that the integration of different forms of communication could be improved. In future she would ensure that every single publication produced by Mvula as well as employees' business cards carried the web address.

8.2 Public relations models

Two people handled communication activities: a communication manager and a communication administrator. Some of their responsibilities included managing the web site as well as the resource center, producing several publications and organizing several kinds of events such as exhibitions or project openings. Media relations was also one of the communication department's responsibilities; however, the interviewee made it clear that the Mvula Trust did not have a very high media profile. Media were involved when a specific project was completed, but media relations were not a priority on a day-to-day basis.

One of the reasons for the organization's relatively low media profile was that its projects were all very similar. Its projects involved the provision of water and sanitation and therefore it was not always possible to make a news story out of just another project that had been completed. A more appropriate way to maintain its media profile would be to write regular feature articles for the media that did not necessarily contain hard news.

The communication manager had two honors degrees: in political sciences and in media and culture studies. The communication administrator did not have any formal qualifications other than a few short courses in communication. However, she was enrolled for a communication degree at Unisa at the time of the interview with development studies as her other major subject.

The interviewee stressed the fact that "what I think is very good of Mvula is the fact that they are very keen on sending you on various short courses". Both the communication manager and the communication administrator had been attending several short courses in communication, media relations and internet related aspects. "It's a kind of a real commitment from Mvula's side to staff development."

Public relations or communication was described as "completely essential, the life-blood of the organization". One of the reasons for the important role of public relations was because Mvula was re-positioning itself to get local governments to make use of its services, to contract the organization and to adopt its development approach. Previously the organization had worked closely with the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, but it was shifting its focus to local government as the responsibility to provide water and sanitation facilities was also shifting.

This meant that communication played a critical role for the organization at that point in time: "people need to know who you are and what you are doing, otherwise your funding will dry up." The importance of public relations was stressed by the fact that the organization was involved in special fund-raising activities to enlarge the communication department as well as to enlarge the communication budget. The Mvula leadership also viewed communication as a "completely important function" for the direction that the organization is taking.

Communication from the organization to its different publics was done mainly via its several publications, including newsletters, annual reports, policy documents and the web site. The organization also ran a resource center that played a role in communicating with different publics. "Every single person within Mvula is seen as a communicator for the organization and not just the people in the communication department". The role of the communication department was to provide backup and support, to produce different publications that people could use when they had to communicate about the organization and its activities.

The organization played a radical social role because it tried to change how water and sanitation was provided and implemented by means of advocating certain policies and by producing policy documents. The organization also played an idealistic role that was formulated in its mission statement: to improve the health and welfare of poor and disadvantaged South Africans in rural and peri-rural communities by increasing their access to safe and sustainable water and sanitation services.

The organization played a critical role as well because it examined the way that government and private institutions would implement water and sanitation systems and then point out whether the practices were unsustainable, too expensive and so on. The policy unit of the organization would play the role of critiquing practices and offering alternatives to improve the deliverance of water and sanitation services.

The communication department saw itself as "the heart" of these roles being played. The communication department and the resource center played a role in "every single program that the organization is involved in." If these departments knew all about the programs that were running, they could provide employees with essential information and also make sure that information was disseminated to the correct people and organizations that should take notice of what Mvula was doing, advocating or critiquing.

The communication department was part of the dominant coalition in the organization as it reported directly to the executive director. This means that the PR function in Mvula was "very well placed" as it reported to the person with the highest authority in the organization. The interviewee also stressed that the communication department had very good connections with all the other departments as well as the regional offices. To illustrate this, she mentioned that the communication department sat in at "every single meeting of the policy unit" a privilege not granted to the other departments in the organization.

The organizational culture was described as democratic and transparent. The organization employed a collective decision-making process. This could be illustrated by the implementation of a media sub-committee called the communication coordinating committee. The executive director as well as people from the policy unit sat on the committee. The function of this committee was to make collective decisions about what publications should be brought out and what the marketing strategy should be.

The role of the committee was to debate all communication products produced by the organization. Its meetings could be described as brainstorming, support and contributing towards creativity with regard to the publications of the organization. Every person in that committee had an equal status for the duration of its meetings and it did not function on an authoritarian basis. The interviewee concluded that working for Mvula was "incredibly democratic and very, very supportive".

The previous example also illustrated that the organization could be described as innovative and conducive to creativity. "In fact you find that at Mvula Trust, if you are not creative, people asking why are you doing such boring stuff?" An example of innovation was the comic strips that were developed by the communication department for school children as target group. "People here encourage you to be creative, they want you to do something different, so innovation is the norm here, because Mvula Trust see itself as an innovative organization, as an organization that pilots new approaches", the interviewee pointed out.

The interviewee stressed that although the organization implemented projects along a set of particular principles, those principles were innovative and the organization was always open to changes and adjustment. She added that the organization had firm procedures for aspects such as financial reporting, writing of minutes after meetings and communication between departments. However, these procedures or structures did not hamper creativity, they rather facilitated communication. Procedures and structures for communication were put in place by the communication department to help communication to run smoothly and to make the department accountable to the organization.

Contact and input were very important, especially with regard to the regional offices of the organization. With regard to contact with other publics it was stressed that the organization's newsletters were quite well received. The Mvula Trust worked in several partnerships with other organizations, especially the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry. However, the communication department was seldom involved in these projects on a direct level. The communication department would rather be involved on an indirect level via the resource center to give information to Mvula staff that asked for this kind of backup.

The organization did not play a protective role in a direct manner, as its core function was to deliver water and sanitation services. However, if the critical or advocacy role of the organization was considered, it could be interpreted as a protective role as well. The organization was critical of some approaches intended to deliver services, and in that way, rural consumers were protected from other organizations or even the government who would otherwise implement policies or services that would not be to the advantage of the consumers.

If some kind of conflict should evolve, the communication department would not usually be involved in the solving of the problem. The executive director of the organization would normally handle conflict situations involving the organization. "Conflict resolution is seen as a kind of separate sphere that is controlled by the directors." Every conflict situation was dealt with individually and no formal procedures existed for the resolution of conflict between the organization and some or other external group or organization or individual.

The communication department was "quite well placed" in terms of strategic planning as the communication manager was in charge of the strategic and planning committee, separately from her tasks in the communication department. This committee included the organization's trustees as well as its top management and some of the key persons from regional offices.

The web site contained three aspects that could be described as signs of transparency. In the first place, information about the organization's main funders (as it was called on the web site) or donors was provided. This aspect was handled differently than in most other organizations, because the funders were not only listed by name and logo, but their mission statements, contact details as well as links to their web sites were also provided.

The second indication of transparency was the inclusion of information on the staff members of the organization and their contact details. The third indication of transparency was the provision of very specific statistics with regard to the daily and monthly hits that the web site got. The reason why the provision of statistics was seen as a sign of transparency was because the organization was willing to share this information with whoever chose to link to its web site. Statistics were therefore public knowledge and not kept secret. The image of transparency could be even more enhanced by the addition of press releases as well as annual reports on the web site.

8.3 Interactive characteristics

8.3.1 Dimensions of interactivity on the web site

Several dimensions of interactivity were present on the Mvula Trust web site.

❖ ***Choice***

The web site offered the web site visitor unrestricted navigation as well as the choice to terminate the navigation at any point. This was made possible by the absence of a registration prerequisite in the web site. Navigation could be done free of charge, which also contributed to the choice dimension of interactivity. However, with regard to the other aspects that the choice dimension referred to, the web site offered fewer choices than it potentially could. Web site visitors did not have a choice between different languages and also no choice between a text and a graphics version of the web site.

The offering of different languages could be an expensive and time-consuming effort on the part of an organization, therefore this option was not offered by many web sites. Furthermore if the download speed of the Mvula Trust web site was taken into consideration, a choice between a graphics and a text version would not be a necessity.

❖ ***Connectedness***

Navigating the web site led to a feeling of connectedness, as several links were included on the web site. Most of the internal links have already been discussed together with the layout of the web site. Two kinds of internal links can be distinguished. Links to the main content categories are the first kind. The second kind refers to links to the sub-categories on each main category's page. These two kinds of internal links lead the visitor to information about the organization and its programs, funders and publications.

The web site did not contain any sub-web sites or advertisements. However, quite a number of external links were present on the web site. These links were found at two locations: firstly on the page where information on the organization's funders was given, and secondly on a separate page reserved for links. On the page where the links were provided, several similar organizations both locally and internationally could be found. There were also links to the South African government as well as links to some state departments.

Although these links provided the web site visitor with a strong sense of connectedness, caution should be taken not to lead visitors away from the web site without some or other mechanism to lead them back again. Therefore the option to keep the organization's logo at the top of the page, even while linking to another organization, has some merit for investigation.

❖ ***Information collection***

The only overt method of information collection on the part of the organization was the presence of a *stats* icon on the *contact us* page of the web site. Clicking on this icon led the web site visitor to a statistics page, where the web site hits were recorded. A link back to the Mvula Trust web site was provided.

❖ ***Reciprocal communication***

Several examples of reciprocal communication could be found on the web site. Unfortunately all these represented reactive communication and not true interactive communication. The following reactive communication devices were present on the web site:

Contact information such as e-mail addresses, physical addresses, telephone and fax numbers;

The option to subscribe to the organization's publications online; and

The feedback form for comments, questions or suggestions.

Other forms of reciprocal communication that are more on the true interactive side of the continuum would be advisable to increase the interactivity of the web site. This could include a bulletin board, chat room or an online forum. A request for online donations could also be considered as another form of reactive communication.

❖ ***Playfulness***

No form of playfulness was found on the Mvula Trust web site.

8.3.2 Level of interactivity

The level of interactivity on the web site can be described as moderate, as it included several reactive methods of communication as described above. Even though this may not sound very positive, this is one of the most interactive web sites analyzed for this study.

8.3.3 Orientation of interactivity

The orientation of interactivity on this web site can be described as close to the middle between source-oriented and audience-oriented. In terms of the audience-oriented dimensions, the strongest emphasis was on connectedness, because of the number of links provided on the web site. In terms of the source-oriented dimensions, reciprocal communication represented the most important dimension. The highest level of interactivity is obtained by including both source-oriented and audience-oriented dimensions of interactivity in a web site. The fact that this web site included an approximately even quantity of both contributed to its relatively high level of interactivity (earlier described as *moderate*, the third level on a 4-point scale).

8.4 Functions and forms of interactivity

The following functions of interactivity were operational on the web site, using several forms of interactivity:

- ***Customer support***

  Customer support was provided on the Mvula Trust web site by means of the comment/feedback option. By means of this function web site visitors could give feedback, but the option could also be used to make enquiries about the organization and its activities. Potential beneficiaries (if they had access to the WWW) could bring their specific needs under the attention of the organization. Other NGOs who would like to make contact and collaborate with the Mvula Trust could make use of this method as initial contact method.

- ***Marketing research***

  The feedback form mentioned above could also be described as a form of marketing research, because specific questions were asked on the form. It was therefore not the same as some of the other feedback forms on other web sites that only provided an open space for comments.

- ***Search for more information***

  A search option was available on the page where the organization's documents were kept. However, on closer examination it became clear that this option was not operational at the time of the analysis. This was a pity, because very few similar organizations had search options on their web sites, and it was an important contributing aspect to interactivity that could motivate people to re-visit the web site.

- ***Advertising/promotion/publicity***

  The Mvula Trust publications were promoted on the web site by means of an online subscription option. However, this option could be described as somewhat misleading because when you clicked on the link to subscribe, the following page said nothing about a subscription to the publications. Rather, this page mentioned subscription to the Mvula Trust as an organization. Web site visitors may have been wondering whether subscription to the organization and subscription to its publications meant the same thing, and also they might have wondered whether any costs were involved.

  No other form of advertising, promotion or publicity was found on the web site.

- ***Entertainment***

  The web site provided no form of entertainment, as games and other forms of playfulness were not present.

8.4 Principles of dialogical/two-way communication

The principles of dialogical/two-way communication were employed in the following ways on the Mvula Trust web site:

❖ ***Test 1: Dialogical loop***

The dialogical loop on the Mvula Trust web site consisted of the reciprocal communication devices discussed earlier. These included methods of reactive communication such as the provision of contact details and the feedback form. Although the dialogical loop on this web site was more advanced than on many other NGO web sites, it could be improved by implementing some of the fully interactive methods of communication, such as a chat room, a live forum or a bulletin board.

❖ ***Reaction on testing***

Reaction to an e-mail inquiry from the researcher was prompt.

❖ ***Test 2: The generation of return visits***

Return visits were promoted by the usefulness of information on the Mvula Trust web site. The information on the web site could be useful for the organization itself, as it could lead to contact with other NGOs and funding organizations. The information could also be useful for potential beneficiaries of the organization, because they could contact the organization to state their specific needs. The logical organization of the content on the web site also could also prompt visitors to return to the site.

However, the impact of these positive aspects was reduced by the fact that the web site was not updated on a regular basis. Visitors would perhaps return to the web site once, only to find that the content had not been updated since their last navigation. Thereafter few of those visitors would return. The regular updating of the web site is therefore an aspect that should be considered seriously.

❖ ***Ease of use***

The simple and logical organization of content according to main and sub-content categories made the web site very easy to use. Also contributing to its ease of use was the fast download speed, together with the fact that web site visitors did not need any special hardware or software to be able to navigate the site.

8.5 Mvula Trust: Conclusions

This web site was an example of an attractive, well-designed web site that could be very advantageous for the organization. However, there were several aspects that could be improved to make even better use of the unique features of the WWW as a medium. The web site could be made more attractive by including more graphic representations. However this should be done on such a level that the download speed is not affected adversely. Photographs that illustrate the development work done by Mvula could be included to give web site visitors a better idea of the organization's projects and successes.

Another aspect that could be improved is the level of interactivity on the web site, by including more interactive devices as was explained earlier. Together with improving the interactivity level of the web site, comes the necessity of regular updating. This also implies that the web site and its content should be monitored closely and that reaction to any communication from web site visitors should be prompt and professional. The option for online donations could be added as well, and the search option on the site should be either operational or removed.

The content on the web site can be evaluated as an indication of a transparent organization, especially with reference to the inclusion of numerous contact details as well as details of sponsors and donors. This aspect, together with the moderate level of interactivity on the web site, led to the expectation that the organization would probably follow the two-way symmetrical model of communication.

The organization viewed the web site as a means to make contact with other NGOs and organizations, as well as to establish networks. It can therefore be said that the web site was seen as a tool to enhance two-way communication. These aims were different from many other NGOs who saw their web sites as mere public information tools. Mvula had another aim for its web site, which was directed more towards persuasion. The organization wanted to use the web site to market itself to local government in order to be chosen as the provider of water and sanitation services for specific contracts.

The interviewee made it clear that the Mvula Trust did not have a high media profile and that its actions were not directed at gaining publicity, except when a specific project was launched. With this in mind it could be argued that the organization surely did not follow the press agentry/publicity model or the public-information model of public relations.

It was found that the Mvula Trust would probably approach public relations mostly from a two-way symmetrical angle, but that there could also be an element of a two-way asymmetrical approach. The reason was the organization's emphasis on marketing themselves to local government in order to persuade local government to make use of the organization with regard to delivering water and sanitation.

On closer examination it became evident that the Mvula Trust displayed several other characteristics that would be applicable to a two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

The organization valued the communication function and the input of the communication department. The communication department was part of the dominant coalition and also had a high profile in terms of strategic planning in the organization. The communication manager had a post-graduate degree in cultural and media studies, enabling the communication department to use public relations strategically as a managerial function and not just as a technical asset to the organization.

Mvula Trust was described as an innovative and creative organization with a very democratic, participative organizational culture. It followed a collective decision-making process, therefore the authority was decentralized and there was no place for authoritarianism. Employees were trusted with a fair amount of autonomy and responsibility to enhance creativity and innovativeness. However, there was an effective operational system in the organization in the form of procedures for communication that was initiated by the communication department to enhance communication in the organization.

Furthermore the organization valued the input of other organizations and understood the importance of networking and collaboration both internally and externally. The communication department played an important role in helping the organization play a critical, radical as well as an idealistic social role. Mvula Trust believed in interest-group liberalism by protecting ordinary people from government and business practices with regard to the provision of water and sanitation. The organization lobbied against policies and practices that would not be to the benefit of these ordinary people.

Different communication media and publications were integrated with the use of the web site, to act as pointers to each other. However, the organization was also critical of its own practices and realized that this aspect could still be improved. The organization also saw the necessity to improve the web site, which received priority attention at the time of the analysis.

It can be concluded that Mvula Trust mostly followed a two-way symmetrical model of public relations, with some two-way asymmetrical practices less often used. It could therefore be said that this organization used a mixed-motive model with emphasis on the symmetrical side of the continuum.

Chapter 9

Child in Crisis (http://home.intekom.com/crisis/index.htm)

Content analysis on June 16th, 2000 and interview with Gert Jonker, founder and trustee, on June 20th, 2000

9.1 Background

9.1.1 Organizational information

At the time of the study Child in Crisis was a charity trust providing places of safety for abused and abandoned children in South Africa. The organization was run from Krugersdorp and it was registered as a charity trust with the Master of the Supreme Court in Pretoria. It was also registered as a non-profit organization with the National Department of Social Development.

The homes that served as places of safety were managed in partnership with community advisory boards that consisted of representatives from the community where the houses were located (Child in Crisis, 2000a). The organization was run by a board of directors who identified certain projects for the organization. Projects at the time of the analysis were the Bethany House Trust that provided safe havens for abused children, a youth support center and an educational trust. Each of these projects was run by its own board of trustees, as well as an executive committee and a community advisory board.

The organizational web site did not provide an organizational mission. The organization's vision was to establish "safe havens" nationwide in all towns with a high incidence of child abuse and a lack of resources to care for those children (Child in Crisis, 2000b).

The web site was implemented in its current form more or less eighteen months prior to the interview, at the beginning of 1999. A person from outside the organization offered to create and manage the web site for the organization. She also offered to sponsor the creation and the launch of the web site. However, this arrangement led to a number of problems that will be explained in Section 9.1.4.

9.1.2 Reasons and aims for setting up a web site

The first reason why a web site was implemented was to save time and money that would otherwise be spent on duplicating and distribution pamphlets and brochures. The organization was frequently involved in presentations to get funding and potential sponsors were referred to the web site for more information about the organization. The organization also followed a specific therapeutic model with the children under its care. This model was often the topic of discussion between the organization and other organizations or government departments. Participants to these discussions were referred to the web site to find more information about Child in Crisis.

A second reason why the organization wanted a web site was to attract sponsors via the internet. It was hoped that people who were interested in children's issues would search the web and by doing so, they would find the Child in Crisis web site and would be persuaded to make donations. Another reason why a web site was put up was to make contact with people (especially professionals) who could become involved in the organization. Closely related to this reason was the fact that Child in Crisis was participating in a number of international discussion groups on children's issues and that the web site could also be used as a reference point during these discussions.

The aims and expectations for the web site were closely related to the reasons why the web site was put up in the first instance. One of the initial expectations for the web site was that it would persuade and enable many sponsors to support the organization and its programs. The web site was targeted at potential sponsors and also at other organizations that were involved in similar work than Child in Crisis. It was hoped to make contact with similar organizations worldwide, to engage in discussions and to learn from these organizations.

The content analysis pointed out that the content on the *Child in Crisis* web site was mostly in the form of general information about the organization and its activities. Another type of content was a donation form, which did not offer the option of online donating at the time of the analysis. The aim of this form could be to strengthen the persuasive appeal of the web site. The web site can therefore be described as mainly aimed at informing and persuading, however, a small effort was also directed towards creating two-way communication by also inviting web site visitors to contact the organization with comments or feedback.

9.1.3 General characteristics and functions of the web site

9.1.3.1 Appearance and layout

The front page of the web site used a watermarked background with pictures of child-related items such as presents, children's faces, playing children and so forth. The background color was light blue and the watermarked pictures were in green, blue and variations of pink. The color scheme seemed to be soft pastel colors such as light blue, pink, purple and green. The most prominent colors were blue and pink, most applicable to children.

Fonts were easily readable as large font sizes were used for text (approximately 14pt) and strong colors, for example black, purple, dark blue and red were used against the light blue watermarked background. The font size for headings was large and the font used for the *Home* and *E-mail* options at the bottom of each page was the same font that was used on the front page, resembling a child's handwriting. The fact that several different colors were used for text could, however, be reconsidered, as it did not contribute to a consistent design of the web site.

Graphics included pictures/drawings on the front page and on the background of each page on the web site (watermarked). Several photographs appeared on the web site, giving the visitor a better idea of what the organization stood for. These photographs and other graphics did not influence the download speed of the web site negatively, as it downloaded at a reasonable speed.

The organization's name was written on top of the front page in a font that resembled a child's handwriting. Below the name was a pencil drawing of three children's figures, the organization's logo that appeared at the top of each web page. This similar appearance of web pages gave the web site a consistent look, except for the use of several different font colors, mentioned earlier. A video clip of a child that turns around in a circular way appeared below the logo and the following quote from the RDP appeared below the video clip:

The rights of children must be protected and... centers with proper health facilities, counseling and other support services must be provided for children.

The description in the previous paragraphs represented the first part of the front page of the web site. These images and content filled the complete computer screen when opening the front page of this site. To reach the main content categories of the web site, you had to scroll down. This could be seen as a shortcoming of the front page, as web site visitors have to "search" for the main content categories before the site could be navigated. The front page did not contain any content itself and served as a front door to the rest of the web site.

The following links appeared on the front page:

- Visit our homes;
- Get involved;
- Contact/comments;
- Need help?
- Who are we?
- Meet our staff;
- Management protocol;
- Other causes;
- Statistics;
- Champions;
- What is child abuse?
- Success stories; and
- Our kids.

The main categories on the front page were not arranged vertically or horizontally as most web sites, rather it was arranged at random in no particular order. This arrangement might strengthen the child-like atmosphere of the web site, together with the fact that the content categories also used a font that resembles a child's handwriting. However, this kind of organization for a table of contents was not very logical and web site visitors had to put in more effort to find the content category that they were looking for. Important content categories could also be overlooked. A recommendation could be to keep the atmosphere of the web site, by still using the same font, but organizing the content categories in a more logical and easy to use manner.

Content was organized according to the main content categories on the front page. The *Get involved* link offered web site visitors the opportunity to provide help to the organization in other forms than to donate money, such as transport, maintenance, groceries, toiletries and so forth. The *Contact/comment* page did not contain a feedback form. Instead, it provided contact information and an invitation to web site visitors to contact the organization with their comments or views. In addition, it also invited visitors to send a subscribing e-mail to receive the organization's "occasional" newsletter. As the main content categories did not contain a category for publications, web site visitors could easily miss the opportunity to subscribe to the newsletter. On the other hand, subscription to the newsletter could be made user-friendlier, by allowing potential subscribers to subscribe online. At the time of the study visitors had to write down the message that had to be sent to an automated subscription list.

Other categories were mainly self-evident. The page on *What is child abuse* was still under construction, the *Champions'* page listed corporate and individual sponsors and the *Other causes* page listed some of the other activities that the organization engaged in.

9.1.3.2 Target and functions

The web site was directed to the general public who could become involved either as sponsors or by providing other kinds of help, as explained in the previous section. Businesses could become involved in the same way. A target group that was envisioned for an updated web site included people (professionals and others) who were interested to know more about child abuse. The web site at the time of the interview had a content category for *What is child abuse* that was under construction. This content category was planned for the new web site to start a process of discussion on the topic, as opinions varied as to what exactly child abuse referred to.

Another target group for the future was abused children who could contact the organization via e-mail from the web site. The decision to direct the web site to the organization's beneficiaries was taken because more and more children gained access to and knowledge about the internet. According to the interviewee child abuse took place in all socio-economic classes, from poor to rich people, therefore it could be more comfortable for some children to contact the organization via e-mail.

Users of the Child in Crisis web site could thus make use of the site to gain information about the organization. This information could have the function of persuading them to contact the organization to get help for themselves or someone else. The web site could also be used to get information on how to make donations or to offer other kinds of assistance. The web site could also be used to contact the organization with comments or questions.

As was illustrated, the web site offered limited functions to its users at this stage. Another useful function that could be added to the web site is an online forum where victims or relatives of victims of child abuse could discuss their viewpoints and experience and offer their advice.

9.1.4 Successes, problems and failures

Some of the minor successes that originated from the web site was a church in the USA that came across the Child in Crisis web site and donated $1000 to one of the organization's children's homes in Pretoria. The church also expressed its willingness to become more involved in the activities of the organization. A South African psychologist who was working in London also came across the Child in Crisis web site by chance, and contacted the organization to get involved in some of its programs during 2001 when she returned to South Africa.

Child in Crisis received positive reaction on its web site from several individuals and organizations. No complaints were received about the web site since it had been online. However, the interviewee mentioned that he was not satisfied with the web site in its current form and that he expected more success when the site was to be re-launched a few weeks after the interview.

The interviewee stressed that the web site had not been marketed or promoted well enough and that it was not listed on some of the most important search engines on the internet. He was also not satisfied with the design and looks of the current web site. Some of the aspects that bothered him were the use of several different colors for text and the fact that the corporate identity of the organization was not correctly displayed on the web site. He explained that the person who had created the site did not have the technical knowledge to include all the features in the web site that had been requested. The result was that the web site was not utilized to its full potential at the time of the study.

One of the biggest problems experienced was the fact that the web site could not be updated since its inception due to a problem with the person who created the web site. The interviewee admitted that the web site was totally under-utilized at that stage. After the web site had been implemented the creator of the web site disappeared and the organization could not get hold of her again. This person had the computer disk with her on which the files for the web site were stored, therefore updating the site was impossible.

To solve the problem the organization had identified another sponsor to update and manage the web site. This meant that the web site would be updated within four weeks after the interview was conducted to reflect the several changes that the organization had been undergoing since the launch of the first version of the web site. It was also mentioned that the web site and its updating was not a priority to the organization, because of the lack of time, money and manpower and the vast amount of work that the employees have to handle on a day-to-day basis. According to the interviewee, these problems would hopefully be resolved soon after the interview had been conducted, as the person who would re-do the web site was technologically more capable.

Another problem was the content category for *What is child abuse* (mentioned earlier) that was put on the web site, but it had been under construction from the launch of the web site and it was not possible to put that category in operation yet. It was mentioned that an *Under construction* notice had remained unchanged for more than a year, leaving a bad impression among web site visitors.

The interviewee complained about the fact that there was no database of e-mail and internet addresses (URL's) available and that it took time to try and ascertain whether some individuals or organizations did have a web presence and access to e-mail. To solve this problem the organization created its own database (called a list of resources) of contacts and contacts addressed two years ago. This was an ongoing activity.

No formal research was conducted before or after the implementation of the web site. However, informal research was done by examining similar web sites and their content before the Child in Crisis web site was finalized. One of the areas investigated was how to create a relationship between text and graphics that ensured a fast downloading speed.

Web site visitors were not monitored by any method. The web site did have a counter when it was launched, but the counter had only been operational for the first month and the organization did not have the technical know-how to repair it.

9.1.5 Integration of media

The only reference to other media or publications appeared on the *contact us* page where web site visitors were invited to send a subscription e-mail to the occasional newsletter of the organization. According to the interviewee this newsletter was mostly distributed as a hard copy via mail. However, some of the subscribers to the newsletter did ask to receive the newsletter electronically and it was sent to them via e-mail. Upon further discussion of this matter it seemed that the interviewee was not aware of the option to publish newsletters and other publications online on the web site of an organization. He was very interested in this option and noted that he would take it up with the new web site manager.

The web site URL and e-mail the organization's e-mail address were printed on all its correspondence and other forms of communication. It seemed therefore that the organization did try to integrate its uses of communication media, but that this could still improve by using the web site more efficiently.

9.2 Public relations models

A full-time media officer or public relations practitioner was not employed when the interview was conducted. Communication activities were handled by two of the organization's trustees, who were also the founders of the organization. A third person, an administrator, was also responsible for some of the communication and public relations activities. None of the three people who handled communication activities had communication qualifications. However, the founder of the organization had previously been employed as public relations officer for the Child Protection Unit of the South African Police Service in Johannesburg.

The first purpose of public relations for Child in Crisis was to make people aware of the existence of the organization and its activities. Together with this aspect it was mentioned that public relations was most important for the organization with regard to its contact with the government, its departments or other welfare organizations. With regard to fundraising public relations also played a very important role.

Public relations also had a prominent role in what the organization called its "development work". This referred to the organization's role in helping other organizations to establish similar institutions (such as children's homes) on the same model that Child in Crisis had followed. Another project of Child in Crisis that needed public relations was the national crisis line that was managed by the organization. Many people phoned the crisis line to find out who the organization was and what they did, mostly also to establish the credibility of the organization.

The communication process between this NGO and its publics varied with regard to the different publics with whom Child in Crisis communicated. When it came to potential sponsors, Child in Crisis usually initiated communication by contacting sponsors and doing presentations about the organization's work. When it came to the organization's "developing work" (explained earlier), other organizations that needed help and advice usually initiated communication with Child in Crisis.

In terms of the organization's beneficiaries (abused children) communication with Child in Crisis was initiated by the welfare system, for instance other welfare organizations or the children's courts where decisions were taken as to what should become of abused children who were taken away from their parents. Abused children or their parents did not usually contact Child in Crisis directly.

The critical and the radical social roles that the organization played were intertwined to a large degree. Child in Crisis played a critical role in criticizing practices with regard to the child abuse management system in South Africa. By being critical of the current system, the organization had also played a radical role in trying to substitute these practices with a new therapeutic model for the last two years.

One example of radical change that the organization was proposing was the handling of children with HIV/Aids in children's homes. Child in Crisis followed an approach of managed care where these children got special treatment and were kept separate from other children. This was to protect them from contracting infections and also to protect the other children from contracting HIV/Aids. Government policy differed drastically from this approach.

According to the interviewee government policy on these children in children's homes was only aimed at feeding and clothing them, because they were not expected to live very long. In contrast, Child in Crisis stressed that children with HIV/Aids were alive and the fact that they might die soon was not taken into consideration. Therefore the organization tried to give these children the best quality of life it could afford, as well as medical care and psychological therapy. A holistic approach was followed, trying to serve these children in every facet of life. The interviewee illustrated the difference between their approach and the government's approach by saying that "we have a life approach and they (government) have a death approach".

The organization was also very critical of some policy issues with regard to the welfare system and tried to challenge government to change or adapt some of these policies. Policies and practices were challenged from within the welfare system by attending meetings and helping national and provincial (Gauteng) government writing legislation and white papers with regard to the plight of abused children.

Child in Crisis played an idealistic role in the sense that the organization strove to be able to deliver the same kind of therapy and other services to all abused children, especially in the Gauteng area. The organization only had the facilities to handle approximately 200 children per year, while there were approximately 5 000 abused children per year who were in need of places of safety and other services.

The PR function in the Child in Crisis organization formed part of the dominant coalition, as this function was the responsibility of the founder of the organization and his wife, together with the administrator of the organization. These persons acted as trustees of the organization and also served on its board of directors. Therefore the PR function played an important role in the dominant coalition of the organization.

The interviewee explained that the organizational structure might look authoritarian on paper, but that the organization in fact functioned in a very participatory manner. The board of directors gave the executive committee certain responsibilities, which meant that the board did not meet to discuss each and every decision that had to be taken. An approach of participative management was used. The organization made use of e-mail to inform all its members on a regular basis of what was happening in the organization. The participative culture was strengthened by case conferences that were held once a week, and personnel meetings that were held once every month.

The organization was described as having a decentralized authority. The board of directors had an executive committee who had a mandate to manage projects on a year-to-year basis. The executive committee gave certain responsibilities to the professional staff and caregivers at the children's homes that ran these homes on a day-to-day basis.

The staff and caregivers had to give feedback to the executive committee on a regular basis, which meant that the executive committee took decisions about children with first-hand knowledge at their disposal. The staff and caregivers also had the authority to take certain decisions themselves, for instance decisions about where children should spend weekends or school holidays. These decisions were taken by means of a team approach, also involving a social worker and the house parents of a particular children's home.

As was explained earlier, the organization was advocating a new therapeutic model that was very different from the traditional approach followed by government and other similar organizations. This new approach illustrated that the organization was more innovative than traditional. The organization therefore concentrated on a new approach to the benefit of abused children.

Contact and networking with other organizations were very important in the current situation in South Africa. It often happened that Child in Crisis had to adapt to the input of other organizations or government. For example, the organization had to adapt to new structures and procedures for applying for funds and subsidies from government. Another example was the Volunteer program of the organization that was based upon input from other organizations that had similar programs.

As the organization's primary goal was to deliver a service to abused children, these children's rights were protected in the process. The organization tried to ensure that the children received the best available services and that they were not shifted around from place to place.

The only conflict situation that Child in Crisis experienced at the time of the interview was a developing conflict situation with the government, due to the organization's opposition to government's practices and policies. However, this was not seen as a negative situation, because the organization followed the existing procedures in trying to effect change. The issue was dealt with in a diplomatic manner, the interviewee insisted.

Two of the people who were responsible for public relations functions in the organization were also trustees of the organization and also served on the executive committee. The implication was that these people were fully involved in the strategic planning process of the organization.

Three signs of transparency were found on the web site. The first referred to the detailed information with individual photographs of the organization's staff members provided on the *Meet our staff* page. The second referred to details about individual as well as corporate sponsors that were listed on the *Champions* page. A third sign of transparency was the detailed information provided on the organization's registration as a charity trust and non-profit organization, on the *Who are we* page.

Another aspect that could be considered for a more transparent image is a mission statement, which could not be found on the web site. A physical address, press releases or annual reports were also not provided on the web site.

9.3 Interactive characteristics

9.3.1 Dimensions of interactivity on the web site

The dimensions of interactivity were not present on the web site on a large scale, as will be explained in the following paragraphs:

❖ *Choice*

On the one hand the web site offered a high level of choice because it did not require registration at any point nor did it require the payment of any fees. Web site visitors were therefore allowed to engage in unrestricted navigation.

On the other hand, the choice dimension was limited because the site did not offer a choice between different languages or between a text and a graphic version of the web site. It could be argued that a choice between a text or a graphic version was not a necessity, because the web site did not contain that many graphics. Its download speed was not affected negatively by the current text/graphics relationship. However, the offering of a choice between different languages remains an option to consider in the future.

❖ *Connectedness*

The web site offered a low level of connectedness, as the only links offered were internal links to information about the organization and its activities. There were also no links to advertisements on the web site. This lack of links could give the impression that the organization operated in isolation from other similar organizations. It also left the web site visitor with a feeling of isolation, as it did not utilize this unique feature of the internet. The reason for the lack of external links was discussed during the interview.

❖ *Information collection*

No devices for information collection purposes could be found on the web site.

❖ *Reciprocal communication*

The Child in Crisis web site did not enhance two-way communication, as examples of reciprocal communication were scarce on the site. The only example of reciprocal communication was the presence of contact information and the invitation directed at web site visitors to contact the organization with comments or feedback. This cannot be classified as true interactive communication and was merely an example of reactive communication.

The donation form on the web site could also not be rated as an example of reciprocal communication, because it did not offer an online donating option. The interactive quality of the web site was therefore one of the most important aspects that needed improvement.

❖ *Playfulness*

No indication of playfulness was found on the Child in Crisis web site.

9.3.2 Level of interactivity

The web site could be rated as having a *limited* level of interactivity as the only true form of interactivity on the web site was the provision of contact information. The donation form, which could represent a form of contact for specific concerns, was not taken into consideration, because donations could not be made online.

9.3.3 Orientation of interactivity

The orientation of interactivity can be described as in the middle between source-oriented and audience-oriented. This was because the web site displayed a very low level of interactivity on both sides of this continuum.

9.3.4 Functions and forms of interactivity

As the web site did not contain many interactive features, the functions of interactivity were mainly under-utilized:

- ***Customer support***

  This function was present on the web site on a very limited scale. It was represented by the invitation of comments or feedback on the *Contact/comments* page. The web site did not contain a feedback form with specific questions. Instead, a general invitation was aimed at web site visitors to use the e-mail address provided, for comments, feedback or to ask for help.

- ***Marketing research***

  No form of marketing research could be found on the web site.

- ***Search for more information***

  The option to search for more information was also not available on the web site.

- ***Advertising/promotion/publicity***

  The only form of advertising/promotion/publicity that appeared on the web site was the donation form on the *Get involved* page. However, this function was not interactive, as donations could not be made online. Potential donators had to print the form, fill it in and then mail or fax it to the organization.

  Another aspect that remotely resembled this function was the invitation to subscribe to an occasional newsletter of the Child in Crisis organization. This function was also not available online, and web site visitors who wanted to receive the newsletter had to send an e-mail message to the organization to subscribe.

  These two aspects asked for more effort on the part of the web site visitor to become involved. In order to enhance interactivity as well as the possibility for dialogical communication, the web site should be designed to maximize comfort for its visitors. In the case of this web site, this had not been done.

- ***Entertainment***

  No indication of an entertainment function was found on the web site.

9.4 Principles of dialogical/two-way communication

The lack of interactivity on the web site led to the principles of dialogical communication not being applied to the web site as well:

❖ ***Test 1: Dialogical loop***

The web site contained the most basic form of a dialogical loop in the form of contact details. This aspect of the site should seriously be considered, because it was one of the most important reasons why a web site should exist. As was recommended earlier, two-way communication via the web site could be enhanced by the presence of an online forum, a chat room or even just a bulletin board. Other options include the use of online feedback and donation forms.

❖ ***Reaction on testing***

No reaction was received to e-mail messages sent by the researcher. The organization had to be contacted by phone to finalize the interview.

❖ ***Test 2: The generation of return visits***

It did not seem as if the web site was updated on a frequent basis, therefore return visits would not be motivated by new information on the web site. However, the information offered by the web site could be useful to a variety of target groups, as was indicated earlier. The information offered was to the advantage of both the organization and its target groups. It could even be rated on a higher level of usefulness, if the content categories were arranged more logically, as was also explained earlier.

❖ ***Ease of use***

The web site was very accessible in terms of its download speed and technical requirements. The only aspect hampering its ease of use was that the main content categories that were not arranged in a very user-friendly way.

9.5 Child in Crisis: Conclusions

The Child in Crisis web site had many shortcomings due to practical problems that the organization experienced. The organization was painfully aware of these shortcomings and was in the process of revamping and improving the web site when the study was conducted.

The Child in Crisis web site at the time of the analysis can be described as a web site in the most basic form that an organization could have. This implied that the web site did not utilize the unique features of the internet to its maximum and it could therefore be improved by especially adding to its interactive quality. At the time of the analysis the only interactive feature of the web site was the provision of contact details and the option for sending e-mail from the web site. Another problem regarding the web site was the fact that it was not updated on a regular basis, and therefore it did not motivate visitors to return. The online publication of the organization's newsletter would be another aspect that could motivate web site visitors to return on a regular basis.

The lack of external links was another point of criticism against the web site, as it did not offer the navigator the opportunity to gain knowledge of other similar organizations. It also left the impression that the organization did not make an effort at networking. A final aspect that needed attention was the organization of content categories on the front page which were not very user-friendly.

The organization did not have a formal public relations practitioner, as two of the trustees and founder members of the organization handled communication activities. On the positive side, these people were part of the dominant coalition of the organization and were able to influence strategic planning and decision-making. On the other hand, none of them had a communications qualification, which could mean that the public relations function would be handled as a mere technical function.

It was not possible to make an exact classification in terms of the public relations model followed by Child in Crisis. It seemed that the organization mostly used a mix between the public-information model and the two-way asymmetrical model, but it also had many characteristics pointing towards the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

The aims for the web site illustrated this mix of different models, because it was aimed at providing information, persuading potential sponsors and also to make contact with other similar organizations. However, it became evident that the most important aim for the web site was to generate funds for the organization, something that did not really materialize.

Some of the characteristics conducive to a two-way symmetrical approach were the participative management style found in the organization. Although the organization had a centralized authority on paper, it did not operate on an authoritarian way in practice. Each employee was able to voice his/her views and employees had a certain amount of responsibility and autonomy.

The organization was also described as innovative and it was clear that Child in Crisis was a growing organization with many innovative plans waiting to be implemented. The organization valued the input from and contact with other organizations and frequently adapted to its environment as a result of this contact. It also believed in two-way symmetrical methods to handle conflict, which concentrated on negotiation and diplomacy.

Child in Crisis emphasized its critical and idealistic social roles, and indicated that the radical role was intertwined with the critical role. Its communication actions should support these roles, yet the lack of a formal communications manager or communications department had the effect that communication efforts were not as effective as they could be.

Despite the fact that the organization displayed almost all the characteristics of a symmetrical worldview, it was not able to follow a true two-way symmetrical model of public relations at the time of the analysis. As was explained earlier, the organization followed a combination of models, and a clear preference for one specific model would perhaps evolve as the organization grows. The revamped web site could also contribute to a more symmetrical approach to public relations.

Chapter 10

Cansa (http://www.cansa.org.za)

Content analysis on June 19th, 2000 and interview with Steve Lepita, CEO, and Belmira Rodrigues from the Cansa information service, on June 20th, 2000

10.1 Background

10.1.1 Organizational information

At the time of the study the Cancer Association of South Africa (Cansa) operated from its head office in Bedfordview, Johannesburg, and has regional offices in Bloemfontein, Durban, Cape Town, Nelspruit, Pietersburg, Port Elizabeth, Rustenburg, and Pretoria. The Cansa structure consisted of a national office with nine semi-autonomous offices in other provinces. The provincial offices were used to reach out "to people at grassroots level, because the national office really do not have the capacity to do that, as one out of every four South Africans will eventually develop cancer". The provincial offices made use of volunteers to reach out to their communities. Volunteers were trained and thereafter functioned by means of forming support groups in their communities.

Its target was the general public, patients, and medical and health practitioners and its mission statement at the time of the study was:

- *To fight cancer and its consequences countrywide to the benefit of all South Africans in cooperation with the community by supporting research, health education, information and care and supportive services.*

The web site was implemented approximately two years ago. The interviewees could not give a more exact indication of when it was implemented. It was mentioned that the web site already had a second version that had been redone during the past two years. The creation of the web site was outsourced to someone from outside the organization, who was paid to create and maintain the web site. This individual had liaison with one representative from Cansa, therefore a team approach to web site building was not used in this case.

10.1.2 Reasons and aims for setting up a web site

According to Steve Lepita, CEO, a first reason for implementing a web site was to promote the organization and to make the public aware of the existence of the Cancer Association. A second reason was to give people easy access to information at their fingertips. A third reason was to attract funders to donate money to the organization.

The aims for the web site coincided with the reasons why the web site was put up in the first place. This meant that the aims were to promote the organization, to give people access to information about cancer and to attract donors to the organization. Similarly, the expectations for the web site were to achieve these aims. Another expectation was to be able to share information on cancer with other African countries via the Cansa web site. With regard to the specific content on the web site, the aim was to put up as much information as possible on the top five cancers in South Africa.

A future aim was to expand the *Research* section on the web site, to provide even more information and to show people which research projects were supported by Cansa. Another aim was to include a forum for discussions on the web site, where people could make announcements or ask questions and discuss cancer-related matters. The analysis of the web site recommended the addition of an interactive device such as a forum or a bulletin board, therefore this planned addition by Cansa could be seen as a step in the right direction. This would enable the association to utilize more of the unique features of the internet via its web site.

To support the aims of the organization for its website, the type of content on the web site at the time of the analysis could predominantly be described as general information. Other types of content such as annual reports, feedback forms, donation forms, and donor detail were not present on the web site. One of the links on the front page led to a heading called *Cancer news* that contained brief news items, each with a date of release that resembled press releases.

The content of the web site seemed to support the general aim to inform and to educate the general public about cancer as a disease, how to prevent it, how to deal with it and about what the latest research says about it. The informative aim of the web site was supplemented by a strong persuasive message entangled through the information. The persuasive message was aimed at the prevention of cancer and several solutions were given on the web site as to how one should adjust your life style to prevent getting cancer.

A less apparent aim of the web site could be to motivate or persuade web site visitors to help the organization by giving either volunteer assistance or financial assistance. However, the web site did not emphasize this request for help very strongly.

10.1.3 General characteristics and functions of the web site

10.1.3.1 Appearance and layout

The web site had a definite color scheme as the same colors were used consistently throughout the web site. The background colors were white and light blue, fonts were printed in black and hypertext (links) was printed in light blue. The consistent look of the web site contributed to an attractive look and the fact that the web site visitor knew where he/she was. However, one point of criticism with regard to the colors used was the fact that the content categories at the top op the page (horizontally) were printed in yellow. The use of this color did not contribute to the consistent look of the rest of the web site, as yellow was not used elsewhere in the web site.

As text was written in black on a white background, readability was high. The background color of headings and content category links was light blue. The black text against the light blue background was also easily readable. The font size of normal text was approximately 12pt, which was large enough to read easily. The font size used for headings was much larger, and printed in bold, making them easily recognizable and readable.

The only criticism with regard to the readability of fonts was the fact that the content categories listed on the left side of each page, were very small, approximately 10pt or even smaller. It was not impossible to read, but it took some effort from the web site visitor. It would be more readable if the font size had only been 1pt larger.

The most frequent form of graphic representation used on the web site was photographs. These photographs were mostly used in the organization's brochures and guides that were published online. The photographs contributed to the informative function of the web site, by illustrating important facts about cancer. The only other graphic representation that appeared on the web site, was the logo of the organization that appeared on the front page, as well as in a watermarked form on some of the other pages. Some of the pages also had small illustrations of cancer-related aspects such as cancer cells on the right side of the page's heading.

The different forms of graphic representation did not influence the download speed of the web site negatively.

Content categories had three different placements on each page, therefore the same content categories were listed on the front page and on every other page on the web site. The categories at the left and on the bottom of each page were exactly the same, but the content categories on the top of each page differed slightly from the rest. The content categories on the left side of each page were:

- Prevention;
- Diagnosed (sic);
- Information;
- About Cansa;
- Help us;
- Research; and
- Contact us.

These categories appeared in the same order at the bottom of each page, except that some of the categories were abbreviated, possibly because of a lack of space, in order to fit all categories in on one line, horizontally. *About Cansa* was listed only as *Cansa*, *Help us* was listed as just *Help,* and *Contact us*, was listed as *Contact.*

The content categories at the top of the page were similar to those listed above, except for the *Contact us* category, that appeared as *Cansa online*. There was also a difference to these links, because the *Contact us* category on the left and bottom of the page linked to a list of Cansa employees and their e-mail addresses. In contrast, the *Cansa online* category at the top of the page linked to a direct e-mail link to Cansa. On this e-mail page it was not possible for the web site visitor to know to whom the e-mail message would be directed.

This lack of a logical layout was the most striking problem with the Cansa web site. These differences and inconsistencies may look inconsequential, but it is important to consider their impact on the web site visitor. It could lead to confusion, could decrease the visitor's willingness to explore the web site and engage in two-way communication.

Another problem was the fact that the front page did not just serve as a gateway to the rest of the web site via its main content categories. The front page contained information as well as other links that differed from the main content category links. Furthermore, the front page was filled to capacity with information and other links, therefore the inconsistent layout, together with the amount of content on the front page could lead to a feeling of confusion and incapability on the part of the web site visitor.

Some of the links on the front page could be accessed via the main content categories as well, but others could not be accessed via the main content categories. For example, the main content categories did not include *Links* or *Publications* categories. These categories could be linked to from the front page, under other descriptions. The front page also contained two different links (under different descriptions) to a *News* page, an important content category that was not included in the main content categories. The front page contained quite a few links to important subjects that were not included in the main content categories. Examples included information on diet and cancer, help for people who wanted to quit smoking and information on the Cuppa for Cansa campaign.

This arrangement of links to main content categories and other content categories made it difficult to establish the logic behind the web site organization. It was therefore not possible to ascertain how different parts of information fitted together.

Other discrepancies included two links to different *Prevention of cancer* pages with the same headings. The *Prevention* categories on the front page led to the same prevention page. However, on the *About Cansa* page, a link was provided for *Education*, which led to another page headed exactly the same as the prevention pages just mentioned. The only difference was that the information on the two prevention pages differed vastly. This illogical organization of content contributed to confusion. It could also result in people not being able to "find" all the information on the web site.

Another important issue was the fact that the Cansa logo did not appear on every page. It did appear at the top of the front page, and also on the rest of the front page as a watermarked image. However, most of the other web pages did not contain the logo. The inclusion of the logo on every page, together with a consistent look for each page, would contribute to a generally consistent look for the web site, as well as a total concept of Cansa as an organization.

10.1.3.2 Target and functions

The content analysis showed that the Cansa web site could be targeted at the general public, as well as at its beneficiaries. Beneficiaries in this case were seen as people who had been diagnosed with cancer, as well as their relatives and friends. Beneficiaries could also include people who were afraid of contracting cancer, therefore they would be looking for information on the prevention of cancer. However, strictly speaking, the general public should be concerned about preventing this disease, but this was not always the case.

Another target that was not displayed very prominently on the web site, was potential donors and voluntary workers who could assist in several ways such as committee work, patient care, street collections and maintenance.

In addition to what could be deduced from the content analysis, the interviewees described the target groups for the web site as "anybody that has access to the internet". The target groups for the web site were, after probing, specified as business people, health professionals or just "everybody". The CEO of Cansa added that another target group of the web site was "lay people, the illiterates who may not even have the equipment to access the internet". Cansa wanted to reach these people via other, more privileged people such as health professionals who could interpret the information from the web site and make it available to "people at grassroots level".

Cansa viewed the media as another important target group, for instance reporters who wanted information on cancer in general, but also information on specific campaigns. For example, the organization had put up extensive information on smoking to coincide with the annual World No-tobacco Day.

As the web site did not contain many types of content it could not have many uses for its visitors. The Cansa web site could fulfil the following functions for its users. It could be used to gain access to valuable, user-friendly information about cancer. Another use for the web site could be to contact the organization via e-mail to ask questions or to make inquiries about voluntary work or donations.

The web site could be improved significantly by adding other functions that were not available on the web site. As the web site contained a vast amount of information a valuable function to add would be a search function. This would enable web site visitors to search for specific information on the site. A second function that would improve the usefulness of the web site, as well as its interactivity, would be to add an online forum or a chat room where people who were affected by cancer could interact. The addition of this function would increase the hits of the web site significantly.

10.1.4 Successes, problems and failures

After the implementation of the web site, the association received many inquiries about cancer as a disease from within South Africa and also from overseas. Overseas inquiries mostly came from people who had relatives or friends in South Africa suffering from cancer. These overseas inquirers mostly wanted information on the type of treatment and medical facilities that were available in South Africa. One interviewee summed it up by stating: "So, the main thing is exposure at the moment."

The interviewees could not think of any problems that were experienced regarding the web site. They had not heard any complaints about the web site content, and no problems were experienced with the external web site developer. No research had been done before or after the implementation of the web site, "because it's a fairly new technology for Cansa". One of the interviewees added that "this thing has only been running for between eighteen months and two years and it still has to be finalized. There will be a time when one has to say we now need market research conducted by outside people, not ourselves".

The only way of monitoring web site visitors at the time of the study was by means of a counter on the web site, counting the hits that the web site attracted. However, the organization was in the process of investigating the implementation of special statistical software that could provide a more detailed monitoring of web site visiting statistics.

The content analysis could not reveal how often the Cansa web site was updated. There were only three references to specific dates. A copyright statement appeared at the bottom of each page, indicating 1998 and 1999 as the timeframe of the statement. The other references were to World No-Tobacco Day on 31st of May 2000 and to the annual Cuppa for Cansa campaign in June (year not mentioned). This reference did not necessarily indicate that the site had been updated in 2000, as this link could have been added to the web site during the previous year.

To clarify this issue one of the interviewees explained that the web site was updated "quite regularly... I would say at least every month. Whenever there's a campaign running, we try to have the information on the web site, so we can refer reporters to the web site." Although this web site was updated more regularly than some of the other NGOs in the study, it still did not give the impression of being very "active".

10.1.5 Integration of media

According to the interviewees Cansa mostly published pamphlets and booklets about cancer and also a monthly newsletter and an annual report. It was stated that Cansa's e-mail address and the web site URL were "usually printed on all publications". However, on examining five of the organization's pamphlets, it was discovered that none of them carried this information. These pamphlets encouraged readers to make use of Cansa's toll free number.

It seemed that Cansa did not realize the importance of using different media as pointers to each other, because the web site also did not contain any *explicit* references to other media or to publications published by the organization. Just a few separate links were provided on the front page some of its publications, and to one medical journal published by another institution.

The first link provided was a link to the organization's guides about sun safety for families, farmers and sportsmen. These guides could be read online. Something else worth noting is that the contact details in these guides were only those of the Cape Town office. This could be confusing to web site visitors. A better idea would perhaps be to create a link from this contact detail page, to the *Contact us* page, where the contact details of all the Cansa offices were provided.

The second reference to other publications was an external link to the *British Medical Journal* for more information about the effect of direct sunlight. The third publication referred to was a Cansa brochure called *Fighting cancer through research.*

The Cansa publications would be more prominent on the web site if a specific content category for publications were added to the main content categories. Probed about why most of the Cansa publications were not published online, the one interviewee stated: "That is something to think about for the future."

10.1 Public relations models

The organization did not employ a public relations practitioner, "because of limited resources". However, the organization employed a PR coordinator, but many PR functions were outsourced. The PR coordinator did not have any communication qualifications. She was qualified in social work, but had previously worked as a fundraiser.

Public relations was seen as a tool "which has to be utilized by an organization to reach out to the people out there". The purpose of public relations for an organization such as Cansa was also to make the organization visible and to market the organization externally as well as internally.

One interviewee explained that some of its publics initiated communication with Cansa, for example volunteers who wanted to work for/with the organization. With regard to other publics such as donors and other NGOs, Cansa often initiated communications with them in terms of presentations done or in terms of networking. Cansa at large had also initiated communication to the public through its campaigns. The CEO of Cansa was responsible for coordinating the dissemination of information about cancer throughout Africa and had already helped some countries to form their own small cancer associations.

Cansa often played a critical social role, for instance with regard to its stand against smoking. The organization's CEO sat on the National Consultative Health Forum with the national minister of health. It is from this position that government was often criticized for its policies or for not doing enough to combat cancer or smoking. Cansa was also instrumental in the writing of the latest anti-smoking laws that for instance prohibit smoking in the workplace.

Cansa also played an important radical role in order to change people's lifestyles to prevent cancer. The organization tries to educate people to have them change their lifestyles, for example to eat healthily and to behave in a sexually responsible manner. The healthier lifestyles that Cansa tries to people to follow also represent the idealistic social role that the organization plays. Eventually the organization would like to see the general public educated and informed about cancer and actively trying to prevent the disease by following certain health guidelines.

As was explained earlier the organization did not have a public relations department or practitioner, but the PR functions were fulfilled by a public relations coordinator with the help of public relations consultants who assisted the organization from time to time. The public relations function was therefore not part of the dominant coalition, as it seemed that the PR coordinator merely had the role of a PR technician. Her function formed part of the marketing and fundraising department of the organization. The CEO explained: "We say that we cannot separate the marketing and public relations functions because of our limited resources."

The organizational culture was described as more participatory than authoritarian. Decisions were not taken and then dictated to the people working for Cansa. Rather, democratic procedures were in place where every employee could express his/her view. The interviewees stressed that Cansa did try new and innovative approaches from time to time. An example was that Cansa had in the past appointed people to give patient service to cancer patients on a one-to-one basis. This approach was not very productive because it "limited the capacity of the organization". This meant that Cansa could not provide care to many patients because of its limited manpower.

To combat this problem a new innovative approach was implemented. It was called the community-based home-care model, which meant that Cansa no longer approached patient care in a hands-on way, but rather played a facilitative role. This was done by training people in the community so they could look after their own cancer patients. Cansa therefore assisted communities in the formation of support groups in order to empower the community to help themselves.

Another innovative approach that Cansa implemented was to reach out to the public by talking about health promotion instead of health education as it was approached in the past. The emphasis was now on a healthy lifestyle, instead of concentrating on cancer as a disease. The result was that people were much more receptive of this approach, because it empowered them by telling them what they could do about preventing cancer.

The CEO of Cansa described the organization as having a decentralized authority, because "I don't believe in centralization, I believe in people doing their own thing". The national office only acted as a coordinating office and did not have all the authority in the organization. The organization was run by a board of directors where every provincial office was represented, therefore every Cansa office had the opportunity to give input on the highest level of management. Steve Lepita, one of the interviewees, added that "a centralized model is very destructive... I think it is always very, very important to consult with people, because they may have valuable input, especially these days, because they are the ones that are working on the ground".

Contact and networking with organizations, such as Sangoco or the SA Federal Council for Disability and others, were very important to Cansa. "If Cansa does not network with other organizations in the NGO sector, such as NGOs working in health, welfare and community development, I think we will be out of the picture." Cansa had contact with other organizations in order to "listen and learn from them, because we need to understand the standards out there, and what is expected of us and what is the trends and the mechanisms that can assist as to improve as an organization". One example of adapting to the input of other organizations was the new approach to funding where donors were not asked to fund the organization itself, but rather to fund specific projects that the organization has identified.

Cansa protected people with cancer in terms of their rights as patients. To a certain extent the public was also protected from doctors, because Cansa motivated patients to seek second and even third opinions with regard to a cancer diagnosis. One doctor might recommend surgery as method of treatment, while another doctor could have another approach to the disease. The organization was also involved in the presenting of workshops, for example at large corporate business where non-smokers were advised about their rights in the workplace.

The interviewees explained that Cansa had not been involved in many conflict situations with its publics, such as other NGOs, government or sponsors. If a conflict situation should evolve, the CEO would first seek the advice of Sangoco (the South African NGO Coalition) in terms of how to deal with that situation. The CEO also stated that he believed that every conflict situation differed from another and that these situations cannot be approached in the same way.

One example that could perhaps be classified as a conflict situation was when a member of the public approached the organization or a sponsor of Cansa to complain about how money was spent. This kind of situation was solved by writing letters to the sponsor and the member of the public to explain the situation. The organization believed in personal contact to resolve these issues, even if a sponsor had only donated R5 or R10 to the organization. The CEO would often follow up the letter with a personal phone call to ascertain whether the matter had been explained satisfactorily.

According to the interviewees the public relations coordinator as part of the marketing and fundraising department was involved in the strategic planning process at a very high level. Even though the organization did not have a public relations department, there was a PR plan put together as a result of the organization's strategic planning. The PR coordinator was also represented at Cansa's forums where representatives of all the Cansa offices often took strategic decisions. The PR coordinator had to be present at these forums in order to know what was decided and what should be communicated to the public and the rest of the organization.

The Cansa web site did not portray a very transparent image overall, as the only sign of transparency was the inclusion of the names of staff members and their e-mail addresses. Other signs of transparency, for example annual reports, press releases, and information on donors and sponsors, were not included on the web site.

However, the web site did include a section where the organization's values were explained. This section appeared on the *About Cansa* page. The reason why these values were important is because they were compatible with the values underlying a two-way symmetrical approach to public relations. These values were also compatible with and essential for a transparent organization. These values are explained as follows:

Cansa operates in an open, participative and enabling environment where trust and care are sought constantly, developing and utilizing human potential to its full.

We are stewards of public trust and are responsible and accountable to the communities we serve.

We can make a difference in beating cancer by striving for excellent service.

These values were in line with the values needed to practice excellent public relations in an organization and will be triangulated with the information gathered during the interview to ascertain whether these values are in fact applied in the management of the organization. This will be discussed in Section 10.5.

10.2 Interactive characteristics

10.3.1 Dimensions of interactivity

The following dimensions of interactivity were portrayed on the Cansa web site.

- ***Choice***

  The Cansa web site can be described as offering a high level of choice, because it offered the web site visitor unrestricted navigation of the web site. Visitors did not have to register or to pay any fees before the site could be navigated. However, this high level of choice was reduced by the fact that the site did not offer any choices with regard to language or a text/graphic version of the site. The choice between a text or a graphics version was not a necessity in this case, because the download speed of the web site was fairly good. However, similar web sites linked to from the Cansa web site did provide a choice between different languages.

- ***Connectedness***

  Most links included in the web site were internal links to information about the organization, its activities and cancer as a disease. A few external links were included, for example to the *British Medical Journal*, the EyeCare Foundation and Quitnet (a web site to help people quit smoking). Following these links led the visitor out of the Cansa web site completely.

  The web site carried no advertisements. However, a company called Internet Solutions sponsored the site and a link was provided to this company. This could be seen as a form of advertisement through an external link. There were no links to graphics and photographs and all links led to information or another web site.

The links carried by the web site provided a high level of connectedness that increased the chances for return visits. However, these links could also have the adverse effect of leading web site visitors away from the site, as the Cansa logo did not appear on any of these external links.

- ***Information collection***

  No overt devices of information collection could be detected on the web site. The issue was dealt with during the interview.

- ***Reciprocal communication***

  Reciprocal communication devices were present on the web site on a very limited scale. The only reciprocal communication was in the form of reactive communication. This refers to the provision of contact information on the web site.

- ***Playfulness***

  No form of playfulness was found on the Cansa web site.

10.3.2 Level of interactivity

As the only indication of interactivity on the web site was the provision of contact details, the level of interactivity is rated as *limited.*

10.3.3 Orientation of interactivity

The orientation of interactivity was more towards the audience-oriented dimensions than towards the source-oriented dimensions. With regard to source orientation, the web site contained no information collection devices and a very low level of reciprocal communication. With regard to audience-orientation the web site provided a fair level of choice and a relatively high level of connectedness. The orientation of interactivity can thus be described as audience-oriented.

10.3.4 Functions and forms of interactivity

The web site did not make use of many interactive functions:

- ***Customer support***

  Customer support was present at an extremely limited level. The web site did not contain any specific requests for feedback or comments, therefore the only customer support provided was the presence of contact information.

- ***Marketing research***

  No form of marketing research was present on the web site.

- ***Search for more information***

  This function was present in a very limited way. The provision of contact details at different Cansa offices could be seen as a form of a branch locator that people could use to find the Cansa office closest to them.

  Earlier it was emphasized that a search function would be helpful to enhance navigation of the web site.

❖ ***Advertising/promotion/publicity***

A limited form of advertising/promotion/publicity was present on the web site, referring to the announcement of three of the organization's events for the year 2000. These events included the Comrades marathon where people could run the race to raise money for Cansa, the World No-Tobacco Day and the Cuppa for Cansa campaign.

Another form of advertising/promotion/publicity that could be included on the web site is the option to give donations online.

❖ ***Entertainment***

No form of entertainment was found on the web site.

10.4 Principles of dialogical/two-way communication

This section explains how the principles of dialogical/two-way communication were applied on the Cansa web site:

❖ ***Test 1: Dialogical loop***

As was explained earlier the Cansa web site contained a very low level of interactivity. A dialogical loop was present in the form of contact details. No other form of two-way communication was possible via the web site. This aspect could be improved tremendously by adding true interactive features such as feedback forms, online forums or a chat room.

❖ ***Reaction on testing***

Reaction to an e-mail inquiry was delayed at first, but with further e-mail correspondence, the reaction was prompt.

❖ ***Test 2: The generation of return visits***

Return visits could be motivated by the fact that the web site provided extensive information that could be useful to its target groups. Both background information and specific information was provided that could create an informed public. However, to keep these visitors coming back, content needs to be updated frequently. It could not be assured if this is the case with the Cansa web site.

The organization of the information on the web site was not as logical as it could be, as was explained earlier. This aspect should be improved to enhance return visits to the web site.

❖ ***Test 3: Ease of use***

The Cansa web site was easy to use with regard to the fact that its download speed was fast and the hardware and software requirements were not too high. However, the table of contents and overall organization of information on the web site, needed improvement.

10.5 Cansa: Conclusions

The Cansa web site can be described as an attractive web site carrying useful information to a variety of publics and target groups. However, this web site was a typical example of the under-utilization of the unique features of the internet and the WWW. The web site had a very limited level of interactivity as the only interactive feature it had was the provision of contact details. Because of its lack of interactivity, the web site could not be used as tool to enhance two-way communication between the organization and its publics in its current form.

The lack of interactivity was understandable when the aims for the web site were considered. The web site was set up to provide information on cancer and to attract potential funders and donors to the organization. It seemed that Cansa did not at first realize the potential of the WWW for two-way communication. However, the current web site is in the process of being revamped and improved, and some of these shortcomings will be addressed.

Another problem was the apparently illogical organization of content on the front page of the web site as was described in the analysis of the web site. If the organization of content on a web site leads to confusion and frustration, web site visitors will most likely not be very eager to engage in two-way communication. The creation of a forum where cancer patients or their relatives can share information and encouragement with each other would motivate visitors to get more involved in Cansa as an organization via its web site.

Cansa did not have a public relations or communications department, as its marketing and public relations functions were combined in one department. The reason for this combination was a lack of resources, according to the organization's CEO. The combination of public relations and marketing under one umbrella was discussed in Chapter 1 (Section 1.2.1) and it was pointed out that excellent public relations could not be practiced with this combination.

The organization only employed a public relations coordinator with no communications qualification. Most of the public relations functions were outsourced, which would also make the achievement of excellent two-way symmetrical public relations unlikely. The public relations coordinator did not form part of the dominant coalition in Cansa. She could therefore not have the influence on policy and decision-making that was needed to practice public relations in a managerial role.

When the purpose of public relations was discussed during the interview, the interviewees did not mention aspects such as two-way communication and mutual understanding. Instead, he said that the purpose of public relations was to reach out and be visible and to market the organization to its publics. Similarly, the importance of contact with and input from other organizations was realized, but its significance was indicated because Cansa could learn from other organizations. Again, two-way communication was not mentioned.

It was evident that two-way symmetrical communication would not be found in Cansa. However, the organization displayed some characteristics that would be conducive to the practicing of the two-way symmetrical model. For example, Cansa was described as being very innovative and functioning with a decentralized organizational culture. On its web site the following aspects regarding the organization were highlighted: an open, participative approach, the gaining of public trust and accountability. Furthermore, Cansa strove to protect ordinary people from government, and for instance medical facilities. It played a radical, critical and an idealistic social role in order to achieve its goals.

However, the organization emphasized the dissemination of information to such a degree that it was concluded that it followed the public-information model of public relations. Several changes should be made to its approach to public relations and its web site before Cansa should be able to achieve excellent two-way symmetrical public relations.

Chapter 11

Women'sNet (http://womensnet.org.za)

Content analysis on June 23rd, 2000 and interview with Sonja Boezak, information coordinator, on June 27th, 2000

11.1 Background

11.1.1 Organizational information

At the time of the study Women'sNet operated from its Johannesburg office and some of its projects included the Women and Election project, the Women and Human Rights project, and a Community Radio project. The organization's target was anybody in South Africa who had access to the internet and who wanted information on gender issues, and women in NGOs and CBOs[1] (HSRC, 2000). Its mission statement was:

- *To empower South African women to use information and communication technologies towards advancing women's equality;*
- *To make technology accessible to women, particularly those who have been historically disadvantaged;*
- *To provide responsive gender-sensitive training and support; linking projects, people, tools and resources;*
- *To facilitate the dissemination of information in formats accessible to women who are not directly linked to the internet.*

Women'sNet was a project initiated by Sangonet[2] and the Commission on Gender Equality. However, the interviewee stressed that Women'sNet functioned as an autonomous organization. The organization had its own budget, did its own financial reporting and worked with its own donors. Despite this independence, the interviewee explained that the organization was "essentially responsible to the Sangonet executive director on everything that we do, on how we spend our finances, how we use our resources and generally on Women'sNet operations". The executive director, in turn, was responsible to the Sangonet board and reported to them.

Women'sNet also had other structures with whom it interacted, for instance an information strategy team consisting of women from different sectors around the country. This team guided the organization on strategic issues, for example on "what kind of information Women'sNet should provide at this stage". Another structure was the Women'sNet's advisory group, consisting of women who were more "sort of high level, high powered". For example, one of the members of the advisory group was the deputy minister of defence, and this group provided strategic input and advice on the management of the organization, "where it is we should go, what the movement or the feeling in the country is".

[1] Community-based organizations
[2] South African NGO Network, an internet service provider for NGOs

The full-time staff of the organization at the time of the study consisted of three people: the information coordinator, the project manager and the training coordinator. Additional staff included an intern as well as a project coordinator who worked with Women'sNet from time to time.

The Women'sNet web site was formally launched in March 1998. The interviewee explained that "Women'sNet never does anything without consulting with people, and it is not just about consulting, it is about bringing people in and making them a part of anything that we do". To illustrate this approach she explained that the original Women'sNet web site had been developed by a group of women from South Africa and some from the Sadec region "who sat down and decided what their needs were". Thereafter a five-day workshop was held during which these women were trained in basic web site development. The women then created the shell of what is now the large Women'sNet web site. Therefore it can be concluded that a team and consultation approach was followed in developing the initial web site.

The interviewee explained that the sub-web sites of Women'sNet were all developed in the same way (for example Radio Exchange or the Flame web site), involving a team of people with relevance to the content of the proposed web site. The result was that Women'sNet in effect did not own its web sites, as its potential users created the web site and also "owned" it.

After the Women'sNet web site had been created it was the information-coordinator's task to develop content for the web site. The intern at the organization was responsible for the updating of the web site. The organization also made use of an external technical person who developed specific technical tools for Women'sNet. The organization's connection with Sangonet meant that it could make use of the services of a systems administrator from Sangonet who owned the server on which Women'sNet was run. This had the implication that Women'sNet had direct and easy access to additional technical support for its web site.

It is important to note that Women'sNet differed from the other NGOs included in the study, because their web site was the sole reason why the organization existed. The web site was therefore not some luxury or an optional communication medium, but it was part and parcel of the goals and operation of the organization.

Another difference was that several of the questions earmarked for the interview were answered by examining the content of the web site. Aspects such as the aims of the web site, the reason why it was set up and its target groups were explained in detail on the web site. The interviewee was therefore only asked whether she would like to add anything to the information found on the web site.

11.1.2 Reasons and aims for setting up a web site

The reasons why the organization existed were also mostly the same reasons why the web site was put up. These reasons concerning the organization itself were listed on the web site and included the following:

- To serve women's information needs in a user-friendly way and in a way that is locally appropriate;
- To make ICT accessible to women, allowing women to define the content of the technology;
- To empower women to create their own relevant knowledge;

- To change the flow of information from north-south to south-south;
- To take advantage of the long-term economic benefit of using ICT: electronic communication is inexpensive and fast;
- To increase networking and support among Sough Africa's women's communities to build relationships that can circumvent traditional barriers;
- To empower and train women to use electronic media strategically and effectively;
- To develop a platform/space for discussing and mobilizing around women's issues;
- To develop indigenous and relevant, useful information sources;
- To make policy more gender-focused;
- To increase flow of information between government and civil society;
- For women's economic empowerment (Women'sNet, 2000b:3).

The interviewee explained that Women'sNet did not see the web site as a means to generate funds. Funds were raised separately for specific projects. However, the organization did plan to put information on the web site on how to raise donations and how to do a project proposal, in order to help other organizations that might need this information.

The organization did not plan to offer a language choice on the web site, because of limited resources and because it would limit the content to certain users. However, the web site did not prevent people from using the language of their choice, for example on the bulletin board any language could be used. Also, the training material used for training courses was made available in English and the other languages that were mainly spoken in the area where training was being conducted. Additionally, materials on the Radio Exchange sub-web site were in several different languages. It was therefore clear that Women'sNet did not want to be exclusive in terms of language, but it rather tried to accommodate people as far as its capacity allowed.

The interviewee was probed on the absence of information on the organization's training courses on the web site, as its mission statement clearly stated training as one of its objectives. She explained that the training component of Women'sNet had only started late in 1999 and that some of the training material would be made available on the web site soon after the interview had been conducted. Training was not done in order to raise funds, instead, the organization raised funds to be able to conduct training.

Therefore it was not seen as a necessity to advertise the training sessions on the web site. Another reason was the limited capacity of the organization, which would not be able to deliver training to all inquirers who learned about it on the web site. Therefore training sessions were not marketed through the web site, but it was done separately to make sure that the organization was able to deliver what it had promised.

The organization aimed to create an information-sharing culture via its web site. The organization's aim for the web site was not to develop the content for the web site itself, but rather to gather information that already existed, and to make it accessible via the web site. The interviewee explained: "We envisaged people sending us information about anything and everything, but obviously our specific agenda is women's empowerment."

The interviewee explained that another aim was to make women familiar with information technology to combat their fears in this regard. She stated that "women tend to have a fear of technology – oh, my gosh, it's something that I don't really understand". The organization thus used its web site and training programs to make women understand that information technology is "like the first time the telephone came, people were afraid to use it, now it is part of our daily activities, we use it, we can't get by without it".

Specific aims for the Women'sNet web site were listed on the web site and included the following:

- To use cyberspace to inform and mobilize women;
- To transform the way technology is used;
- To give every woman access to electronic information;
- *To organize a two-way flow of information;*
- To develop technology-empowered women;
- To develop an information base;
- To develop linkages between women;
- To be a high-powered body;
- To produce excellent women in technical positions (Women'sNet, 2000a).

Note that the aim *to organize a two-way flow of information* reflected a similarity with the practicing of a two-way symmetrical model of public relations. This indicated at an early stage that Women'sNet was probably applying the principles of the two-way symmetrical model. More of these characteristics will be discussed in Sections 11.2 and 11.5.

An analysis of the type of content on the rest of the web site revealed that it contained general as well as specific information regarding women's issues. (See the content categories discussed in Section 10.1.3.1.) The web site provided a bulletin board where visitors could post their messages, therefore the web site could serve as a platform for the discussion of relevant issues. The web site contained up-to-date news about women's issues and events, but press releases from the organization itself were not found on the web site. Content such as annual reports, donor forms or feedback forms were also not found on the web site.

The content on the web site informed women on several issues such as human rights, violence against women, technology and health issues. The web site also posed a strong invitation to its visitors to get involved in two-way communication. Several pages contained invitations to web site visitors to react and to send feedback, to submit web sites and so forth. Another indirect aim deduced from the content analysis that was not so obvious at first sight was to persuade women to become empowered in several ways. The web site offered the information that women might need to take action, for example to fight for their human rights, to escape from a violent situation or to be successful in an enterprise.

11.1.3 General characteristics and functions of the web site

11.1.3.1 Appearance and layout

The Women'sNet web site did not make use of many colors. Instead, the web site had a very simple design, using minimum colors. The background color was white and text was mostly in black. The Women'sNet logo was a picture of the sun in yellow and black with the organization's name written in purple. This logo appeared on every web page. Therefore the most prominent color scheme on the web site was white, black and to a lesser degree, purple, green and yellow.

Some other colors were used on the front page, as some of the text was written in a variety of colors. At the time of the content analysis the front page also contained the logo of the international Aids Conference 2000 that had been held during July 2000. Content categories that could be linked to from the front page were written in green, red and blue. However, all these colors were not repeated on the rest of the web site. These colors were probably only used on the front page to make it more colorful.

The use of a white background throughout the web site enhanced the readability of fonts, as most colors were highly visible against a white background. Font sizes were very large for headings and a medium size (approximately 12-14pt) for text. This made it easily readable as well.

The web site did not contain many graphics. The only graphics that appeared on the web site were the organization's logo on top of each page, and a black and white page border at the left side (vertically) of each page. The main content categories were repeated at the bottom of each page and the logo was repeatedly placed as a small icon on top of each content category. This limited use of graphics had the effect that the web site had a relatively fast download speed. An excessive usage of graphics would also not be suitable on this web site, because it contained a vast amount of information. It could be argued that a lot of graphics were not needed to conceal a lack of content, as was often the case with web sites where the content was limited.

The front page had a large version of the Women'sNet logo on the left side of the page, whereas the Aids2000 conference logo (small version) was situated on the top right side of the page. The main content categories appeared next to the large Women'sNet logo on the right hand side of the page. However, on opening the web site, the name of the organization was only visible after scrolling down the front page. This could be seen as a shortcoming in the layout of the front page, because the organization could not be identified immediately.

After scrolling down the front page, the name of the organization appeared in large purple letters, with the following statement below it:

Women'sNet is a vibrant and innovative networking support program designed to enable South African women to use the internet to find the people, issues, resources and tools needed for women's social action.

The second set of content categories with the logo icons on top was listed below this statement in a horizontal way. The page was ended with the names (as hyperlinks) of the organizations that initiated the organization, and Women'sNet's contact details in a very small font (approximately 8pt).

The front page was attractive and served as a gateway to the web site, as it did not contain any information itself. However, the two sets of content categories could be confusing, as well as the fact that the organization's name was not visible immediately.

The rest of the web site had a consistent look in terms of design and layout. The organization's logo appeared at the top of each page, with its name written in purple below the logo. The font size used for writing the name was much smaller than the font size on the front page. Besides the logo, each web page also had a black and white vertical border on its left side and the second set of content categories appeared at the bottom of each page. This consistent look was a positive aspect of the design of the web site, because it helped visitors to know where they were and to get familiar with the web site. A consistent look for each web page was particularly important for the Women'sNet web site, because it contained so many links to sub-websites and external links to other web sites.

The following content categories appeared on the front page of the web site:

- Daily reports and updates from key correspondents at AIDS 2000 in Durban;
- New this week;
- News;
- Radio exchange;
- Job and study opportunities;
- Beijing +5 in Africa;
- Women and human rights;
- Preventing violence against women;
- Gender in parliament;
- Health;
- New communication technologies;
- Women and enterprise;
- Gender links and resources;
- Directory of SA women's organizations; and
- Women'sNet Archive.

As explained earlier, some other, more general content categories were listed at the bottom of the page in a horizontal organization. These content categories were the following:

- About Women'sNet;
- Women'sNet updates;
- Search this site;
- Women'sNet archive;
- Calendar of events;
- Bulletin board; and
- Contact us.

The logic behind the two sets of content categories was not clear, as some of the categories overlapped and others were only mentioned in one of the two sets.

The web site contained a vast amount of information and hyperlinks. The Aids2000 conference logo linked to the web site of this conference that was to be held in Durban during July 2000. The first content category just below this logo, linked to the same web site (*Daily reports and updates from key correspondents at Aids2000 in Durban*). As the web site was analyzed before the conference started, it was presumed that this content category link would change as soon as the conference had started to link to reports and updates from the conference.

The *New this week* category led the web site visitor to a list of new additions to the web site, in terms of news, events and job and study opportunities. This page also contained an archived list of previous additions to the web site that could be accessed by date. The *News* link from the front page led to news stories and articles, as well as happenings and events that were relevant to gender issues. Some of the content of this page overlapped with the content of the *New this week* page.

Two of the main content categories on the front page led to sub-websites that covered specific projects of Women'sNet. The first was the *Radio Exchange* category that led to a web site managed by Women'sNet. Visitors to this web site could get connected to a community radio station on women and gender issues. The software needed to listen to this radio station's programs via the internet could be downloaded from the web site. The programs could also be downloaded for re-broadcasting on another radio station.

The second sub-website that could be linked to from the front page of the Women'sNet web site, was the *Women and Human rights* site that referred to another project from Women'sNet. Although it was clear that both these sub-sites were created and managed by Women'sNet, both had its own separate design and content categories.

The other content categories in the first set of categories on the front page referred to pages on the topics mentioned. Most of these pages gave access to several external links. The *Women'sNet Archive* category led to a searchable page where previous content of the web site could be accessed.

The second set of content categories at the bottom of the front-page contained links to other options on the web site, but some categories overlapped with the first set of categories, as pointed out before. An example was the *Women'sNet archive* and the *Calendar of events* (partly overlapping with the News category).

The *About Women'sNet* category led to a page with extensive information about the organization and how it was formed. The *Women'sNet updates* category led to a page where visitors could subscribe online to a Women'sNet_news newsletter sent via e-mail to notify subscribers of any new content on the web site. The page also contained an unsubscribe option.

The *Bulletin board* category led to a page where visitors could post messages, ask for help, notify other visitors of happenings and so on. The page contained postings since 1998 when the web site was created. The *Contact us* category led to an e-mail form to send e-mail to the organization.

The layout of the web site can be described as functional, in spite of some of the overlapping and seemingly illogical placement of content categories. It seemed as if "larger" categories were placed in the first set of content categories, and smaller categories or options were placed in the second set of content categories. However, this placement was not too confusing or disturbing in the navigation of the web site.

11.1.3.2 Target and functions

The interviewee explained that when Women'sNet was formed most women using the internet were white middle-class academics within development organizations. Women'sNet targeted the following groups in order to expand women's access and use of the internet: Urban and rural women without access to the internet for whom access is a long-term goal; Civil society in general, and NGOs and CBOs; sectoral groups; organized women; women in self-employment and small business; women in neighboring countries; women in the media; women in government; women information workers; and people (men and women) with interest in gender issues.

On the web site it was explained that the organization targeted women with both primary access (direct access from home or work) and secondary access (access from somewhere else, for instance a library, community center, or internet café). Its target was summarized as primarily those women who had access to the internet individually and through organizations, those who may have secondary access and marginalized women (Women'sNet, 2000b:4).

As a result of the extensive types of content the web site could have several functions for its users. Besides information about Womens'Net as an organization, the web site also carried general as well as very specific information on gender issues. Women using the site could be empowered by the information on the site. The site also served as a platform to discuss gender issues via its bulletin board. As the web site had two search functions (search the site and search its archives) web site visitors could also search for specific information without much effort.

The web site could be used to find a job, as vacant positions were listed on the site. The events and related news that were updated regularly could be useful for its users to keep up to date with gender happenings internationally. Another use for the site was the option to submit information about gender events or other related web sites that could be included in the Women'sNet web site.

11.1.4 Successes, problems and failures

The interviewee explained that the web site visitors were very active, as the organization received approximately 150 inquiries per week via the web site. The web site has gradually received more and more hits since its inception until the time of the interview. The organization was satisfied that it was reaching its aims: "I think we are reaching our goal in a, you know, not by leaps and bounds, but that we're making changes", the interviewee said.

A specific example of success via the web site was the Election 1999 project of voter education for women, mentioned previously. According to the interviewee this was probably the most successful project that Women'sNet had ever engaged in. The information on the web site was used extensively and the organization had received many inquiries about the project.

Another success via the web site was the Radio Exchange project. Before the project was launched, the information coordinator tested the idea of the project extensively in other African countries. Valuable input was obtained through this process. At the time of the interview the project involved community radio stations in Gauteng, especially those that did not have a very extended infrastructure. According to the interviewee the organization received many inquiries especially from other African countries to extend the project to those countries as well.

The success of the web site was also illustrated by the fact that approximately 800 people were subscribed to the weekly mailing list that carried information on new additions to the web site.

Visitors to the Women'sNet web site were carefully monitored. Statistics were kept of the hits received as well as trends as to when the web site was mostly used. Other information obtained from the statistics was from which country the web site was accessed and also whether it was an individual or an organization accessing the web site, and what kind of organization it was (academic, government, business and so forth).

It was found that the web site was visited significantly more often when certain issues were high on the political or news agenda. The election program that ran during 1999 was a good example. The web site gave information on how women could use their vote and other important information on voter education and the web site was used extensively to visit these pages.

Regarding problems, Women'sNet had a technical problem with regard to the web site and the statistics of its usage. The organization was in the process of transforming the many documents on the web site to a database, as it would be easier to manage. The problem was that the user statistics program could not monitor the usage of the database on the web site. Special software had to be developed to solve this problem.

Another problem that the organization experienced previously was to persuade other organizations to use information technology not just for technology's sake, "but to use it as a tool to make whatever else you do, easier". This problem was especially related to partner organizations and community radio stations participating in the Radio Exchange project. The project did not only involve radio stations but NGOs as well.

The idea was to get community radio stations and NGOs working together in "creating decent content and programming" for community radio. The interviewee explained that "it was really difficult trying to get people understand that information sharing is not about ownership, although it brought about bigger ownership. If we all own it we have more power in it and that keeping something closed is narrow-minded. It is hard to convince people that information sharing is also enriching".

The intern working at Women'sNet updated the web site on a daily basis at the time of the study. Web site visitors and subscribers to Womensnet_News were notified on a weekly basis of what had been added to the web site during that week. The fact that it was clear that the web site was managed and updated regularly was a positive aspect of the web site that could persuade web site visitors to return to the web site on a regular basis.

11.1.5 Integration of media

Women'sNet put a lot of effort into the integration of new and traditional media. At the time of the study, the organization did not have a newsletter like many other NGOs. However, the interviewee explained that although Women'sNet used information technology almost exclusively, it was always used in collaboration with other "tools" or media. The reason was the reality that large parts of South Africa and Africa did not have the infrastructure or access to be able to use information technology. This was one of the reasons why the organization started its Radio Exchange project, which made it possible to access information on the web site, via radio. By doing this, people who did not have access to the internet could also share in the information on the web site by means of radio.

The interviewee explained: "ICT's (information communication technologies) are never used in isolation". Some of the content on the web site was also brought to people on grassroots level by others who had access to the internet. People were often trained to make information on the web site available and understandable for others who were not able to make use of the web site themselves. Training material was made available in hard copy format but it would be published on the web site as well, soon after the interview had been conducted.

Another way in which the organization tried to increase access to the internet, was by publishing a pamphlet called *Getting connected to the internet*. The pamphlet explained the internet in very simple terms and it could be used by organizations or individuals that wanted to know more about information technology. The pamphlet had also been translated into French and it was distributed throughout Africa.

Other documentation published on the web site, was the evaluation of Women'sNet projects. The organization evaluated each project carefully and made this information available via its web site, for the use of other organizations. By doing this, the use of information technology could also be enhanced with other organizations learning from the Women'sNet experience. Related to the evaluation was a booklet that would be available on the web site shortly after the interview was conducted. The booklet would carry information on how to conduct a advocacy/lobbying project such as the election project run by Women'sNet, using electronic media. The aim was that other organizations would make use of this "manual" in order to increase their usage of electronic media for similar projects.

Another, similar booklet being developed by Women'sNet and the APC (Association for Progressive Communication) was about lessons learned around combining old and new technologies, for instance radio and computer. The booklet explained what would work and what would not work in this regard. The booklet would be distributed in paper format, on CD Rom and via the Women'sNet web site shortly after the interview was conducted.

It was clear that the different communication media used by Women'sNet were integrated to a large degree and that every medium was used as a pointer to the web site to increase people's (especially women's) usage of information technology across Africa.

11.2 Public relations models

This section will show that Women'sNet displayed many characteristics that could be associated with the practicing of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. This issue will also be explored further in Section 11.5.

The organization did not employ a full-time media officer or a public relations practitioner when the study was conducted. Instead, the communication functions were mostly fulfilled by an information coordinator who was responsible for aspects such as developing all the organization's web resources, maintaining contact with the organization's partner organizations, developing content and "developing a sort of a public face for Women'sNet". The information coordinator that fulfilled some of the public relations functions for the organization did not have a communications or public relations qualification. Instead, her background was feminist theory and political sciences.

The interviewee stressed that the organization followed a participatory approach in everything that was done. "From a development ethics perspective we don't believe in using colonialist methods, that 'we know better and we will tell you how to do it'. We will speak to people, saying that 'your knowledge is as important as mine and perhaps if we exchange it we might end up with a useful product'". She also explained the importance of understanding the power structures in different communities and that "different communities have different needs and that we need to be sensitive to it. And by far, we are not the people who know about your needs, you are the best person to ask about it".

The interviewee explained that Women'sNet could not exist without public relations/media contact or the functions that the information coordinator fulfils. However, she admitted that the organization did not always "remember" to market itself and its projects. The organization learned in the recent past that it was essential to include a budget for the marketing of each project in the project proposal. When it was remembered to plan for the marketing of a project or the marketing of the organization, it worked very successfully. The interviewee mentioned examples of post cards, buttons, balloons and other objects that were used to promote the organization's name and image in the past.

The interviewee explained that Women'sNet had to initiate communication with its different publics for the first few months of its existence. However, as the organization became better known different groups and organizations started to initiate communication with Women'sNet. One example was the organization's invitation to and involvement in bilateral talks on women's issues together with the government.

The interviewee explained that Women'sNet played a radical role because it advocated change in the society. "The reality in South Africa is that the poorest people are excluded and the poorest people inevitably are women that do not have access to information technology and infrastructure." Women'sNet used advocating and lobbying at every level, from people at grassroots level up to government level to try and change this.

To achieve the change with regard to women's access to information technology, the organization played a critical role, criticizing for example government structures or policies. It also played an idealistic role in trying to give more women access to information technology and to empower women by doing this. The organization started out wanting to create a platform for other organizations to "give them a voice and to give a voice to the voiceless".

However, this approach had changed as women now had a voice that just needed to be heard. The interviewee admitted that Women'sNet had its own political agenda, meaning that "the organization strives to have feminist theories realized within the South African context". Stressing the importance of political power for women was enhancing this agenda whenever a representative of the organization talked to people responsible for the implementation or formulation of policies.

The organization also tried to raise women's issues whenever it was possible in a subtle way, "without being prescriptive, because we believe it is important for people to realize things on their own, without us telling them. What we do is, I suppose we are more the spoon. We stir. I think that is an important role for us to play in addition to the three social roles mentioned".

The interviewee explained that the organization would never be satisfied with any status quo and that it would always evaluate the current status quo and come up with innovative ways to change what was wrong.

The public relations or the information coordinating functions were essential to the organization in fulfilling these social roles. The organization used electronic media to lobby, to criticize and to state its ideals in terms of gender issues in South Africa. At the same time the organization advocated the increased use of information technology by women to try and achieve the changes it advocates. It could be said that the web site was the organization, therefore its communication function formed the core of what the organization did.

It was made clear that all the employees participated in policy-making in the organization, as "everyone has an equal say in... work styles, for example. We do not define how people should work. It's about communicating and speaking to each other as openly as possible, and adjusting accordingly". It seemed that the organization followed the same transparent and participatory approach internally, as it did externally with its publics and stakeholders. The employee mentioned that employees got the opportunity to complain if they were not satisfied with the conduct of the organization or any other matter regarding Women'sNet.

In terms of a centralized/decentralized authority, the interviewee responded by saying that "we are very much against hierarchies". She explained that although the employees had specific functions and titles, "those only denote our roles within the organization". The transparent way in which the organization functioned fitted with a decentralized authority, where employees carried much authority and responsibility themselves. For example, employees did not have to adhere to strict office rules in terms of working hours or in terms of where they did their work. They were allowed to operate from their homes and the use of electronic technology such as the internet made this option feasible.

Women'sNet functions in a very innovative way, illustrated by the following statement: "We do not have a standard policy saying you must adhere to this and that, or we can't work with you. We adjust, we change." However, the fact that Women'sNet was against a hierarchical structure did not have the effect that the organization could not adapt to working with other organizations that do follow strict hierarchical lines. The example of the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) was mentioned. This organization was one of the most important partner organizations working with Women'sNet. The Commission functioned according to strict procedures and rules and according to the interviewee, Women'sNet respected that by adhering to these procedures.

The organization's innovative nature was also illustrated by the innovative means used to make information from its web site available to women without direct access to the internet. The training projects as well as the Radio Exchange project were some examples in this regard.

Throughout the interview it was made clear that Women'sNet valued networking and input from other organizations. One example of Women'sNet adapting to the needs and demands of other organizations was mentioned as an answer to the previous questions. Another example was the organization's relationship with the Women's Development Forum, which had a different, more open nature than the relationship with the CGE. The interviewee explained that Women'sNet did not deal with every organization in the same way, and that "we build relationships with people around how they want us to deal with them".

The two-way symmetrical model was also implicated by the organization conducting a "social and ethical accounting auditing and reporting process". This entailed the identification of all the organization's stakeholder groups and accessing how Women'sNet was fulfilling their needs, for example "if we say we're doing this, do you think we are doing this. We evaluate ourselves, but on your terms. We're opening up the space for people to say this is what you're not doing right".

The organization had an important role in protecting women against government and businesses policies and practices. The organization believed in the empowerment of women in order to enable them to protect themselves with regard to their human rights, political rights and other issues. This protective role was described in more detail earlier when the social roles of public relations within Women'sNet were discussed.

The most immediate conflict situation in which Women'sNet was involved at the time of the interview was internal conflict between the organization and the staff of Sangonet to which Women'snet was accountable. As Women'sNet was based within Sangonet, the relationship between Women'sNet staff and Sangonet staff had often been strained. For example, Women'sNet had a "very loose operational style" enabling employees to work from their homes from time to time. This approach sometimes led to conflict with Sangonet staff members who were not allowed to do the same.

Another problem between Women'sNet and Sangonet was racial conflict and the fact that the Womens'Net staff and the Sangonet staff were not representative of the South African population in terms of race. The racial imbalances within these organizations restrained Women'sNet's operations, because the organization did not "practice what it preached". The organization wanted to fight against racial discrimination and inequality in society, but within its internal structures the very same problems were not solved yet.

According to the interviewee, conflict was dealt with by means of negotiation. Women'sNet was in the process of discussing the valuing of employees with the Sangonet executive director. "We've opened up a conversation, we are speaking about it, trying to be as honest as possible, coming up with solutions without getting aggressive or angry about it. We sort of said: 'this is our needs, this is how we think you can address them. We understand that you have different needs, let's speak about it.'"

Conflict was also sometimes experienced with other partner organizations, especially because of racial imbalances. The example of the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) was mentioned, because "white American women essentially run this organization". The APC consisted of more or less 40 partner organizations and the interviewee was the only non-white member at its last meeting.

The interviewee explained that Women'sNet did its own strategic planning, separately from Sangonet, although the overall goals of the two organizations were essentially the same. Women'sNet engaged in strategic planning sessions in which every employee was involved on an equal basis. This meant that the information coordinator, as the person responsible for some of the public relations functions, was fully involved in this process. The organization also held strategic planning sessions with its information strategy team, as well as with its advisory group.

In terms of transparency the web site contained two aspects that could be described as signs of transparency. The first was information on the organization's sponsors, as well as links to their web sites. The second aspect was a very detailed document that explained how the organization and the web site were formed. This document also contained information about the organization's staff, consultant and other members of the "Women'sNet teams" as it was called on the web site.

The web site did not contain any annual reports or press releases from the organization. It also did not contain any statistics on the hits that the web site had attracted.

11.3 Interactive characteristics

11.3.1 Dimensions of interactivity

The Women'sNet web site demonstrated more examples of interactivity than most of the other web sites that had been analyzed for purposes of the study:

❖ ***Choice***

The Women'sNet web site offered unrestricted navigation as no registration before or during navigation was requested and no fees were payable as a prerequisite for navigating the web site. With regard to unrestricted navigation the web site therefore provided a high level of choice.

The web site did not provide a choice between a graphic and a text version of the web site. This choice was not, however seen as a necessity as the web site contained the minimum graphics and download speed was not affected by the presence of graphics and photographs.

The only aspect of choice where the web site could improve was by offering a choice between different languages, which was not done. The inclusion of an African language could be considered, as women from disadvantaged communities were one of the web site's target groups. However, the lack of time and manpower could prevent this choice from being offered. This aspect was discussed during the interview.

❖ ***Connectedness***

The Women'sNet web site offered a very high level of connectedness because of the many internal as well as external links present on the web site. The web site contained several internal links to information on the organization, its origin, activities and planned activities. Other internal links led to information on important gender topics such as health, violence against women, human rights and new communication technologies.

Most of the pages on these topics also contained external links to other relevant organizations and information. Besides these external links, one of the main content categories on the front page led to a page that contained general gender links and resources. Another example of external links on the web site would be the links to the web sites of sponsors that was mentioned earlier as well as links to the initiators of the organization Sangonet and the Commission on Gender Equality.

Although these links left the web site visitor with an overwhelming feeling of connectedness and also impressed the visitor with its richness in content, caution should be exercised not to lead visitors away from the web site too easily. One method of doing this is to keep the Women'sNet logo at the top of the page that the link leads to. Another method is to provide a link back to the Women'sNet web site on the front page of the particular linked page. This was not done at the time of the analysis, and could be considered to lead visitors back to the Women'sNet web site as soon as they had explored the links provided on the web site.

No links to advertisements could be found on the web site.

- ***Information collection***

  The web site did not contain any over monitoring devices such as a registration form or a hits counter. The issue of covert monitoring devices was explored during the interview.

- ***Reciprocal communication***

  Several examples of reciprocal communication were found on the web site. Most of these examples could be classified as reactive communication, but the presence of a bulletin board where visitors could post messages and could discuss relevant issues represented an example of true interactive communication.

  Reactive communication examples were the provision of contact details as well as the invitation to visitors to contact the organization with suggestions, feedback and a description of other needs. Visitors could react to the invitation for feedback via an e-mail link provided on the web site. However, it could be improved by asking specific questions about the web site by means of a feedback form. Other examples of reactive communication were the invitation to add events to the events listing and the option of subscribing to *Womensnet_news* to be reminded via e-mail of new additions to the web site.

  Although the web site offered several options for reciprocal communication this aspect could still be improved. The inclusion of a feedback form with specific questions on the web site was already mentioned earlier. The bulletin board as an example of true interactive communication could be elaborated on by developing it into a live chat room where participants could discuss issues online in real time.

  Another option could be to hold special live forums on specific gender-related topics on certain specified dates. The discussions could be initiated by inviting well-known personalities or academics to explain their views online. Web site visitors could then pose questions or remarks to the forum and react on each other's comments or on the remarks of the invited personalities. These forums could be advertised and promoted by means of the traditional media such as radio and newspapers or even pamphlets. It could also be advertised in existing newsgroups on gender issues on the internet.

  The web site did not contain any requests for donations or sponsorship. The reasons for this were discussed during the interview.

- ***Playfulness***

  Although the web site did not contain any conventional examples of playfulness such as games or post-cards, the bulletin board could be described as a form of playfulness. The reason was that the presence of the bulletin board could arouse curiosity and prompt visitors to become more involved and to participate in two-way communication via the web site. Reading the messages posted on the bulletin board could also be an entertaining experience to web site visitors.

11.3.2 Level of interactivity

The level of interactivity could be described as between *moderate* and *high.* The web site contained contact information as well as several invitations to contact the organization for specific concerns (to add events or links or to subscribe to womensnet_news). On the next level of interactivity (the inclusion of a survey or feedback form) the web site failed to perform. However, regarding the highest level of interactivity, the web site did include a bulletin board.

As the web site did not include interactivity devices from all four levels, it could not be rated as having a *high* level of interactivity. However, it did contain several examples of interactivity, therefore it was decided that a rating of between a *moderate* and a *high* interactive level would be justified.

11.3.3 Orientation of interactivity

The web site included examples of both audience-oriented and source-oriented measures of interactivity. Examples of playfulness, and a high level of choice and connectedness represented audience-oriented dimensions of interactivity, while reciprocal communication and information collection were examples of source-oriented dimensions.

Because the web site did not include any examples of information collection, the orientation of interactivity was closer to audience-oriented than it was to source-orientation. However, interactivity devices from both orientations were included which had been recommended to enhance interactivity on a web site. (See Chapter 2, Section 2.5.4.3.)

11.3.4 Functions and forms of interactivity

Several functions and forms of interactivity were applied on the Women'sNet web site. However, the level of interactivity could still be improved.

❖ ***Customer support***

Customer support was present on the Women'sNet web site in the form of software downloading to listen to the internet community ratio station on gender issues. Listeners could also make online inquiries if they had trouble listening to the radio station.

Another example of customer support was the invitation to send comments or feedback via e-mail. This option could be improved by including a more formal feedback form, as was explained earlier.

❖ ***Marketing research***

Marketing research was not present in the form of a site survey or a product/program survey. However, the web site did include suggestions of new or future programs and activities planned by the organization that could be described as a form of market research. (See Chapter 2, section 2.5.4.4.) Web site visitors could comment on these suggestions or ask questions about it via e-mail.

- ***Search for more information***

  The only example of the search for more information option was the inclusion of a search function on the web site. The Women'sNet web site could be searched in two ways. In the first instance the whole web site could be searched, and in the second instance the archived documents on the site could be searched separately. This function was a convenient way for visitors to locate specific information and to save navigation time, as the web site contained a vast amount of information.

- ***Advertising/promotion/publicity***

  Advertising/promotion/publicity was done by means of the bulletin board, which could be described as a form of a usergroup that was operational on the web site. Another form of advertising/promotion/publicity was the job opportunities posted on the web site. These postings did not link to any outside source, it merely provided the contact information for applying or inquiring about a certain position.

- ***Entertainment***

  The bulletin board could be viewed as a form of entertainment and playfulness, as was indicated earlier.

11.4 Principles of dialogical/two-way communication

Several principles of two-way communication were applied on the web site. The interview also revealed several important principles of two-way communication that had been practiced in the organization. (See Section 11.2.)

- ***Test 1: Dialogical loop***

  The dialogical loop was present in different forms on this web site. Both reactive communication, and true interactive communication formats were present on the web site, as was described earlier. Aspects that could improve the dialogical loop are the inclusion of a feedback form and live online forums or a chat room.

- ***Reaction on testing***

  The first reaction to a test message from the researcher was delayed as it was only answered after more than two weeks. This had to be ascribed to the large amount of inquiries received via their web site, as the organization realized the importance of prompt reaction to inquiries.

- ***Test 2: The generation of return visits***

  The web site should succeed in motivating return visits, because of the fact that it was updated regularly. Other aspects that would be convenient for return visitors were the *New this week* section, and the option to subscribe to the *Womens_net news* updating service. These options made it easy for return visitors to find new additions to the web site fast and easily.

  Return visits could also be motivated by the useful information on the web site. The content of this web site would be useful to a variety of publics and the contact made with its visitors would also be beneficial to the organization.

❖ ***Test 3: Ease of use***

The web site was easy to use because of the text/graphics relationship that did not adversely affect the download speed. It was also easy to use because there were no special requirements for hardware. The fact that special software was needed to tune in to the radio station did not decrease the ease of use, as the software could be downloaded from the web site.

The only aspect that could hamper the ease of use with regard to the web site, was the organization of its tables of content. Earlier on it was mentioned that the front page contained two sets of content categories. Some of these content categories overlapped and others did not. Also, some of the categories within the first set of content categories overlapped. Though this organization of content would not really confuse web site visitors, it could lead to frustration and irritation, especially where categories overlapped.

11.5 Women'sNet: Conclusions

Women'sNet had an impressive web site with usable information that was well organized. The web site was attractive and had several interactive features. It is important to note that this web site differed from the other nine web sites that were analyzed because the web site was not just a luxury or just another means of communication. The Women'sNet web site existed to promote the very reasons why the organization existed. It was therefore understandable that this organization would put in more effort in using its web site.

The web site was used to create two-way communication between the organization and its publics. This did not mean that the web site was without shortcomings. Although it displayed several interactive devices, its level of interactivity could still be improved by adding a feedback form or a chat room or even live forums from time to time.

Although the organization did not employ a media officer or a public relations practitioner, the information coordinator was responsible for more or less the same functions that would be expected of a public relations practitioner. This meant that, although Women'sNet was a small organization, it still realized the importance of communications both internally as well as externally. The information coordinator did not have a communications qualification, but she did have a tertiary education.

It was clear that Women'sNet made use of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. One of the organization's aims for the web site stated explicitly that the promotion of a two-way flow of information was envisaged. The following two quotations were examples of some of the statements by the interviewee, illustrating this approach:

From a development ethics perspective we don't believe in using colonialist methods, that 'we know better and we will tell you how to do it'. We will speak to people, saying that 'your knowledge is as important as mine and perhaps if we exchange it we might end up with a useful product'.

We build relationships with people around how they want us to deal with them.

The organization believed in frequent contact with its publics, keeping its "ears on the ground". Mutual understanding was important when dealing with its publics. Women'sNet believed in collaboration with its publics and the communities that it served. The organization valued networking and contact with other organizations and was open to adapt to the input of others. It therefore realized the importance of interdependence, an open system and the fact that the organization functioned in a state of a moving equilibrium. The organization valued change and innovativeness, also stressing a two-way symmetrical worldview.

Other aspects contributing to a two-way symmetrical model was the organization's decentralized and participative organizational culture. Equity was important in Women'sNet, as every employee had equal opportunities for growth and providing input to the organization. Employees were trusted with autonomy and responsibilities, for example in structuring their workdays themselves and being able to work either from the office or from home.

Women'sNet also believed in interest-group liberalism, as it protected especially women against government and business by making them aware of their human rights and providing crucial information on a variety of women-related topics. The critical social role of the organization as well as its communication activities was stressed, by the statement that "Women'sNet would never be satisfied by any status quo". Many of the goals of the organization, as well as its web site, were idealistic in nature, another role of public relations within a two-way symmetrical model.

Besides the several signs of a two-way symmetrical model being practiced, it became evident that the organization sometimes had to make use of persuasive techniques as well. The examples of the Radio Exchange project and the conflict situation with Sangonet were used to illustrate this. However, it was clear that the persuasive techniques were used in an ethical manner, by means of negotiation and sometimes mediation. Even when conflict arose, the organization still strove to reach a state of mutual understanding. Therefore it was concluded that the organization made use of a mixed-motive model of public relations.

Chapter 12

Interfund (http://www.interfund.org.za)

Content analysis on June 26th, 2000 and interview with Dumisani Hlophe, Head of the information department, and Helle Christiansen-Cawthraw, information officer, on June 27th, 2000

12.1 Background

12.1.1 Organizational information

INTERFUND

At the time of the study Interfund operated from offices in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. The organization represented a consortium of donors based in Scandinavia and Europe who had pooled their resources around a common set of criteria and policies to advance development and democracy in Southern Africa. The interviewees explained that Interfund did not have an international web site for its international office in the United Kingdom and that South Africa was the country where the organization was operating at the time of the analysis.

The organization had been transformed shortly before the interview from an international funding organization operating in South Africa, to a South African non-profit organization with a South African board of directors. One of the interviewees stated that "you still have UN donors on board, but its essentially a South African board of directors, so Interfund's status or the nature of Interfund has changed". Besides the board of directors the organization had an executive director to whom the managers of the different departments in the organization had to report.

The interviewees explained that the previous structure of Interfund had been much flatter than the current structure because the restructuring process aimed at getting certain essential structures and procedures in place. The previous structure was not conducive to the activities of the organization, as there had not been enough accountability built in the structure and there was "too much democracy that resulted in the work not being done properly".

The organization supported and promoted capacity-building of NGOs and Community-based organizations (CBOs) in the areas of development management training, land reform, rural and urban development and local governance. It also supported education policy formulation, conflict resolution and democratization, education for Aids awareness and community health programs.

Interfund targeted its activities at other NGOs and CBOs and its mission statement at the time of the study was:

- *To empower communities disadvantaged by the social and political injustices of apartheid by promoting greater access to opportunity, resources and skills;*
- *To contribute to the building of a non-racial, non-sexist democracy founded on a strong civil society and a respect for human rights* (HSRC, 2000).

The interviewees could not remember the exact date when the web site was implemented, but stated that it was more or less at the beginning of 1999, which was eighteen months prior to the interview. A former deputy director of the organization created the web site. However, to coincide with the restructuring of the organization, a new web site was being planned to be implemented a few months after the interview had been conducted. A team approach would be followed in creating the new web site, as several people from the research and information department would be involved in the process. The interviewees explained that they wanted to keep the web site "an in-house job" to be able to control the content and looks of the web site in terms of their own technical skills and knowledge.

12.1.2 Reasons and aims for setting up a web site

Both interviewees had been employed by Interfund just a month or two before the study was conducted, and therefore they had not been involved in the implementation of the web site at the time. They could therefore not be sure exactly what the reasons for the implementation of the web site had been. However, they tried to assume certain reasons.

According to the interviewees one of the reasons was probably to put the organization's quarterly journal (*Development Update*) and its other publications on the web site. Another reason could have been to "provide people with information about the organization itself and also about its funding criteria".

As the interviewees could not state the original aims and expectations for the current web site, they were asked about the aims/expectations of the new web site that was being planned. One of the organization's main objectives was to "assume a center stage in development discourse and for us to be able to do that quite significantly we need to impact on policy makers and decision makers and people who get affected by such policies and decisions. The best way to do that is to widen your scope of dissemination of information which, in the light of this growing globalization is the best thing to do".

The aim of the new web site could be described as intended "to give the full picture as to what Interfund is, who constitutes Interfund, what are the various departments, what is it responsible for, what is it that we do at Interfund, what is our output like publications, what is it that people can access from us, what kind of projects do we cover and our linkages with other partners".

One of the future aims for the web site was also to include external links to the organization's members and project partners who had web sites and also to include links to other related organizations. Another aim was to link the organization's resource center to its web site, in order for web site visitors to see what kinds of information were available from the organization. It was also planned to have a separate page for each program on the web site. A choice between different languages on the web site was not planned because of the time it would take and the fact that the staff would not be able to make this kind of input with their workload.

The content on the Interfund web site at the time of the interview could be described as mostly general and specific information about the organization and its activities. It did not contain any press releases, annual reports, feedback forms or grant application forms. It could be deduced that the most important aim of the web site was to provide information with a secondary, less important aim to persuade potential beneficiaries to contact the information in order to apply for funding. Although the web site did contain contact information such as telephone numbers and e-mail addresses, it was clearly not the aim to generate online two-way communication via the web site.

12.1.3 General characteristics and functions of the web site

12.1.3.1 Appearance and layout

The web site was colorful because of the use of several different colors. Every page consisted of a text box with a colored background, such as orange, blue, purple or green. The color scheme was therefore not restricted to one or two colors, as almost every existing color was used on the web site. The colorful appearance was enhanced by the use of a border at the top and bottom of each page consisting of small blocks in different colors.

Headings were very large (approximately 36pt), making them easily readable. Other text was also in a readable font size (approximately 12 pt). However, on some pages readability was a problem due to the colored backgrounds used.

The web site did not contain any graphic material besides the colorful borders at the top and bottom of each page. This contributed to a fast downloading speed, but the web site could be made more attractive and more informative by adding photographs and other graphic material.

The front page contained the organization's name on the top with a colorful border on top and below the name. The following statement was placed below the lower border:

Against poverty and inequality for development and democracy

This statement was followed by a welcoming statement and a colored text box in which the current restructuring of the organization was explained and the promise was made to update the web site very soon.

The web site user had to scroll down to reach the site menu. On the one hand it was a positive sign that the name of the organization has a high visibility on the front page. On the other hand, the fact that the main content categories were not visible without scrolling down was not so positive. It would be more user-friendly to have the name of the organization as well as the site menu visible on first entrance of the web site.

On scrolling down the front page, the site menu was found of the left side of the page (vertically) and a text box with a colored background filled the rest of the page. In this text box a profile of the organization was given. This text box was followed by another text box with another background color in which the contact details of the organization were given. The page was ended with the same border that appeared at the top of the page.

The front page could be described as a front door to the web site because the only information it contained was a relatively short description of the organizational profile. The layout of the rest of the web site was done according to the content categories that appeared on the front page. The following content categories appeared on the front page:

- Interfund: a snapshot;
- Interfund's development objectives and principles;
- Interfund's members;

- Applying for funding from Interfund;
- Interfund's project partners (1998);
- Reviews, publications and other resources;
- Integrating Aids awareness into project cycle management;
- Integrating gender into project cycle management;
- Interfund's capacity-building program; and
- Development update.

As can be seen, content category names were mostly very long, preventing the web site visitor from getting a quick overview of content categories on the web site. These long names demanded more effort from the web site visitor in reading them. It could be shortened and re-named to assist its visitors in this regard.

The content categories led to more information on the organization, its members and project partners as well as information on applying for funding from the organization. However, it was not possible to apply for funding online. Other content on the web site included copies of its publications to be downloaded or ordered and information on some of its programs.

The web site did not contain any external links and it had very few internal links between its different pages. Some of the internal links were not operational at the time of the analysis, leaving a bad impression and frustration on the part of the web site user. The content category on *Interfund's project partners for 1998* led to a page where links to different projects were provided. Clicking on the project names led the visitor to information on relevant partners and their contact information. However, some of these links led to the reloading of the same page and no information on the relevant project partners.

12.1.3.2 Target and functions

The interviewees agreed that the web site was aimed at potential beneficiaries (NGOs and CBOs) to inform them about the organization and to persuade them to apply for funding from Interfund. It was also hoped that potential applicants would look at the funding criteria on the web site, before contacting the organization, as an "initial screening process".

Other target groups mentioned for the web site were academics, researchers and "potential researchers such as students", politicians, and international organizations who would be interested in, for example, the publications on the web site. Journalists and the mass media in general were another target group mentioned by the interviewees.

The web site offered limited uses to its visitors because of its lack of interactive devices and a lack of a variety of contents. Web site visitors could use the site to obtain information about the organization, its members and its programs and also to obtain the organization's contact information. The web site could also be visited to gain access to the organization's publications.

12.1.4 Successes, problems and failures

The web site was described as "being dormant for quite a while" as it had not been updated on a regular basis. Therefore the interviewees could not think of any specific successes linked to the web site, except for occasional inquiries received via the web site. They explained that organizations would often contact Interfund to inquire about funding. However, it was not known whether these inquirers reached the organization because of the information on the web site, as web site visitors were not being monitored at the time of the study.

The web site carried several promises to be updated soon. However, because Interfund was still going through a restructuring process, the web site could not be updated before the board of directors had confirmed all the changes in the organization. The board of directors' next meeting would be in November 2000, which meant that the web site could not be updated for the next five months after the content analysis had been conducted. The "soon" promised on the web site thus turned out not to be "so very soon." The interviewees did acknowledge the necessity of updating the web site "as often as it takes" and stated their intention to do so when the new web site came into operation at the end of the year.

One of the technical problems experienced was the linkage of Interfund's resource center to its web site, because "it uses another computer system". Another problem was the lack of technical knowledge in terms of the WWW, as the interviewees did not have extensive training in this regard. The lack of technical knowledge was not problematic for maintaining the current web site, but as other, more advanced features were planned for the new web site, more technical knowledge was needed.

The option to apply for funding online was not currently being considered by Interfund, as only two computers in the office had access to the internet and most of the staff still had to be trained in internet usage. One of the interviewees mentioned: "I suspect that would be a highly debatable issue, because we do research and engage in community development projects. Now, I suspect part of the argument will say if people can apply through the internet it would somehow privilege those organizations who are more urban-centered and have access to the net." The other interviewee replied by saying: "One could obviously have a combination of methods... but I think we need to take one step at a time within the organization".

No formal research had been done before or after implementing the first version of the web site, but it was made clear that marketing research would be placed on the agenda "a bit further down the line" after the new web site had been implemented.

12.1.5 Integration of media

Interfund integrated communication media by using different media to promote each other. Hard copies of the organization's publications were used to alert readers to the web site and also to other publications on the web site. Most publications on the web site were available free of charge. On the other hand, the web site was used to prompt people to order hard copies of some publications if they wanted to do so. Upcoming issues of publications were announced on the web site and web site visitors could either download the publications from the web site, or order hard copies via the web site.

The web site contained two content categories to link to its publications. The first was called *Reviews, publications and other resources* and the second was called *Development Update*. The first category linked to a variety of publications that was published by Interfund during the past 2-3 years. Some of these publications could be downloaded from the web site, and others could be ordered by means of sending an e-mail message to the organization.

The second category linked to a joint publication of Interfund and the South African National NGO Coalition (Sangoco), *Development Update*. This link provided information on this publication, for instance its manifesto, instructions for submission to the journal and forthcoming themes. The web site visitor had the choice to download the publication from the web site or to subscribe to a hard copy of the publication via the web site.

The interviewees explained that they planned to charge people for some of its publications at a later stage, when the publications were more widely known and read. People interested in these publications would then have to subscribe to a publication, pay a certain fee and receive a password to be able to download the publication/s from the web site.

The variety of publications and the option to download these publications can be seen as one of the aspects that could make the web site useful for its users.

12.2 Public relations models

Interfund did not have an employee with the job title of media officer or public relations practitioner at the time of the study. However, a new department, called the research and information department, had been formed as part of the restructuring process. This department consisted of four people who were responsible for aspects such as publications, conferences, and launches, functions that would normally be fulfilled by a public relations department. The newly formed department was therefore not a traditional public relations department, although it was responsible for some public relations functions.

From the four people in the department, two had a political science background. One had a background in criminology and another had journalistic experience. The interviewees did not want to state their specific qualifications, but did mention that the members of their department all had an academic/research background. The public relations function or the communication function of the research and information department formed part of the dominant coalition of the organization, because the manager of this department reported directly to the executive director.

The interviewees commented on their department, saying that in order to enhance their research function, they had to make contact with experts, academics, writers and journalists on a wide spectrum. The idea was to collaborate with these people (publics) on research projects and publications. In this sense public relations was very important to the organization. Links with other people and organizations were needed in order to build capacity for the organization and its publications. By extending these links, the organization would become better known and the organization could access more information. Workshops could be held with experts on how to improve publications and to decide on important themes for upcoming issues.

The initiation of communication between the organization and its publics differed depending on which public was involved. The provision of funds to organizations involved in certain spheres of development was the main task of Interfund. Organizations that applied for funding usually initiated communication with Interfund. After the donation of money had been approved, Interfund applied strict measures to ensure that the money was used as had been intended. This necessitated regular communication between the relevant organizations and Interfund with both sides initiating communication from time to time.

The interviewees found it hard to explain Interfund's involvement in the three social roles. They explained that the critical role that NGOs should play was being hampered by the fact that large international funders now donated money to the government and not directly to

NGOs as had been done in the past. Government then had to award tenders to NGOs and other organizations to get development work done. The result was that NGOs were mostly dependent on government as a source of money and for this reason they could not afford to be too critical of government policies and practices. However, both the interviewees agreed that the organization should play a more critical role after its restructuring process than it had done before.

It was explained that the research and information department assisted the organization in its critical role in an indirect way by publishing articles that criticized aspects of Gear and other governmental issues. However, it was agreed that the critical role should also entail the provision of better alternatives, and not just criticizing existing practices and policies. With regard to the radical role the interviewees explained that Interfund played this role in a limited way as a member of Sangoco (the South African NGO Coalition). Sangoco played an advocating or lobbying role in the development sphere, representing South African NGOs as its members. As Interfund did not place much emphasis on the critical role, the radical role was also not played very often by the organization.

In terms of the idealistic role the organization strove to enhance development in South Africa, especially with regard to the many programs and projects that were funded by Interfund. Some of the development issues that were on the organization's agenda were the following:

- The prevention of HIV/Aids and support for people with HIV/Aids
- Democratization/conflict resolution/farmworkers rights/gay & lesbian rights
- Environmental issues
- Land reform and rural development.

The research and information department enhanced this idealistic role by doing research on relevant development issues and to generate an informed debate on these issues through its publications.

It was explained that although the new structure may look bureaucratic or authoritarian on paper, it did not function that way in practice. The new structure was described as more consultative in nature and the term "cooperative management" was used to describe the culture of the organization.

According to the interviewees the organizational culture was getting more and more participatory as result of the process of restructuring that the organization was going through. This opinion was proved by the fact the major decisions were taken by the meetings of the "management team", which had not apparently happened before the restructuring of the organization. One of the interviewees commented that this "brings some kind of openness and connectivity".

Another example raised was a problem that the research and information department had with a certain job description. The authoritarian approach to this problem would have been for the executive director to make a final decision about the issue and the employee/s involved "could either take it or leave it". However, a more participative approach was used. The issue was discussed and then continued in a workshop where the whole management team was involved. The final decision taken came from within the relevant department and "not from the top, although it was endorsed by the executive director".

The authority in Interfund was described as decentralized. The interviewees mentioned that the executive director could not take decisions by herself. She had to consult at least the management team, which constituted of the managers of the various departments in the organization. The example was described of an incident where the members of the research and information department decided that they needed a scanner in their department as a matter of urgency. The management team discussed the issue and the decision was taken to buy a scanner immediately.

With regard to the question whether Interfund was more innovative or more traditional in its approaches and activities, the interviewees maintained that the current restructuring process was proof that the organization was not too conservative or traditional. One of the interviewees said that "there is a real need to transform Interfund and I think there is a sense of innovation to a certain extent. It may not be moving as quickly, but for instance, initially Interfund did not have a mission and a vision, but now there is a mission and a vision, so there is some kind of innovation".

The interviewees explained that input from other organizations was very important, but that it was currently under-utilized by Interfund. The organization was in the process of expanding its contact with other stakeholders in order to exchange information and to engage in cooperative research with relevant stakeholders.

In terms of this department, cooperation with other organizations might entail the exchange of research articles between different publications by different organizations. On another level, Interfund had a relationship "at a very high level" with NDA (the National Development Agency) in terms of soliciting funds and identifying projects for development.

The interviewees also expressed their wish to improve their relationship with Sangoco, as Sangoco was also in a restructuring process. It was clear that contact and input with and from other publics were valued and that the organization was willing to adapt when necessary. The mere fact that the organization was restructuring itself was an indication of adapting to the changing development environment in South Africa.

Interfund did not run development programs, but it provided the funds for other organizations to conduct such programs. The idea was that people had to be empowered by these programs to be able to protect themselves. The protective role was therefore not emphasized directly by Interfund as a donor organization. Indirectly Interfund could be playing a protective role by ensuring that its recipients did not misuse money donated. The organization had strict measures in place for this purpose. However, this monitoring role was not part of the activities of the research and information department's responsibilities.

According to the interviewees they had no knowledge or experience of conflict between Interfund and some of its publics. They assumed that this kind of conflict must exist but explained that it was probably more in the field of the other departments, for instance the programs department. The research and information department did not deal with conflict between, for instance, beneficiaries and Interfund.

The research and information department was fully involved in the strategic planning process. Planning was done within the department and also on a management level. The approach was participative because "people tend to perform best if they feel they are part of something". It was therefore made possible that ideas and plans may originate from the various departments and not only from the management team's side. One interviewee commented that "the long term goal is to get as much as possible a bottom-up flow as far as communication and ideas are concerned. But, obviously you do have a management structure, you do have director and you do have a board whose responsibility it is to endorse and approve final decisions".

The Interfund web site did not display many signs of transparency. Aspects such as annual reports, press releases, financial details and information on its staff were not provided on the web site. The only sign of transparency was the provision of information on the organization's members and its project partners for 1998. However, no links were given to the web sites of its members and partners. Some of the e-mail addresses were linked to the option to send e-mail online and others had to be written down to be used within the web site visitor's e-mail software.

12.3 Interactive characteristics

12.3.1 Dimensions of interactivity

The following dimensions of interactivity were found on the Interfund web site:

❖ ***Choice***

The web site offered a high level of choice with regard to the fact that it did not require registration or any fees from its visitors. It was therefore possible to explore the web site in an unrestricted manner. A choice between a text and a graphics version of the web site was not applicable in this case, as the web site contained virtually no graphics.

The web site could, however, provide a higher level of choice by including a choice between different languages, which was not available. However, the inclusion of more languages would have implications in terms of time and manpower.

❖ ***Connectedness***

A very low level of connectedness was found, because no external links or links to advertisements were present on the web site. The web site visitor should therefore be satisfied to explore the web site in isolation of other relevant information or related organizations.

The lack of connectedness was one of the most serious shortcomings of the web site, because the unique interactive characteristics of the WWW were not utilized.

❖ ***Information collection***

No overt monitoring device/s were found on the web site. The possible presence of covert monitoring devices was discussed during the interview.

❖ ***Reciprocal communication***

Reciprocal communication was represented on a very limited scale in this web site. The only example of reciprocal communication was reactive communication in the form of the contact details of the organization. Although the web site did provide information on the application for funding, it was not possible to apply online, therefore it did not represent another form of interactivity. The lack of reciprocal communication was another serious shortcoming of the Interfund web site.

❖ ***Playfulness***

No example of playfulness was found on the web site.

12.3.2 Level of interactivity

In line with the previous paragraph the web site could only be evaluated as having a *limited* level of interactivity.

12.3.3 Orientation of interactivity

The orientation of interactivity on the Interfund web site can be described as more or less in the middle between audience-oriented and source-oriented. As was mentioned the web site displayed a very low level of interactivity and the only dimensions worth mentioning was choice (as audience-oriented) and reciprocal communication (as source-oriented). However, both these dimensions were present on the lowest level possible.

12.4.4 Functions and forms of interactivity:

The low level of interactivity on the web site meant that most of the functions of interactivity had not been used.

❖ ***Customer support***

Customer support was present in a very limited way in the sense that web site visitors could make use of some of the e-mail addresses provided to send e-mail online. However, the web site contained no invitations for feedback or comments from its users.

❖ ***Marketing research***

No form of marketing research was present on the web site.

❖ ***Search for more information***

The option to search for more information was also not available on the Interfund web site.

❖ ***Advertising/promotion/publicity***

No form of advertising/promotion/publicity was present in the web site.

❖ ***Entertainment***

No form of entertainment appeared on the web site.

12.4 Principles of dialogical/two-way communication

The lack of interactive features on the web site had the implication that most of the principles of dialogical/two-way communication had not been applied to the Interfund web site.

❖ ***Test 1: Dialogical loop***

The web site contained a dialogical loop in its most basic form, as only contact details and some links to e-mail addresses were provided on the web site. The dialogical loop is one of the most advantageous characteristics of the WWW, therefore this aspect should be improved drastically to utilize the WWW more productively.

❖ ***Reaction on testing***

Reaction on testing the dialogical loop was prompt, as e-mail messages were answered within 24 hours and sometimes within a few hours.

❖ ***Test 2: The generation of return visits***

The web site did offer some come back-again-ness, because of the very prominent promise it made with regard to being updated soon. This promise could prompt visitors to visit the web site again in the near future. However, if not fulfilled soon, this promise could leave a negative impression on web site visitors who would not return to the web site again very soon or at all.

Return visits could be affected negatively at this stage because of the limited uses of the web site. The web site contained very limited examples of interactivity, therefore its users could not use the web site for much more than gaining information. As no indication of frequent updating (for instance weekly or monthly) was given, web site visitors would also not be motivated to use the web site on a regular basis.

On the positive side, the web site did provide some useful information that could be to the advantage of its users. The content was also arranged fairly logically. However, the current content could not be much to the advantage of the organization itself, as the WWW was not utilized to its full potential.

❖ ***Test 3: Ease of use***

The Interfund web site was very easy to use because of a logical arrangement of content and because no special hardware of software was needed to make use of the site. The lack of graphics on the web site might cause the web site to be less attractive, but on the other hand it led to fast download speed and less frustration on the part of its users.

12.5 Interfund: Conclusions

The analysis of the Interfund web site showed several shortcomings and a limited usefulness of the web site to its users. The web site was under-utilized in terms of interactivity and two-way communication. It contained only the most basic form of interactivity, namely the organization's contact information. It did not contain any external links, which meant that the web site could not connect its visitors to other relevant organizations or information.

These shortcomings were mostly due to the fact that the employees who had to manage the web site did not have the necessary technical know-how that was needed to include more advanced interactive functions. The inclusion of more interactive devices and external links would lead to more possibilities of creating two-way communication between the organization and its publics and would prompt visitors to become more involved via the web site.

It is likely that the organization had realized this problem and therefore the promise was made to update the web site in the near future. It could be that some of these shortcomings would be addressed in a new version of this web site.

From the analysis it could be deduced that the web site was not updated regularly and the interviewees agreed that he web site had been "dormant" for "quite a while" because of the restructuring of the organization. Although the promise to update the web site "very soon" was made very prominently on every page of the web site, it was discovered during the interview that it could only be updated after the board of directors had had their meeting in November 2000.

This meant that the web site would be "dormant" for at least another 5-6 months, while the promise to be updated "very soon" would still be prominent on each page. This would clearly not generate return visits to the web site and it could cause visitors to be negatively inclined towards the organization. It would perhaps have been more acceptable to indicate a time frame for updating on the web site, in order to ensure that visitors knew when to return to the web site after it had been updated.

Some of the positive aspects of the web site included its ease of use, useful information and a consistent layout and web design.

With regard to the organization itself, it was discovered that Interfund was in a state of flux, as the restructuring process had not been finalized yet. The interviewees felt positive about the changes in the structure of the organization, despite the fact that the restructuring process did not move as fast as they would have liked it to be. One of the changes that was important for this study was that the organization now functioned as a South African non-profit organization and not as an international NGO anymore. This made it possible to investigate Interfund at the same level as the other NGOs chosen for this study.

Another important result of the restructuring process was the formation of the research and information department, which had some resemblance to a public relations department as was explained during the interview. The fact that this department was placed relatively high in the organizational hierarchy resulted in its being part of the dominant coalition in the organization. However, none of the members of this department had formal communication or public relations qualifications.

The lack of relevant communication qualifications could be one of the reasons why the research and information department did not approach their communication functions from a public relations point of view. The importance of contact and input from other organizations was realized, but it seemed as if they regarded the dissemination of information as an important method to reach this goal. The interviewees did also mention that Interfund wanted to generate debate on developmental issues, but it seemed if they did not see the WWW as a medium for debate and dialogue. It was clear from the interview that the web site was seen as a tool to disseminate information about the organization and its publications and activities.

This led the researcher to conclude that the organization followed a *public-information model* of public relations and utilized the WWW as one of the media to practice this model. As was explained earlier, the public-information model is a one-way model of public relations and could not result in the practicing of excellent public relations. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.4.)

However, it must be borne in mind that the organization was, at the time of the interview, in a transition and that many of the changes brought about by the restructuring process would be conducive to the practicing of a two-way symmetrical model of public relations. Some of these changes were more effective operational systems and procedures and the establishment of a participative organizational culture.

However, the establishment of a different hierarchical structure and more formal procedures for some actions were not a sign of conservatism or traditionalism in this case. These changes constituted a more streamlined structure where every employee had accountability and involvement in decision-making and planning. The fact that the organization was changing to adapt to its environment was a sign of innovation and the operation of the organization as an open system. Another important factor was the decentralized authority in the organization, which also resulted from the restructuring process.

The organization did realize that it should play an idealistic and a critical social role, as most NGOs did. The research and information department enhanced the idealistic role through its research and publications. However, the organization was not placing enough emphasis on its critical role. For public relations to be practiced according to a symmetrical worldview the critical social role should be more actively played.

It would seem that the restructuring process in Interfund was moving in the right direction, but that its management still had to realize the importance of public relations according to the two-way symmetrical model. Before this was realized the organization would not be able to utilize its web site and other communication media as effectively as possible.

Chapter 13

The Center for Development and Enterprise

(http://www.cde.org.za)

THE CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT AND ENTERPRISE

Content analysis on July 3rd, 2000, and interview with Judith Hudson, senior research coordinator, on July 11th, 2000

13.1 Background

13.1.1 Organizational information

The Center for Development and Enterprise (CDE) was established in 1995 to play a critical role in post-apartheid South Africa. At the time of the study CDE was a business-funded policy research and advocacy organization that aimed to develop policies on crucial national issues. By doing this, the organization aimed at influencing national policies. The fact that CDE was a business-funded organization made it different from most other NGOs that were donor-funded.

During the study CDE operated from Johannesburg and was involved in the formulation and promotion of policy proposals after in-depth research of international experience and South African trends in national development issues such as urban strategy, migration policy, development and economic growth, role of business and regional and rural development. The organization organized workshops on development and policy issues and published various research documents, debates and a resource booklet series.

Its mission statement was:

- *To be an independent voice on critical national development issues;*
- *To develop well-considered and practical policy proposals in areas of national significance.*

The organization targeted policy-makers and decision-makers in government (all levels), business leaders, media, community organizations, trade unions, NGOs and the South African population (HSRC, 2000).

The organization was run by "a very strong, interactive board", an executive director and a management team. When the study was conducted the management team was made up of four people, consisting of the director, the senior international associate, a research manager and the senior research coordinator in the person of the interviewee. Additionally the organization employed three researchers, two "IT people" who ran a database and three "admin people." Financial accounting and human resources management were outsourced and the organization worked with a range of different consultants, locally and internationally.

The CDE web site was implemented approximately two years prior to the study. The organization that hosted the web site, Sangonet, also developed the web site. They had offered the organization different options to choose from and worked mostly with the communication person at that time.

13.1.2 Reasons and aims for setting up a web site

The interviewee explained that the implementation of the CDE web site was "a bit of an experiment for us". The organization had a lobbying and advocacy role to play and made use of radio, print media and television coverage, and "the internet seemed to us a very important vehicle for further dissemination, to maximize our impact".

The CDE web site was implemented to develop networks and linkages countrywide as well as internationally. According to the interviewee another reason was to "move with the times, and as you know, the internet is a major source of information and its fun, its accessible, its just a nice way of using and sharing information". The interviewee explained that using the internet in general had become "quite a valued and integral part of our day to day work" and that the organization therefore also wanted to have its own web site.

Originally CDE did not know what to expect from the web site, "because it was a new area". It was expected to develop networks through the web site and to use it for information sharing purposes. The interviewee explained that launching the web site was an exploration for the organization but that the time had come to revamp the site and "to spend some money on it". She therefore had the aim to improve the web site in the near future and to persuade the board to approve the necessary budget to be able to do so.

To support the aims of the organization, content on the web site included information on the organization as well as information on the work that the organization had engaged in, its publications and debates that had been organized at the time of the study. This content could motivate other organizations or individuals to become involved in the process of debating and criticizing government policies. The aim of the web site could therefore also be slightly persuasive. However, it was clear that CDE did not view the WWW as a platform for such debates and public discussion, as this option was not provided in the form of a chat room or a forum on the web site. The aims of the web site were therefore apparently not directed at generating two-way communication or publicity for the organization.

The only other type of content on the web site was the option to order the organization's publications online. This option represented another apparent persuasive aim of the web site content. The web site did not contain other types of content such as annual reports, press releases or feedback forms.

13.1.3 General characteristics and functions of the web site

13.1.3.1 Appearance and layout

The web site used a consistent color scheme: grey, black, dark green and white were used on every page. Fonts were easily readable, as the font color was mostly black on a grey background. Links and page headings were in dark green, which were also easily readable against the grey background. The font size for text was approximately 12pt, while headings were approximately 24-26pt. The font sizes contributed to the readability of the web site text.

The CDE web site contained very few graphic images when the content analysis had been conducted. There were only two examples of graphic usage on the web site. The first was the organization's logo, of which a large version was watermarked on each page of the web site. The second was a photograph of the organization's director, Ann Bernstein. Although more graphics on the web site would contribute to an interesting and attractive look and gave a better idea of what the organization did, the limited usage of graphics at the time of the analysis resulted in a very fast download.

The web site displayed a consistent design and layout, as every page had a similar look. The front page started with the organization's logo and name at the top with the following statement beneath it:

CDE: at the leading edge of South African policy analysis

A list of six new additions to the web site appeared below the statement to which the web site visitor could link directly. To reach the main content categories of the web site, one had to scroll down. This could be a point of criticism, because the web site visitor would have less effort if he/she could have an instant view of the content categories on the first frame of the front page.

The content categories were listed vertically on the left side of the page. A short paragraph explaining the role and audience of the organization appeared next to these categories. The organization's core areas of research were listed vertically beneath this paragraph, next to the rest of the content categories on the left side of the page. The fact that the web site had been designed and hosted by Sangonet was mentioned at the bottom of the front page, with an external link to Sangonet. The front page did not contain any other information and could therefore be described as a front door to the rest of the web site.

The web site content was arranged according to the main content categories on the front page. Main content categories were:

- About CDE;
- Publications;
- CDE Focus;
- Debates;
- Lectures;
- Upcoming events;
- Round tables; and
- Contact us.

Worth mentioning is the fact that the *Publications* page contained an online order form which contributed to the interactivity of the web site.

Another important aspect, although negative, was the fact that the page on *Upcoming events* only gave a heading and was empty. This made an unfavorable impression on the web site visitor, because it gave the idea that the organization was passive and that nothing was happening at the organization. It could also give the impression that the web site was dormant.

13.1.3.2 Target and functions

The target for the web site was defined on the front page of the web site as policy-makers and decision-makers in government (all levels), business leaders, media, community organizations, trade unions, NGOs and the South African population.

The web site did not offer many functions to its users. It could mainly be used to gain information on the organization, its activities and current policy issues. It could also be used to order from the organization's extensive list or publications. However, the web site could not be used to get involved in policy discussions or debate.

13.1.4 Successes, problems and failures

The interviewee was satisfied that the CDE web site was successful, especially in view of the fact that it had not been "up and running for that long". She added: "I think we're doing quite well, lots of people like the site, journalists access the site to find out more about CDE... and in radio interviews we'll often say to people 'just look at our web site'". She explained that the web site contained "a lot of background material, it reduced a lot of paper work and it was very immediate".

The example was mentioned of a television show where a representative of CDE had to appear. Before the show, the presenter of the show was directed to the web site for background information on the organization. This helped the discussion on the show to "go a lot smoother, because when I arrived, he (the presenter) had printed out some of our media releases and picked a few quotes" to guide the discussion. In the process the television viewers were also directed to the CDE web site, because it was mentioned on the show. The CDE web site was also successful in helping the organization to establish national and international networks for sharing information.

The interviewee explained that the updating of the web site was sometimes problematic, because some of the publications of CDE were meant to have a shelf life of at least two years. This explained why the *New* section on the front page contained content that was not so new anymore. However, it was kept under the *New* section, because it seemed that there was still a demand for those publications. She intended to create another section for *Highlights* to be used for publications that were not so new anymore but still of importance.

Other problems experienced were a limited budget for developing the web site, as well as limited technical knowledge on the part of the interviewee, who was responsible for the updating of the web site. She was aware of some of the shortcomings of the web site such as its lack of interactivity or graphic material and she explained that she was working on a new, revamped version of the web site to address some of its shortcomings.

On the issue of the absence of external links on the CDE webs site, the interviewee explained that the issue was being investigated. She said that the organization encouraged other organizations to link to the CDE web site from their web sites. However, the CDE did not want to put links on its web site that would not benefit the organization. Therefore CDE was cautious of just putting several links on its web site.

Another problem experienced was the CDE board that was described as "quite conservative" and sometimes ignorant of the advantages of the internet and its unique features. The interviewee explained that she first had to persuade the board before she could make drastic changes to the web site. She also had to persuade the board to approve the needed budget in order to make major changes to the web site.

She complained about the fact that it was difficult for CDE to know how effective its web site was. The organization received many positive comments about the web site via word of mouth, but it was impossible to measure its effectiveness accurately. Formal research on this matter had not been done, but there were frequent meetings within the organization to discuss the reports on the web site usage and other matters such as the investigation into external links.

Web site visitors were monitored by the organization hosting the web site (Sangonet) in terms of hits per page. However, the employee complained that this feedback was not received regularly, and that she would prefer to receive monthly or quarterly reports on web site statistics.

The web site was not updated at regular pre-determined intervals, but instead it was updated whenever the organization did something new or when a particular event (for example CDE's birthday on August the 8th, 2000) took place. The updating of the web site was usually timed to coincide with the publication of, for example reports in paper format. However, the content analysis showed that the web site was slightly outdated, because it contained an invitation to take part in a debate one the 30th of May, 2000. As the web site was analyzed during July 2000, this invitation should already have been removed from the web site.

13.1.5 Integration of media

It seemed as if one of the web site's main objectives was to give its users access to the organization's extensive list of publications. It was also clear from several statements by the interviewee that CDE aimed to integrate different communication media to maximize its reach.

In encounters with the traditional media such as newspapers, radio or television, the web site was mentioned and used by reporters and presenters. CDE publications carried the web site's URL as well as the organization's e-mail address. Some publications were also available on the web site, and others could be ordered via the web site. Different communication media were therefore used as pointers towards each other, to maximize the reach of each medium. The high level of integration between the web site and other communication media was illustrated by the fact that a high profile media launch of for example a new publication, would be followed by a significant increase in traffic on the CDE web site, according to the interviewee.

The interviewee explained that CDE's integrated approach of media usage, including the internet, was more persuasive to people who had to make policy decisions, than if they would only use one method of communication, for example letters. She added that civil society, organizations, NGOs, government, and business were all very important actors and that the media was crucial in reaching them.

13.2 Public relations models

The CDE did not employ a full-time media officer or public relations practitioner at the time of the study. The interviewee mostly handled communication activities despite the fact that she trained as a political scientist and had no communication qualifications. However, the communication function formed part of the dominant coalition in the organization, as she was part of the management team.

The reason why she was responsible for communication and marketing functions was, in her own words: "I get bored easily and I like doing these things." She mentioned that the organization's communication functions had been outsourced earlier, but when the person who handled it decided not to do it anymore, the interviewee took over most of the communication responsibilities. She said that the CDE did not see the necessity of a full-time communication specialist.

Media work and contact were described as very important to the CDE. The interviewee explained: "As a public policy and advocacy organization our influence is very important. Not only in government and business which are very important actors in the policy process, but also generally, to raise the level of debate from everybody. We see our media work, the use of the internet, radio, print media and so on... its very important."

It was explained that the communication process between the CDE and its publics varied depending on the particular situation. "If government is not tackling an issue we'll have to initiate that and go for it. I mean persuade government that this is an issue or persuade business that this is an issue." She explained that when the organization was started five years ago, "we had to establish ourselves, why should anyone listen to us?" So in the beginning the organization had to establish a track record: "we had to push, fairly aggressively".

Now that the organization had been in operation for five years, it changed and it was no longer an issue of survival, as "we get government approaching us", as well as business people who also approached the CDE. However, the organization valued its independence and would not necessarily take on everything. The organization would also sometimes initiate communication with government or business as a matter of sensitivity, before a media release reaches the media, criticizing government or business.

Throughout the interview the interviewee stressed the role of the CDE as an advocacy and lobbying organization. She pointed out that the organization would sometimes play a critical role when policies and practices of government or business were discussed in CDE publications or debates. However, it was emphasized that the organization was not always critical of government and that it often focuses on collaboration with government or business. The organization tried to be constructive and did not believe in being critical "just for the sake of being critical". Therefore all its publications offered recommendations or possible solutions for problems.

The organization also played a radical role when it pursued an issue before government had taken a stand on that issue. An example was the CDE's publications on the migration issue that were published in 1997, before the Green Paper had been published. However, the interviewee mentioned that the radical role was not always planned or played deliberately, because when the organization embarked on research it did not know "with what it is going to come up with".

In terms of a possible idealistic role, the interviewee explained that "one of the advantages of being a business-funded think-tank is that the pragmatism flows from the board right down to the director... It is a pragmatic organization. It is pragmatic in the way that it runs and it's pragmatic in the kind of work that it chooses to do... I think we try and be realistic about what's going on and the limits of what can be done with limited resources". She mentioned that it would not be suitable to be idealistic about policies, because "you might have a wonderful policy, but if the organizations and institutions that have to implement it don't have the capacity, then the policy is a failure".

The public relations or media function contributed to the radical and critical roles played by the organization, by means of the publications, functions and events for which it was responsible. The integration of different communication media was also an important task to assist CDE in playing these roles.

In terms of the organizational culture the interviewee mentioned that "it's quite a difficult question to ask, because the director is a very strong and dedicated woman and ultimately it is her face that goes out. So when it comes to decisions, then... she can be quite persuasive and driven." However, in terms of the product that went out, a more transparent and participatory approach was followed. The research process was described as very open: "We try and open the process... we try and make it as wide as possible... we try and make CDE a place for government, business and research people to get together and talk to each other." The board of the organization was also very participatory "in terms of stuff that comes out".

In terms of the question whether the authority in CDE was centralized or decentralized, the interviewee responded by saying that the director "has final say on a lot of things, if you feel very strongly about something, you have to provide very, very good reasons to do so. And it takes a special kind of person to do that... she is open to persuasion, but..."

As far as tradition and innovativeness were concerned, the interviewee explained that "in the work that we do, we try and do things that are innovative and offer innovative solutions, as part of the creativity and so on". On the other hand, the organization had a specific product and a specific branding, "so we try and keep that, so that people know who we are and what we are doing". The interviewee mentioned that the organization became more innovative in the last year, trying to reach different kinds of organizations, and trying new "vehicles" or different kinds of products.

The interviewee stressed that CDE cooperated with a number of consultants and organizations locally and internationally. She explained that CDE hosted workshops, debates and "round tables" in an effort to bring important role players together to debate and discuss important policy issues. The example was mentioned of CDE collaborating with organizations that had problems, for instance the Department of Transport. The organization adapted to circumstances by trying new and innovative products and approaches, but the interviewee explained that the organization valued its independence, and the scientific nature of its results. The organization did not aim to make everybody happy and it often did not know what the results of a certain project would be, until it was completed.

The interviewee explained that policies had to be judged in terms of their impact on the lives of ordinary people. In doing this, it could be said that CDE played an indirect protective role. On the other hand she also explained that some of the recommendations made by CDE did not always make the man on the street very happy. She used the example of the migration issue and the shortage of skilled workers in South Africa. Ordinary people who were xenophobic would not like to have skilled people from other countries allowed in South Africa, for various reasons.

However, the CDE said that the door should be open to skilled people from other countries because of the chronic shortages of skilled workers, the impact of Aids and other reasons. This viewpoint "would not make Mr. Average Xenophobe ultra happy" but it would be in the long-term interest of the economy that would in turn benefit the average person. The interviewee stressed that CDE does not see itself as being protective, instead, the organization wants to get policies that are realistic and make sense for a middle-income country like South Africa.

According to the interviewee the organization sometimes experienced conflict with some of its publics. She mentioned the example of minister Mangosutho Buthelezi who came to the migration workshop held by the CDE last year. "He fought with us on a number of occasions in the media, and we've had criticism from the local government person." The local government person later apologized, and the Buthelezi issue was handled by responding to the letters in the media. She explained that the conflict was resolved over a period of time, when CDE was gradually invited to give comments and briefs on a number of occasions.

It was stressed that conflict was unavoidable for a policy and advocacy organization such as CDE. It was impossible to always make people happy all of the time, but "we certainly don't try and aggravate anybody".

The interviewee, as the person responsible for public relations functions, was involved in strategic planning on different levels. The planning for a launch of a new document was the most important aspect in which the interviewee played an important role. As a member of the management team of the organization, she was also involved in the strategic planning of other issues regarding CDE.

Some signs of transparency were found on the *About CDE* page during the content analysis of the web site. This page showed a photograph of the organization's director, together with a short description of her areas of expertise and her previous work experience. This was followed by an explanation of the main areas on which the organization planned to concentrate in 2000, as well as the organization's corporate strategy that was explained. Finally the page provided lists of the organization's donors, the members of its board and also its associates. It could, however, be considered to provide a profile of other staff members as well, as it would be more transparent and informative to web site users.

The web site did not contain an annual report or specific reference to press releases. However, some of the *New* additions to the web site on the front page gave the impression that it could have been press releases, for it explained "new" work done by the organization (although dates were not given in most cases).

13.3 Interactive characteristics

13.3.1 Dimensions of interactivity on the web site

As the CDE web site lacked interactivity, most of the dimensions of interactivity were not applied to the web site:

- ***Choice***

  The CDE web site offered a high level of choice in terms of the unrestricted navigation that it offers. Web site visitors did not have to register or pay a fee before they were allowed to browse the site. However, in terms of other choices, the web site did not offer a choice between different languages or a choice between a text and a graphic version of the web site. It could be argued that a choice between a text and a graphics version was not applicable in this case, because the web site contained virtually no graphic material.

- ***Connectedness***

The web site offered a low level of connectedness to its users. A limited number of internal links appeared on the web site. These internal links were mostly links from the main content categories on the front page, and links to the organization's contact information from several of the other pages on the web site. This meant that the web site content did not contain links within pages or links between different pages.

Furthermore the web site contained only one external link and no links to advertisements or sub-web sites were found. The external link was to Sangonet, the organization's web site service provider. This could be seen as a serious shortcoming of the web site.

- ***Information collection***

No overt monitoring devices were detected on the web site. The organization was questioned on the possible use of covert monitoring devices during the interview.

- ***Reciprocal communication***

The web site contained only limited examples of reciprocal communication. The provision of contact details and the inclusion of the online order form for publications were the only examples of reciprocal communication on the web site. These examples could not be classified as true interactive communication, because it represented examples of reactive communication instead.

The CDE web site could be vastly improved by the inclusion of more interactive devices, especially reciprocal communication. Policy issues could be debated and discussed internationally via an online forum or a chat room.

- ***Playfulness***

The web site did not display any signs of playfulness.

13.3.2 Level of interactivity

The CDE web site was rated as somewhat interactive, because it only contained interactive devices from two levels, namely contact information and the option to order publications online. The level of interactivity was one of the aspects of the web site that could be improved.

13.3.3 Orientation of interactivity

The orientation of interactivity could hardly be evaluated because of the limited interactive nature of the web site. However, its orientation could be described as mostly source-oriented, because of the two examples of reciprocal communication on the web site. Examples of audience-oriented interactivity devices were close to non-existent on the web site.

13.3.4 Functions and forms of interactivity

A small number of interactive functions and its associated forms were present on the CDE web site:

- ***Customer support***

  The web site did not contain examples of customer support. Although contact information was provided, there was no specific invitation to web site users to send their comments or feedback to the organization.

- ***Marketing research***

  The CDE web site was not used for marketing research. The only aspect that remotely resembled marketing research in the form of a new program proposal was the invitation to a debate on the Aids crisis posted on the web site. However, as was indicated earlier, this invitation was out of date because the debate had already been held on the May the 30th.

- ***Search for more information***

  The web site did not contain any options or devices to help its users search for more information.

- ***Advertising/promotion/publicity***

  The option to order the organization's publications online was an example of advertising/promotion/publicity via the web site. The invitation to attend the debate on Aids on May 30th was another example of this function of interactivity. However, this invitation was out of date and therefore contributed to a negative impression of the web site.

- ***Entertainment***

  The CDE web site did not contain any examples of entertainment.

13.4 Principles of dialogical/two-way communication

The following principles of dialogical/two-way communication were employed on the web site:

- ***Test 1: Dialogical loop***

  The dialogical loop on the web site was represented by the inclusion of the organization's contact details, as well as the online order form for publications. As was indicated earlier, the web site was apparently not intended to generate two-way communication, therefore its interactive nature was limited. The dialogical loop could be improved by the inclusion of more true interactive devices, as was also explained earlier.

- ***Reaction on testing***

  It seemed as if the organization lacked the commitment needed to maintain a web site and especially the dialogical loop. The organization did not react on e-mail messages sent by the researcher. The organization only reacted after they had been sent a fax to explain the proposed research project.

❖ ***Test 2: The generation of return visits***

Information included on the CDE web site could be described as potentially useful to a variety of publics. The web site contained general as well as specific information. Another positive aspect regarding the web site content was the fact that it was organized logically, thereby limiting the effort needed on the part of the web site visitor to try and find specific information.

However, the usefulness of the information was decreased by the apparent lack of frequent updating. This had the implication that web site visitors could visit the site once or twice and not ever again, because it was not updated frequently. Earlier it was mentioned that the *New* section on the front page of the web site was not so new as it should be. Some of the so-called new additions dated from five months prior to the analysis of the web site. The conclusion could therefore be drawn that the web site was not very successful in creating return visits from its visitors.

The inclusion of more interactive functions would also contribute to the generation of return visits to the web site.

❖ ***Test 3: Ease of use***

The web site was very easy to use because its content was organized logically and the web site had a consistent look and design. The fact that the web site contained the minimum graphics contributed to its fast downloading speed and made special hardware or software unnecessary.

13.5 CDE: Conclusions

At the time of the study the CDE web site was attractive and its content well-organized. However, it displayed the same shortcomings as many other NGO web sites in this study. The shortcomings were represented by the under-utilization of the unique features of the internet, having the implication that two-way communication was not promoted via the web site.

The web site contained a somewhat level of interactivity, with much room for improvement. The inclusion of more interactive features on the web site would contribute to the potential uses that web site visitors could derive from the site, as it only allowed limited uses to its visitors. It was also not updated frequently, with some outdated information still posted on the site. This could decrease the usefulness of the information on the web site, as visitors would not be likely to return to the web site once they've realized that it still contained the same content than was the case a few months ago.

Furthermore the web site offered a very low level of connectedness because of the lack of external links. This can give the web site user the impression that the organization operates in isolation or that it does not want the public to know about its partners and strategic alliances.

It was clear that CDE did not view the internet as a platform for policy discussions and debate. The organization used other methods to enhance public discussion and debates on policy issues. However, their web site could be used very productively as an additional discussion forum to gain international inputs on policy issues. This possibility was discussed during the interview and will be related in the next section.

From the interview it was clear that the organization did not value communication functions very highly, as the senior research coordinator together with the executive director handled it. It could be concluded that, in a sense, public relations was seen as a mere technical function by the CDE, hence the conviction that there was no need for a communication specialist in the organization.

It seemed as if the organization had three purposes for its public relations efforts: to gain publicity, to disseminate information and to persuade. The purpose of mutual understanding and two-way communication was not mentioned during the interview, although it was pointed out that the CDE does have a collaborative role in some cases. In terms of these three purposes for public relations, the purpose of persuasion received the most prominence. The interviewee mentioned the organization's aim to persuade several times during the interview, pointing to a two-way asymmetrical approach.

It was evident that the CDE did not function according to a two-way symmetrical model of communication. Very little evidence pointing to this model was found. The only aspect conducive to a two-way symmetrical approach was the fact that the persons responsible for public relations efforts were part of the dominant coalition of the organization. However, these people did not have any communication qualifications. Furthermore the organizational culture was seemingly also not very applicable to the two-way symmetrical model. The culture was described as fairly authoritarian with a centralized authority regarding its internal operations.

The interviewee mentioned the prominent role of the executive director at CDE several times. It was made clear that the executive director carried most decision-making power and that every product must pass through her hands for approval. An organization functioning according to a symmetrical worldview would offer its employees autonomy and responsibility and would operate with a decentralization of management. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.7.2.) However, in the CDE it seemed that this was not the case, because of the power and strength of the executive director, as well as the involvement of the board.

It was, however, made clear that research process in which the organization was involved followed a more participatory approach with regard to other organizations, government and business representatives. This could be true, but authoritarianism and a centralized authority are not associated with excellent management principles, which could, in turn, lead to the practicing of excellent public relations. Instead, these characteristics are typical of an asymmetrical worldview.

Another characteristic of an asymmetrical worldview is conservatism, which was mentioned during the interview, describing the CDE board. The board apparently did not realize the advantages of using the internet for creating two-way communication. The interviewee mentioned that she still had to persuade them to approve a budget for improving the web site and that the board was apprehensive about the use of this new medium.

The emphasis on the independence of the CDE could also be evaluated as an asymmetrical feature of the organization. To a certain degree, the independence of an organization conducting research should be respected, because it would not be possible for either business or government to influence the results. However, in the case of the CDE there should also be a sense of interdependence from its environment, which was not mentioned during the interview.

The critical and the radical roles played by the organization were emphasized, together with the realization that these roles were assisted by the communication activities in the organization. According to a two-way symmetrical worldview, public relations should inter alia play a critical and idealistic social role. Although the critical social role was highlighted in the case of the CDE, the idealistic role was denied.

It was therefore concluded that the CDE broadly made use of a two-way asymmetrical model of communication with very little emphasis on two-way communication. It was also important to note that CDE was business-funded by large businesses that were very likely to follow this model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:26; Grunig, 1989:29). The kind of work that the CDE did could also lead to a preference for this model, as the organization played a critical and advocacy role by definition. Its purpose was to analyze policies and to advocate changes to policies where applicable. This purpose could be best served by means of a strong persuasive approach in general. However, it does not necessarily mean that the CDE could not follow a two-way symmetrical approach as far as communication and contact with its publics were concerned.

In the case of this organization, the revamping of the web site would not have the expected results, because several other changes throughout the organization were needed to make its communication and public relations activities more successful.

Chapter 14

The Nelson Mandela Children's Fund

(http://www.mandela-children.org)

Content analysis on July 5^{th}, 2000, and interview with Maeline Engelbrecht, manager of international donor relations on July, 11^{th}, 2000

Nelson Mandela
CHILDREN'S FUND

14.1 Background

14.1.1 Organizational information

At the time of the study the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund (NMCF) focused on the plight of the youth in need. Its main emphasis was on the homeless and abused, the disabled, those who have not had the benefit of formal education and those in detention or prison. The organization built creative alliances with other funding agencies to mobilize greater resources to produce more effective results. It acted as a catalyst in supporting innovative and inspiring initiatives to develop opportunities for the youth.

The NMCF had a small staff of eleven people and functioned with four departments: finance and administration, programs and projects, donor relations and systems development. These departments reported to the CEO of the organization.

Its target was children and the youth and at the time of the study its mission statement was:

- *To help repair the ravaged fabric of youth's social and economic circumstances and to empower them through strengthening their capacity to engage positively and successfully in every aspect of life (HSRC, 2000).*

The organization implemented its first web site during 1996. This web site was redesigned and put into operation about one month prior to the interview. All NMCF staff was involved in creating the new web site. Every employee could give input before the web site was technically created by an organization in the United Kingdom, called Digital Partners. The web site was created and hosted free of charge as a donation to the NMCF.

14.1.2 Reasons and aims for setting up a web site

The organization cooperated internationally with fundraisers in several countries and the interviewee explained that it became very expensive to send annual reports and other information about the organization via ordinary mail. The web site was mainly put up to assist with international donor relations in order to save costs otherwise spent on faxes and postage.

The most important aim of the web site was to provide information on the activities of the organization. According to the interviewee the web site did not have any persuasive aims, because its focus was more on "programs and where the money is going, than on raising funds". The previous version of the web site had the generation of donations as one of its aims and therefore offered the option to donate money online. However, for security reasons this option was removed from the revamped web site. The interviewee mentioned that online donations would be put back on the web site at a later date, when security issues had been resolved. The option to do shopping online was another future aim in order to make the NMCF's Nelson Mandela merchandise available on the web site.

Probed about the limited information currently on the web site, the interviewee explained that one of the future aims for the web site was to expand its content. She mentioned the example of the *Projects* content category where only four projects were listed. It was being planned to list all the organization's projects in the future, categorized in terms of every financial year. Several other additions to the web site were also being investigated, for example the possibility of the web site to act as a charity portal to other related charity organizations. The interviewee explained that through this option the web site would contain "sort of mini-web sites where specific projects can be tracked and monitored".

To support its aims, the NMCF web site mainly contained general information on the organization and its programs and projects. It also contained a section with press releases, although some of the news items on this page were outdated. Another type of content on the web site was the annual report that could be downloaded.

14.1.3 General characteristics and functions of the web site

14.1.3.1 Appearance and layout

The web site was very colorful, using several colors. Each page had its own color scheme, for instance red, yellow, green or blue. This contributed to an attractive web site. The layout of every page was the same, therefore the design was still consistent. The backgrounds of web pages were colored, for instance red, green, yellow or blue, while the font color was mostly white. This meant that fonts were generally readable. A quotation from Nelson Mandela was placed at the top of each page and for this quotation the text color was a lighter version of the background color.

The font size for headings was approximately 14pt and for sub-headings approximately 12 pt. Text was written in a font of approximately 10pt. Although text size was relatively small, it was still readable and easy to follow.

The web site made use of photographs as a form of graphic representation. Photographs of Nelson Mandela and children of all age groups were placed on the left side of each page, as well as in between text and headings. These photographs depicted the work done by the NMCF and contributed to the attractive layout of the web site. The only other graphics on the web site was a colorful border at the bottom of each page in the form of childlike figures holding hands. The border also included figures on wheelchairs, telling the web site visitor that the organization was involved with the disabled youth as well.

The web site followed a very consistent design throughout, which was a positive attribute, because it enabled the web site visitor to know where he/she was at any given moment during the browsing of the web site.

The front page showed a photograph of Nelson Mandela on the left side, while the main content categories were listed horizontally at the top of the page. As was mentioned earlier, three other content categories were listed at the bottom of the front page, on the right hand side. The name and logo of the organization that manages the web site appeared below these content categories. Next to the photograph on the rest of the page, the following statement appeared, in quotation marks. However, the person quoted (possibly Mandela?) was not mentioned:

"The Children's Fund... a way of forging a path to the mainstream of love and warmth and caring, of participating in creating a future free of the pangs of hunger, ignorance and abuse".

The front page was concluded with the border of childlike figures holding hands, described earlier.

The front page did not contain any information itself and had a simple, catching design. It served as a front door to the rest of the web site, and another positive aspect about it was the fact that the web site visitor did not have to scroll down to read or see more. Everything was contained in one computer screen frame.

The layout of the rest of the web site was also very consistent, although every page had its own color scheme. Each page had a frame on its left side, containing a watermarked photograph of either Nelson Mandela or children as the beneficiaries of the NMCF. The sub-categories for that particular page were listed over the photograph. The main content categories appeared at the top of each page, similar to the front page, with the logo of the organization included linking back to the front page.

A different quote by Nelson Mandela appeared on each page next to the frame on the left, on the top right hand side of the page. The sub-categories on the left side linked to information placed right next to it, on the right side of the frame, below the quote by Nelson Mandela. This meant that for the majority of pages, all information was contained in one frame, with no need to scroll down to find more information. Clicking on the sub-categories on the left side of the page meant that the page stayed exactly as it was, with the relevant information appearing next to the subject categories.

The following content categories appeared at the top of the front page:

- ❖ Programs;
- ❖ Projects;
- ❖ News;
- ❖ International;
- ❖ Contact us; and
- ❖ Donations.

At the bottom of the front page, on the right hand side, the following content categories appeared:

- ❖ Our vision;
- ❖ Our mission; and
- ❖ Nelson Mandela audio.

On the one hand, the layout was attractive and easy to use and did not require much effort on the part of the web site visitor. On the other hand, it had the implication that the web site carried very limited information, because everything had to be fitted into a very small space.

For instance, clicking on the *Programs* content category led to a page with sub-categories such as:

- Well-being of children;
- Disabilities;
- Education and development;
- Leadership and excellence; and
- Financials.

Linking on these sub-categories provided the web site visitor with very little information, as only the key objectives of each program were listed. The only exception was the *Financials* sub-category, which allowed the visitor to download the organization's annual report.

The lack of in-depth information on the web site was one of the shortcomings of the web site.

14.1.3.2 Target and functions

The interviewee explained that the web site was targeted mainly at the corporate sector worldwide. The idea was to direct potential sponsors and donors to the web site first, and thereafter to approach them with a specific proposal for a specific program or project. However, in practice the web site created reaction from several other "unintended" target groups as well. Especially individuals, adults as well as children, contacted the organization via the web site to get involved in some or other way.

As the web site content was limited, the potential functions for its users were also limited. It could mainly be used to gain information on the organization and its activities, as well as information on how to donate money to the NMCF. The web site could also be used to contact the organization and its worldwide offices via e-mail. However, no explicit invitation for comments or feedback was found on the web site. Although the web site did not contain the option to make online donations, web site visitors could fill in an online form to apply for a Nedbank Affinity credit card, which was one type of donation that could be made. Nedbank donated some of its profits from the use of this credit card to the NMCF.

14.1.4 Successes, problems and failures

The interviewee explained that the NMCF regarded its web site as successful, because of the amount of inquiries that originated from it. During the previous month the organization had received approximately 300 e-mail messages via the web site. She also mentioned that during the previous month, the NMCF had made contact with two major program sponsors via the web site.

No major problems or failures were experienced with the web site. The only problem was "really to find time to respond to all these e-mails". An earlier problem had been the fact that the first version of the web site was not very successful due to the fact that it was not very attractive and its content was not organized well enough. The interviewee also explained that the requirement to first download the relevant software before its annual report could be downloaded, was to be removed in the near future. The annual report and financial statements were to be listed as a separate content category with no need to use special software to browse this content, as was the case at the time of the interview.

The interviewee was probed about the difficulty to print pages from the web site, a problem experienced by the researcher. It seemed that the interviewee was not aware of the fact that only blank pages were printed. She promised to investigate the matter.

The content analysis could find no indication as to when the web site had last been updated. However, the web site did contain news items about an event in August 2000, which showed that the web site or a part thereof, was updated not too long before the interview. The interviewee explained that she would normally update the web site once every month. She explained that she would usually save the additions to the web site as HTML files and then e-mail these to the hosting company in Italy who would take care of the technical side of updating the web site.

No extensive research had been done before or after the implementation of the web site, except for the fact that employees of the organization "were consulted on the design and the content of the web site". The previous web site was evaluated to determine its shortcomings and employees were asked, "what they wanted to achieve via the web site".

Web site traffic was being measured in terms of the hits per page by the organization hosting the web site. More detailed information on web site visits was not available to the NMCF at the time of the interview.

14.1.5 Integration of media

No references to other media or publications by the NMCF were made on the web site. The interviewee explained that the NMCF did not publish any publications at the time of the interview, but it planned to start an in-house newsletter as soon as the communication department was operational. However, the internet was integrated with other forms of communication by printing the URL of the web site, as well as an e-mail contact address, on all business cards, letter heads and in the annual report.

14.2 Public relations models

The organization did not employ a full-time media officer or public relations practitioner at the time of the interview. However, the organization was in the process of creating a communication department and interviews were being conducted with possible candidates to manage the department. In the meantime the CEO of the organization, together with the interviewee, were responsible for communication activities. The head of the programs and projects department also gave input as far as communication aspects of her department were concerned.

The two people currently in charge of the communication functions for the NMCF did not have formal communication qualifications. The interviewee, who was in charge of the web site and most of the public relations activities, did not have any formal qualifications. She learned about public relations and communication through experience and "trial and error".

The interviewee explained that the NMCF had grown since its inception five years before and that the organization was now "in a better position to advocate and lobby at government level on issues that we feel are pertinent to children, to changing the lives of vulnerable children. So I think really a communication person is vital, not just for internal purposes, but really for interacting with the public out there".

She explained that the "communication person" would play a crucial role in assisting the organization in its lobbying and advocating role. Public relations efforts by the organization were described as "a very disjointed effort, because my media list is probably different to the Programs lady's," so the communication person was needed "in order to centralize the message that would go out from the Children's Fund as well." The main objective of the communication department or the public relations function would be "really communicating between the NMCF and the public, because Mandela's vision was for South Africans to say: this is our charity, this is a development organization for our people".

The interviewee explained that charity organizations would usually contact the NMCF to apply for funds. If an application was approved, "we partner with that organization" in order to distribute the funds and to ensure that the program objectives were met. The organization also had its own pilot projects, such as the Aids Initiative, where the NMCF would contact other organizations to become partners in these projects.

The interviewee stressed the importance of the advocacy and lobbying role played by the organization, which could be categorized as a radical and a critical social role played by the NMCF. These roles were played particularly in the area of the disabled, "providing access for the disabled, for our constituency is from zero to twenty two years, so providing services and education in terms of the integration of the disabled into society".

The NMCF lobbied for a community-based model for disabled children to have "as much a normal life for children as possible and that will come throughout in all our programs. Not taking them out of the community to solve the problem, but rather sitting with the community and developing solutions with the community and giving them ownership of that... A child hasn't just dropped from the sky. The child has come from somewhere. If that child has come from that community, why take that child out of the community... Let's work with that community and keep that child there".

The organization also played an idealistic role in terms of its goal to eradicate poverty, which was seen as the cause of many of the other social problems in the South African society. The communication department would contribute to these roles by assisting the organization to communicate its goals and programs to the public and to other relevant organizations and sponsors.

As was mentioned earlier, a communication department was being set up at the time of the interview. This department would be residing under the CEO, reporting directly to him. It would therefore have a higher position in the hierarchy of the organization than the other departments mentioned. The implication was that the manager of the communication department would have a very strong position in the organization, being part of the dominant coalition.

In the mission statement appearing on the web site, the organization was described as being participative in nature. The interviewee described the staff as a "family" with a high team spirit. As the organization only had eleven employees, it was sometimes necessary for staff to help each other out, even if an activity was strictly not part of someone's job description. With big events the entire staff would be involved, adding to the team spirit in the organization.

The interviewee explained that the NMCF had strict policies in place, because "to have policies and procedures in place is good and it also provides the accountability and transparency". According to the interviewee the organization did not function according to a specific hierarchy or an authoritarian approach, as staff members acted as family to each other. Staff meetings were held regularly and all staff members were included in decision-making. For example, the NMCF staff was involved in setting up the human resources policies for the organization and therefore had ownership of these policies.

In line with the explanation above, the authority in the NMCF was described as decentralized. The interviewee noted that the organization had certain structures in place such as management trustees of which Nelson Mandela was the chairperson. Although the structures were there, she explained that it was "the way we interact with each other that really does not have that 'authoritativeness'". The organization was furthermore described as "very innovative", because its staff were all "very young". However, the interviewee could not think of an example to prove her statement.

The NMCF had many strategic partnerships with donor organizations, charity organizations, NGOs and the government. Representatives from these partner organizations met on a regular basis where grants were distributed and policy issues were discussed. These organizations had one common interest: the child. They collaborated in order to make the lobbying and advocacy role under the umbrella of the NMCF more successful.

The interviewee described contact and input from other organizations as very important. She explained that no decisions on policy issues were made before extensive discussions were held with all parties involved. However, she could not mention any specific example/s of the NMCF adapting to these inputs.

The organization looked after the needs and interests of children, for example traumatized children or street children to try and "getting them out of that situation". This protective role was described as a consultative process during which various other organizations were consulted to address the various needs of such children.

The interviewee could not think of any disagreements or conflict situations between the NMCF and other organizations. She explained that when the NMCF started working with a particular organization, the objectives were agreed on in advance. Even when selecting partners for a specific project, preference was given to organizations that worked towards the same kind of principles and objectives. Partner organizations then worked towards one common goal and conflict in these partnerships was rare.

Conflict with communities was also rare, because the NMCF worked with communities in assessing their needs, and try to give them ownership of the projects that they would be involved in. Common ground and mutual understanding were important principles in this regard.

The interviewee explained that every single staff member was involved and instrumental in the strategic planning process. Ideas would sometimes come from Nelson Mandela, but every employee at strategic planning workshops would still discuss them.

The NMCF web site contained two signs of transparency. The option to download the organization's annual report could be seen as one indication of transparency, while the inclusion of press releases on the web site could be described as another sign of transparency. However, a transparent image could be more obvious with the inclusion of information about the organization's staff members, as well as more details about its donors and sponsors. The current web site contained information about and links to only two donor organizations (Red Ribbon Project and Canadian Friends of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund).

14.3 Interactive characteristics

14.3.1 Dimensions of interactivity

The following dimensions of interactivity were present on the NMCF web site:

- ***Choice***

  The web site offered unrestricted navigation, as no registration or fees were required before browsing was allowed. However, no language choice was provided and it also did not offer a choice between a text and a graphics version of the web site. The web site had a fairly fast download speed, making a text version unnecessary.

  Something worth noting is that the web site design was done in terms of a graphic representation. This meant that the frame for each page could be saved as a gif file, because the text was embedded in a graphic frame. This was not a problem when only browsing the web site. However, as mentioned before, this design became problematic when the user wanted to print pages from the web site, as printing resulted in a blank page with a few lines and frames being printed, as pictures were generally not printed. Saving pages from the web site as html files had the same result.

- ***Connectedness***

  With regard to links the web site contained mainly internal links, from main content categories to the relevant content pages. Links to e-mail addresses of the organization's different offices worldwide were also provided.

  The web site did not have a special *Links* category, which would have increased the feeling of connectedness experienced by its users. It did contain only three external links to related organizations with which the NMCF collaborated to generate funds. Two of these links led the web site user completely out of the NMCF web site, with no link back, except to using the *Back* button of the web site browser.

  The web site did not contain any links to advertisements. However, the placement of the name of the organization that managed and hosted the web site on the front page of the NMCF site could be regarded as an advertisement for the internet company Tin.it.

  To improve the web site, more links could be added, providing that the NMCF logo appeared at the top of these pages, or a clear link back to the web site was provided.

- ***Information collection***

  The web site did not contain any overt mechanisms to monitor its visitors. The issue of overt monitoring mechanisms was discussed during the interview.

- ***Reciprocal communication***

  The NMCF web site did not contain any form of true interactive communication. Reciprocal communication was included in the form of reactive communication, for instance the provision of contact details and the option to apply for the Affinity credit card online. However, the Affinity card application form was not contained on the NMCF web site, as a link to the Nedbank web site was provided where this form was situated.

The web site could be improved by adding more interactive features such as a feedback form or a chat room where children's issues could be discussed.

- ***Playfulness***

  No examples of playfulness were found on the NMCF web site, which was interesting, given the fact that this NGO aimed at improving the fate of children and also received hits from children.

14.3.2 Level of interactivity

The level of interactivity was rated as *limited*, because it included only one example of interactivity in the form of the organization's contact information. The credit card application form did not contribute to the level of interactivity of this site, because it was provided via an external link to the Nedbank web site.

14.3.3 Orientation of interactivity

As the web site was very limited in terms of interactivity, it was hard to evaluate it in terms of the orientation of interactivity. The orientation could be described as in the middle between audience-oriented and source-oriented, because the web site contained very limited examples of both dimensions. In terms of the audience-oriented dimension the web site depicted a limited level of connectedness and choice. In terms of the source-oriented dimension the web site contained a limited level of reciprocal communication.

14.3.3 Functions and forms of interactivity

A limited number of interactive functions were used on the NMCF web site:

- ***Customer support***

  Customer support was provided by means of the option to download the organization's annual report via the web site. The option to download required software was also offered on the web site. Web site visitors could also send comments or feedback via the e-mail links on the web site, although it did not contain any explicit invitation to its users to do so.

- ***Marketing research***

  A form of marketing research was found on the web site by means of the announcement of the Red Ribbon Project and the provision of a link to the project's web site. This announcement could be described as a new program/product proposal. Web site visitors were invited to become involved in the project by buying a rose for $10 to complete the giant red ribbon.

- ***Search for more information***

  The option to search for more information was not available on the NMCF web site.

- ***Advertising/promotion/publicity***

  A publicity function was present in a limited form, by means of the News page that contained press releases. However, this function could be improved, because some of the information on the page was outdated. The advertising/promotion/publicity function was also available via the option to apply for the Affinity credit card. The announcement of the Red Ribbon Project could also be seen as a form of advertising/promotion/publicity.

- ***Entertainment***

  No form of entertainment was found on the web site.

14.4 Principles of dialogical/two-way communication

As the web site lacked interactivity, the principles of dialogical/two-way communication were not applied as they should have been.

- ***Test 1: Dialogical loop***

  The dialogical loop was present on a very limited scale, as the only form of reciprocal communication on the web site was the provision of contact details and e-mail links. The absence of true interactive communication was one of the most important shortcomings of the web site.

- ***Reaction on testing***

  Reaction to an e-mail message to the organization was delayed. At first the organization did not respond to the e-mail message. It was only after the message had also been faxed that the organization reacted by replying via e-mail. It was therefore concluded that the NMCF was not sufficiently committed to manage the dialogical loop via its web site.

- ***Test 2: The generation of return visits***

  Dialogical communication was not promoted by a strong sense of come back again-ness or return visits on the web site. This was mostly due to the fact that the web site contained a very limited level of information and that it was not possible to determine whether the web site was updated on a regular interval. The web site only contained one reference to a date in August 2000 which was not sufficient proof of regular updating.

  Although the current content was organized logically, the web site would be improved vastly by adding more in-depth information on its programs and projects.

- ***Test 3: Ease of use***

  The web site was easy to use in terms of the logical organization of its content. However, there were a few other constraints that made the web site not as easy to use as it seemed at first.

  Firstly, the web site contained an audio insert of Nelson Mandela that required special software to download. The option to download the applicable software was not provided on the web site. Secondly, the option to download the annual report required the web site visitor to have specific software, or to download the software from the NMCF web site. Although the option to download the required software was positive, it takes time to do so, and many web site visitors would not be willing to engage in this activity. Thirdly, the fact that the web site content was embedded in a picture frame caused certain problems as explained earlier.

14.5 NMCF: Conclusions

The NMCF web site was colorful, attractive and contained content that was organized in a logical way. However, it had limited interactive features and did not promote two-way communication. Web site users could not have many uses for the web site, because of its limited content and lack of interactivity. The web site did not offer many external links, an aspect that could also be improved. Furthermore the web site was not as easy to use as it should be, because of the need for special software to be able to access some of its content.

During the interview it seemed that the organization was aware of some of these shortcomings, and that it was planned to improve the web site accordingly. However, it was evident that NMCF did not view the WWW as a dialogical tool at the time of the study. The emphasis was more on the use of the WWW for information dissemination.

NMCF was a young and vibrant organization, still in the process of organizing itself. This was illustrated by the establishment of a communication department, which was currently underway. The organization realized that its public relations efforts were not effective at the moment. The current role of public relations could be described as technical, as the persons responsible did not have communication qualifications. Public relations efforts could at the time of the interview be described as haphazard and only doing the minimum to keep the development programs running.

Although public relations efforts were rather disorganized, it was concluded that the organization followed a mix between the public information model and the press agentry/publicity model of public relations. The utilization of the web site fell under a public information model, while other public relations efforts were directed more towards gaining publicity and media coverage.

NMCF had many characteristics that would fit into a two-way symmetrical model of public relations and it was expected that the organization would follow this model in due time. The situation was expected to improve gradually after the employment of a communication manager. One of these positive aspects was the fact that the future communication manager would report directly to the chief executive officer, as the communication department would be placed high in the organizational hierarchy. This meant that the communication manager would be part of the dominant coalition, enabling this person to have an impact on decision-making and strategic planning.

From the interview it was clear that NMCF valued a mutual understanding between the organization and its publics. The organization tried to work from a common ground between itself and its publics. The communities in which development programs were run had been given ownership of these programs, meaning that the organization did not try to persuade them that NMCF knew best. The emphasis on mutual understanding and common ground was typical of a two-way symmetrical approach to public relations. Other important aspects of this approach was the interdependency between NMCF and other organizations, as well as its emphasis on collaboration with other organizations.

Furthermore the participative and decentralized organizational culture was also an aspect conducive to following the two-way symmetrical model. The interviewee made it clear that internal communication between employees was like communication in a family with good relationships, participation, responsibility and autonomy.

In terms of the social role played by NMCF, the interviewee stressed a radical, critical and idealistic role. The last two are important roles for public relations to be both excellent and two-way symmetrical. However, current communication efforts could not support these roles very productively, because of the situation described earlier. The new communication department was expected to coordinate activities to enable the organization to play these roles more effectively. At the time of the interview public relations functions was a mere technical function, but with the establishment of the communication department it was expected to change to a managerial role.

From the discussion above it can be deduced that NMCF was on the right track with regard to its public relations efforts. Much would depend on the kind of person being employed to run the new communication department. However, this person only had to build on existing positive attributes to be able to lead the organization to the practicing of excellent public relations.

Part III

Conclusions

The ten organizations involved in this study were examined individually in Part II. Some of the trends that emerged from this examination are the problems that NGOs experienced with regard to a lack of funding, a lack of manpower and a lack of technical knowledge to manage their web sites. It was also clear that some of these organizations did not value the communication function in their organizations or that the emphasis was put on the dissemination of information, rather than on two-way symmetrical communication.

These findings will be put into perspective in the next chapter by answering to the objectives stated in Chapter 1. It is not possible to compare these organizations to each other, because of the differences between them that make them incomparable. However, during the content analyses and semi-structured interviews, several trends emerged that will be discussed in Chapter 15.

Chapter 15

Conclusions and recommendations

15.1 Introduction

In order to put the findings described in Part II into perspective, this chapter aims to give a bird's eye view of the results of the study. The previous chapter discussed the content analysis of and interview with each NGO[1] separately, providing some conclusions on each organization. These findings will now be linked to the aims and specific theoretical statements set previously, conclusions and recommendations be made and possible contribution made by the study suggested.

The findings are mostly summarized in table or figure format at the end of this chapter to give an overview for easy reference. (See pages 282-288.) The tables carry very brief information, as the findings have already been discussed in detail in Chapter 5 to Chapter 14. At the risk of being repetitive the findings are summarized here in order to identify certain trends with regard to the web sites of the NGOs included in the study.

It is important to note that the study did not aim to compare the selected NGOs with each other. They were selected to be different from each other in order to have the sample as diverse as possible. Furthermore they were selected in order to detect general trends with regard to the usage of their web sites. Although the findings with regard to these organizations will now be discussed, it will not be based on direct comparisons between the selected NGOs.

15.2 Answering to the research aims: Ten NGOs in review

15.2.1 Background information

The first three aims dealt mostly with background information regarding the web sites of the selected NGOs and therefore these aims were not linked to specific theoretical statements.

- *Aim 1*

  To determine what the reasons, aims and expectations of public relations practitioners at selected NGOs in South Africa were, with regard to their usage of the WWW as a communication medium

Generally, a distinction could not be made between the reasons, aims and expectations that NGOs had for setting up their web sites. Mostly their reasons became their aims and their expectations were to reach their aims. Table 15.1 (p282) gives an overview of the findings with regard to this aim.

From the interviews it was evident that most of the NGOs did not have clear strategic goals for setting up their web sites. The interviewees had to formulate reasons, aims and expectations when asked the question, because they did not go through a proper process of planning before their web sites had been set up. One of the most mentioned reasons for setting up a web site was "to keep up with the times", which points to the current hype surrounding the internet.

As was reported in Chapter 3 (Section 3.17.1) many organizations felt that they "must have a web site", even though they did not know exactly why. This trend also coincided with previous studies that found that a very limited number of organizations conduct formal research before implementing their web sites, as was also reported in Chapter 3 (Section 3.17.1). The same trend was detected in this study with only one NGO reporting to have done formal research before setting up its web site.

This NGO (Women'sNet) was also the only NGO with clear strategic goals for its web site. They went through a very extensive planning process and a needs assessment before the web site was created. This process was inclusive of its staff, as well as its potential target groups all over the country. Almost all the other NGOs reported that they had only consulted their own staff before creating their web sites. While Women'sNet was in constant contact with its various target groups since the creation of its web site, none of the other NGOs had, at the time of the interviews, made any effort towards conducting any form of research on their established web sites.

With regard to the reasons, aims and expectations mentioned by the interviewees, almost none of the replies indicated that the WWW was regarded as a medium for two-way communication. Women'sNet was the only organization that specifically mentioned aims corresponding to the utilization of the WWW for two-way communication. The other NGOs viewed the WWW as a tool to disseminate information and to generate donations and sponsorships. The expectation to raise money by means of the WWW was in most cases not fulfilled, as the findings for the second aim showed. However, there were a few NGOs that did realize the potential of the WWW for networking nationally and internationally.

❖ *Aim 2*

To determine what the successes, failures and problems experienced with regard to the WWW as a communication medium were

Following the same pattern as with the previous aim, failures and problems were discussed as one aspect during the interviews. Interviewees generally did not make a distinction between these two aspects. A summary of these findings is also presented in Table 15.1 (p282).

Most of the NGOs regarded their web sites as successful, even though they could not provide examples of major successes accomplished via their web sites. Because most of the NGOs did not have specific aims for their web sites, it was also problematic to determine their success or lack of success. However, most interviewees claimed that the continuous hits and inquiries via their web sites were for them a sufficient measure of a successful web site, even though they did not generate large sponsorships via this medium. The probable reasons for the lack of success with fundraising via the internet are discussed later in this chapter. (See Section 15.3.)

Two organizations, Famsa and Interfund, could not relate any examples of successes from their web sites and the Famsa representative did not even know whether the Famsa web site was still operational. The Interfund web site was probably losing hits because of the very prominent promises on the web site that it would be updated very soon. As had been pointed out earlier this promise was misleading, because the web site would only be updated in a few months' time. (See Chapter 12, Section 12.1.4.) Visitors could well become irritated by this promise that had not been fulfilled for some time.

In contrast, Women'sNet could give a clear description of major successes because of its web site, probably also because the organization had very specific aims for it. This organization could point out several success stories with regard to specific projects that had been in operation during the past two years. In addition, its web site was managed on a day-to-day basis, resulting in the creation of sound relationships with very active web site visitors. Later on in this chapter it will be explained that the Women'sNet web site had more interactive features than the other web sites. It seemed as if its level of interactivity resulted in more hits and inquiries via the web site.

The most common problem/failure mentioned by interviewees was the lack of technical knowledge with regard to the WWW. This led to most of the NGOs being placed in a position where they had to outsource the creation and management of their web sites, or to struggle on on their own. Both situations seemed to be problematic as outsourcing produced its own problems.

These problems were mostly related to the updating and general management of the web sites. Some of these companies did not respond promptly to the NGOs' requests regarding the updating of their web sites. In another case, the individual responsible for the web site disappeared with the web site files on computer disk. The result was that the web site could not be updated until the organization could find another organization to redesign and help manage the web site. Some of the individuals to whom the web sites were outsourced did not have sufficient technical knowledge themselves, resulting in poorly-designed web sites. The NGOs accepted these poor products because of a lack of money to go elsewhere for help.

In the case of Famsa, the interviewee reported having no problems regarding the organization's web site. This was an indication of an internal orientation in terms of the organization's worldview, meaning that the employees were not able to be objective about the organization and its shortcomings. It was evident that Famsa did not value the importance of communication and public relations fully and that its web site had little or no value to add to the organization. The web site had been dormant since its creation and it was not managed at all. However, the interviewee was not aware that this could be a problem and she was quite happy with the organization's web site, even though she did not know for certain whether it was still operational.

It was clear that the problems were not only related to the design of the web sites, but also to the updating and day-to-day management thereof. In most cases the selected NGOs had major problems with this.

15.2.2 NGOs and the integration of media

The literature study revealed the importance of integrated communication efforts in general and also with regard to the integration of the WWW into the communication mix. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.17.3 as well as Appendix D.)

Most of the NGOs were aware of the importance of integrating their communication efforts. However, not all of them were practicing this principle as well as it could be done. The integration of communication efforts into a total communication approach referred to the following aspects in this study:

- The use of different media as pointers to each other, for instance referring to the web site in hard copy publications/media or the electronic media and vice versa; This kind of integrated usage of the web site together with other media would result in people consulting different kinds of media whenever the organization was getting extended coverage because of a specific happening or event;

- The promotion of the web site by printing the web site's URL and the organization's e-mail address on all hard copy publications;
- The online publishing of all hard copy publications such as pamphlets, newsletters, annual reports and press releases.

The study revealed that Trees for Africa, Women'sNet, Interfund and the CDE were particularly successful in applying the principles mentioned above. Project Literacy and the Mvula Trust had already progressed well in the integration of their communication media, while Cansa, Famsa, NMCF and Child in Crisis still had to improve their application of the total communication approach.

15.2.3 General characteristics of NGO web sites

- ***Aim 3***

  To determine what the general characteristics and functions of NGO web sites were

Table 15.2 (p.283) contains a summary of the most important findings regarding the general characteristics and functions of the selected NGOs' web sites. Coinciding with one of the most often mentioned aims for their web sites (*to provide information*), the most common type of content carried on NGO web sites was general and specific information. Most of the web sites carried a variety of content types, while others only offered information (for example Interfund and Famsa). The web sites carrying a variety of content types could offer their visitors more functions than those that offered limited content types.

Although some NGOs offered their web site visitors the option to order online, others did not have the technical know-how to offer an online donation option. Project Literacy, Trees for Africa and Child in Crisis included donation forms on their web sites that had to be printed, filled out and then mailed or faxed to the organization. Although it was a brave attempt to utilize some of the WWW's unique features, it still did not offer the web site visitor the comfort of donating from his/her home. As will be pointed out later the inclusion of more interactive devices on these web sites is a necessity. (See Section 15.2.5.) However, it should be truly interactive and not adding to the effort expected of web site visitors, as was the case at the time of the analysis.

The aims of the web site content were evaluated from the perspective of the researcher and triangulated during the interview to ensure that fair conclusions had been made. From Table 15.2 (p.283) it can be deducted that the aims *to inform* and *to persuade* were the most common for the content on the selected NGO web sites. As the majority of the NGOs included in the study did not view the WWW as a medium to generate two-way communication, very little of the content on these web sites had this intention.

Besides Women'sNet, that defined *the generation of two-way communication* as one of its aims for the web site, other organizations that did not define this aim beforehand also tried to initiate some kind of two-way communication via their web sites. Examples were Mvula Trust that included a feedback form and Child in Crisis that included several invitations for comments and feedback on its web site. The Trees for Africa web site also carried invitations for feedback and invitations to contact the organization, however, none of the e-mail links on the web site was operational at the time of the content analysis.

In terms of the intended target groups for their web sites, most NGOs could identify several target groups. Some NGOs (such as Women'sNet and CDE) named these target groups on their web sites, to ensure that web site visitors would know for whom the web site was intended. Although the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund targeted its web site mostly towards the international corporate sector, the organization's representative mentioned that the organization received inquiries and hits from other, unintended, target groups, such as the general public.

This phenomenon highlights the difficulty to target certain publics via the internet, because the web site is available to "everybody". This could be one of the reasons why organizations such as Trees for Africa and Cansa noted that their web sites were directed at "everybody with access to the internet".

15.2.4 Public relations models

The fourth aim was targeted at determining what public relations model was followed by the selected NGOs. Organizations could only be placed roughly with regard to their choice of model, because the study did not involve the specific quantitative measurement of all the indicators in this regard.

- *Aim 4*

  To determine what public relations model NGOs practiced and why a particular model was preferred

To determine the public relations model practiced by the NGOs four specific theoretical statements were defined. Each statement will be discussed separately.

With regard to the public relations model applied by the selected NGOs, it was found that most of these organizations displayed several characteristics that would be favorable for the practicing of the two-way symmetrical model. However, in many cases these characteristics were not enough to enable the organization to practice its public relations according to this model. In many cases the purpose and importance of public relations were not realized or the WWW was not viewed as a medium to enhance the practicing of two-way symmetrical public relations.

Specific theoretical statement 2 (See p.67)

The public relations model practiced by NGOs could be determined by examining the:

- *purpose of public relations (for example to persuade or to build relationships);*
- *the nature of communication by public relations departments (one-way or two-way communication) and*
- *the PR practitioners' view of the relevant communication model (sender/receiver; or group I/II.).*

Almost all interviewees acknowledged that public relations was essential for the existence of their organizations. However, as will be explained later in this section, the placement of public relations within the organizational structure did not always reflect this view. Although the NGOs viewed public relations as very important, they did not describe its purpose in terms of two-way symmetrical communication. The purpose of public relations was very seldom described as building relationships and mutual understanding with the organizations' publics.

Some of the aims of public relations often mentioned were the dissemination of information, making the public or certain target groups aware of the existence of the organization and persuasion to help raise funds. Other vague purposes included to "reach out to the people out there" or to "make contact with other organizations or target groups". Clearly, none of these purposes mentioned could be described as representative of true two-way communication.

On further examination it was found that although two-way symmetrical communication was not explicitly mentioned as the purposes of their public relations efforts, some of the NGOs did indeed engage in two-way symmetrical communication with their publics. NGOs that did conduct most of their public relations efforts as two-way symmetrical communication were Project Literacy, Child in Crisis, the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund and Women'sNet. It seemed that some of the other NGOs practiced two-way symmetrical communication with some of their publics and one-way asymmetrical communication (for example via newsletters and other publications) with other publics. Examples are Trees for Africa, Cansa, and Mvula Trust. The NGOs that mostly practiced one-way asymmetrical communication during public relations efforts were CDE, Famsa and Interfund.

However, it must be made clear that the NGOs could not be classified in terms of what public relations model they practiced solely on the basis of the description given above. The evaluation of NGOs' one-way or two-way communication was based on the interviewees' description of the communication process between the NGOs and its publics. Although this description could give an indication of what public relations models were practiced, many other criteria had to be taken into account, such as the worldviews of the NGOs and the organizational cultures and other managerial concepts.

In Chapter 3 (Section 3.4.3) it was pointed out that the practicing of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations necessitates the adaptation of the traditional communication model to avoid the classification of senders and receivers in the communication process. This means that communication was no longer "something that a sender does to a receiver", but that both parties could at any time initiate the communication process. The interviewees were questioned on this to get a clearer picture of the communication process between the NGOs and their publics.

It became evident that most NGOs had to initiate communication with their various publics when the organizations were started. However, as the NGOs progressed with their work and became better known their different publics increasingly started to initiate communication as well. It was also found that the initiation of communication depended on the specific public concerned. It seemed that in the case of sponsors and donors, the NGOs mostly initiated communication, but in the case of their beneficiaries, the beneficiaries often initiated communication with the NGOs. One example was Trees for Africa, where communities and schools had to contact the organization in order to benefit from its greening projects.

It can therefore be deduced that the communication process between the NGOs and their various publics was largely situational, depending on the specific public concerned and the type of developmental work the NGOs were engaged in.

Specific theoretical statement 3 (See p. 68)

The reason why a NGO practices a certain public relations model could be determined by examining:

- *the expertise of the PR department;*
- *whether the public relations manager is part of the dominant coalition of the NGOs;*
- *and the organizational culture of the NGOs.*

The findings with regard to the expertise of the PR/communication departments are summarized in Table 15.3 (p. 284). None of the NGOs involved in the study had a traditional PR department. However, three NGOs had departments that specifically dealt with communication and PR issues, as can be seen in Table 15.3 (Prolit, Mvula and Interfund). These departments and their employees were given several different names and titles, but all handled communication and public relations functions.

NGOs that did not have a communication/PR department mostly had a specific person responsible for the communication functions in the organizations. The management of the web site was usually also the responsibility of this person. Famsa was the only organization that did not make provision for a communication function in the organization and a specific person to handle these functions. In the case of Cansa there was only a PR coordinator, as the PR function was outsourced. The result was that this coordinator was not part of the dominant coalition in the organization, one of the requirements for the practicing of excellent public relations. The CDE also did not value communication/PR activities very highly, as the person handling PR functions was actually a researcher who took care of communication activities in her spare time.

The expertise of the people responsible for communication functions proved to be problematic. Only two of these people had communication qualifications, while most of the others did have tertiary qualifications in other disciplines such as political sciences and social work. This meant that the majority of NGOs involved in the study could not be rated very high in terms of the expertise of their communication staff. During the interviews it was clear that the interviewees who did not have communication qualifications tended not to value communication functions in their organizations as highly as those who had communication qualifications. Some of the interviewees did not have any formal qualifications at all, but learned about communication and public relations by means of experience and short training courses.

It should also be mentioned that some of the NGOs were in a state of flux as they were in the process of restructuring. One example was Interfund where the research and information department responsible for communication had just been formed at the time of the interview. The employees in this department therefore did not have sufficient opportunity to make an impact on the web site of the organization as well as its other communication actions. Another example was the NMCF that was in the process of establishing a communication department.

In terms of the relationship between PR and marketing, some NGOs combined these functions in one department because of a lack of resources (e.g. Cansa and Prolit). The utilization of PR techniques for marketing purposes reflected a pragmatic social role ascribed to public relations. The pragmatic social role for public relations is usually associated with an asymmetric worldview. The practicing of two-way symmetrical public relations would therefore not be expected in these cases. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.7.1.)

On the positive side, all the NGOs but one (Cansa) allowed the people responsible for communication/PR functions to be part of the dominant coalition of the organizations, a prerequisite for the practicing of excellent public relations. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.) As such these people could influence the decision-making process in the organizations directly. These interviewees reported to be part of their organizations' strategic planning processes on a very high level.

With regard to the organizational culture of the selected NGOs, it was found that most interviewees regarded their organizational cultures as transparent, democratic and favorable to innovation and creativity. However, the majority of the NGOs stressed that they had operational systems and procedures in place and that being innovative did not mean that these processes could be bypassed. (For a discussion of important managerial concepts for the practicing of excellent public relations as well as the presence of an effective operational system and communication procedure, see Appendix D.)

With regard to authority most NGOs were described as having a decentralized authority, an important prerequisite for the practicing of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. Most NGOs had operational procedures in place that allowed for a collective, democratic decision-making process.

Only one NGO (CDE) was described as having an authoritarian culture with a centralized authority. As will be explained later, CDE was evaluated as following a two-way asymmetrical approach to public relations mainly because of its emphasis on persuasion. Its organizational culture is another aspect that led to this placement along the symmetry/ asymmetry continuum.

Specific theoretical statement 4 (See p. 71)

It is expected that NGOs' choices of public relations models would be directly influenced by their organizational worldviews.

An asymmetrical worldview (characterized by an internal orientation, a closed system, efficiency, elitism, conservatism, tradition and central authority) will lead to the practicing of an asymmetrical model of public relations (press agentry, public information or two-way asymmetrical).

A symmetrical worldview (characterized by the NGOs' views on the need for interdependence, an open system, moving equilibrium, equity, autonomy, innovation, decentralization of management, responsibility, conflict resolution and interest-group liberalism) could lead to the practicing of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

The findings with regard to the worldviews of the selected NGOs are summarized in Table 15.4 (p.285). The worldviews of the NGOs were evaluated after analyzing their web sites and also by studying their responses during the in-depth interviews. (See Chapter 4, Table 4.1.)

All NGOs except Women'sNet seemed to portray elements of both symmetrical and asymmetrical worldviews. During the interview with the Women'sNet representative no indications of an asymmetrical worldview could be found. With regard to the other NGOs, it seemed that although they displayed some elements of an asymmetrical worldview, the majority of the worldview indications were on the symmetrical side of the continuum. Although none of the NGOs formally displayed many characteristics of an asymmetrical worldview, it seemed as if the asymmetrical characteristics had an important impact on the model of public relations practiced by those NGOs. The asymmetrical worldview elements corresponded with other asymmetric characteristics displayed by the same NGOs. Examples are Famsa and CDE. Trees for Africa had also displayed very few symmetrical characteristics probably because of its focus on publicity instead of two-way communication.

The NGOs that seemed to display most symmetrical worldview characteristics (Project Literacy, Mvula Trust, Women'sNet and Child in Crisis) were also rated closer to the two-way symmetrical side of the public relations continuum. (See the discussion of specific theoretical statement 7 later in this section.) This rating was not only decided on because of their worldview elements but also because these elements corresponded to other characteristics that were important for the practicing of two-way symmetrical public relations.

Specific theoretical statement 5 (See p. 73)

The NGOs' views on the social role of public relations will also influence their choice of a public relations model:

The view of public relations as having an idealistic or a critical social role will contribute to the practicing of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations. If NGOs view public relations as a managerial function they will be more likely to practice the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

Those NGOs that view public relations as having a pragmatic, conservative, radical or a neutral social role will be more inclined to practice an asymmetrical model of public relations. If the NGOs view public relations as a mere technical function they will also be more likely to be practicing an asymmetrical model of public relations.

Specific theoretical statement 5 makes a distinction between the social roles that public relations could play. However, this distinction needs to be put into perspective with regard to this study. The social role played by the public relations function in an organization would be related to the social role played by the organization as such. The interviewees explained that NGOs differed from other organizations such as businesses or governmental organizations in the sense that the developmental sphere that they worked in necessitated them to play specific social roles.

They need to be critical of government and its policies and practices in order to improve the developmental process in South Africa. However, to be critical alone would not necessarily result in the much-needed changes in the South African development sphere. Therefore NGOs also need to play a radical role in order to promote changes with regard to policies, practices and the delivering of developmental services to millions of under-privileged South Africans. The critical and radical roles should supplement each other in order to achieve the best results. Furthermore most NGOs would also be idealistic in terms of a certain ideal that they promote: for instance better water and sanitation services, more literate adults, or more women with access to information technology. It was therefore found that the NGOs included in the study mostly played these three social roles. Although the radical role could be regarded as an indication of asymmetrical assumptions, it became clear that the NGOs were not radical in a physical sense. They promoted change mostly by means of being critical and negotiating with the relevant parties through existing communication channels. It could therefore be concluded that they played a radical role by means of two-way symmetrical techniques.

In order to maximize the impact of these roles, the public relations function should support the organization in playing these roles. In the case of the NGOs involved in this study support was mostly given in the form of publications and media coverage in order to explain the aims and principles of the organizations. However, it was found that in some cases the communication departments or people responsible for public relations functions could give only limited input with regard to these roles. The reasons were that some NGOs did not have any publications of their own or because the public relations function was practiced as a mere technical function, for instance at Cansa, Famsa, CDE and the NMCF.

Two NGOs indicated that their playing of a critical social role was being hampered by the fact that funding procedures had changed since 1994. They explained that prior to 1994, NGOs would receive funding from foreign donors directly. After South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, foreign donors started to donate money directly to the new government, who, in turn, had to form partnerships with organizations such as NGOs for specific development projects. The result was that many NGOs became cautious of criticizing government for fear of losing current and future potential contracts with government.

Besides the three social roles most often played, some NGOs also described either themselves or their public relations functions in terms of a pragmatic role. In the case of Prolit and Cansa, their public relations efforts formed part of the marketing departments, thereby combining public relations and marketing into one function to maximize fundraising efforts. This view of public relations is not conducive to the practicing of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations and can be seen as a shortcoming in the case of these NGOs.

In the case of the CDE the interviewee denied that the organization played an idealistic role and explained that CDE was a very pragmatic organization in terms of its functioning. The result would be that its public relations efforts would also be pragmatic, strengthening the organization's asymmetrical approach to communication.

In terms of public relations being practiced as a managerial or a technical function, this largely depended on the structure of the organizations and the presence of a communication department with qualified employees. The organizations that did not have trained communication specialists and/or a communication department tended to practice public relations as a technical function (Famsa, Cansa, CDE, NMCF, Child in Crisis, Interfund and Trees for Africa). In contrast, those organizations that did have communication specialists and/or communication departments saw a more strategic role for public relations and practiced it as a managerial function (Project Literacy, Women'sNet and Mvula Trust).

Despite the difficulties mentioned, it can be concluded that the NGOs studied mostly played a critical, radical and an idealistic social role in society and that these roles were supported by their communication functions. These roles can be described as compatible with the two-way symmetrical model of public relations, although not all of these NGOs generally practiced this model.

Specific theoretical statement 7 (See p. 81)

NGOs involved in this research can be placed on a continuum in terms of how symmetrically or asymmetrically they practice public relations. Those NGOs that practice the two-way symmetric model will not practice it in a pure form, but they will rather follow the mixed-motive model approach where persuasion may also be part of their actions. It is important to *note that these NGOs will use persuasion but they would also be willing to be persuaded by their publics if disagreement arises. They would generally strive to reach the win-win position on the symmetry/asymmetry continuum.*

In Figure 15.1 (p.286) the NGOs involved in this study were placed along the symmetry/asymmetry continuum. The placements were made after the careful evaluation of the findings that were described in Part II, and discussed further on in this section. To make these placements, the findings with regard to each organization were evaluated as a whole, with the totality of the impression as the most important guidance. Note that some of these organizations did not seem to practice a particular model in a pure form. In such cases the organization was put in between the two models that it seemed to emphasize most. For instance, Child in Crisis was placed close to the two-way symmetrical model, but because of its emphasis on the dissemination of information via its web site, it was also placed within the public-information model.

Women'sNet is the only organization that was evaluated as practicing the two-way symmetrical (mixed-motive) model. Project Literacy, the Mvula Trust and Child in Crisis[2] were placed between the two-way symmetrical model and the two-way asymmetrical model. These organizations displayed many characteristics that were compatible with the two-way symmetrical model, but they still had too much asymmetrical characteristics to be placed in the same category as Women'sNet.

CDE was categorized in the two-way symmetrical model mainly because of its pragmatic views and emphasis on persuasion. Trees for Africa concentrated mainly on publicity and the dissemination of information, therefore it was placed between the press-agentry/publicity model and the public-information model of public relations.

The other NGOs were placed within the public-information model, mostly because of their view of public relations as having the purpose to disseminate information. These organizations did not focus on the building of relationships or persuasion as the purpose of their public relations efforts.

The analyzed web sites can be compared to the placement on the symmetry continuum in Figure 15.1 (p.286) for more perspective on why the web sites had certain characteristics, especially with regard to interactivity. These comparisons will be made in the subsequent sections.

15.2.5 Interactivity on NGO web sites

To assess the level of interactivity in the web sites of the selected NGOs, the following aim was set:

❖ *Aim 5*

To determine how the characteristics of interactivity are implemented in NGO web sites

The following specific theoretical statement guided this aim:

Specific theoretical statement 1 (See p. 56)
An organizational web site can be examined to determine its degree of interactivity by noting the presence of the following dimensions of interactivity:

- *Playfulness*
- *Choice*
- *Connectedness*
- *Information collection*
- *Reciprocal communication.*

Reciprocal communication can be studied on a continuum with reactive communication on the one end and interactive communication on the other end. It can be expected that organizations that function according to a two-way symmetrical model would also include more interactive devices on their web sites.

By means of the content analyses of the NGOs' web sites it was determined that the majority of the ten web sites had at least one aspect in common. The low degree of interactivity was the single most important shortcoming of these web sites. The continuum of interactivity was analyzed and the *choice, connectedness* and *reciprocal communication* dimensions were generally found to be present to a very limited degree. In terms of *playfulness* and *information collection* it was found that these two dimensions were present to an even lesser degree than the other three.

The *reciprocal communication* dimension was regarded as the most important indicator of two-way symmetrical communication on the web sites that were analyzed. In terms of the two levels of reciprocal communication most of the web sites contained only examples of reactive communication, for example contact information, feedback forms or online ordering/donating options. The Women'sNet web site was the only site that contained an example of true interactive communication by means of its bulletin board.

The Women'sNet web site was the most interactive web site of the ten web sites that were analyzed. Comparing this finding to the findings in the previous section on which model of public relations was seemingly practiced, it is evident that there was a close relationship between the public relations model that seemed to be practiced and the interactive characteristics of the web sites.

This conclusion is made because Women'sNet was the only NGO that could most probably be placed at the two-way symmetrical side of the continuum, and similarly this web site also had the most interactive characteristics in the sample that was analyzed. The expectation formulated in specific theoretical statement 1 (*It can be expected that organizations that function according to a two-way symmetrical model would also include more interactive devices on their web sites)* would therefore appear to be proved true in this study.

This finding also confirms the findings of other studies that compared interactivity with two-way symmetrical communication (Schickinger, 1998; Elliot, 1997). The relationship between interactivity and symmetry is illustrated in Figure 15.2 (p.287). When the NGOs' viewpoints on public relations and its purpose are taken into account the lack of interactivity on their web sites is understandable. Most of the NGOs did not think of public relations as the practicing of two-way communication, therefore they could also not understand the utility of the WWW to enhance the practicing of two-way symmetrical communication.

The analysis also showed that there was a relationship between interactivity and the number of visits that web sites could attract. NGOs closer to the more interactive end of the continuum also had more web site visitors, for example Prolit, Mvula Trust and Women'sNet. An exception is Child in Crisis, whose web site was dormant, although its public relations efforts seemingly resembled the two-way symmetrical model. Child in Crisis had no record of web site visitors, therefore it could not be determined how many visitors the dormant web site could attract.

Another exception is the NMCF that could attract a high number of web site visitors despite the low level of interactivity on its web site. This could be because of Nelson Mandela's name and association with the organization.

A detailed analysis of the presence of the different dimensions of interactivity is discussed in Part II.

15.2.6 Two-way symmetrical communication in NGO web sites

As has already been pointed out, two-way symmetrical communication in NGO web sites is closely related to the presence of interactivity on these web sites, because two-way symmetrical communication is made possible via the web sites by means of the inclusion of interactive devices. On the other hand certain principles of two-way symmetrical communication have to be present on a web site to ensure that the interactive devices will be used and re-used by web site visitors. The following aim was set to examine this aspect:

- *Aim 6*

  To determine how the principles of dialogical communication and two-way symmetrical communication were implemented in these web sites and how these principles correspond to the public relations model practiced

The investigation into dialogical and two-way communication on NGO web sites was guided by the following two specific theoretical statements:

Specific theoretical statement 8 (See p. 91)
NGO web sites can be evaluated for two-way symmetrical and dialogical communication attributes by analyzing the following principles:

- *the presence of a dialogical/feedback loop;*
- *the usefulness of information;*
- *the generation of return visits;*
- *the intuitiveness/ease of the interface;*
- *the conservation of visitors.*

It could be expected that NGOs who practice the two-way symmetrical model of public relations would apply more of these principles in their web sites than NGOs who practice one of the asymmetrical models of public relations.

As with the presence of interactivity on the web sites, the *application* of these principles also proved to be problematic for the NGOs involved in the study. The intuitiveness/ease of the interface was most successfully applied in the sense that the web sites were all relatively easy to use with no extra requirements for extra hardware or software. The exception was the NMCF, whose web site required the downloading of special software to access some aspects such as its annual report. The Women'sNet web site also necessitated the downloading of special software to gain access to its radio programs. However, on both these web sites it was possible to download the needed software from the web site before continuing to browse the site.

The principles dealing with the usefulness of information, the generation of return visits and the conservation of visitors are related to each other because they focus on the management of a web site. In Chapter 3 (Section 3.18) the necessity of a commitment to the active management of a web site on behalf of an organization or a business was explained. It is not good enough to merely have a web presence. This presence needs to be managed in order to maximize its possible benefits.

The management of a web site includes the frequent updating of the web site, the provision of useful information to a variety of web site visitors and also the conservation of visitors to ensure that they return to the web site after their first visit. The management of a web site also includes a prompt and professional response to inquiries via the web site and a close monitoring of the interactive devices on the web site, together with a watchful eye on its users. Unfortunately the NGOs included in this study did not do very well with the application of these principles.

Some web sites contained such limited information that it could not be very useful for its visitors and it was unlikely to ensure the return of those visitors in the future (Famsa). Many web sites were not updated for long periods of time (e.g. Famsa, Child in Crisis, Interfund and Mvula). The implication is that information that was useful once could later become useless if not updated. Web sites that are not updated frequently would not conserve its visitors or generate return visits. Similarly, web sites that rated low on interactivity would not have much use for its visitors and return visits were unlikely.

In terms of the response to inquiries via their web sites, most of the NGOs did not do very well. Their reaction was tested by sending them an inquiry via e-mail to become part of the study. More than half of the NGOs gave a delayed response or did not respond at all. On the positive side of the application of these principles was, once again, the Women'sNet web site that was managed very well. This web site was updated on a daily basis and the organization's commitment to its web site paid off in terms of its high number of very active web site visitors. The relatively high level of interactivity on the web site in comparison to the other NGOs probably contributed to its success.

The application of the dialogical loop was the most serious problem in terms of the presence of two-way symmetrical principles on the web sites of the selected NGOs. The dialogical loop should be represented by the presence of reciprocal communication. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.18.) As was explained earlier, most of the web sites only contained limited examples of reactive communication. Women'sNet was the only NGO that had displayed a high degree of interactivity on its web site.

The limited application of the dialogical loop principle corresponded with the lack of interactive devices on most of these web sites. The implication is that most of these web sites could not be used to enhance two-way symmetrical communication or dialogical communication within a two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

The expectation that NGOs practicing the two-way symmetrical model of public relations would apply more of these principles in their web sites as expressed in specific theoretical statement 8 proved to be true for this study. Women'sNet, as the only NGO that seemed to practice the two-way symmetrical model of public relations, also applied most of these principles on its web site. To illustrate the placement of the NGOs in the sample along the symmetry and interactivity continua, the illustrations of *Figure 15.1* (p.286) and *15.2* (p.287) were combined in *Figure 15.3* (p.288).

Specific theoretical statement 6 (See p. 77)
NGOs that support the two-way symmetrical model of public relations will also support and engage in dialogue with their different publics. These NGOs will regard the WWW as an important medium to promote dialogue with its publics. Some of the characteristics of dialogical communication efforts are honesty, mutual respect, and encouragement of free expression.

NGOs that practice asymmetrical public relations will not see dialogue as an integral part of their public relations efforts. They would rather engage in monologue aimed at their publics. These NGOs will mostly use the WWW to embark on one-way, monological communication with its publics.

The assumptions made in specific theoretical statement also seemed to be proven true in this study. Women'sNet being the only NGO that seemingly practiced the two-way symmetrical model of public relations consistently also supported and engaged in dialogue with its different publics. This organization supported the characteristics of dialogical communication and displayed many characteristics of a symmetrical worldview. Women'sNet also regarded the WWW as an important medium to promote dialogue with its publics.

It must be mentioned that although Child in Crisis, Mvula Trust and Project Literacy were not practicing the two-way symmetrical model of public relations to the same extent as Women'sNet, they came relatively close to this ideal. These organizations also supported and engaged in dialogue with their publics. Although they did not utilize their web sites as well as Women'sNet did, they also stressed the importance of dialogue and two-way symmetrical communication principles in public relations.

On the other hand, the other NGOs did not see dialogue as an integral part and purpose of their public relations efforts. Most of them engaged in monologue aimed at their publics and also used the WWW as an information dissemination tool to embark on one-way, monological communication with their publics. Although these NGOs did not admit to using techniques such as deception, coercion and distrust in their public relations efforts (which is also not inferred here), they did display several characteristics of asymmetrical worldviews as was explained earlier. (See Section 15.2.4.)

15.3 Conclusions

In view of the discussion of the results of this study, the following conclusions were reached:

- Most of the NGOs that took part in this study did not view the building of relationships and mutual understanding as the purpose of their public relations efforts.
- This was illustrated by the finding that only one of the NGOs consistently practiced the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.
- Public relations efforts were hampered by the lack of communication specialists with communication qualifications in most of the selected NGOs.

- In some cases the merging of the public relations and marketing functions were also problematic.

- However, most of the NGOs also displayed characteristics that would be conducive to the practicing of two-way symmetrical communication, for instance with regard to their organizational cultures and worldviews. The people responsible for public relations were in most cases part of the dominant coalition of their organizations, another positive aspect with regard to the practicing of the two-way symmetrical model.

- As a result of their asymmetrical views on the purpose of public relations most of the NGOs could also not realize the potential of the WWW for the application of two-way symmetrical purposes. This finding corresponds with the findings of Elliot (1997:131), i.e. that the poor quality of public relations overall led to an inadequate response to the internet as a means to practice two-way symmetrical communication.

- Most of the web sites analyzed displayed a lack of interactivity and two-way symmetrical communication principles and web sites were often utilized as an information dissemination tool or instrument.

- The majority of the NGOs therefore under-used the unique features of the WWW and their web sites could be improved quite substantially by addressing some of the shortcomings identified in this study.

- One of the shortcomings was that most NGOs did not define clear strategic goals for their web sites before implementation. They did not conduct research or a needs assessment prior to or after setting up their web sites.

- Many NGOs experienced problems in terms of a lack of technical knowledge, a lack of time, money and manpower to optimize their utilization of their web sites.

- The aim to raise sponsorships and donations via the WWW could not be reached by the NGOs that set out to use their web sites for this purpose. This failure should not be attributed to the WWW or the characteristics of the web sites, but should rather be understood in view of the NGOs' approach to public relations.

  Successful fundraising should be dependent upon a good relationship between the potential sponsor and the organization to be sponsored, as was pointed out by some of the NGOs in the study. By using the WWW as an information dissemination tool and trying to raise funds at the same time, this prerequisite was violated. Fundraising via the WWW should therefore be combined with the practicing of two-way symmetrical principles via the web site as well as via other methods.

- Another problem exposed by the study was the lack of commitment to the management of their web sites. Every NGO felt that web presence was very important, but not all NGOs were prepared to make the necessary commitment in order to make the most of their web sites. The lack of commitment resulted in web site visitors and inquiries from the web site not being monitored or responded to and web sites not being updated regularly. In turn, this could lead to the loss of web site visitors who would not return in future.

On examination of the conclusions reached, it is evident that several of the NGOs involved in the study did not regard their web sites and the management thereof as a high priority. Some of them were struggling to survive and for them their web sites were more of a "nice-to-have" than a necessity. However, the study did not only examine the NGOs web sites, but also their views and presupposition about communication and public relations in general.

It was found that most problems with the analyzed web sites could be ascribed to these views on public relations, inter alia not realizing the importance of relationships and mutual understanding. The NGO that best realized the importance of these aspects, namely Women'sNet, practiced more of the principles of two-way symmetrical communication and its web site displayed more interactive features than the others. Women'sNet differed from the other NGOs because its web site was the very reason for its existence. One may therefore be tempted to ascribe its successful web site to the fact that the organization deals with new media technology as its main area of operations.

However, the organization's views on communication and public relations were also vastly different from those of most of the other NGOs. The argument is therefore made that the nature of the work done by Women'sNet could not be the only reason for the high level of interactivity on its web site. Instead, its application of two-way symmetrical principles to the web site was more likely the result of its views on public relations. The Women'sNet interviewee, Sonja Boezak, made several statements that could be linked directly to the practicing of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations:

"Women'sNet never does anything without consulting with people, and it is not just about consulting, it is about bringing people in and making them a part of anything that we do."

"From a development ethics perspective we don't believe in using colonialist methods, that 'we know better and we will tell you how to do it.' We will speak to people, saying that 'your knowledge is as important as mine and perhaps if we exchange it we might end up with a useful product.'"

"Different communities have different needs and we need to be sensitive to it. And by far, we are not the people who know about your needs, you are the best person to ask about it."

"We build relationships with people around how they want us to deal with them."

"We've opened up a conversation, we are speaking about it, trying to be as honest as possible, coming up with solutions without getting aggressive or angry about it. We sort of said: this is our needs, this is how we think you can address them. We understand that you have different needs, let's speak about it."

Contradicting these statements, NGOs on the other end of the symmetry continuum mostly did not have procedures for a specific way of handling conflict, and their views of public relations were centered around the distribution of press releases when a specific event was due. As none of the NGOs on the more asymmetrical end of the continuum employed communication specialists with suitable tertiary training in public relations, this view of public relations is understandable.

After having gone through the details of the ten NGOs and their web sites, the question could be asked what the most important reasons for their different approaches to public relations and the WWW were. Stated differently, how can the NGOs' different approaches be explained? To argue possible answers to this question the context in which each NGO operated at the time of the study should be kept in mind. The answers could be found in a combination of aspects of which the most important were the NGOs' historical context, purpose, and the training of communication specialists.

In terms of the historical context in which the NGOs functioned at the time of the study it could be argued that the older NGOs would be more inclined to think about public relations in terms of a traditional mass media model. This means that the older NGOs would be more inclined to embark on one-way communication with their publics, focusing either on publicity, the dissemination of information, or persuasion.

This argument could be true in some instances, but not in the case of every NGO that participated in the study. Supporting this argument is the fact that Women'sNet (established during 1998) was one of the youngest organizations in the sample. Similarly, Trees for Africa, being placed on the less symmetrical side of the continuum, was much older, having been operating since 1990.

However, Project Literacy was one of the oldest organizations in the sample, having been operating since 1973, and it was placed very close to Women'sNet on the continuum. Also, the Mvula Trust (established in 1993) was older than the CDE and Interfund, yet it was also placed closer to the symmetrical side of the continuum. It was therefore concluded that the historical context could play a role in determining how public relations would be practiced, but it was not the only aspect influencing the matter.

Another determining factor could be the purpose of a specific NGO, whether it focused more on advocacy or networking. It could be expected that those NGOs that focused more on an advocacy role would be more inclined to practice an asymmetrical model of public relations, while those focusing more on networking would be more likely to practice the two-way symmetrical model.

The study showed that all the NGOs in the sample viewed themselves as playing an advocacy role to some degree, while all of them also stated that networking was important for their survival. It seems that this aspect also could not fully explain the question at hand. For example, Women'sNet, being at the most symmetrical end of the continuum, played an important advocacy role in terms of women's rights and empowerment. However, this did not inhibit the organization to follow a very participative approach in terms of networking.

Similarly, the CDE placed much emphasis on its advocacy role, yet it was placed further on the symmetrical side of the continuum than Trees for Africa or Child in Crisis that also played an important advocacy role. It was therefore concluded that it is indeed possible to place a high value on advocacy, and at the same time value relationships and networking to enable and organization to practice the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

A third important aspect is the training of communication specialists or their presence/absence in the hierarchy of an organization. Only two NGOs (Project Literacy and Mvula Trust) had people with some qualifications in communication studies in their communication departments. Five others had people in their communication departments with tertiary education in other disciplines such as social work, political science, feminism or development studies.

Examining *Figure 15.3* (p.288), it becomes evident that those organizations with more highly-educated people responsible for their communication functions were placed closer to the symmetrical end of the continuum. These NGOs were CDE, Prolit, Mvula Trust and

Women'sNet. On the other hand, those organizations that did not have people with some kind of tertiary education responsible for their communication efforts, were placed on the more asymmetrical end of the continuum. These NGOs were TFA, NMCF, Famsa, Cansa, and Child in Crisis.[3] The only exception was Interfund that did have people with academic backgrounds in its information and research department (the department responsible for communication activities).

However, it was explained that Interfund was in the process of restructuring and that its information and research department had been formed only a month or two prior to the interview. It could therefore be expected that the practicing of public relations in Interfund would have changed drastically after the restructuring process. Another organization that should be mentioned, is the NMCF that was in the process of establishing a communication department at the time of the study.

Provided that this organization employs someone with an applicable education, its practicing of public relations would also tend to move to the more symmetrical side of the continuum in the future. These two organizations displayed several characteristics that would be conducive to the practicing of two-way symmetrical public relations and therefore it would not need a total metamorphosis.

It seemed as if the education and presence of communication specialists were one of the most important aspects to explain an organization's tendency towards the one or the other side of the symmetry continuum. This aspect should be examined in conjunction with the organizational culture as another important aspect, because an excellent communication specialist would not accomplish much in an authoritarian, stagnant organization. However, all the NGOs studied displayed some characteristics in their organizational culture that would be compatible with the practicing of two-way symmetrical public relations.

15.4 Recommendations

The findings of the study led to the formulation of recommendations for NGOs to improve their web sites, but also to improve their public relations efforts in general. These recommendations were formulated to be able to answer to the following aim:

- *Aim 8*

  To determine how these web sites could be improved with regard to the features and characteristics examined in this study

- Web sites could be improved by the inclusion of more interactive devices and the inclusion of two-way symmetrical principles as was pointed out in earlier chapters.

- However, in order to improve the web sites, the most important condition is the necessity to address the problems that prevented NGOs from fully using their web sites to their full potential.

- The most eminent problem is their current views on public relations that could only be changed through education and training and the appointment of more communication specialists in these organizations.

- It is therefore recommended that the relevant people in these NGOs be sensitized in terms of their philosophical views on communication and public relations as such. They have to be made more aware of the importance of public relations as a process of relationship building.

- This process should be combined with a training course on the technical aspects of web site design and programming. Most of the NGOs did not have the money to outsource the creation and management of their web sites, and some of those who did outsource this function experienced problems. Therefore it is recommended that NGO members be empowered by training to be able to create and manage their web sites themselves. Logistically this would be the most practical option and it would enable the organizations to apply their newly acquired views on public relations to their web sites.

- It is recommended that universities and technicons should move away from a one-sided emphasis on marketing and total communication on the one hand, and technical skills on the other hand. Public relations and marketing should not be combined into one function in the name of the total communication approach, because this leads to a pragmatic view of public relations where public relations is merely seen as a tool to make more money. An emphasis on technical skills, without the philosophical assumptions needed for excellent public relations on the other hand, is also not advisable. Technical aspects should be combined with communication training and students should be sensitized to the symmetrical presuppositions needed to practice the two-way symmetrical model. Without sensitization to these aspects the WWW would most probably not be utilized to its potential.

- NGOs could form partnerships with universities in their vicinity to collaborate in the training and education of their employees that are responsible for public relations. These partnerships could include the placement of communication interns (senior students in training) at NGOs in order to assist the organizations with their communication activities. The placement of interns could also contribute to the NGOs being more willing to appoint communication graduates, once they realize the value of this qualification.

- While the training process is in progress NGOs could consider the option of a sponsored web site, something that a few NGOs had already made use of. This involves a competent company or organization sponsoring the creation and management of the web site in return for a link from the NGO web site to the organization's web site. This is only a short-term solution because the sponsoring organizations with the technical know-how probably would not have the necessary communication knowledge and background to optimize the web site for public relations purposes of the particular NGO.

- Finally it is recommended that a tool for self-analysis of NGO web sites be developed as one step further to the findings of this study. The development of user-friendly guidelines and an analysis tool for evaluation would assist NGOs in improving not only their web sites, but also their approach to the practice of public relations in general.

It is fully recognized that the problem in terms of people's presuppositions could not be solved in the short term. The re-education of people in this regard takes time, just as it would take time to fill the market with new potential employees trained and educated at tertiary level to understand the importance of two-way symmetrical communication in public relations efforts.

However, as most of the NGOs in this study have already displayed several characteristics that are conducive to the practicing of two-way symmetrical communication, it should not be too difficult to embark on the process of gradually changing some of their presuppositions with regard to public relations. It could therefore be expected that NGOs would want to change and improve their web sites as natural consequence of having changed certain asymmetrical worldviews, characteristics, and viewpoints on the purpose and nature of public relations.

15.5 Shortcomings of this study and recommendations for further research

Being an exploratory study of a qualitative nature, one of the shortcomings is the small sample of NGOs that took part in the study. The findings could therefore not be generalized to all NGOs in South Africa. However, because very few of the NGOs in Gauteng had web sites[4], the sample was not so small in terms of the populations of NGOs making use of an organizational web site.

It would have been the ideal to make a longitudinal, in-depth study of each NGO in order to obtain a better understanding of the effect that two-way symmetrical communication has on its relationships in the long-term (Grunig & Huang, 2000:26). Such a study could include the various versions of organizational web sites as they progress and improve. The public relations functions within each NGO could be studied in much more detail than had been the case with this study. However, the time frame in which this study had to be completed did not allow for such an expansive research design.

Future studies should include some of the aspects that this study could not examine, for instance the NGOs' beneficiaries, stakeholders and its web site users. The inclusion of these aspects would allow a more detailed picture of the functioning of NGOs and the views of some of their publics. It could also be considered to examine the impact of organizational web sites on the effectiveness of NGOs' public relations functions. It is recommended that such studies should include both sides of the communication relationship: the organization as well as its publics, as was also suggested by Grunig and Huang (2000:26).

It is also recommended that two of the NGOs mentioned earlier, the NMCF and Interfund, be studied within a year or two after this study to determine whether the restructuring process had influenced their practice of two-way symmetrical communication.

15.6 Contribution

The study endeavored to make a contribution to the body of knowledge in the field of communication studies by exploring practical as well as theoretical issues regarding public relations as sub-discipline.

- With regard to practical issues the study revealed detail about NGOs' uses and misuses of the WWW in the South African context. It also explored some of the unique problems experienced by NGOs in terms of the use of information technology and public relations. It contributed on a pragmatic level by making some recommendations as to how some of these problems could be solved in the short-term as well as in the long-term. These recommendations will be handed to and discussed with the NGOs that participated in the study.

- The study also showed that qualitative research tools could successfully be applied to the study of the WWW and public relations. The success of this application shows a promise that more extensive web analysis could be done for improved communication effectiveness. This holds true especially for organizations with limited resources such as NGOs in a development context.

- Also at a practical level, the findings showed that the WWW could be applied to enhance development projects in South Africa. Although some of the NGOs in the study still used the WWW as an optional luxury item, others used the WWW as an irreplaceable communication tool to improve their communication efforts as well as the projects that they worked on.

- With regard to theoretical issues the study discovered that shortcomings with NGO web sites were not only due to a lack of technical knowledge and other practical problems. The most important problem seemed to be the NGOs' views on the purpose and nature of public relations. The under-utilization of their web sites was only a symptom of their problematic presuppositions about communication and public relations.

- The application of the two-way symmetrical model of public relations on the WWW as communication medium is another contribution of the study. Although the two-way symmetrical model has been studied extensively in other contexts, only two studies could be found in the USA that applied this body of theory to the new world of cyberspace. In one study the model was applied to activists groups and their use of the internet, and in the other study the model was applied to investor relations in a financial context (Elliot, 1997; Schickinger, 1998). In South Africa no similar studies could be found.

  It was confirmed that this model could be applied to the use of the WWW for public relations purposes. The finding that Women'sNet seemed to practice the two-way symmetrical model and also applied its principles to the WWW could be regarded as proof that this normative theory can be applied to new communication technology in a developmental context.

- It can also be argued that the *technical* characteristics of the WWW make it possible to apply the two-way symmetrical model to the practicing of public relations via the WWW. The similarity between symmetry and interactivity has been pointed out in other studies (Elliot, 1997) and was again confirmed in the findings of this study. Schickinger (1998:6) refers to the technical capabilities of the internet as "technical symmetry". Technical symmetry opens up the way for operational symmetry and the internet does indeed pose the possibility to practice public relations within the two-way symmetrical model by means of operational symmetry. As such this model acts as an idealistic, normative criterion for practicing public relations by means of new communication technology such as the internet.

- However, the other side of the coin is also true: the study confirmed that the internet is the first communication device/medium to technically accommodate all four models of public relations, something that Schickinger (1998:77) had also pointed out. This means that the internet could be used to practice all four models of public relations, something that is not true for other media such as radio, newspapers or television. This aspect highlights the importance of an organization's viewpoints on the purpose and role of public relations, which are instrumental in determining how the organizational web site will be used.

Table 15.1: Summarized findings for Aims 1 & 2

NGO	Reasons, aims, expectations	Successes	Problems or failures	Research
Project Literacy	Everyone talked about the web, to attract sponsors/donors, to provide information	No major successes, except positive feedback and inquiries via the web site	Did not attract donors, initial listing on search engines	None
Trees for Africa	To keep up with the times, to raise funds, to network, to provide information, to save costs	The *Getting involved* section attracted many visitors ordering stuff	Lack of technical knowledge, time, and money. Lack of an online payment system	None
Famsa	To market its services, to create more awareness, to provide information	None reported	None reported	None
Mvula Trust	To be up to date, to assist international communication and networking	Minor successes. Continuous hits and inquiries from the web site	Updating was a problem because it was outsourced. Technical problems with the search engine on the web site	None
Child in Crisis	To provide information, to save time and money, to attract sponsors, to network	Minor successes in terms of contacts and donations generated	Updating, because it was outsourced. Lack of technical knowledge, the promotion of the web site	None
Cansa	To promote the organization, to create more awareness, to provide information, to attract donors, to share information with Africa	Success in terms of inquiries about cancer local as well as international	None reported	None
Women'sNet	Clear strategic goals, inter alia to organize a two-way flow of information and to build relationships	Major successes with two projects, web site visitors are very active, 800 subscribers to the update service	Technical problems with web site statistics and archiving of content	Yes
Interfund	To provide information and publications	No specific successes	Lack of technical knowledge	None
CDE	To experiment, to maximize impact, to move with the times, to develop networks and linkages	Successes in terms of hits and inquiries	Lack of technical knowledge, tight budget Conservative board	None
NMCF	To assist international relations, to save money	Successes in terms of hits and inquiries	No major problems, except to find time to respond to the many inquiries via e-mail	None

Table 15.2: General characteristics of content on NGO web sites (Aim 3)

NGO	Type	Aims	Target	Functions
Project Literacy	General information, donation form, guest book	To persuade, to inform	Donors/sponsors, international funding agencies, business	To print the donation form, to inform, to contact the organization
Trees for Africa	General information, order/donation form	To inform, to persuade visitors to become involved in several ways	Everybody (sic) including potential beneficiaries	To inform, to print the donation form, to order, to contact TFA (beneficiaries)
Famsa	General information	To inform	General public, potential beneficiaries	To inform
Mvula Trust	General information, feedback form, search function, links	To inform, to generate two-way communication, to ease navigation	Local government, consultants on policy-issues, funders, policy-makers	To inform, to search the site, ask questions, to give feedback, to link to similar organizations
Child in Crisis	General information, donation form	To inform, to persuade	Potential sponsors, similar organizations	To inform, to print the donation form, to contact the organization
Cansa	General information, press releases, links	To inform, to educate, to persuade	Business people, health professional, or "just everybody", the press	To inform, to contact the organization,
Women'sNet	General and specific information, bulletin board, news, links	To inform, to educate, to generate two-way communication,	Women (also those without access to the internet), researchers, civil society, NGOs and CBOs.	To inform, to discuss issues, to search the site, to find a job, to submit information, to link to other organizations
Interfund	General information	To inform, to persuade potential beneficiaries to apply for funding	Potential beneficiaries, academics, researchers, politicians, the press	To inform, to access publications
CDE	General information, order form	To inform, to persuade	Policy-makers, decision makers in government, business leaders, media, community organizations, trade unions, NGOs, public	To inform, to order publications
NMCF	General information, press releases, annual report, links	To inform, to persuade, to generate publicity	International corporate sector, potential sponsors/donors and beneficiaries	To inform, to contact the organization, to link to partner organizations

Table 15.3: The expertise of PR departments

NGO	PR/Communication department or practitioner	Qualifications	Part of the dominant coalition
Project Literacy	Yes: Communication and Fundraising department	Tertiary: Communication	Yes
Trees for Africa	No department, one person	None	Yes
Famsa	No specific communication function	None	No communication function
Mvula Trust	Yes: Communication department	Post-graduate: Communication	Yes
Child in Crisis	No department, three people handle communication	None	Yes
Cansa	No department, one person for coordination, outsourced	Tertiary: Other	No
Women'sNet	No department, one person as information coordinator	Tertiary: Other	Yes
Interfund	Yes: Research and information department	Tertiary: Other	Yes
CDE	No department, one person handles PR among other obligations	Tertiary: Other	Yes
NMCF	In process of establishing a communication department, currently one person for communication functions	None	Yes (when communication department is established)

Table 15.4: Symmetrical and asymmetrical worldviews of NGOs

NGO	Symmetrical	Asymmetrical
Project Literacy	Mutual understanding, interdependency, open system, interest-group liberalism, conflict resolution by negotiation and compromise, effective operational system	PR is seen as part of marketing
Trees for Africa	Open system, interdependency	Concentration on publicity
Famsa	Open system	Elitism, internal orientation
Mvula Trust	Open system, interdependency, collaboration, interest-group liberalism, autonomy, responsibility, effective operational system	Importance of persuasion
Child in Crisis	Open system, interdependency, conflict resolution by negotiation and diplomacy, autonomy, responsibility, effective operational system	Importance of persuasion,
Cansa	Open system, interdependency, interest-group liberalism	Importance of two-way communication not realized; PR functions in the marketing department
Women'sNet	Mutual understanding, relationship building, collaboration, open system, interdependence, moving equilibrium, equity, autonomy, responsibility, interest-group liberalism, negotiation, mediation	None
Interfund	Open system, interdependence, effective operational system,	Importance of the dissemination of information, instead of two-way communication
CDE	Collaboration (sometimes)	Concentration on publicity, persuasion and the dissemination of information, conservatism, independence,
NMCF	Mutual understanding, interdependency, open system, collaboration, responsibility, autonomy	Importance of information dissemination, instead of two-way communication

Figure 15.1: The placement of NGOs along the symmetry continuum

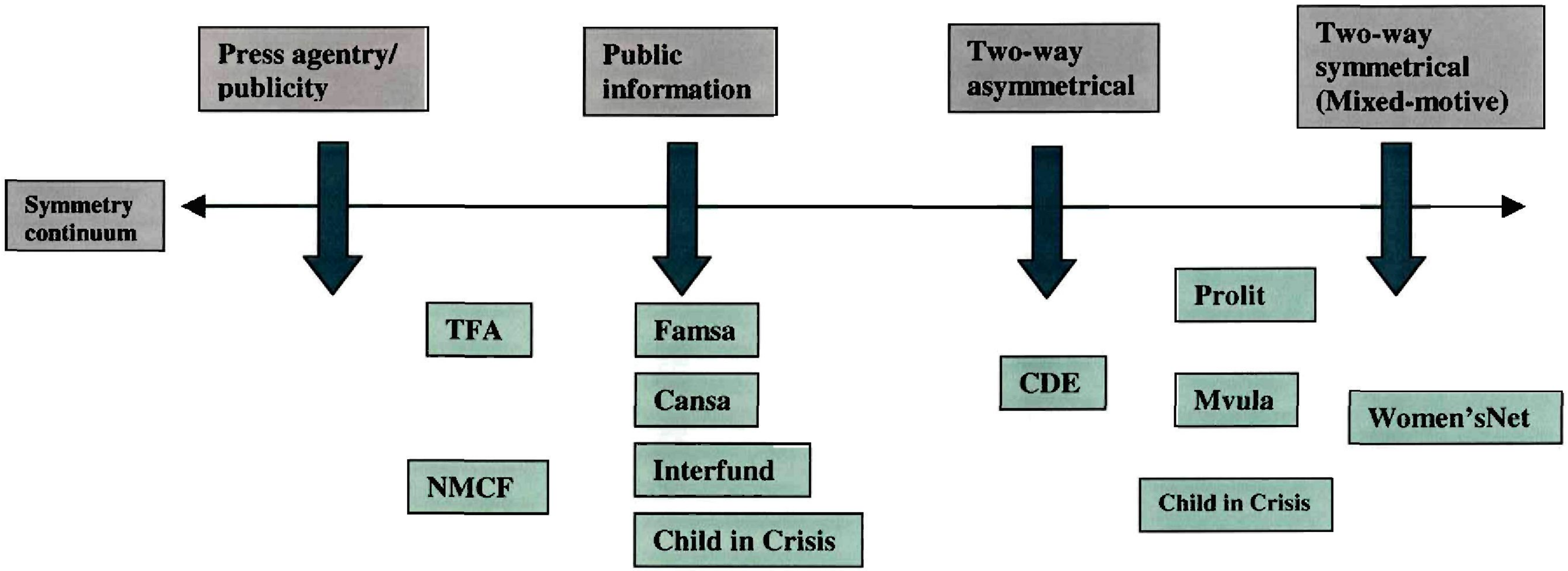


Figure 15.2: The relationship between symmetry and interactivity

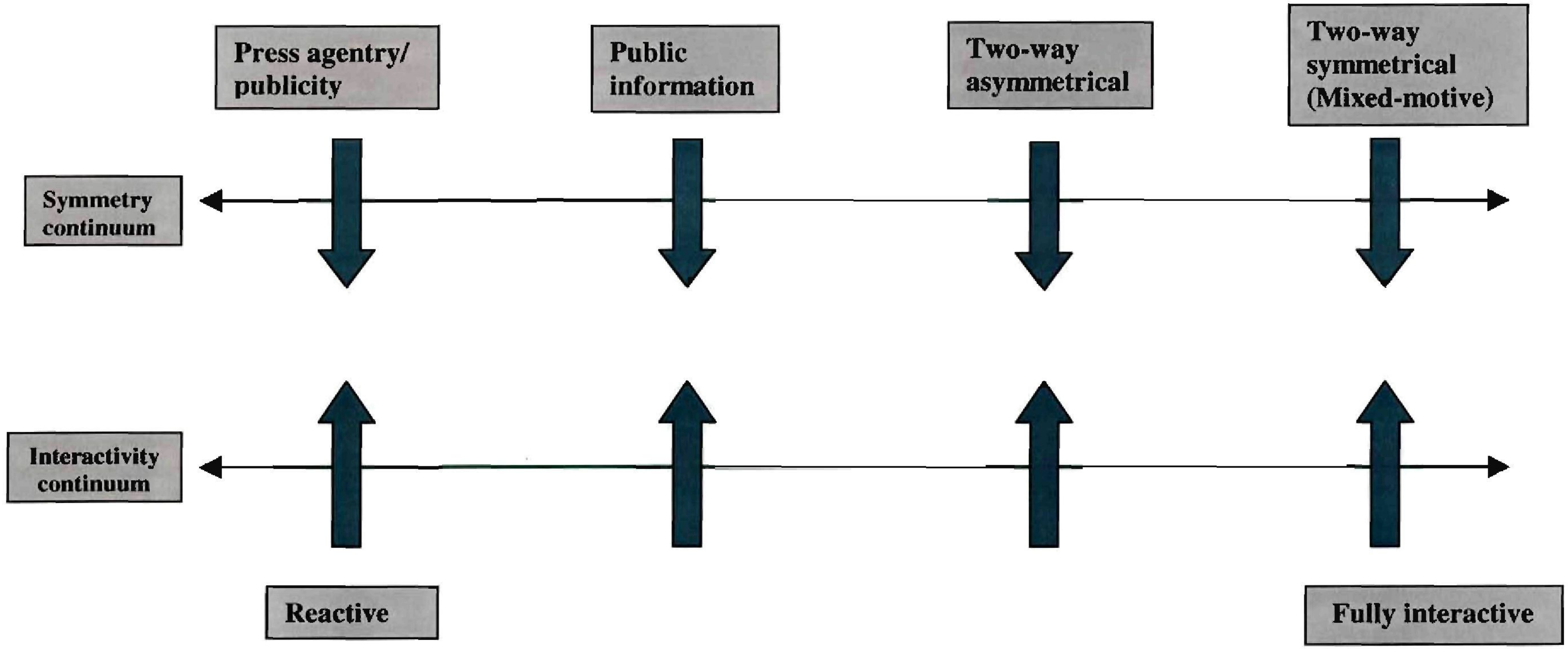
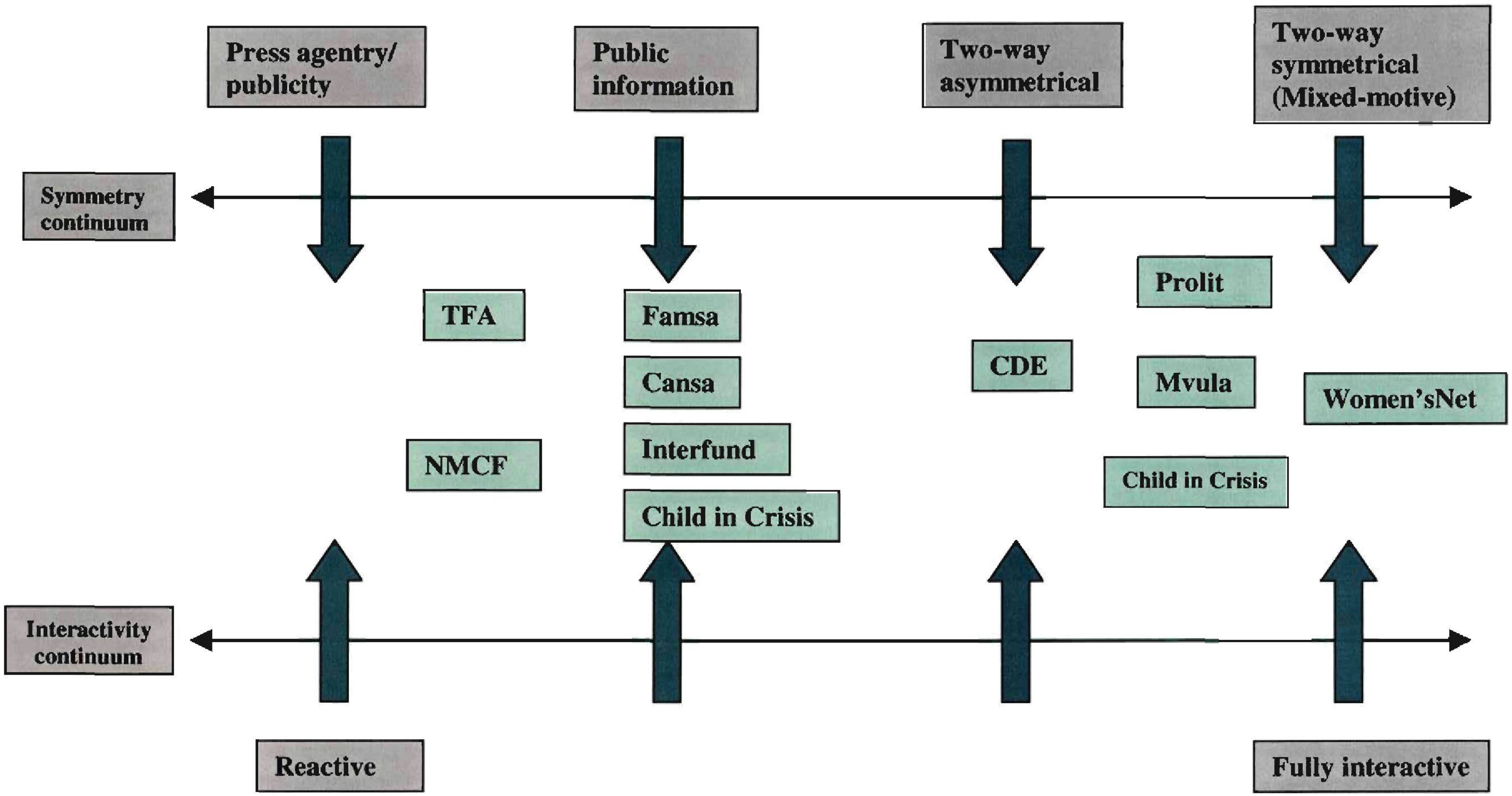


Figure 15.3: The placement of NGOs along the symmetry/interactivity continuum



[1] Some of the NGOs' names and/or web sites may have changed since the research was conducted.

[2] Child in Crisis was placed twice on the symmetry continuum. Its web site was dormant and had the function of disseminating information, therefore the placement at the public information model of public relations. However, its public relations efforts in general displayed many characteristics of the two-way symmetrical model, hence another placement closer to the symmetrical end of the continuum.

[3] See the previous footnote. The person responsible for public relations for Child in Crisis did not have any formal tertiary education. This could explain why the organization also had to be placed at the asymmetrical end of the continuum.

[4] At the time of the study only 50 of the NGOs in Gauteng registered on the Prodder database had web sites. Therefore the 10 NGOs included in the study represented a sample of 20% of the available study population.

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Appendices to Chapters 2 & 3

Appendices A - D

Appendices A to D contain general background information that could have been included in the text and footnotes of Chapters 2 and 3. However, to increase readability it was kept apart and organized into four appendices.

Appendix A

Consequences of development in the field of communication technology

1. *Social consequences*

As was mentioned in Chapter 1 (Section 1.3.2) the extreme views on communication technology development are represented by the technophobes on the one hand and the technophiles on the other hand. The technophiles advocate only the possible effects of technology on society (for example freedom, democracy and positive effects on medicine right through to medicine), while the technophobes warn about all the potential negative effects (for example the loss of human employment, environmental damage, and increased control over information). However, some communication researchers felt that Communication studies could provide a balanced middle ground between these two extremes (Atwood, 1998; Pavlik, 1996).

Whether the consequences are positive or negative, many researchers agree that the most important social consequences of information technology can be summarized as follows (Pavlik, 1996:306):

- New communication and computer technology brings about a faster flow of information;
- New information technologies bring about new activities, processes and products;
- Social and political change happens at a more rapid pace as global real-time multimedia communications become more common.

Some of the potentially positive and negative social consequences of new media technology include social fragmentation, cultural homogenization, the rise of English, digital isolation, virtual communities and the virtual public. Although many of these potential consequences are based on speculation, they are is still worth taking note of.

1.2 Social fragmentation

The potential *social fragmentation* of society is often mentioned as one of the consequences of new media technology such as the internet. New media offer specialized and personalized content that differs much from the content of traditional media where the same content is provided for all its users. Television has an important social function, because shared viewing experiences result in the nurturing of a common culture (Pavlik, 1996:307-308; Cairncross, 1998:1). However, the traditional media will not disappear and stop fulfilling their different functions in society altogether. New media users will still make use of traditional media as well. Therefore social fragmentation is not something that will happen soon, if ever.

1.3 Cultural homogenization

The opposite of social fragmentation is a prediction of the effect of globalization on *cultural homogenization*. International contact between people from different countries and cultures could produce more understanding for cultural differences, eventually leading to cultural homogenization where the vast differences between cultures as we know them today can disappear (Pavlik, 1996:310). However, only time will tell whether this prediction will become true or not.

1.4 The rise of English

English is the language most widely used on the internet, and although some researchers have predicted it will change, others predict that it will never change as English is the universal programming language for computers (Scholtz & Steyn, 1999:477; Herman & Chesney, 1997:133). Some researchers predict that English will be the global second language and that many countries, especially in the developing world, would adopt English as a subsidiary language (Cairncross, 1998:4).

1.5 Digital isolation

Another possible social consequence of new media usage may be *digital isolation* for people who become obsessed with the use of new communication technology. The prediction is made that such people would not ever have to leave their rooms or houses and will become alienated from society. Their only social contact with other people would be via, for example, the internet by means of individual contact or via a virtual community. This is not pure speculation, but a real danger, as researchers such as Atwood (1998) warn about the effects of internet addiction. Other writers such as Rheingold (1995:5) are also very sceptical about the "rejection of human contact in favor of a textually mediated communication experience".

1.6 Virtual communities

The emergence of *virtual communities* could not be viewed as entirely negative, as long as it is not functioning as a substitution for normal human contact. The virtual community refers to a social collective or community that forms in the online, electronic world of cyberspace. These virtual communities can form very quickly around specific issues on a global scale. They develop their own rules, regulations, mores, and patterns of behavior. They are often held together by the use of electronic mail, their most important form of contact with each other.

Geographic and political boundaries are not applicable to virtual communities, as it is in the sense of other communities. However, it has to be mentioned that although normal boundaries do not apply, many people with no access to new media are still excluded from becoming members of virtual communities. This is especially true in developing countries such as South Africa and other parts of Africa and for instance South America (Pavlik, 1996:311).

1.7 The virtual public

The emergence of virtual communities has important implications for public relations, where the growth of virtual publics is changing the way organizations relate to their internal and external publics. The use of an organizational web site opens up new global markets and publics for organizations that should be taken note of. The virtual public redefines the time in which the public could be mobilized for or against a cause of concern. In a matter of minutes a worldwide public (potentially with the size of millions of people) could be mobilized electronically around a problem perceived initially by just a single computer user (Pavlik, 1996:314).

Some of the possible social consequences still remain to be proved true or false. However, it seems that, one the one hand, new media use can lead to isolation, but on the other hand, it could also lead to more contact with people on a worldwide scale. Thus, the most important aspect is that communication via new media can never replace human contact in person. Another important aspect is that although new media will have some social consequences, the traditional media will also remain in place, therefore the interaction between the two types of media remains to be studied.

2. *Institutional consequences*

Pavlik (1996:315) argues that every major institution will eventually be influenced by new media technologies, from the world of politics, education, libraries, journalism, government, religion, medicine to law and the military. Although of the changes in these institutions are varied and some unpredictable, certain common patterns have emerged. Some of the most common changes include decentralization, multidirectional communication, and a drive for increased efficiency, productivity and adaptability.

It would be impractical to try and discuss the effect of new media technology on all the institutions that could possibly be affected. Therefore only two institutions are singled out to illustrate some of these changes that could be brought about by new media technology, namely the political system and the educational system.

2.1 New media technology and the political system: Virtual democracy?

The internet is the first medium that allows the democratic principles of free speech and self-governance, according to Pavlik (1996:317). A medium such as the internet is destroying the ability of people in elite positions to control what people know, hear or read about.

The existence of virtual communities could have important implications for democracy and the democratic process. (See Section 1.6.) New technologies could be used to facilitate an informed citizenry and to increase public participation in the political process. The public (or virtual voters as called by Pavlik) can be given more, faster, and easier access to an increased number of information resources. Political alienation could be reduced and with the help of new communication technologies it could be easier to register voters by using electronic means or to allow voting or public opinion polling by online methods. Electronic town meetings or town halls could also be used to enhance public participation in the political process (Pavlik, 1996:313; Schultz, 2000:207).

This could have the result of a rebalancing of political power, according to Cairncross (1998:4). People will communicate their views on government more directly, therefore rulers and representatives will be more sensitive and responsive to lobbying and public opinion polls. This would especially be the case in established democracies. In the case of dictatorial regimes it would be easier for the citizens to make contact with the rest of the world.

In countries where access to information technologies is not common, however, it would be difficult to use these technologies to enhance political participation. In a country such as South Africa the use of these technologies for political purposes could increase the knowledge gap between the information rich and the information poor, mentioned in Chapter 1 (Section 1.5.3). Instead of a means to democracy, the internet could simply be another way to divide the country into haves and have-nots (Rheingold, 1995:6).

To enhance access to information technology and especially governmental information the South African government approved the creation of several MPCCs (multi-purpose community centers) around the country, as mentioned in Chapter 1 (Section 1.5.3). At these centers public information terminals will be installed carrying online governmental information and other online services aimed at people especially in rural areas (Winsbury, 1999:35). In other countries such as the USA and France, the governments have also put governmental information and services online (Pavlik, 1996:319).

To use information technology to enhance a democratic system, certain questions should first be answered (Pavlik, 1996:318):

- Will these innovations be readily accessible to all people, perhaps through such institutions as schools, churches, and community organizations, or will only some part of the population have access?
- If the technology is in place and everyone has access to it, will we know how to use it?

These questions stress that there are also potential dangers in the use of electronic media for political purposes. One danger is the creation of electronic mobs. Citizens may be subjected to biased information or propaganda without recognizing it. This could be the result of direct or immediate access to information and political sources without the traditional journalistic filter.

Rheingold (1995:5-6) is also very critical of a medium such as the internet as a tool for creating or improving democracy. He warns that the inherent democratic characteristics of the internet could not be equaled to actual democracy, because democracy is dependent on the individual's ability to act on the information received.

The information and political education should be applied in the real, physical world, not in virtual reality. For example, if you live in a country where it is illegal to be gay, all the information in the world on human rights and gay rights would not help you at all. Your actions still have to be consistent with the law of the country in which you reside.

From the above discussion it is clear that the use of communication technology in the political system could have both positive and negative consequences. The use thereof should therefore be planned carefully for the specific country and situation at hand.

2.2 Advancing education through technology

Education is one of the social systems that could benefit from the development of new media technology, such as interactive television, cable television, and electronic networks such as the internet. The use of these technologies by educational institutions could have the following consequences (Pavlik, 1996:320):

- Multimedia interactive learning programs for students of all ages, whether delivered to classrooms or directly to the home;
- Simulated learning activities, such as laboratory experiments or archeological digs, featuring realistic simulations;
- Universal access interfaces to allow students, workers, and those with disabilities to fully participate in the learning experience.

These consequences obviously describe the ideal situation that has not been reached in many countries. In Chapter 2 (Section 1.5.3) the formation of the SchoolNet SA network for South African schools was been discussed, as well as the South African government's commitment to link South African schools to the internet. Several universities in South Africa also make use of new technology for telematic distance education, such as the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education and the University of Pretoria.

However, it is important to note that technology alone cannot improve education. As was also mentioned in Chapter 1 (Section 1.4.2) interpersonal contact between teacher and student is still very important (Atwood, 1998). Aspects such as teacher involvement, full student interactivity, and richness of content are prerequisites for the optimum use of technology for educational purposes (Pavlik, 1996:321).

In the sphere of education new media technology could also have profound consequences for libraries. Some of the changes that could be expected are the following (Pavlik, 1996:324):

- Libraries could turn into "print-houses", because readers who go online for information in the library would want to create hard copies of the information that they found to take home with them;
- More and more libraries are converting books and other information sources to digital format to permit almost unlimited revision of works treated as a database to which users can log on at a certain price;
- In this process online communications will create virtual libraries that each user can create from any computer connected to the global data network.

In the above discussion the institutional consequences of new media technology were discussed, focusing on only two institutions, the political system and education. Obviously there could be many other consequences for other institutions that would not be appropriate to discuss here. The fact remains that political and educational institutions will be influenced by the use of new media technology. It is especially the political system that could be changed be these media. However, in developing countries such as South Africa these changes could happen more slowly or in a different fashion from developed countries.

3. Cultural consequences

Cultural consequences of new media applications refer to aspects such as hyperfiction, random access, remote control and access and multimedia art forms.

3.1 Hyperfiction

One of the most important consequences of the use of new media is based on the use of hypertext, earlier described as nonlinear, nonsequential writing. The use of hypertext has led to the emergence of a new form of literature called hyperfiction in which there is no preset beginning, middle, and end. It is a form of writing in which the author creates characters, environments, and motivation, but not a predetermined plot. Each online reader is a participant in a simulated reality and he/she helps to define the reality by his/her decisions, actions, and communication (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996:1; Jackson, 1997:3).

What disappears in the process of creating hyperfiction is the notion of a single narrative line, and not narrative itself. Stories are still created and read, but the author is now both reader and original creator. According to Pavlik (1996:331) the next generations could rely increasingly on computer-based hyperfiction as an important tool for sharing and transferring cultural symbols and meaning.

Hypertext links do more than just define the means for moving from one location or document to another. They offer a new way of structuring communication. Such a structuring may carry unique implications for the nature and consequences of human communication (Jackson, 1997:2).

3.2 Random access

Another cultural consequence is the increased importance of *random access* to information. In traditional media a central content provider such as the editor of a newspaper or television news broadcast has always predetermined content. This content is presented for consumption at a particular time and in a preset order and must be consumed as it is packaged. With some traditional media such as newspapers, there are more options than, for example with television broadcasts. A newspaper reader could read the newspaper in any order, not necessarily from page one to the last page, but it is not possible to do a keyword search to immediately go to a particular story or item of interest.

The unique characteristics of new media have changed this. Its users can go directly to any desired content. In effect it is creating a cultural generation that wants information and entertainment on demand (Pavlik, 1996:331).

3.3 Remote access and remote control

Another demand that is created by new media is the demand to remote access and remote control of any media content whenever, wherever, and however this new cultural generation wants. This demand includes, for instance, the remote access to and remote control of aspects such as voice mail, electronic mail and bank accounts (Pavlik, 1996:331).

3.4 Connecting concepts in hyperspace

The use of hypertext has changed the way we access information in several ways. Information can be gathered with more speed and more efficiently and nonlinear media also cause its users to make unexpected connections between concepts, "almost in a spiderweb fashion" (Pavlik, 1996:331; Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996:1). It is not necessary any more to search for information organized in the way that someone else has decided. We can make connections by our own concepts and ideas.

3.5 Multimedia art forms

The development of multimedia technology and online communications has resulted in important implications for contemporary culture, such as music and other art forms. The convergence of visual and aural arts has resulted in a multimedia creative environment that music artists could utilize to present for instance music videos via the internet or on CD-ROM. Digital technology provides the opportunity for young and upcoming artists to create a new medium for artistic expression. New media could also be a venue to display their work and hold public discourse on art and artistic expression. Virtual art galleries provide worldwide public access to art and the issue of copyright could increasingly be problematic in the future. More and more museums are putting their collections in digital form for access to the internet as well.

Another emerging media form with cultural implications is known as video games, a very popular activity for especially teenagers. Online video games in virtual reality and in game arcades are very popular and the cultural effects of this medium have not yet been explored (Pavlik, 1996:334). Software for video games comes from all parts of the world, especially from the eastern countries such as Japan and China, therefore the cultural values embedded in these games could have several intended or unintended cultural effects on its users.

In this section it was made clear that the emergence of new media technology has many positive as well as negative consequences on a variety of levels. The discussion should be seen as tentative because many of the consequences are still emerging and more about it will only be known in a few years.

Before communication theory can be applied to the study of new media a further attempt will be made at a better understanding of this phenomenon by examining three perspectives on new media technology.

Appendix B

Different perspectives on new media technology

1. *Sociological perspectives*

Sociological perspectives on new media are important because the increased use of new media can have implications for how we live, work and play.

1.1 Telecommuting: The transformation of the workplace

Telecommuting is made possible by new media such as the internet, meaning that a person can do his/her job at a remote location and not necessarily at the office. By means of communication technology such a person can always be in contact with the office by means of fax, email, or cellphone (Pavlik, 1996:336). Some people, such as mothers with small children, prefer to set up an office at home and work from there. Others work from several remote locations, visiting clients and potential clients, for example public relations practitioners or marketing agents.

Marken (1996:47-48) also notices the trend toward telecommuting, but stressed that this change in the workplace would not work in every organization. Organizations with a management style that can delegate and let go and give its employees more responsibilities and empowerment could make use of this approach. In organizations where management feels it has to be in control of every aspect of their business should avoid this approach because employees cannot be under surveillance during the whole work day if they work from a remote location. There has to be trust between management and employees, as well as a feeling of shared responsibility in order for telecommuting to be implemented successfully.

Like most aspects regarding new media use, telecommuting could have certain positive as well as negative effects. On the negative side some argue that it could lead to alienation and less interpersonal communication which could affect these workers negatively. On the positive side telecommuting could contribute greatly towards overall quality of life, productivity and work performance. It could also have environmental benefits such as less air pollution because of less traffic on the roads (Pavlik, 1996:336-337).

1.2 Gender and technology use

Research has showed that males tend to have a higher level of usage of new media technologies and much of the accompanying hardware and software has also been designed by males. Therefore much of the software and games is based upon male interests. Pavlik (1996:339) quotes research done on the difference between boys and girls' perceptions of computers. It was found that boys and girls had different cognitive styles in handling computer interactions. Girls tended to engage in a form of soft mastery and understood the computer as sensuous and tactile. Boys, on the other hand, tended to engage in a form of hard mastery using a competitive approach and attempting to impose their will over the use of the machine.

Although the world of the internet has traditionally been a male-dominated one, there are many opportunities for women as well. Women in the world of new media technology are steadily on the increase, as Pavlik (1996:338) indicates. One initiative in South Africa in this regard was the creation of Women'sNet, an internet-based NGO with the aim of empowering women by training them to use the internet and electronic communications effectively (Danzig, 1999:2). This organization was particularly active in the pre-election period in 1999.

In a study during 1998 it was found that the internet news audience was slowly becoming more middlebrow, meaning that the previous typical characteristics of internet users (white, male, upper-income) were changing. The number of female internet users in the USA was also increasing since the previous study on this matter had been done (The Pew Research Center, 1998). However, in South Africa the internet audience is still very much male-dominated as was found in a research project in 1999 (Naudé, 1999b).

1.3 People of color and new media use

Pavlik (1996:339) indicates that the information highway has bypassed people of color in the USA and, as was the case with women, they have had a limited role in the development of new media in general. The computer technology field has traditionally been dominated by white males in the USA as well as in other countries in the world. In the USA people of color represent a minority group, while in South Africa they represent the majority of the population.

In South Africa the majority of the population can be described as information-poor. This is mostly as a result of the legacy of apartheid that ended in 1994 (Naudé, 1999a). The South African government is, however, determined to make use of the information superhighway to enhance development as well as wider access to information technology, as was discussed earlier. (See Chapter 1, Section 1.5.3.)

1.4 Different generations and new media use

The most active generation in the new media world today is the under-30s generation. Especially teenagers are among the heaviest users of online communication services and if it were not for cost involved their use of these technologies would have been much higher (Pavlik, 1996:340). It often happens that children who are still in school know much more about computers and the internet than their parents. It is for this reason that many people are concerned about the uncensored nature of content on the internet.

The availability of pornography, potential contact with and exploitation by pedophiles online and other potentially dangerous information (for example how to make a drug used for date rape) on the internet is enough reason for parents to be negative about the internet. It is for this reason that software companies have started to develop internet filters (such as NetNanny) to act as censors for internet content by filtering through the domain names on the internet. However, these filters are not always a hundred percent reliable.

1.5 The individual: empowerment through the use of technology

Despite some of the threats brought about by new media (such as loss of privacy) it brought a promise of a better future as well as personal empowerment. Individuals around the world have been empowered to act, communicate and participate in the broader society and political processes. Some people use the internet for romance purposes, sending email to someone they have never met and in some cases these electronic romances have led to face-to-face meetings and eventual marriages.

A new medium such as the internet can act as a potential equalizer because it empowers individuals around the globe (Pavlik, 1996:340). Not only can individuals be empowered, but also small organizations such as NGOs can get an international voice at a relative low cost, as was already mentioned in Chapter 1 (Section 1.5.2).

The increasing use of new media technology has already changed many aspects of human life, not just at an institutional level (see the previous section) but also for individuals. The workplace has been altered for many people who prefer to work from home or to be in closer touch with their organization's customers. There are, however, still some imbalances with regard to new media usage, for instance with regard to gender, people of color and different age generations.

Despite these imbalances in the use of new media technology it could still lead to the empowerment of the individual, equalizing people and also organizations around the globe.

2. *Critical perspectives*

In Chapter 1 (Section 1.4.2) it was stressed that new media technology can be viewed in a positive or a negative light, and that an extreme position is this regard is not supported. The researcher argued in favor of a position in the middle that approves neither of technological determinism nor of technological rationalism. Communication scholars should study the negative as well as the positive consequences of new media to provide a balanced position in this regard. However, it is essential to remain critical in this process to avoid being swept away by an over-optimistic view of the wonder of technology. It is therefore important to take a look at some of the cautions from cybercritics.

According to Pavlik (1996: 349) cybercritics from the neo-Marxist field do not see the current technological developments as a revolution, but simply as an extension of capitalist influences, calling it cybernetic capitalism. Information has become a valuable commodity that can be sold according to supply and demand. Therefore these critics argue that the making of meaning (from information) is synonymous to making money in a capitalist society.

The information highway is seen as a toll road with a pay-as-you-go philosophy and the aims of those involved are not universal access or to further public good, but to make as much money as possible. This critique is especially aimed at telecommunications companies and other media companies that try to further access to the internet by laying optic fibres and telephone wires, and by designing new internet access deals for new subscribers.

There have been warnings about the potential of the information superhighway to create more inequality in the distribution of wealth. This would happen if new media technology would bypass the poor and, for instance rural residents. Pavlik (1996:349) explains that, even in the USA, minority groups in rural areas are bypassed in terms of access to the information highway. The danger of bypassing some groups is that society's elite will benefit first, although they are already the information-rich. The gap between information-rich and information-poor will therefore be widened. (See Chapter 1, Section 1.5.3.) Even if the information-poor should eventually get access to new media technology, they would need special knowledge and skills to use it, which they most probably would not have.

Of course, this is also the case in South Africa, but the government has accepted policies to change this and to provide people from all layers of the population with internet access. This was already discussed in Chapter 1, Section 1.5.3. Organizations such as Women'sNet mentioned earlier in this Appendix (Section 1.2) do invaluable work to empower people with the necessary skills to make use of the information highway when they get access to it.

It is true that much of the hype of new media technology is about money or the potential to make money and it is important that the value of content should not be left behind. In Chapter 3 (Section 3.20.3) it is emphasized that fancy graphics or, for that matter, the drive to make money would not lead to the successful use of, for example, an organizational web site. It should also be kept in mind that telecommunications companies are run according to business principles that mean that they should set up networks in areas where they would be able to make a profit, or at least not run at a loss.

It is only once these networks are up and running that they would be able to turn to other communities with special needs that have been bypassed in the process. It will take time to reach universal access, especially in a country such as South Africa where there are many other developmental needs and money is scarce. Which is important, however, is that the South African government has accepted that information technology can enhance development efforts, a view that is in line with international perspectives, discussed in the next section.

Other critics, for example Stephens (1998) also question the view of new communication technology as a "communications revolution" from a historical perspective. He argues that it is too early to label the emergence of the internet a "communications revolution" and that the passing of time could prove this label to be wrong. He pointed towards other forms of technology such as video that could have a greater impact on media usage patterns. These forms of media technology have a deeper market penetration and more people have access to it than the internet or just home PCs. Video could also be utilized via computers and the internet, making it even more widely used, says Stephens.

3. International perspectives

In terms of an international perspective on new media technology, two aspects are especially important. In the first instance, the role of communication technology in development (discussed in Chapter 1, Section 1.5.3), and in the second instance, the importance of communication technology in public diplomacy.

3.1 Public diplomacy and new technology

New media technology has made it possible for broadcasting companies (for example CNN) to give the world nonstop coverage of events all over the world. By means of laptop computers, wireless telephones transmitting to satellites and mobile satellite dishes, foreign correspondents can send news to their head offices without transmission delays, political interference or military censorship. Breaking news can be posted on the internet within seconds, before any other medium could make the events public. This gives the opportunity to monitor news events constantly and to disseminate timely diplomatic information, leading to what is sometimes called *electronic public diplomacy.*

Politicians now often feel a "loss of control", because they cannot take several days any more to respond to news events and to make foreign policy decisions based on news reports. Policy decisions, actions and communications should now take place on an almost instantaneous basis. If a politician, for instance a minister of foreign affairs, takes too long to react, he/she may look indecisive or weak. It could also have significant economic implications. A delay in a response from a world leader could have a tremendous effect on world currency trade, and therefore have implications for the economies of the countries involved (Pavlik, 1996:355).

Appendix C

Conceptual themes in the two-way symmetric model

Grunig and Grunig (1992) identified the following conceptual themes in the two-way symmetrical model:

- ***Interdependence and relationships***

  Public relations manage the interdependence of the organization with publics that restrict its autonomy, as stated earlier. The interdependence between the organization and its publics can be managed by building long-term, stable relationships with the relevant publics. The themes of interdependence and relationships are frequently present in literature on conflict and negotiation (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:313).

- ***Conflict, struggle and shared mission***

  Literature on interdependence suggests that interdependence can lead to either a shared mission or to conflict and power struggles, therefore there is a need for public relations. To solve or manage this, effective communication is very important and literature suggests a process of *collaboration* between the organization and its publics.

  Collaboration can be defined as follows: "*all parties believing that they should actively and assertively seek a mutually acceptable solution and being willing to spend large amounts of time, and energy to reach such an outcome*" (Conrad, 1985 in Grunig & Grunig, 1992:315). Another definition for collaboration is the "unfolding of a negotiated order" (Gray, 1989 in Grunig & Grunig, 1992:315). Grunig and Grunig (1992:315) note that the collaborative model or the mixed-motive model could be other names for the two-way symmetrical model and that collaboration could be used to manage either conflict or a shared vision.

- ***Openness, trust and understanding***

  These concepts are crucial symmetrical concepts without which mutual understanding can not be reached between an organization and its publics. Literature on negotiation also frequently refers to these important concepts (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:315).

- ***Negotiation, collaboration and mediation***

  According to a literature study by Grunig and Grunig (1992:315-316) these three key concepts can be equated and two-way symmetrical public relations can be described as a process of collaboration (defined earlier). Furthermore definitions of negotiation make it possible to also define collaboration as the process of negotiation. Two-way symmetrical public relations can generally not be described as mediation as practitioners are usually perceived as involved in the conflict at hand. However, public relations practitioners could bring in neutral parties as mediators when collaboration is not successful.

- ***Process and strategies***

  Organizations wanting to engage in collaborative actions need certain processes and strategies to make it work. Theory suggests that organizations have to set up structured systems, processes, and rules for two-way symmetrical public relations activities. There are numerous examples in literature of how these processes and strategies should function in practice.

One of the examples in Grunig and Grunig (1992:317) is the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's "Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication" that, according to these two researchers are normative, two-way symmetrical principles:

- Accept and involve the public as a legitimate partner;
- Plan carefully and evaluate your efforts;
- Listen to the public's specific concerns;
- Be honest, frank and open;
- Coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources;
- Meet the needs of the media;
- Speak clearly and with compassion.

The literature on conflict, collaboration, and risk management has many examples of practical advice that can be translated into principles useful for public relations practitioners following the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:318).

- ***Limitations, obstacles and effectiveness***

Literature suggests that there are conditions under which collaboration will probably not be effective. Some of the often-cited obstacles are unequal power relations between two conflicting parties, as well as historical and ideological barriers (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:318).

- ***Mediated two-way symmetrical communication***

Most of the literature reviewed in the previous paragraphs was based on interpersonal communication. The two-way symmetrical model of public relations makes more use of interpersonal communication than the other models, but mediated communication through the mass media, the internet or other media such as newsletters or brochures are equally important. It is therefore also important that practitioners know how to make mediated communication symmetrical.

For example, it is important to do research to find out what information people might need to understand a situation or to make a decision, and not just to assume what the public would want to know. According to Grunig and Grunig (1992:320) there is a substantial body of knowledge that could give practitioners guidelines on how to collaborate interpersonally with publics and also on how to use different media symmetrically for communication with publics.

Appendix D

Excellence in public relations and excellence in management: Important characteristics

Grunig (1992) and the Excellence Team conclude that there is a strong relationship between excellence in public relations and excellence in public relations. The following management principles have to be excellent in an organization in order to facilitate excellent public relations.

❖ ***Human resources***

The good use of human resources in an organization contributes indirectly to excellent public relations because it helps to create the kind of organization in which excellent public relations can function. Research showed repeatedly that people in organizations with decentralized, organic structures and participative cultures, have more autonomy, their morale is better and they are more innovative. These are also conditions conducive to excellent public relations. Communication is also important in the managing of human relationships in organizations, therefore internal public relations can help management to use human resources in an applicable way (Grunig, 1992:225).

❖ ***Organic structure***

The organic[i] structure of an organization is closely related to its use of human resources, therefore the previous paragraph could also be applied here. The existence of an organic structure does not guarantee the presence of excellent public relations, but excellent public relations cannot exist within mechanical organizational structures (Grunig, 1992:229).

❖ ***Intrapreneurship***

The term "intrapreneur" refers to those who take the responsibility to create innovation of any kind *within* the organization. As organizations become larger, they tend to become less innovative and more attention should be given to the development of entrepreneurial individual within the organization. The management of human resources, organic structure and intrapreneurship are closely linked and entrepreneurial organizations need excellent communication systems to survive. Therefore excellent public relations would be likely to be found in entrepreneurial organizations (Grunig, 1992:230-231).

❖ ***Symmetrical communication systems***

Most writers on excellence in management do not mention the term public relations, but they often describe the importance of communication in organizations in ways that agree with a two-way symmetrical model of communication. Phrases such as "stay close to the customer" and "listen to the customer" are often cited. Grunig (1992:233) therefore concludes that excellent organizations should have an excellent public relations function to manage this symmetrical communication.

- ***Leadership***

The importance of the dominant coalition in an organization was pointed out in section 3.5. The most powerful people in an organization create the climate in which public relations have to function. The worldview of the dominant coalition as well as whether the public relations manager is a part of the dominant coalition usually determines which model of public relations would be practiced. Grunig (1992:236) concludes that effective leaders combine direction and empowerment and that such leaders would probably also promote the combination of asymmetrical and symmetrical public relations. This approach is called the mixed-motive approach and it will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

- ***Strong, participative cultures***

Culture and organizational structure are two of the most important conditions for excellent public relations. The worldview of an organization is determined by its culture and Grunig (1992:237) found that excellent public relations most often occurs in organizations with strong, participative cultures (Dozier et al., 1995). In less effective organizations, the organizational culture is usually authoritarian. The importance of a participative culture is that it distributes power throughout the organization, which means that it is likely that the public relations department would have enough power to implement two-way communication programs.

Note, however, that a two-way program can only be implemented if the public relations department has the expertise to do so and if the dominant coalition and the public relations department share the same expectations about communication (Grunig, 1997:297).

- ***Strategic planning***

Most writers on excellent management include chapters on strategic planning. Grunig (1992:239) stresses the importance of strategic partnerships with the stakeholders of the organization. Another writer, Hutton (1999:208) defined public relations as the management of strategic relationships. Excellent organizations plan strategically by identifying their most important opportunities and constraints in the environment and excellent public relations departments should be involved in the process of strategic planning (Grunig, 1992:240).

Empirical research has proved that participation in strategic planning and management by the communication department has been one of the most important predictors of overall organizational excellence (Dozier et al., 1995:87; Grunig, 1997:290).

- ***Social responsibility***

One of the most important tasks of excellent public relations is to balance the interests of the organization with the interests of its publics. This refers to the concepts of mixed-motives and reciprocity that will be discussed in the next section. The balancing of interests can be managed by means of strategic planning and symmetrical communication programs (Grunig, 1992:241).

- ***Support for women and minorities***

  This is a characteristic that is not so often cited in literature, but according to Grunig (1992:242-243) the effectiveness of public relations and the organization could be improved by the variety that more women and members of minority groups can provide. Organizations that value the contributions of women and minorities are more likely to have excellent public relations departments than those that do not.

  The reason is that cultural diversity among all employees helps organizations to stay in touch with what is going on outside the organization. Top management can easily become isolated from outside changes because they are usually surrounded by people like themselves. When this happens, the dominant coalition makes up their own reality, consistent with its members' perceptions. It is therefore important for an organization to have as much diversity inside the organization as there is outside its boundaries. The diversity within would provide a basis for building mutually beneficial relationships with the diverse population outside the organization (Dozier *et al.*, 1995:151; Grunig, 1997:294).

- ***Quality***

  Grunig referred to the Total Quality Movement (TQM) which he equated with the Japanese word "Kaizen", meaning continuous improvement (Grunig, 1992:243-244). He stresses that the Total Quality Movement could be applied to public relations as every public relations process should be improved constantly if excellence is pursued.

  TQM can also be associated with the total communication concept that refers to the coordination of all the communication activities of an organization (Overton-de Klerk, 1993; Overton-de Klerk, 1994:199). Ensuring that communication efforts are coordinated and communication media are integrated can enhance the practice of excellent public relations (Holtz, 1999). Total communication should not be confused with an integrated marketing approach which normally views public relations as part of the marketing function. (See Chapter 1, Section 1.2.1.)

  Communication can help to cultivate a climate of continuous improvement in the organization. Customer perceptions of quality should also be monitored. Therefore internal communication programs should be developed together with the managers of programs on quality. Public relations departments should also work with the marketing department to monitor customers' perceptions of quality.

- ***Effective operational systems***

  For organizations to function they have to implement procedures and systems incorporating the previous characteristics that were discussed. These structures should be simple and flexible in the public relations department such as in any other department of the organization. Public relations departments should have structures and procedures for planning, monitoring and evaluating and for doing research to determine employees' perceptions on the effect of the operational system on their productivity, innovativeness and their quality of work (Grunig, 1992:245).

- ***Collaborative societal culture***

Grunig (1992:247) found that excellent management and excellent public relations could only be practiced successfully in collaborative, participative cultures. The positive side of this finding is that organizations that follow the mixed-motives model (discussed in the next section) of public relations can help to change organizational culture. In the long-term, collaborative organizations could, in turn, influence the culture of the society in which they function.

[i] The term "organic" can be interpreted as opposite to "static" or "mechanical". It means that the organization has a structure like a living organism – constantly adapting to its environment. It is a concept closely associated with systems theory.

Other Appendices

Appendix E: Letter of invitation to NGOs

Appendix F: Front pages of NGO web sites

In the following pages the front pages of the NGOs studied, can be viewed. Note that these pages are not numbered continuously as it was reproduced from the WWW. Only 9 front pages are included, as the front page of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund could not be printed, due to a technical problem explained in Chapter 14.

From: Annelie Naude
To: In:slepita@cansa.org.za
Date: 5/3/01 6:32PM
Subject: Invitation to take part in research project

18 May 2000

Dear Mr Lepita

Research project: NGOs and the World Wide Web

I am a lecturer at the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education and working on a *Ph.D. research project on the above-mentioned topic. I have identified your organization as one of* the 10 NGOs in Gauteng that I would like to include in the research.

NGOs, like many other organizations, could benefit much from using the WWW to their advantage, as you probably know. Recent research has, however, shown that most organizations do not use the WWW to its full potential. This research project therefore aims to investigate South African NGOs' use of the WWW in order to make suggestions for improving their web sites to their advantage. The study is done from a public relations perspective as I am attached to the School of Communication Studies.

Unfortunately I can only include 10 NGOs in this project because of limited time and resources. If you agree to take part in this project your organization could benefit by the results and the recommendations of the study. Your involvement will entail the provision of background information about your organization, as well as your experiences regarding your web site, that I intend to gather by means of an interview in the near future.

Would you be so kind as to inform me if you would agree to take part in this project? You can reply on this message and if you have agreed to be involved I will make contact with you again in the near future to organize the proposed interview.

Regards
Ms Annelie Naude
komamen@puknet.puk.ac.za

CC: In:cjeffrey@cansa.org.za

PROJECT LITERACY

Email: info@projectliteracy.org.za

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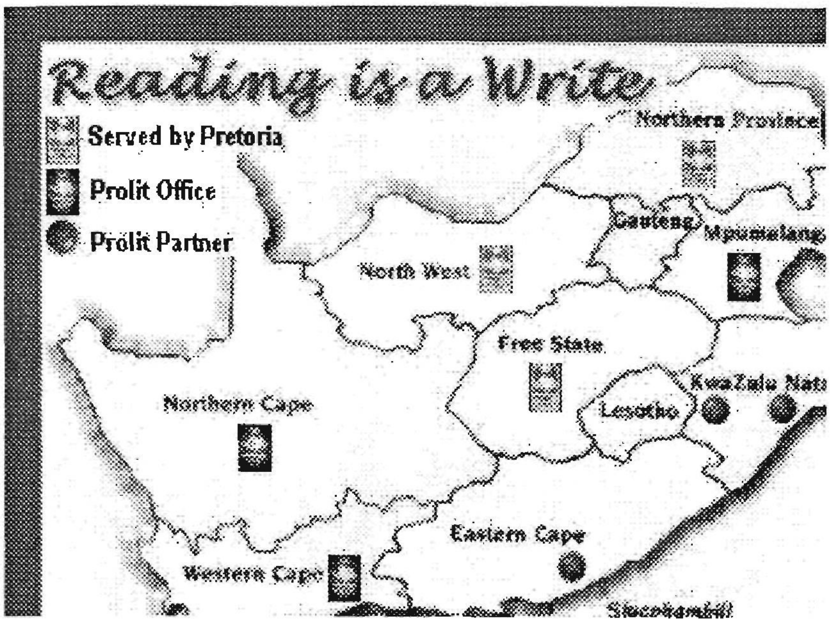

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SAADA

Project Literacy is honoured to have been chosen as the charity to benefit from this year's South African Antique Dealers Association's (SAADA) fair

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South Africa's first community based, non-government, greening organization specifically dedicated to the promotion of tree planting and environmental awareness in disadvantaged areas.

Contact Trees for Africa

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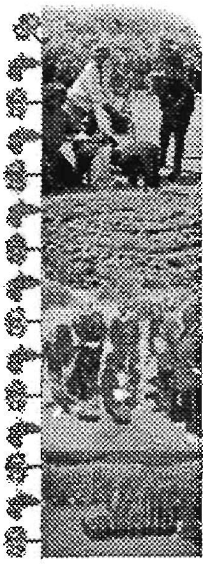

TREES for AFRICA (TFA) has contributed to the greening of South Africa for a decade. During this time we have facilitated over 400 community food gardening, greening or environmental projects and distributed over 1.2 million trees to disadvantaged and degraded areas of South Africa. TFA is widely recognised as urban greening experts and has won national and international awards.

We are now working with many government departments, providing a valuable service as consultants, advisors or project implementers. If you are not already working with us, we would appreciate an opportunity to present our services to you.

"No shade tree? Blame not the sun, but yourself."Ancient Chinese proverb

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FAMSA

Family and Marriage Society of S.A.

Fundraising no. 02 200039 0004

Rams Practice no. 9012729

Vision

Mission

What is FAMSA?

Priority issues

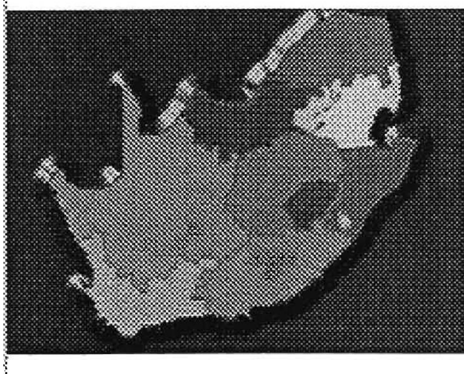
FAMSA societies

FAMSA summerised

Webmaster

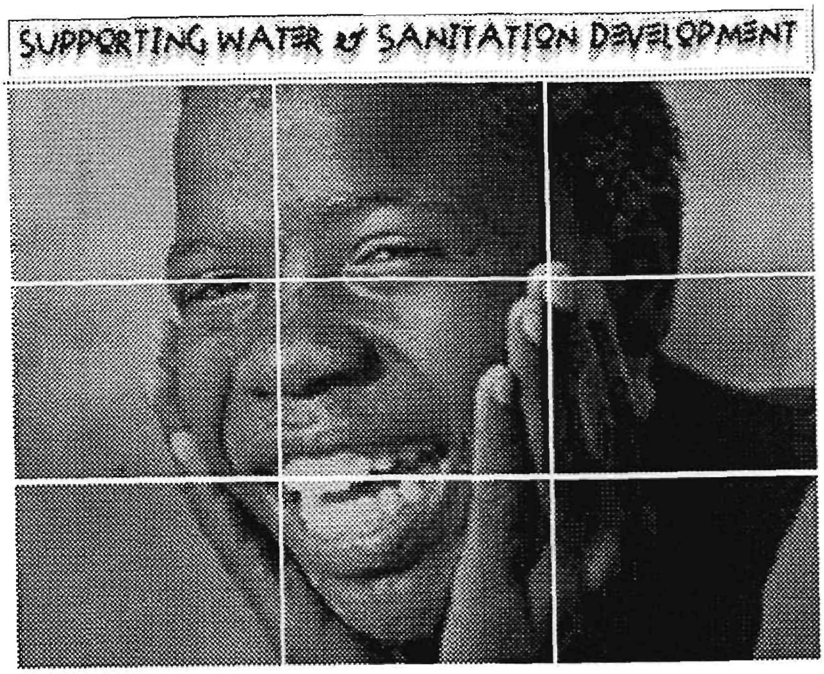
Regional Contacts

Select your region



(click on your region on the map for area specific detail)

You are visitor number: (since April 1999).



Last Updated: 18 May 2000

Welcome

" The rights of children must be protected and ...
centres with proper health facilities, counselling and other support services must be provided for children"

RDP 2.13.17

Click on the section of interest

E-mail

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082 820 99 90

The Cancer Association of South Africa has as its Mission Statement to fight cancer and its consequences in partnership with all South African communities and relevant stakeholders by providing direction for and supporting the following cancer control components :

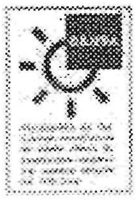
- Health promotion through prevention and early detection.
- Patient service facilitation.
- Research to enhance the above.

CANSA was established in 1931 and is registered as a Section 21 Company 'Not For Gain'. CANSA is the only non government organization in South Africa with the sole purpose of fighting cancer. For a more in-depth look at CANSA click here.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) annually sponsors the World **No-Tobacco Day** to call attention to the seriousness of the impact of tobacco on health. Read on...

Every entrant who selects the Cancer Association of South Africa as the beneficiary of their personal efforts, will make a difference in someone else's life. Read on ...

Our guides are now online!



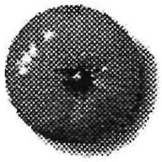
- Families
- Farmers
- Sportsmen

Direct Sunlight
The direct sunlight debate rages on @ The British Medical Journal. Read on.

Prevention
It is estimated that 1 in 4 of all South Africans will be affected by

CANSA's annual **CUPPA FOR CANSA** campaign will again take place in June and this year aims to raise the grand sum of R1-million for the fight against cancer. Read on ...

DIET AND CANCER
by Professor Walter Willet



A lecture tour sponsored by CANSA and the Tomato Producers' Organisation.

Trying to stop smoking?
Check out www.quitnet.org

Help
The Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA) thrives on volunteer, donations and funding support from the community. If you would like to help, click here.

Research
South Africa is a natural laboratory for cancer research. Read about how CANSA researchers are dealing with the South African context.

The Cancer Association of South Africa has noted with concern the reports in the press of **scientific misconduct** in a cancer research study reported by Dr W.R. Bezwoda... read on.

South Africans will be affected by a cancer diagnosis in their lifetime. Cancer can be prevented. Read up on how.

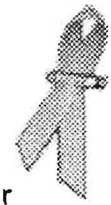
Diagnosed?
A diagnosis of cancer is always a shock, to both the patient and the immediate family and social circle. For info on support read our 'diagnosed?' section.

Information
Cancer is not just one type of disease. It is a name given by the Greek physician Hypocrites in 400 B.C. to a collection of diseases that are identified by a common characteristic: uncontrolled cell growth. Do you want to know more? Read our cancer information section.

Eye Cancer
For those looking for eye cancer info check out this great site. www.eyecancer.com

Bezwoda... read on.

BEAT
BREAST CANCER
keep in touch.



October was
National Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

News.
Check out the latest news .

Find out what CANSA Research is doing by clicking on the above image.

CANSA Toll Free 0800-226622 (RSA ONLY)

XIII INTERNATIONAL AIDS CONFERENCE

Daily Reports and Updates from Key Correspondents at AIDS 2000 in Durban

New this Week

News

Radio Exchange
Job and Study Opportunities
Beijing +5 in Africa
Women & Human Rights
Preventing Violence Against Women
Gender in Parliament
Health
New Communication Technologies
Women and Enterprise
Gender Links and Resources
Directory of SA Women's Organisations
Women'sNet Archive

Women'sNet

Women'sNet is a vibrant and innovative networking support programme designed to enable **South African women** to use the Internet to find the people, issues, resources and tools needed for women's social action.

about Women'sNet | Women'sNet updates | search this site | Women'sNet archive | calendar of events | bulletin board | contact us

Women'sNet was initiated by SANGONeT & the Commission on Gender Equality
Women'sNet is housed at SANGONeT: PO Box 31 Johannesburg 2000
13th Floor Longsbank Building 187 Bree St Johannesburg
Tel: +27 11 838-6943/4 Fax: +27 11 492-1058 email: women@wn.apc.org

INTERFUND

AGAINST POVERTY AND INEQUALITY
FOR DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY

WELCOME TO INTERFUND'S WEBSITE!

INTERFUND is currently undergoing
a major restructuring process,
redefining its mission, vision, objectives,
principles, strategies and programmes.
The relevant pages on this site will be updated
as soon as this process is completed

**This site is best viewed through Netscape Communicator 4.0.
We are working on expanding the range of fully compatible browsers.
Please be patient!**

The site was last updated on 6 July 2000

SITE MENU

INTERFUND-
a snapshot

INTERFUND's
development
objectives and
principles

INTERFUND's members

Applying for funding
from INTERFUND

INTERFUND's
project partners (1998)

Reviews,
publications
and other resources

Integrating
AIDS-awareness into
project cycle management

Integrating
gender into
project cycle management

INTERFUND's
Capacity-Building
Programme

Development Update

INTERFUND:
an organisational profile

Founded in 1986, INTERFUND is an international development agency working in Southern Africa.

INTERFUND is a consortium of donors based in Scandinavia and Europe who have pooled their resources around a common set of criteria and policies to advance development and democracy in Southern Africa.

The consortium mobilises resources - financial and non-financial - to support the initiatives of voluntary sector organisations. Where appropriate it collaborates with government departments. INTERFUND seeks to forge effective partnerships between like-minded development organisations in the North and South, based on shared goals and working principles of openness reciprocity and joint initiative.

INTERFUND appraises, finances, co-implements, monitors and evaluates programmes on behalf of its donors and member agencies. As well as funding, the consortium provides other forms of programme support, designed to improve the quality of development work. It facilitates exchanges of information and development experience, within Southern Africa and between North and South. It also lobbies actively on issues of social justice, the strengthening of the voluntary sector and the consolidation of democracy in Southern Africa

INTERFUND provides support to some 110 programmes in nine developmental sectors, ranging from land and rural development, to housing and local government, to promoting human rights and democratisation

In collaboration with the South African National NGO Coalition, INTERFUND publishes a quarterly journal *Development Update*, which is fast establishing itself as an unrivalled source of information and debate on the local voluntary sector and on development

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TO THE TOP

THE CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT AND ENTERPRISE

CDE: at the leading edge of South African policy analysis

- CDE gives evidence at parliamentary hearing
- CDE comments on government's Draft Immigration Bill
- White Paper on International Migration
- CDE Focus: Housing in South Africa - Significant Government Achievement Based on Public-private Partnership
- Encouraging small business: Is government doing more harm than good?
- Policy-making in a new democracy: South Africa's challenges for the 21st century

About CDE

PUBLICATIONS

CDE FOCUS

DEBATES

LECTURES

UPCOMING EVENTS

ROUND TABLES

CONTACT US

Funded by private donors, CDE was established in August 1995 to play a critical role in post-apartheid South Africa. In essence, CDE is a business-funded policy research and advocacy organisation that aims to develop policies on crucial national issues. In so doing, CDE aims to influence national policies. CDE's audience is decision makers throughout the country - those in all levels of government, business, community organisations, trade unions, NGOs and the media.

CORE AREAS OF RESEARCH

- Urban development
- Migration
- Demography
- Politics
- Economics
- Business and Society
- Regional Planning
- Policy studies, analysis and advocacy
- Development

{Best viewed on Netscape version 2.0 or higher, with a 256 color monitor}

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