



When Media Corrections Are Not Enough

In earlier alerts, we discussed the need to respond to media inquiries rather than telling reporters "no comment." Clients often ask a related question – whether they should directly contact important constituencies or stakeholders (such as customers and business partners) in addition to giving their views to the press. A [recent study in the journal *Political Behavior*](#) illustrates why our response is often an emphatic "yes."

Brendan Nyhan at the University of Michigan School of Public Health and Jason Reifler at Georgia State University's Department of Political Science conducted a study to learn whether false or unsubstantiated political beliefs can be corrected with accurate factual information when that information is presented through news articles alone. Earlier research found that *directly* providing relevant facts can sometimes change opinions, but Nyhan and Reifler wanted to know whether people with strongly held views change opinions when they learn corrective information through more typical, indirect means, such as news articles.

They found that when people with strong ideological preferences were presented with facts contradicting a statement supporting their predispositions, the corrections alone did not work and sometimes "backfired," actually *strengthening* the misperceptions among the most strongly-committed people. *Why?* Nyhan and Reifler suggest that these individuals act like lawyers when reading the corrections and immediately form counter-arguments to support their original beliefs, in the process becoming *more* convinced that they were right.

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(May 12, 2010)

Although the study focused on politics, organizations dealing with a public issue or crisis can learn the following from the study and our experience:

- While advocating in the media is an important component of any public policy or crisis strategy, it might not turn around stakeholders with hardened views based on misinformation;
- To maximize the opportunity to change opinions among the most negative stakeholders, a public policy or crisis strategy should include direct communications with key stakeholders that individually addresses and corrects inaccurate or incomplete views; and
- Commenting to the press is still an essential tool for correcting misinformation among the majority of stakeholders, as are corrections themselves, which we believe are critical to form the complete record about the coverage of an issue.

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