

## **Press and Media**

**Mark Borkowski, Borkowski PR**  
**Julia McKenzie, BBC**  
**Facilitated by Katy Fuller, Artichoke**

Mark Borkowski (MB) began by talking about his early career as a theatre publicist in Swindon in 1981. He had no experience, processes or money to generate interest in the theatre, so he drew on the most important and effective way to get an audience, which is word of mouth. What generates word of mouth, according to MB, is “transformational story telling”. Nearly everyone involved in the theatre is interested in narrative. Narrative is also crucial to a media campaign. To engage the media you have to tell a story and involve the narrative in the very framework of the publicity campaign. It is important to talk to people within your organisation who will go out and talk to others - so the most important people, in this respect, might be the clearers, not the press manager.

This principle was something practised by Phineas T Barnum (MB’s muse!). He had a lot of respect for his audience, but he understood that the audience had to go away and tell the stories of what they had seen in order to entice other people in. We are all involved in fantastic projects and we have to use our creative imagination to drive the story in the media.

When MB did the publicity for Arkaos, he went back to the idea of getting people talking, so he took the, then unknown, circus company out into the street. You need to be bold enough to take the story out to people. Visual images stimulate conversation.

You need to think about the motivations of the media. These days, this is not just an issue of traditional media as we now have much more immediate forms and we’re in a 24/7 news generation. People take pictures on their mobile phones and can send them straight to paparazzi syndication sites and put them on their blog. Many in the “performance generation” don’t use the web to their advantage yet.

The main motives of the media are sex, humour, fame and controversy. We think these are modern motives, but they are not. MB showed a picture of a woman called Tempest Storm taken in 1947. She managed to establish herself as a star from having no background. Again, it was about boldness and understanding what motivated the media. Salvador Dali made a waxwork of his head at a press conference, which created outrage. Banksy has totally controlled his media presence, with no money and no, initial, power. He has played with outrageous images and culturally political things.

Stunts are the way to make it work. Warner Brothers were creating publicity for *Gone With the Wind* seven years before the film started; it consequently opened to the greatest box office success of any movie. Every shop was ready for the Scarlet O’Hara dress. Movies play around with these things. For *The Simpsons Movie*, a cartoon of Homer was created next to the Cerne Abbas Giant. Everybody was talking about it.

The internet is a fantastic tool that we all have in our hands. It's never been a better time to be a publicist, because it's a free tool. MB has just relaunched Wispa using Facebook and very little money. In 1987 when it was first launched it cost £8.5 million. Even modern terrorists are using the web to create terror, such as for 9/11. In MB's opinion this was the darkest, most gruesome and most brilliant publicity stunt of all time. This is the terrorists' own form of transformational story telling. There was a 15 minute break between the two planes going in which meant that the world was on the spot and ready for the second photo opportunity when it happened.

We all have the power, but we have to be bold. It's not about your budget, it's about your approach. MB thinks that the critics are dominating theatre publicity at the moment and this is the wrong way round. We have to craft the story instead of them.

Katy Fuller (KF) then talked about the media campaign and coverage for *The Sultan's Elephant*. Ben Chamberlain managed the media campaign and, as with the marketing, everything had to be kept as secret as possible in advance of the event. KF showed one of the folders full of press clippings on the show. Some connections were made with some specific journalists (Lyn Gardner, Jane Edwards, Clifford Bishop). They were taken to France to see the show, but they were under an embargo preventing them from revealing the details before it happened in London. They were allowed to write about the company but not the particular show, and certainly not to show pictures of the elephant. The kind of features they would write and when they would be published were firmly in place.

In the end, however, only one paper published what and when they said they would and the rest ran spoilers, often because the editor did not agree to the terms agreed with the journalist. *The Guardian* actually ran a "papped" picture of the elephant in rehearsals, at Battersea, a day before it was supposed to. Although this was a disappointment, in some ways it marked a turning point because, from there on, the show became a news story rather than staying on the arts pages. Rather than getting reviews, Artichoke was getting news stories, headlines and a slot on *The Today Programme*. The job of the press team became simply to facilitate the press to get the best pictures and so on.

There were a few things that helped towards the widespread coverage of the story. There were elections the same week as the show which meant that there were lots of journalists in the area at the same time who went on to write about the show having happened across it. Equally, the fantastic images of the show with the backdrop of iconic London buildings was a real bonus in getting coverage.

One thing that hindered the media campaign was the fact that Royal de Luxe wasn't very well known in this country. The company has always been quite secretive and not interested in promoting itself through a website so it was difficult to make people understand what the event was going to be like.

There was not a lot of TV coverage for the show, mainly because the event days were over a weekend when there are fewer people working on the news shows and it is more difficult for them to get coverage.

In terms of the spread of media coverage, there were pieces in *The New York Times* and *The Beijing Post*. The most surprising bit of coverage was *The Daily Mail* or *The Sun*. Most disappointingly, there was hardly any coverage in *The Evening Standard*, which was a real shame, because the show was about Londoners and their city. Not many papers reviewed it as a piece of theatre.

KF finished by reading out the following extracts from reviews by Lyn Gardner and Michael Billington.

*If art is about transformations, there's no more transforming experience than The Sultan's Elephant. This is a show that disrupts the spectacle of everyday life and transforms the city from an impersonal place of work and business into a place of play and community. It does something very simple and important: it makes you feel incredibly happy and it gives you permission to let your imagination take flight. ...What the Sultan's Elephant represents is nothing less than an artistic occupation of the city and a reclamation of the streets for the people.* Lyn Gardner, The Guardian \*\*\*\*\* 6<sup>th</sup> May 2006

*So The Sultan's Elephant has come and gone. And, without wishing to sound misanthropic, I am tempted to say good riddance. It doubtless made many people harmlessly happy. But its touted carnivalesque qualities were not apparent to anyone trying to get around Oxford Circus on a baking summer morning. More importantly, I question whether this kind of diversionary spectacle can really be classified as "theatre"...What it does do is appeal to the mood of infantilism that seems to be taking over. Whatever happened to adult scepticism and rationality? For me The Sultan's Elephant is simply a spectacular irrelevance to the real business of theatre.* Michael Billington, The Guardian Website, May 2006

KF then described how the rationale behind the media partnership with BBC London was similar to the desire for *The Evening Standard* to take the story on; Artichoke wanted a media partner which was rooted in London and would give Londoners a chance to get involved and get engaged. Julia McKenzie (JM) then explained that BBC London, as with other regional variants, is a tri-media operation, providing local radio, TV news bulletins and a website. There are 40 local BBC radio stations in the UK, who really want to have relationships with arts organisations and to cover cultural events. BBC London has a young and diverse audience, unlike most BBC local stations.

JM knew Ben Chamberlain already and trusted his opinion, although she wasn't initially convinced about the show because it is so hard to describe. She went to see the show in Amiens, along with other journalists, and so was able to see it in context, and that impact was key. JM's journalist colleagues at BBC London were more sceptical, but the buy-in of other major players such as TFL and the Mayor of London, made it clear that it was a significant event. The secrecy aspect was also quite tantalising to the journalists and the sense that they would be part of a club helped to get them on board.

The BBC always covers arts and culture on a day-to-day level, but the difference between this standard cover and a full-blown media partnership is that in the latter, both partners give each other more time; *The Sultan's Elephant* got more coverage in return for Artichoke allowing BBC London more access than other media and acknowledging the support. BBC London also usually provides lots of information on travel, so given that there was a lot of travel disruption over the elephant it was also useful that they could disseminate this information. Other media partnerships with BBC London include the Notting Hill Carnival, London Film Festival and the London Marathon. BBC London has to devote more staff and resources than for normal coverage, so it is important that it is sure it is the right thing to support, but it is a rich, fulfilling relationship.

KF asked what coverage there was on the website, radio and television.

JM replied that the TV was hardest to get. She thought that the local elections were detrimental rather than beneficial, as KF had said, because TV gave time to the elections rather than the show. It was also made harder because there were no moving images available before the show, even when the embargo was broken. The other stumbling block was that TV wanted access to the build site at Battersea but Royal de Luxe would not agree to this, so TV was alienated at an early stage. MB added that the issue is that international companies have a perspective on their own media not yours. It's very difficult for them to think about global media so they will always say "we don't do it like this in Germany". In France, companies have a stronger sense of control, so this can be the trickiest. JM felt that it was because Royal de Luxe didn't have enough trust in TV to do it sensitively and not give everything away.

The online coverage was amazing. People sent in their photos so it was very visual, but it also carried lots of useful information about travel and route maps. BBC London Radio was the linchpin, however, as from Thursday it was onsite in a radio car, covering the show as it unfolded. Vanessa Feltz came to see it and then took calls for three hours about it on the Saturday morning. She was totally passionate about the show. JM played an extract of Vanessa's radio show, where she talks very emotionally about how fantastic it is and how everyone must go. She describes the show very vividly and talks about how adults were reduced to having the emotions of children.

Vanessa ended up getting phone calls from a really broad range of Londoners. JM played another extract of a cabbie describing his reaction to the show. Initially he had tried to avoid it because of the traffic, but decided the following day that there was no point in working so took his kids to see it and then described it as life changing. For JM it was magical calls from ordinary people that proved the importance and impact of the event. Many people didn't see it as theatre, but something they could directly interact with. It all made for very vivid material for the radio programmes.

It also drove huge traffic to the website. There were 2.3million hits in all, with 1.9million going to the photo galleries which was unprecedented. A usual news story gets about half a million hits and even the Marathon website didn't get that much.

KF asked whether BBC London saw it as a successful partnership in the end. JM replied that it definitely was, even though it took a lot of resources. The success was in the secrecy aspect and the opportunity to be one step ahead of the other media on such a seminal event.

The session was opened up to questions from the floor.

*Robin Morley (Magnetic Events) asked whether the secrecy of the show was something that the company contractually bound Artichoke to? He asked whether there was a lot of tension between doing the secrecy while striving for media coverage and whether Artichoke got the numbers expected?*

KF responded that there were many facets to the secrecy. It mainly came from the company. In France they are used to the name Royal de Luxe bringing in an audience, but clearly that wouldn't work in London. It also came from the Police because they didn't want too many people to be attracted and for it to become a health and safety issue. There is no way for us to know how many people did come; the only thing that we can say is that it was full!

*RM said that there must have been a projection of the numbers expected in the event plan.*

KF passed the question to Tim Owen (Westminster Council Special Events) who was part of the logistics team. TO said that the total numbers are irrelevant. If all the transport modes are 'full' then that's enough.

*RM also asked MB whether he would have done the press in the same way as Ben Chamberlain?*

MB replied that he wouldn't have done it in the same way, although he didn't think he was the right person to do it. He thought it was foolish to get involved in embargos as nobody does this any more. It was absolutely right to take people out to see it and to convince BBC London to take it on board. The arts need to get out of the ghetto, off the culture pages and into people's lives. He also said that he didn't think it was something that London coped with very well. Shutting down the city for a performance event is hard.

*Michael Morris (Artangel) said that the brilliant thing that Artichoke did was to shrink London so it felt like a small town. This is why people spoke to each other. London felt accessible.*

MB said that for people who don't normally see that kind of thing, it was life changing, but there is an issue about what's next.

*Mikey Martins disagreed. He thought it was a huge example of what street theatre does on a small scale all the time and asked why it has taken so long for the media to become interested in this kind of work?*

MB said it's about the coverage you want. The old male critics want text-based work, but most people don't read the arts pages. Do you want critical acclaim or do you want to reach your audience?

*Les Sharpe talked about marketing as a creative thing, rather than just getting an audience in. The marketing should become as important as the show itself and create its own mythology. For example, greater use could have been made of The Sultan's Elephant newspaper.*

MB said that Les was talking about integration. The book *Disruption* shows how you can make people take notice of the marketing. Flash-mobbing is an example. There's too much detachment between e-bulletin, poster campaign, press campaign etc. Much of this is driven by funding at the moment, so a lot of risk has gone.

*Another delegate added that a whole lot of information is needed to use the web and so on effectively.*

MB said that it is about man-hours and working out which groups you want to engage. It's about getting the best quality of things on Youtube, Flickr etc. It's how Youtube links back to a website and what you have to offer with other elements of online activity. KF added that once you have started there is a huge knock-on effect. On *The Sultan's Elephant* there were 80,000 photos on Flickr on the first day, and conversations between posters, without Artichoke doing anything to encourage the online presence.

*Dave Reeves (Zap) said that, while the elephant was successful in getting press coverage, a lot of other events aren't. What are we doing wrong?! Is there a political hurdle? The live audience numbers don't seem to be reflected in the amount of press coverage we can get.*

MB replied that publicity is often the last thing that's done and the first thing that's cut, and more effort needs to be put into it. It is not enough for a show to be

amazing. There has to be a story to go with it. Also, there has to be an image. People want to be able to visualise things.

*Carol Alevroyianni (Creative Partnerships) said that she has never had any trouble getting into local press, but can't get into the business papers. How do you do this? MB said that you have to read the papers to see what people are writing about. Everyone in MB's company has to do this as a discipline. Learn who to target and find out more about them. What would be a good hook for them to a particular story? They might not even be on the culture pages. It is highly competitive and hard to reach people. Years ago MB employed actors to talk loudly on a train next to a critic to get them interested in something. If all fails, stalk!*

*Robin Morley asked whether MB was saying that if there isn't an exciting story with a project, then create one?*

MB finished by quoting Jim Moran, a fantastic publicist who put humour in front of everything he did. "There's nothing more dismal than a fact."