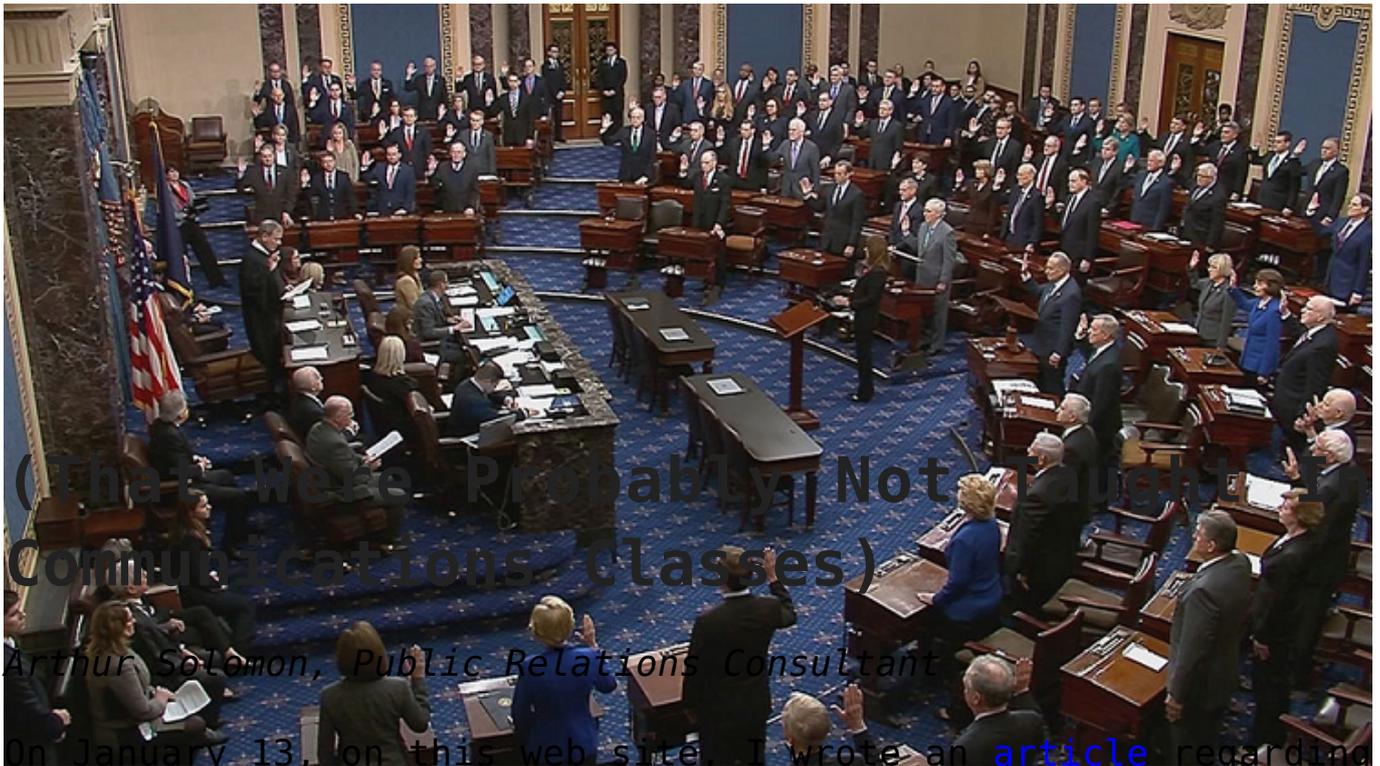


# **Media Lessons Learned From The Trump Senate (Impeachment) Trial**



(No More Probably Not Qual Communications Classes)

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On January 13, on this web site, I wrote an [article](#) regarding media lessons learned from the House impeachment hearings. Many of the examples I listed also applied to none political accounts that most PR practitioners who work at large and small agencies can use.

The natural sequel to that article, I thought, was Media Lessons Learned From The Trump Senate (Impeachment) Trial. And there were plenty.

But before the lessons, there are important happenings that occurred prior to the actual trial:

It's not unusual that before a highly anticipated trial of a celebrity begins for the accused to claim that:

- The charges are untrue,

- That the only reason for the trial is because of false media stories,
- That everyone is lying about the situation,
- That, in this case, it's a witch hunt, and, also in this case,
- How can they impeach me when I'm such a great president?

President Trump has been tweeting a variation of the above for months, but on Sunday, January 12, he seemed unable to make up his mind about his upcoming trial. He tweeted backing for a Senate trial that would include Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Rep. Adam Schiff, Chairman of the House Committee on Intelligence, as witnesses. But a few hours later Trump said he didn't want a trial; instead that the Senate should dismiss the impeachment charges without one. (*Lesson: PR people should never release a statement unless it has been decided that it is the definitive one, the exception being if facts have changed between statements. Doing so will make you an untrustworthy news sources for journalists. Also, if necessary, perhaps as the president should have done, don't forget to take your medicine before releasing statements.*)

In addition to Trump's tweet attacks, there was a lot of the usual give and back comments between Trump and his GOP defenders and the Democrats, but only one statement that no one can quarrel about: It was by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on the December 12 "This Week with George Stephanopoulos" program. Ms. Pelosi said, "Ten months from now we will have an election if we don't have him removed sooner. But, again, he'll be impeached forever." No one can argue with that fact (except some defenders of Trump among my friends, who don't know the meaning of impeachment).

For people who have worked on Broadway shows, as I have, the lead up to the actual trial might remind them of how producers and publicists structured the advance publicity of shows with different daily announcements prior to opening night. The same techniques were used by Democrats in the days prior to the

beginning of the Senate trial.

## **The sequence:**

1. On January 14, the Democratic caucus met to discuss strategy.
2. At about 10 a.m., on January 15, Speaker Pelosi announced the seven Democratic managers who will act as prosecutors in Trump's Senate trial. A few hours later, the House debate regarding approving the managers and advancing them to the Senate began. By early afternoon, both measures were approved.
3. At 5:24 p.m., after a short speech, House Speaker Pelosi signed the impeachment documents and it was delivered to the Senate at 5:36 p.m.
4. After each step, the Democrats made a spokesperson available to reinforce their points and answer media questions.
5. On January 16, Speaker Pelosi again spoke to the press prior to the Democratic impeachment managers reading the charges against President Trump to the Senate, which officially was the beginning of the trial.
6. On January 17, the Democrats released information regarding the relationship between Lev Parnas, President Trump and Rudy Giuliani.
7. Also on January 17, Ms. Pelosi said during a television interview that the Democrats knew more damaging information regarding President Trump would become public, but the new details were not necessary to bring impeachment charges.
8. On Saturday, January 18, the Democrats released its impeachment brief to the media.
9. On Sunday, January 19, Speaker Pelosi ceded the media mikes to Reps. Adam Schiff and Jerrold Nadler, both House committee chairman and impeachment managers, providing the media with an opportunity to get their perspectives on what will happen during the Senate

trial.

10. On January 20, the Democrats transferred the platform to Sen. Bob Casey, and Rep. Gerald Connolly to make their case.

Of course, the great majority of you, if any, will not be involved in political campaigns, local, national or presidential, as I was when my first PR job was with a political firm. But if someone was crafting a publicity program with the objective of receiving continuous and long-term media coverage, using some aspects of the Democratic media plan is a model that should be considered. Some of the tactics resemble the strategy I always used at my two none political agency jobs.

Another tactic the Democrats employed, that I always used, was not to call a major press conference to announce news, unless there was truly blockbusting information. (*Announcing a new and improved car seat cover does not fall into that category, no matter what your client may say; neither does the reformulation of a hair shampoo or the new packaging of a cereal*). The Democrats made their points known by having short meetings with the media, sometime in a group setting, other times via one on one interviews.

*(Because the media turnout at a press conference is never guaranteed, I would arrange interviews for the client with a handful of important news outlets the day prior to the conference, with the proviso that their stories not be released until the conference begins. All of these journalists were long time friends, from the days I was a reporter, or that I forged a strong-working relationship with during my PR days. Caveat: Don't use this tactic with reporters that you can't trust. A reporter breaking the story the day before a press conference can affect the turnout.)*

## **There are important media tactics that people in our business should remember regarding the above before trial tactics:**

- If you have good news, considers staggering its release over several days to gain continuous positive coverage for your client.
- But, if you have bad news, release it ASAP all at once, hoping that it will limit continuous negative coverage, which media history shows is mostly an unfulfilled wish. *(This is still considered a must tactic of PR crises specialists even though it hardly ever works and never will in a major PR crisis. It might have, once in a millennium, during the days before the 24/7 news cycle, never now, regardless of what PR crises specialists say. It's like the still used PR crises maxim that says, "Get ahead of the story," whatever that means.)* Don't believe me. Ask President Trump, Joe and Hunter Biden.
- The way the Democratic leadership crafted their media strategy, so that their messages had a continuing flow of negative information about the president's conduct, should be required teaching in PR 101 courses. Certainly savvy PR practitioners can craft brand and corporate publicity campaigns, as I have done a number of times, so they can be structured to have a long shelve life.

## **Media Lessons Learned From Proceedings During The Trial:**

*(I mistakenly thought the trial was about the abuses to the Constitution by President Donald John Trump. But once it began the Republican senators and their attorneys renamed the trial:" The Joe and Hunter Biden Punching Bag" piñata.)*

Nevertheless:

- Despite his previous hard line stance regarding the

rules of the impeachment trial, Mr. McConnell surprised senators with revising two of the most controversial ones on the opening day of argument, January 21. The majority leader agreed to permit both sides 24 hours to make their case over three days, instead of two days, that he advocated for the previous day, and also said that the evidence gathered by the House Democrats would automatically be entered into the Senate record unless there was an objection. Previously McConnell said the evidence would be barred. **Lesson:** Be flexible, even if it means contradicting yourself to achieve your goal.

- Too often during an agency press conference, the speakers are limited to one or two persons. That's fine for pre and after conference interviews. But I've always crafted press conferences to have several principal speakers so journalists can have various ways of approaching a story to meet the needs of their outlet, assuring significant coverage. During the debate over the rules of the impeachment trial, the Democrats did the same thing. That's a good technique that is too often not utilized. **Lesson:** Don't be penned in by "do-it-by-the-book" tenets.
- January 21, was the day the Senate met to discuss the rules for the trial. But by using a clever technique, introducing numerous amendments to Sen. McConnell's proposed organizing resolution, the Democrats presented their entire case for impeaching the president. **Lesson:** The Democratic strategy should be a template for press conferences and individual interviews: Important points should always be disclosed immediately because, history shows, not all reporters at agency press conferences stay for the entire show, and when a client is being interviewed the reporter controls the clock.
- On January 22, prior to the Senate reconvening, Democratic Senate leader Schumer held a press briefing summarizing what transpired the day before, which again emphasized the Democrats positions. **Lesson:** While it's

not possible to use the same technique the day after an agency press conference, there is a method of accomplishing the same goal that I have often used: It's emailing a document to the reporters immediately after the conference or interviews emphasizing the key client points. Then send another email the following day, asking if any more information was needed. (*But don't be a pest and telephone.*)

- If I was writing a Saturday Night Live skit I could use the words of Chief Justice Roberts verbatim during the impeachment trial session that began on January 21. Justice Roberts admonished both the House impeachment managers and Trump's defense team for using " language that is not conducive to civil " Nothing wrong there. But his statement also reminded the opponents that they are "addressing the world's greatest deliberative body," a ridiculous statement considering that all 11 Democratic amendments were rejected by a party line vote, without having the senators debate them, and that since Sen. McConnell became the GOP Senate majority leader, tabling legislation has become the norm rather than allowing debates. **Lesson:** When preparing remarks for a client, do not use grandiose or embellished language. Make certain the statements agree with the facts.
- The Democratic House managers repeated the same facts continuously during the trial, (much like advertising agencies repeat the same ads many times). By doing so, their messages of Trump's wrong-doings were heard by TV audiences at various times of the days, reaching people who might have not heard the charges earlier in the proceedings. **Lesson:** In order to be successful, a [PR](#) program's message points must be sustained over a long period in order to break through the clutter of others' messages.
- On January 23, an important PR lesson that everyone should remember was played out on national television.

Democratic House manager Nadler played a videotape of remarks that Sen. Lindsay Graham made when he was a House manager for the GOP during the impeachment trial of President Clinton. Graham's statement contradicted his then Clinton position now that Trump is on trial. Shortly prior to the video clip being shown, Graham, who had a script of the power point presentation, left the room, returning when Nadler moved on. **Lesson:** Be careful what you say. It might be used against you.

- Speaker of the House Pelosi gave a lesson that all PR practitioners should remember when having a press conference: Despite being the leader of the Democrats, once the Senate trial began she deferred to those involved in the trial to hold press briefings. Too often during agency press conferences, the ceo, president or other high corporate executives are featured, instead of individuals who really know the details of the subject being discussed. That leads to an unhappy press and sometime disgruntled reporters who says the PR people wasted their time. (*Not good for cementing relations with journalists.*) **Lesson:** Do not schedule a press conference unless you are prepared to have a spokesperson who can provide specific details; never craft a dog and pony show for corporate execs to use as a promotional tool.
- Unlike some PR practitioners, who feel that if a client refers to notes during a TV interview it will give the impression of not knowing the facts, I have always told clients that they should always refer to notes, if necessary. During the q and a sessions during the Senate impeachment trial, the Democratic House managers and Republican lawyers believed the same as I do. It was clearly seen on TV that both referred to briefing books. **Lesson:** A client, or PR person, should never answer a question unless they are positive that what they are saying is correct.

There was also one very important non-media lesson that should be remembered from the trial – the use of email – because it was used extensively by the House managers as evidence against President Trump. Sensitive information should never be emailed. It should be personally walked to others on a need-to-know basis. If the information has to be sent to colleagues in other offices, use overnight mail marked “personal.” Inter-office telephone conversations regarding sensitive information should be avoided, and used only when absolutely necessary.

## **Impressions from the trial:**

- Democratic impeachment manager Rep. Adam Schiff was far and away the best messenger during the trial, resulting in providing him with a national reputation should he seek higher office.
- The Democratic media strategy before, during and after the trial was the first time in many years that the Democrats’ tactics bested the Republicans.
- President Trump’s “scam” and “hoax” remarks during the trial seemed old hat and didn’t receive much press coverage.
- Throughout the trial, the defenders of the president provided minimal evidence to contradict the impeachment charges.
- The lameness of cable TV news was again evident during the trial. During the trial breaks, the fish in my aquarium could have predicted the answers, when the reporters questioned the senators about their views of the proceedings: Democrats replying that their House impeachment managers are doing an excellent job; Republicans slamming the presentations. (*Not exactly a surprise.*)

## **General Observations:**

Despite Senate Leader McConnell not allowing a vote on whether

to allow witnesses until the second week of the trial, the Democratic House managers found a way to use witnesses from the first day of their opening statements: As part of their presentations, they used video of the testimony of witnesses taken during the House impeachment inquiry; also of the president and "Mick" Mulvaney, Trump's Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and acting White House chief of staff, who said at a press briefing that Democrats should, "Get over it. There is going to be political influence in foreign policy," when questioned about the freeze in foreign aid to Ukraine.

The news reporting regarding President Trump's defense attorneys once again confirmed what I've said for decades: Once an entity or individual has been involved in a PR crisis, it becomes embedded in its DNA and can be revived by the media at anytime. That's what happened to Ken Starr and Alan Dershowitz, when they were announced as part of the Trump defense team.

Radio, TV and print media mentioned that both lawyers were involved with negotiating lenient plea deals for sex offender Jeffrey Epstein and that Dershowitz was accused of having sex with an under age girl, which he denied. Stories also mentioned a list of seedy clients that Dershowitz defended. A New York Times story said that "Starr was pushed out as the Baylor University president because of his handling of sexual misconduct by the football team.

TV reporters and pundits also continuously told of the advantage that some Democratic presidential candidates had in Iowa because senators sitting as jurors during the impeachment trial couldn't campaign there and other early primary states. Of course, everyone in our business knows that's nonsense. Because of technology dating back many years, a person in Washington can use video interviews to gain the media exposure in states across the country.

By repeating the same facts continuously throughout the trial the Democratic House managers were pursuing a two-pronged strategy: 1) to convince the Senate to remove President Trump from office, (which they knew would not happen), and, 2) to convince the voting public of the president's guilt so they will vote against him in the November election.

I thought the Democratic House managers did a superb job of presenting the case against President Trump, except for two facets: Too much of their presentation was about the past; too little about how Trump would continue to trample the Constitution and power of Congress in the future if he remains unbridled. They began to make these points later in the trial but it should have been a key message point from the beginning.

As a reporter and editor prior to crossing the line to the PR business, I've always known one truism about media reactions to major PR crises situations, which I've always told to clients: Diversionary public relations or publicity initiatives will result in temporary overlaying press coverage but will still be miniscule compared to that of the underlying predicament. Coverage of media reporting of the Senate trial, compared to the travels of President Trump and Vice-President Pence and other smoke screen tactics they used during the Democratic House manager's presentations, again proves what I've said.

To lift a thought, and some words, from Jason Gay's non-political sports column in the Wall Street Journal (January 24), regarding the baseball sign stealing scandal: (*My take*). Both the baseball commissioner and President Trump seemed to get what they wanted – an in-house investigation and a speedy trial before a fixed jury. But in both cases, suspicious media coverage will continue, because of the past conduct of cover-ups by baseball commissioners, and what the GOP Senate Majority Leader and other "impartial" jurors said publicly about how they would vote prior to the flawed Senate trial's

commencement. Eventually the truth about both situations will become known. Until then the fairness of the in-house sign stealing investigation and the acquittal of the president will linger as a damaged piñata over the heads of baseball commissioner Rob Manfred and President Trump, waiting for the truth about both situations to be revealed by an investigative press, whistle blowers or, eventually, insiders who have had enough.

Because of the Republican control of the Senate, the Democratic leadership knew the chances of President Trump being found guilty were nil to none. But, looking ahead to the 2020 presidential election, they proceeded with the impeachment process.

That's a very important PR media lesson that should be learned from their tactics: When crafting a media-oriented publicity program, it should include long-term as well as short term objectives.

In addition to the media lessons learned from the Senate trial of President Trump, and from the prior impeachment inquiries, there's a valuable personal lesson that PR practitioners who work at small and large agencies should remember: Take contemporaneous notes of your daily activities and what is said to you (you'll never know when you might need them). Be careful of what you say, what you write and what you do because no matter how complimentary your supervisors, top management and H.R. are to you, you're still an employee number. And if circumstances change, (like a new client contact wanting a new account supervisor for an account you've managed for years), even if you've done nothing wrong and everything correct, management will feed you to the sharks if it helps the agency.

## **Final Thoughts:**

- The outcome of the Senate trial was known before it

began. Even before the first words were spoken the outcome was never in doubt. The GOP Majority Leader was true to his word, when he said he would work step-by-step with the White House

- The Democratic House managers' arguments were made with the November election in mind.
- The Republican vote refusing to allow John Bolton to testify was beneficial to the Democrats. If Bolton testified, the outcome of the trial would not have changed. By blocking his testimony, the Democrats can now claim, "what were they trying to hide," from tomorrow to election day.
- I've said for years that when a client has had a PR crisis, as the president has had even before he was inaugurated; it becomes embedded in the individual's or entities DNA and never goes away. It can be revived by the media unexpectedly at any time, even years later. That's not true in this case. In this case, the media will keep the president's crisis alive day-after-day until the election.
- There's another important media lesson that people in our business should remember regarding the Senate proceedings. When a client has a PR crisis, self-designated crises specialists, in this case the president's defenders cannot prevent negative coverage. Only the media can decide when to cease writing about the subject. And there's nothing PR people can do about it. If you don't believe me, ask the impeached president.

Are there overriding media lessons that can be learned from the impeachment trial? Yes there are. In fact, there are four. **Lesson 1:** For the remainder of his tenure, and during his next term if he is re-elected, the president, like Boeing, Wells Fargo, Facebook and so many other individuals and entities that have had major media crises, the president will always

need a crisis team in place, because the negative press coverage will continue as new information emerges after court rulings and new books are published by people who have worked for his administration. **Lesson 2:** Even though much of their advice is flawed, PR employees should consider joining a PR crises firm. It's an aspect of public relations that will always be in demand. **Lesson 3:** If you reach the stage in your career where you will manage a large group of people, be nice to them. If you're not, don't expect them to say nice things about you to the media, and **Lesson 4:** If you are ever interviewed by the press or an investigative body, remember that whatever you say can be used as evidence, if necessary.

The Senate trial ended in the acquittal of President Trump. But the history books will record him as only the third impeached president of the United States. And beginning right now, the day-to-day chroniclers of history – the journalists – will report on his plans to convince a divided country to reelect him in November. And the impeachment of the president will remain a continuing story line. **Media Lesson:** *Despite the best efforts of PR crises specialists, the press will always have the final words.*

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**About the Author:** Arthur Solomon, a former journalist, was a senior VP/senior counselor at Burson-Marsteller, and was responsible for restructuring, managing and playing key roles in some of the most significant national and international sports and non-sports programs. He also traveled internationally as a media adviser to high-ranking government officials. He now is a frequent contributor to public relations publications, consults on public relations projects and is on the Seoul Peace Prize nominating committee. He can be reached at [arthursolomon4pr](mailto:arthursolomon4pr)

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