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News journalism and public relations: a dangerous relationship

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“A lot of people think that British journalism is corrupted. I agree with them. Our job as journalists is to tell the truth, but repeatedly we fail. From the great global falsehoods on weapons of mass destruction and millennium bugs to the daily dribble of routine disinformation and distortion, we serve up stories which are no better than the idea that the Earth is flat.”

Nick Davies (2008)

“Getting PR material into the news is easy.
You just need to know what buttons to press.”

Bournemouth University
BA Public Relations graduate (2012)

When news journalism and public relations (PR) meet in the newsroom, there is tension. These two communication types want incompatible outcomes: independent reporting against favourable reporting. At a time when PR is on the rise, the challenge for contemporary journalism is to produce news that retains a critical distance from its sources, no matter how strong the tide of PR.

That tide has strengthened in the UK because of the phone hacking-scandals of 2008 to 2011 caused by widespread but often-denied illegal and unethical practices when journalists listened in to private conversations. The British press had to wash its dirty linen before global audiences at the televised Leveson Inquiry into Press Standards (2012) which exposed

the interconnected world of politics, lobbying and media power. Weeks of testimony revealed a near continuous exchange of ideas, emails, dinners and favours between Downing Street and News International. These wrongdoings, subsequent cover-ups, denials and public hearings are the nearest the British media has come to its own Watergate, with the closure of Britain's best-selling newspaper, the News of the World. In the endemic tension between journalism and PR, these events have put journalists on the back foot. Old, new and aspiring journalists need to be on extra guard to right the balance.

In this chapter, we offer a critical overview of emerging trends in the relationship between PR and journalism. We ask questions such as:

- The news industry is in flux, the PR industry is growing: how is this changing power relations between the two professions?
- Is unfiltered PR getting into the news more easily, and what are the consequences for independent journalism and democracy?
- How can journalists stem the tide of unfiltered PR and keep news PR-lite?

In gathering answers, we argue that structural and commercial developments in the media industry have led to changes in journalism practice, which are eroding the crucial practices of fact-checking and independent investigation. Meanwhile, the PR industry continues to grow, and is in a good position to exploit hard-pressed journalists by offering them 'news' stories. In this chapter we document how this process of 'PR-isation' occurs. We end by demystifying some of the methods PR professionals use, and offer a number of practical guidelines for independent, monitoring journalists to follow so that they can keep the news PR-lite.

News and the threat of colonisation by PR

In a watchful, modern democracy, a permanent question is: can we trust the news we see, read and hear via newspapers, radio, television, news magazines and online? The traditional answer has been that UK news organisations are staffed by

journalists and editors following a professional practice that produces factually accurate reporting after sources are scrutinized, verified, and if necessary, balanced with alternative viewpoints. We can trust the news this journalism presents to us. Moreover, this journalism has a larger role in democracy: the scrutiny of government and powerful interests so that public opinion can make up its mind about which policies best suit its needs. When honest copy and fair scrutiny are delivered, this is the news media as the fourth estate. It is worthy of citizens' trust and respect.

Since the 1960s in the UK, however, there has been a well-documented loss of trust, with trust in British newspapers, for instance, falling to just 19% according to the Edelman global trust barometer, (cited Greenslade, 2009). The reasons are various and include the rise of 'infotainment', tabloid media and high-profile ethical indiscretions such as phone hacking; the presence of partisan media owners; the 'de-professionalisation' of journalism through the impact of new media (Picard, 2009); deregulation and the retreat of public service media; and the arrival of hundreds of openly-biased commentators on the radio, cable and satellite news and in the blogosphere (Allan, 2010; Thussu, 2007). Whatever the mix of reasons for less trust and respect, research shows the public have low opinions of many sections of the news media (see Cushion, 2009).

We suggest that much of this mistrust is well founded, but our focus in this chapter is different. We are concerned with a more invisible and difficult-to-trace factor threatening modern news journalism. We believe that this is another powerful cause for mistrust, and we turn to academic and professional literature (and to a lesser degree personal experience) to build our case. Our general concern is that the growth of the public relations industry represents a serious threat to the quality and independence of much contemporary journalism in the UK. But in particular, we focus on the PR-isation thesis, which Moloney defines (2010, p. 152) as "the professional state where PR attitudes are incorporated into journalism's mind-set, and where PR-biased material is published without sourcing". We believe that PR-isation is colonisation of the news media by stealth.

The second key concept we concern ourselves with is 'churnalism' (see Davies, 2008). Churnalism is where press releas-

es, agency stories and other forms of pre-packaged material are 'churned out' by journalists "who are no longer gathering news but are reduced instead to passive processors of whatever material comes their way, churning out stories, whether real events or PR artifice, important or trivial, true or false" (Davies, 2008, p. 59). We should see this manufacturing of news from pre-assembled parts as a production process that delivers the sought outcome of PR-isation. For Stefan Stern, Director of Strategy, Edelman, "[Churnalism] is a symptom of a media market where PR has become too powerful relative to news organisations that are too weak" (The Journalist, 2011, p. 15.).

The great Niagara of PR material now descending on newsrooms, and the changes in the working practices of journalists have led to PR material appearing in a disturbingly high proportion of important news stories. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, given the pressures and time constraints news gatherers must contend with, resistance amongst journalists to this increasing colonisation of news by a well-resourced public relations industry is difficult. Through their interviews with practicing journalists, Lewis et al (2008, p.4) suggest a mood of helplessness. We fear a similar lack of concern among much of the seeing, hearing and reading public. PR-isation is well established in the entertainment, celebrity, travel, fashion and consumer news sectors (Moloney, 2006). More disturbingly, PR-isation is also established in the financial, business, healthcare, military and intelligence news sectors (Brown, 2003; Davis, 2002; Miller, 2004). While the practice of political public relations is "probably as old as politics and society itself" (Strömbäck and Kioussis, 2011, p.1), PR's penetration of political news is less straightforward. Political journalists have learned to build a degree of 'metacoverage' of the publicity process into their reporting, with the subsequent demonization and demystification of spin a result (see McNair, 2006; Esser and Spanier, 2005). There is also no shortage of negative news of politicians, despite their best PR efforts to shape coverage in their favour (Barnett and Gaber, 2001). Nevertheless, political journalists are not immune from PR-isation, as was shown in their uneasy, mixed relationship with Alastair Campbell, the most powerful PR person in the UK during his tenure of office as Director of Communications (1997-2003) to Prime Minister Tony Blair.

We view this power shift away from independent journal-

ism to PR-isation as an unwelcome challenge to modern democracy. PR always has consequences for democracy because it is a powerful set of persuasive techniques available to all interests in the political economy and civil society. This wide access, however, has been more theoretical than actual, and it has not brought communicative equality to all interests, pressure and cause groups. Access to PR has been and still is more available to the powerful as a service industry for advancing and defending their positions (Beder 2006a). The imbalance of source access has been documented in various business and government campaigns in Britain and the US from 1914 to the 1950s (Ewen, 1996; Moloney, 2006); in the 1990s in the City of London (Davis, 2002; Miller and Dinan, 2007); and in the current financial troubles in the UK (Mair, 2009; Jones, 2009).

Since the 1960s, the use of PR has widened out to less powerful interests such as small and medium sized businesses, trades unions, charities and protest groups. We see this slow, if uneven, widening access to PR as a positive development because it advances communicative equality in the political economy and civil society. But we do not believe that there is always a clear distinction between ‘bad’ PR done by the most powerful interests and ‘good’ PR produced by the worthy or least powerful. All PR, we argue, is “weak propaganda” (Moloney 2006, p.8) and although its messages are sometimes, even often, socially and individually benign, it is still selected information passed on to advance the interests of its producers and often published without scrutiny or its source declared. When scrutiny by journalism is absent; when facts and opinions are not checked, and sources are not revealed, PR-isation of the media occurs.

View from the front line

Here is an anonymous journalist (in Slattery, 2009), a sub-editor on a regional daily newspaper, reporting on journalistic dependence on local authorities for news copy and the worrying merger with PR:

“There used to be a pride that if something came from a PR you did your best to find opposing voices and new angles to

'make it ours'. That attitude has now gone. There is a lack of journalistic nous. There's no awareness that a local authority might have something to hide. It is just a matter of filling a hole on a page.

Local papers should not be ringing up local authorities asking 'have you got a story?' It is servile. But some papers want to be part of a 'good news' agenda promoting their town. They are hand-in-glove with the local establishment. The sense of distance has totally gone."

News rooms as easy targets for PR entry

How do we explain the steady power shift away from journalism and in favour of PR? A number of factors are making it easier for PR to push the newsroom door open. The first factor we will briefly examine is employment patterns in the two professions, as boots on the ground matter when it comes to rigorous, independent journalism. Lewis et al (2008, pp. 6-8) searched the annual accounts of national newspaper companies filed at Companies House, London, between 1985 and 2004 and compiled a table of average employment of journalists per title. This shows a total of 786 in 1985 and 741 in 2004. They conclude that there is "... an overall pattern of relative stability and gradual increases since 2000". When local news media and the BBC are taken into account, however, a more uneven picture emerges. Nel (2010), for example, calculates that 'the UK's mainstream journalism corps' has dropped between 2001 and 2010 by between 25% and 33% to around 40,000, close to the NUJ's membership of 37,000 members (The Journalist, 2011, p.12).

Another way to look at numbers is to compare with PR employment. The best estimate of PR people in the UK based on 2005 figures is 48,000 (CIPR, 2012), but given the continued growth of the profession at around 6-7% per year (Moore, 2007), we expect that number to have risen to the point where it matches or exceeds that of journalists. Britain is home to the second largest PR industry in the world (Moore, 2007): it has some way to go to match the proportions in the US where PR professionals outnumber journalists by up to five-to-one (McChesney and Nichols, 2010), but the trend is in this direction.

Whilst the employment statistics for journalism might not

be an immediate and pressing cause for concern regarding PR-isation, the changes in working practices are. The backdrop to this has been the radical changes in the news media environment in the last 20-30 years. There have been technological drivers: satellite, cable and latterly digital signals have opened the door for new television channels to be launched without great cost. The regular bulletins on terrestrial television channels have been supplemented with those on new channels. These have been joined by three UK-based channels devoted entirely to news: Sky News, BBC News 24, and for a time, ITN News. Likewise in the newspaper sector, falling printing costs have been one reason for greater pagination and for the launch of free sheets. As a result, newspaper pagination has increased on average by two and a half times compared to 20 years ago (Lewis et al., 2008). The internet has provided further space for an almost unlimited amount of news, and has provided fresh challenges for existing media organisations and opportunities for new entrants. Governments have also played their part in change: they have deregulated media markets, thus ending spectrum scarcity and enabling a more commercially-based media system. Together these influences have transformed the media environment, bringing on an explosion in the number of news outlets, a subsequent fragmentation of news audiences, and more news outlets operating 24/7 across multiple platforms (Jackson, 2008; Gowing, 2009; Thussu, 2003).

The consequences for journalists are inevitably multifaceted and by no means all negative, but one important change is the increased pressure to produce more copy. According to the NUJ (Oliver, 2008), journalists “. . . are spread even more thinly across more media” reflecting dramatically increased pagination and the new demands of online services”. Lewis et al (2008, pp. 6-7) report that “While the number of journalists in the national press has remained fairly static, they now produce three times as much copy as they did twenty years ago”. An outcome of this pressure on workloads is that journalists are increasingly deskbound. This means less time to develop contacts, less original investigation, and more reactive journalism by way of writing up agency copy or PR material. Consequently, many journalists are now processors of news rather than generators. Time pressures also mean that ‘good’ journal-

istic practices of fact checking and balancing; criticising and interrogating sources have been compromised (*ibid.*, p. 6-7).

Whilst the structural and economic dynamics of change account for increased PR-isation, there are also arguably cultural changes that are eroding some of the professional and ethical distance between PR and journalism. Ex-journalist 'poacher-turned-gamekeepers' have always populated the PR industry, but this process has accelerated in recent years, as the PR industry has taken advantage of increasingly uncertain journalism careers. Furthermore, the seniority of individuals flowing from journalism to PR is noteworthy: former national newspaper editors David Yelland, Stuart Higgins, Sir Nicholas Lloyd and, most notably, Andy Coulson have all made the switch, as have Stephen Carter (OfCOM to Brunswick) and Michael Cole (BBC to Harrods). Journalism's loss is PR's gain: former senior journalists with up-to-the minute expertise in constructing the news agenda and who personally know the news makers is an important part of the package offered to wealthy corporate clients. Witness Phil Hall Associates, led by this former editor of *The News of the World*, who boast on their website: "No Public Relations Company knows the media industry better than we do and no one has better access. We take your business right to the top of the news agenda" (cited in Moore, 2007). It is notable that many senior figures in the PR industry, including the aforementioned, have job titles that might not obviously align them with that industry (see Davis, 2002). This role ambiguity only further muddies the waters between the two professions.

PR professionals are also inventive and companies such as Editorial Intelligence have emerged, offering a 'bridge' between corporate PR and journalism through members-only networking. This has drawn controversy for its open attempts to remove some of the ethical distance between the corporate world and journalism (see Barnes, 2006). As well as this, journalism students are being encouraged to embrace PR and consider 'hybrid' careers spanning the two (e.g. Evans, 2010). Together these developments represent a cultural shift that threatens the professional identities of two roles that should be essentially antagonistic. This is not a problem for PR professionals, as a large part of their job is to cultivate close relationships with journalists in order to secure the most favour-

able media coverage as possible for their clients. The problem belongs to journalism, and ultimately society, as public interest journalism struggles with a rising tide of promotional PR.

The investigative journalist Nick Davies in *Flat Earth News* (2008, p. 28) provides a trenchant critique of his own profession. Whilst acknowledging the structural effects of change over time, he argues that the ignorance of journalists is at the root of media failure to meet higher professional standards and to fulfill their informal constitutional scrutiny of powerful institutions in a democracy. Journalism has brought trouble upon itself. He writes that “. . . modern media failure is complicated and subtle. It involves all kinds of manipulation, occasional conspiracy, lying, cheating, stupidity, cupidity, gullibility, a collapse of skill and a new wave of deliberate propaganda”. PR-isation has taken advantage of a sorry mess.

Personal witness

One of the authors of this chapter worked as a news journalist and PR professional before teaching and writing about public relations. Kevin Moloney reports:

“I spent five years on the regional and national daily papers (Yorkshire Evening Press, Bradford Telegraph and Argus and Daily Mail) in the 1960s. There was a pally relationship with the few PRs we were in contact with because they were useful for basic facts and as door openers into companies, police and hospitals, and because they bought us lunches and evening drinks. But we were privately critical of their role because they offered tainted goods (selectively biased facts and waffly quotes). Their higher salaries made us even more sniffy. When one of the newsroom reporters left for a PR job we were split between condemnation and jealousy. I enjoyed my reporting and front-page bylines went straight to my head!

But the time came for me to change sides and the reason was financial. Newsroom pay was not good (and like MPs until recently, we saw expenses as substitute pay). I needed a mortgage for a growing family and doubled my pay in corporate PR. On that side of the fence, journalists on nationals and trade press were important contacts: well worth dining, wining and winning over. They reached important audiences

company bosses wanted to influence. We were not contemptuous of the reporter's role but deeply suspicious of their need to focus on one negative and make it the lead. Their frequent inability to get basic facts right certainly did get up our nose. And as to their writing ability . . . This combination of positives and negatives led to our standard treatment of them: play them long and patiently to get the least negative version of our important stories into top media so that our powerful stakeholders got the message we wanted them to get."

Colonisation at work

These organisational, technological, professional, cultural and market changes in the news and PR industries have tilted the balance of power in favour of the latter (see Davis, 2002). Since 2000, there has been an "increasingly influential role for public relations professionals and news agencies in the newsgathering and reporting processes of UK media" (Lewis, Williams and Franklin, 2008, pp. 27-8). How does this manifest itself?

Firstly, we should point out that PR is invasive of journalism in many ways, which are often difficult or impossible to identify (see Davis, 2002). PR people operate under non-obvious work titles, and they distribute their material through third party sources (e.g. press agencies). Identification is further complicated by two imponderables. The first is that much PR work is about keeping negative stories out of the media, and thus if identification of PR work depends on counting, it is impossible to enumerate the invisible. Secondly, journalism and PR have become "inextricably linked in a relationship that is largely invisible" (ibid, p. 28). Davis notes that both parties are shy about admitting a demand and supply relationship; and that some PR tactics (e.g. press conferences, photo-ops, surveys) are so embedded into news production that their PR purposes have been mostly forgotten.

In light of these imponderables, we will focus on two PR techniques that can be traced from source with reasonable transparency: media/ press releases and the increasingly used pre-packaged news items. These make their way into newsprint and broadcasts in direct and indirect ways. The direct route is where journalists pick up PR material that is posted on the web as a press release, or sent direct to them via a PR

professional or networking service. Churnalism occurs when these (usually) press releases are published as news with little corroboration. In a typical example, in January 2012 The Daily Mail and The Daily Telegraph both lifted substantial parts from a Waitrose press release about how home cooks are increasingly making their own marmalade. 80% of the Telegraph article was directly copied from the press release (see <http://churnalism.com/ttg5s/>). Similarly, at least eight national news outlets reproduced substantial sections of a press release by the University of St Andrews in 2011 about a scholarship launched in honour of Prince William and Kate Middleton (now his wife, the Duchess of Cambridge), with The Daily Mirror and The Daily Express articles being over 83% lifted copy which was pasted directly into news items.

The indirect route PR copy takes is through newsgathering agencies such as the Press Association (PA) or Reuters. PA is a London-based clearing house of news, matching on an industrial scale, incoming PR sources with outgoing agency reports. The PR material is incorporated, with various degrees of checking and identification, into outgoing stories for journalist subscribers. Often, other news outlets will publish agency stories with minimal scrutiny on the assumption that the agency journalists have already done the fact-checking and verification. The problem is that there are inconsistencies here: some stories are crosschecked more assiduously than others. A number of fake news stories have exemplified this, where spoofs have successfully made their way through the whole range of news outlets because journalists assumed that the news agency had done their fact-checking (see Lewis, 2011).

Another source of inconsistency for the beleaguered journalist is in the credibility of the news agency itself. Take South West News Service (SWNS), who operate a 'news wire' service for journalists. Much of their 'news' emanates from surveys commissioned by companies through OnePoll, whom SWNS own. These surveys are not written up as press releases but as 'news copy' by professionally trained 'news agency journalists' (Moore, 2011). Consequently, according to SWNS, they are "factually accurate, rigorously checked news copy which needs little or no subbing" (ibid). Hence, some mainstream news organisations are publishing many survey-based stories with little or no verification or scrutiny.

These include the story that BMW drivers were found to be Britain's angriest motorists according to a poll commissioned by Go Compare (who offer car insurance), or money worries being the main reason for lack of sleep according to a survey by Premier Inn. Both stories gained widespread national media coverage, with a Telegraph article over 95% copied and pasted from the wire 'news copy' of the BMW story (<http://churnalism.com/duyd9/>). OnePoll news items are not just occasional, but approximately one per day according to Moore (2011), and they are only one of a number of similar survey services. What we are looking at here, we argue, is PR substance with a journalistic layer on top: the OnePoll survey stories are commissioned by companies to help promote a product or service. The appeal for these companies is firstly that they get promotion of their brand without paying for advertising, and secondly, their product or service benefits from the third party endorsement that the process of journalism (at least theoretically) offers. According to a testimonial on their website, "The team at OnePoll knows precisely what editors want, how to present the material and how, at the same time, to get a key message across to a mass or targeted audience". The reading public is encouraged to view this as independent journalism, when it is at the very least "branded news" (in SWNS's own words) (Moore, 2011).

The research of Lewis et al (2008a) estimates that 80% of published news stories in 'top end' news outlets (national newspapers and broadcast news) come from the direct (press releases) and indirect (news agency) routes we have described above. In more detail, Lewis et al. found that 41% of press articles and 52% of broadcast news items contain PR materials that play an agenda-setting role or make up the bulk of the story (with broadcast news items much more likely to involve agenda setting). Given the methodological challenges of finding PR content in news, the figures suggest this is a conservative estimate of PR-isation. A further 13% (press) and 6% (broadcasting) could be added to the above figures where the involvement of PR seems likely but could not be verified.

It would be a mistake to claim that because around 80% of stories emanate from PR/ agency copy that this number of news stories are not news. PR represents a multitude of journalistic sources that often have inherent newsworthiness. Often, as with

a senior politician's statement or a company in the eye of a media storm, journalists will need to use chunks of a press release verbatim. Whilst this is entirely justifiable, good journalism practice includes adding additional material – commentary, supplementary information or opposing perspectives. This process is under threat in hard-pressed newsrooms but without it, the public receives a partial view of the issue at stake.

In their defence, journalists could also argue that churnalism is mostly accounted for by harmless stories such as the quirky surveys commissioned by OnePoll's clients. Nobody is hurt in these stories, and their role is largely to draw audiences in with an entertaining or attention-grabbing headline (see Sabbagh, 2011). The evidence does not appear to support such a sanguine view. Aside from the question of how far such 'infotainment' drives out hard news, churnalism stretches beyond light news-fillers to issues of public policy and regulation. Moore (2007) gives the example of a "major medical breakthrough" in hip replacements that was covered by eight national newspapers and many local and regional papers in 2003. These stories were all based closely around a press release issued by Barnet and Chase Farm Hospital Trust, though further investigation found that the press release emanated from a campaign by Kaizo PR on behalf of healthcare manufacturers, Zimmer. The aim of the campaign was to raise awareness of the product and stimulate demand through the NHS. There had been little clinical trialling of the product and after this had been conducted, it was found that the 'breakthrough' product offered no long-term benefit for the patient.

Lewis et al.'s (2008a) study offers further reason for concern about the democratic implications of churnalism: they found that the corporate/ business world is three times more successful than NGOs, charities and civic groups at getting PR material into the news. Furthermore, government was the single most successful source at getting its PR material transformed into broadcast news (39% of all received PR materials), a figure which dwarfed NGOs, charities, professional associations and citizens combined (15%). Perhaps we should not be surprised at government dominance in PR material supply, given that it has over 3000 press officers and it communicates public safety information such as crime, traffic and weather warnings. But remembering that civil society groups

(e.g. trades unions, churches, charities, protesters) are often in conflict with government and are much less well resourced, the imbalance suggests that the public do not receive a balanced account of all public policy issues.

Keep your distance

Whilst we accept that the symbiotic relationship between PR and journalism implies regular contact, journalists, especially news reporters, should keep their distance from PR people because of role incompatibility. This conclusion is fundamental to our argument. While we note the vehement dislike by some journalists of PR (Brants et al., 2011; Jempson 2004), we are not anti-PR in a blanket way. In pluralist democracies with free markets, we accept that ideas, goods and services and people will be promoted. PR is probably today the most frequent and maybe most effective device for self-promotion, measured by volume of messages (Moloney, 2006). In these democracies, PR is inevitable and the scrutinising role of journalism is essential. Our concern is whether the contemporary news media in the UK are up to the job of effective scrutiny. Our worry intensifies because PR-isation, we argue, begins as a material transfer of words, briefings, data, and then turns into an ideological transmission of PR attitudes into newsrooms. Despite similarities of form and language, PR and news journalism are chalk and cheese. The former is advocacy, and is always a partial case; the latter is reportage, done with cross-checking and scepticism. They are two communication systems that should remain separate in a healthy democracy.

Keeping news journalism PR-lite

How can the newsroom prevent colonisation by PR? How can journalists see through the agenda of their sources? Here is a list of signs for the aspiring and practicing news journalist to watch out for, and ideas they can adopt to face this challenge head-on.

Be sceptical when PR professionals present themselves (mostly) as helpers. Most reporters develop an innate suspicion of this stance, without being rude or aggressive. This caution is right. The easiest material identifier of PR help is detailed briefings of the background to a story, especially in

technical areas. These briefings are usually written in a journalistic style and are easy to embed into news copy. PR people also offer access to internal experts and senior managers whose quotes make the story more likely to lead the news. Many stories are inherently complex (financial takeovers; technical calculations; fraud investigations) and need time and competing explanations for the reporter to understand. For example, in Spring 2010 first reported estimates about the volume of oil being spilled from BP's destroyed rig into the Gulf of Mexico were later revised by 'independent scientists' upwards 'as much as 10 times' (BBC, 2010). Lower estimates initially provided by oil industry 'experts' suited the purposes of BP who were keen to downplay the likely effect of the giant oil spill. These initial, misleading estimates remained largely unchallenged by reporters who appeared to accept industry estimates at face value.

Similarly, media reporting of the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station disaster largely relied on nuclear industry experts and Japanese government spokespersons for their assessment of the likely impact of the radiation leaks, despite a long history of secrecy and cover up by these same authorities (Wareham, 2009). The risk of meltdown which occurred at three reactors was dismissed as highly unlikely by industry 'experts' invited onto news broadcasts. Later reports showed there was a systematic cover up of the extent of the damage, the plant's potential vulnerabilities and the radiation exposure levels workers endured in the clean-up operation (BBC News Online, 2012a; 2012b) The lesson of Fukushima is check data with multiple sources. No wonder journalists get stories wrong first time round – even specialists!

Oscar Gandy's (1982) notion of an 'information subsidy' offers an academic account of these helping hand tactics. It offers an explanation of how PRs do their colonisation. He observed the behaviour of Californian big business dealing with the rise of environmental and consumer pressure groups and of politicians more critical of business operations. He wrote of the "modern public relations firm" supplying information to the media "on behalf of those with economic power" (p.64). The media accept material because it reduces their costs. PR "plays the central role in the design and implementation of information subsidy efforts by major policy actors" (ibid). He

notes that “the source and source’s self-interest is skilfully hidden” (ibid). Looked at from the viewpoint of news media managers, journalism that has been subsidised is a cost saving to their newsrooms; looked at from the PR subsidiser’s position, the story is invariably more favourable than if the reporter was left to his/her own resources.

Other forms of PR help are photo-opportunities whereby the famous are shown to the camera at one location and time to all photographers. TV and web news broadcasts are led by pictures, and their editors are often desperate to lead their verbal stories with visual images. To newsrooms, pictures allow a thousand words to be written or read out, and so fill pages and airtime. Press conferences and time embargoes on publication of stories are other PR devices. These mean that a story is released at one time and this is usually to the advantage of PR sources. By not giving a story to one source, this increases the chances of more coverage by obliging journalists to line up at the same place and time for its release. Getting news is a competitive business and a newsroom does not want to miss out on what could be a good story. At the same time, most journalists will want an exclusive and will test PRs to give them the story earlier or with a different angle. Embargo Watch (2010) reports on how accurate reporting of science fares under this sort of popular journalism.

Journalists should be wary of ideas and suggestions from PR sources. They should remember that the PR professional’s role is always to advance the interests of their client or of the causes they believe in. Getting their news into the media is just one means to achieve that advance. Conversely, journalists should always remember that their use of PR will invariably mean tensions with their role as guardians of the public interest: a central pillar of their professional identity.

As we have shown above, not all news agency copy has been rigorously and independently written by agency journalists, and is therefore not always page-ready news copy, despite its appearance. Journalists should check facts and seek their own sources. The journalistic integrity of some news agencies is questionable at best, so journalists should make sure they know when commercial agendas are present and treat the information from these sources with appropri-

ate caution.

Surveys about health care, consumer behaviour, holidays habits, tastes in food and drink are to be treated with great suspicion if they are not funded by scientific, academic and officially neutral sources such as the Office of National Statistics. When these come into the newsroom, checking who is paying and who is doing the fieldwork is essential. Surveys are a traditional way of getting selective data and self-interested conclusions into the news under the guise of apparent scientific/official impartiality. They often come from ‘front’ organisations, bodies with claims to be independent but which, on investigation, are funded by business directly; or indirectly by their PR companies (Beder, 2006a; 2006b; Dinan and Miller, 2007). Civic groups such as the Centre for Media and Democracy’s PRWatch (<http://www.prwatch.org/>), Spinwatch (<http://www.spinwatch.org/>), Alter-Eu (www.alter-eu.org), and the Foodspin project of Powerbase (http://powerbase.info/index.php/Foodspin_Portal) have emerged in recent years with the aim of exposing corporate spin on behalf of the public. They are useful resources for the monitoring journalist.

Greater transparency in sourcing news stories is a thorny issue for journalists, as it could infringe confidentiality of the journalist-source relationship. There are times when sources must be protected. However, as online news continues to erode the concept of journalistic impartiality, more voices are calling for transparency to be the new objectivity (see *The Economist*, 2011). David Weinberger, a technology commentator, has argued that transparency prospers in a linked medium: “Objectivity is a trust mechanism you rely on when your medium can’t do links. Now our medium can” (cited in *The Economist*, 2011, p. 13). Transparency means linking to sources and data, something the web makes easy, and has been applied by bloggers for years. Many mainstream news organisations – even national newspapers which now have large online operations – have been slow to embrace greater transparency. But today in the context of PR-isation, publicly linking sources to news copy lets the reader judge story credibility and partiality for themselves.

In the face of greater attempts on the part of political elites to control the news agenda, political journalists have shown that it is possible to distance themselves from PR

within their copy, by including commentary on the publicity process. This metacoverage can be reflective, edifying or cynical depending on the circumstances. Stories about spin in politics erect “crucial, and commercially valuable ethical distance between two mutually dependent professional groups, in the interest of preserving journalistic legitimacy in the wider public sphere” (McNair, 2000, p. 137). In the political context, spin has arguably been ‘de-mystified’ by such reporting, representing a progressive evolution in our political culture towards one of greater transparency and scrutiny (McNair, 2006). Journalists in other spheres could assert their independence in a similar manner. For example, if they publish survey stories they should make it clear to the public that these are ‘sponsored news’ stories by labeling them as such.

Finally, newsrooms should always remember that PR people often do not have job titles with these letters. ‘Information officer’, ‘public affairs manager’ or ‘head of communications’ are alternatives. This job description variety reminds us of what is more important in spotting churnalism at work: the human source or the content coming from that source? It is the content embedded in the news that the PR literate reporter should be tracing and avoiding. Titles are here today and gone tomorrow: your skills in spotting embedded PR are the professional prize to go for.

But being PR literate does not deny that some content coming from PR people is important and is news. Use PR material where it is news and is checked against other sources. What the Prime Minister says through their spokespeople is often of national importance. What companies or trades unions say about a workplace dispute is often factually true (numbers involved) and explains consequences (job and revenue losses; inconvenience to the public). What Oxfam say about disaster relief is often accurate but may not be the complete picture. The aware journalist uses these basic ‘facts’; quotes sources and notes where they differ. Their news sense, however, is always focused on what data and explanations are not offered; how the data and explanations differ, and the reasons for what is said and not said in public. The wary and independently minded journalist is the best guarantor for PR-lite, if not for PR-free, news.

Challenging Questions

- One of the traditional roles of the media is considered to be the ability to hold authority to account. Does the advent of social media make this task easier or more difficult?
- Governments and corporations are often accused of using “spin” to manipulate public opinion through the media. Have the changes in today’s media landscape made this easier or more difficult for those wishing to “manage” a message?
- Should we see the rise of “citizen journalism” as a threat to journalism and traditional news values of objectivity, impartiality and freedom from bias?

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