

Manufacturing News: Exploring  
how Public Relations Content is  
Presented as News  
From an Agenda-Setting Perspective

A Senior Project presented to  
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## ABSTRACT

This study, conducted in San Luis Obispo, California, analyzes and investigates the relationship between public relations professionals and journalists, the role of public relations in news and how often content developed by the public relations industry is later portrayed as news.

Public relations-developed content has a growing presence in news. This is due, in part to the fact that more people work in the public relations industry than do in journalism fields. There is also a symbiotic relationship between the two industries, which is confirmed by existing studies and scholarly texts.

An effort was made by the author to track the flow of PR-developed content into news outlets.

Data for the study was conducted on the internet, using the *PR Newswire*, a *Google* search and the *LexisNexis Academic* database. The study tracked how press releases distributed via *PR Newswire* flowed to newspapers, news sites and other websites.

An analysis of the data revealed that most press releases reappeared labeled as news, and all press releases reappeared elsewhere on the internet.

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## Chapter 1

### *Introduction*

#### **Statement of the Problem**

For over 100 years, formalized public relations has tried to manipulate journalism. PR history started in the early 1900s with Ivy Lee, who is known as “the so-called father of Modern Public Relations” (Gibbs 1967). Lee established one of the first public relations firms, had his own PR philosophy and managed public relations for the likes of Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, The Rockefellers and the American Red Cross (Gibbs 1967). Public relations has played an important role in American journalism ever since.

This study focuses on the presence of public relations in news. Public relations and journalism both play important roles in the media. They have a symbiotic relationship and work together to put out content that is often labeled as news (Larsson 2009). Like Mark Twain once said, “Many a small thing has been made large by the right kind of advertising.” As a result the audience thinks that they are consuming news when in reality they are consuming public relations spin.

#### **Background of the Problem**

Although public relations industry content has always found its way into news, many argue that the trend is increasing. Public relations professionals have increased, while journalists have decreased (Cavanaugh 2009). The economic collapse from 2007-2008 sped up the trend. *The Pew Research Journalism Project* does a yearly report on the media, and according to the 2013 edition, “the ratio of public relations workers to journalists grew from 1.2 to 1 in 1980 to 3.6 to 1 in 2008—and the gap has

likely only widened since.” Since there are more people working for the public relations industry than there are working for news, public relations has a large presence in what is portrayed as news.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to investigate the relationship between public relations professionals and journalists, public relations’ agenda-setting in the news and discover how often public relations content reappears as news. Investigating this trend will inform readers and scholars as to the growing presence of public relations content in news.

### **Setting for the Study**

This study was conducted as part of the data collection for a Senior Project at California Polytechnic State University located in San Luis Obispo, California. The findings of the study will help establish how much of public relations stories are later spun into news. Public relations stories will be researched on *PR Newswire* and then tracked on *Google* and *LexisNexis* to see where the same stories show up, but as news.

### **Research Questions**

The study used the following research questions to answer fundamental questions surrounding public relations in news and agenda-setting on the side of public relations.

1. What kind of presence does public relations have in the news?
2. How has the paradigm of gatekeeping changed?
3. What strategies do PR professionals use to get their content displayed as news?

4. In what ways is the relationship between PR professionals and journalists symbiotic and how does that account for PR presented as news?
5. What are the long term effects on the news audience of presenting news that is derived from PR?

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms are defined to clarify several of the terms on the topic and assist the reader by providing context to the remainder of the study.

Public Relations Professional: James Grunig, author of *Managing Public Relations*, defines a public relations professional as someone who works in the public relations field producing content for the public and controlling the spread of information between an organization or an individual and the public. Often the information is spread through the news. Gina Rubel, author of *Everyday Public Relations for Lawyers*, said that public relations content is intended to convince the public, investors, partners, employees, and other stakeholders to preserve a certain point of view about a company or business, its leadership, products or of political decisions. A huge part of public relations is working with the press, which involves “building and managing relationships with those who influence an organization or individual’s audiences has a central role in doing public relations. After a public relations practitioner has been working in the field, they accumulate a list of relationships that become an asset, especially for those in media relations” (Kamau, 2009). In other words, the relationship that PR professionals have with journalists is instrumental to success in their career. Other common public relations tasks include speaking at conferences, winning industry awards and employee communication (Rubel 2007).



Journalist: Journalists collect information through research and interviewing sources, and write and distribute news and other forms of stories and information. Journalists are taught to be held to a level of ethics and standards. *The Society of Professional Journalists* believe that “public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy.” Journalists have a duty to further those ends by looking for the truth and presenting the public with an account of events and issues that is fair and comprehensive. “Conscientious journalists from all media and specialties strive to serve the public with thoroughness and honesty because professional integrity is the cornerstone of a journalist's credibility” (SPJ Code of Ethics 2013).

Gatekeeping: Media gatekeeping involves what stories are selected for publication, and gatekeepers are the individuals who decide the stories that will get attention. Gatekeepers are present at many different levels of media, from a reporter who seeks out certain story ideas and sources, to an editor who chooses what is published (Soroka 2012). Media outlet owners and advertisers also function as gatekeepers. Many people consume their news online now, so gatekeepers can also be the individuals who select their own news content.

Agenda-Setting Theory: The news media influences and controls the importance of topics on the public agenda. Traditional agenda-setting deals with the salience of objects, and second-level agenda-setting has linked the concept with framing by suggesting that news media attention can influence how people think about a topic by selecting and placing emphasis on certain attributes and ignoring others. An attribute can be defined as a property, characteristic, or quality that describes an object (Kiousis).

## **Organization of the Study**

This study is comprised of five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the background of the problem, purpose of the study and definition of terms. Chapter 2 will review existing scholarly articles and studies in public relations and news. Chapter 3 will present the methodology of the study. Chapter 4 will present and organize the findings based on the original research questions presented in Chapter 1. Finally, Chapter 5 will include a summary of the study and recommendations for journalism professionals of how to effectively keep public relations out of the news.

## Chapter 2

### *Literature Review*

The review of literature focuses on existing studies and scholarly articles analyzing journalism, news, public relations and how these work together and affect each other. I will explore the decline in the number of journalists and the increase in the number of public relations professionals, public relations' presence in the news, the news gatekeeper, public relations' agenda-setting and the symbiotic relationship between public relations professionals and journalists.

#### **Fewer Journalists, More Public Relations Professionals**

The number of hard news reporters is dwindling, while public relations professionals are on the rise. "The amount of investigative reporting going on in Sacramento has definitely declined over the last decade," says Jon Fleischman, who runs a California politics news site called *flashreport*. "Numbers from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics suggest that in the decade from 1998 through 2007, another field was outgrowing, and perhaps growing at the expense of, traditional journalism. The number of people working as "reporters and correspondents" declined slightly in that period, from 52,380 in 1998 to 51,620 in 2007. But the number of public relations specialists more than doubled, from 98,240 to 225,880." (Cavanaugh 2009).

Amy Mitchell summarized *The 2014 Pew Research Center's State of the News Media* report, and said that although the extensive majority of places producing original reporting still come from the newspaper industry, "those newspaper jobs are far from secure. Full-time professional newsroom employment declined another 6.4 percent in 2012 with more losses expected for 2013" (Mitchell, 2014).

## **Public Relations' Presence in News**

Larsake Larsson discussed the results of a study focused on the PR industry and its implications for society and role in a democracy. The study is based on personal (in-depth) interviews with 64 professionals – information officers and PR consultants, on the one hand, and news journalists, on the other (Larsson 2009).

The study discovered a close and ongoing contact between PR professionals and those working in the journalism field. The contact is mostly one-sided; PR agents tend to initiate the contact and provide journalists and editors with “instrumental news angles with regard to news management.” PR professionals in the study said that they are frequently successful in planting their promotional ideas in newspapers and programs, while journalists mostly denied this claim. However, journalists did admit that the PR sphere acts as a skilled news producer, and that, in times of decreased editorial resources, journalists depend on material from outside sources, which is often a PR source. “A mutually dependent, exchange relation can thus be seen as a summarized picture of the PR-media relationship” (Larsson 2009).

The *PewResearch Journalism Project's* report by Mitchell that, in digital news, the relationship between public relations and news is overlapping more than ever.

“One of the greatest areas of revenue experimentation now involves website content that is paid for by commercial advertisers – but often written by journalists on staff – and placed on a news publishers' page in a way that sometimes makes it indistinguishable from a news story” (Mitchell 2014).

*The Atlantic* and *Mashable* were among the first news agencies to do this technique, known as native advertising. Native advertising “caught on rapidly in 2013,” and is picking up speed. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and most recently *The Wall Street Journal* are currently in the stages of devoting staff to native advertising, usually as a part of a new “custom content division” (Mitchell 2014).

Zvi Reich discovered in his study, *Measuring the Impact of PR on Published News in Increasingly Fragmented News Environments*, that while public relations is becoming more sophisticated and journalism is weakening, public relations’ impact on news becomes greater and more diverse. “A multifaceted examination of their impact on the news shows that items totally free of PR involvement are an exceptionally rare phenomenon: only 40 percent of the items involve no direct input of information and no more than quarter of them are totally free of any kind of PR involvement, as far as reporters can tell” (Reich 2010).

### **The News Gatekeeper**

The original idea of a gatekeeper is that, in traditional news, gatekeepers of the news are primarily editors and producers. Journalism practice studies reveal that the story-selecting work of editors is overpowered by a focus on the prior newsgathering work of reporters (Schudson 1996). Gatekeeping depends on what content has already been collected and made available, and how the content has been collected and produced.

“Numerous studies have shown how newsgathering routines, established news sources, and various commercial and technological factors determine the pool of available stories” (Clayman 1998).

Now that so much of news is online, people can be their own gatekeepers and choose what news stories they wish to consume. “New communication technologies allow information providers to

avoid media gatekeepers and enable audiences to gain control over communications” (Lee 2012). People are selecting their own news online, and what they are reading on the internet is not necessarily accurate. Average people who make up the online news audience are not as skilled at individual gatekeeping as traditional news gatekeepers. Another issue is that readers are clicking on the “most popular” articles, which is a narrow view of all the news out there (Lee 2012). Picking up a newspaper and reading the news stories is a far different experience than going online and reading the most popular articles.

### **The Role of Agenda-Setting in Public Relations**

Public relations professionals have a goal to give their stories news value, so that journalists run their stories as news. Public relations stories are thus manipulated into appearing as newsworthy (Kanzler 2007). “Regardless of the campaign, PR professionals need to tell interesting, believable stories that inspire the target audience to consider new perspectives.” Those new perspectives could be buying a product from the public relations professional’s company or thinking positively of the company.

### **The Symbiotic Relationship Between PR Professionals and Journalists**

The PR industry aims to obtain media publicity. These leads to a connection “between those who aim to influence the media and those who work in the news business” (Larsson, 2014).

PR professionals use networking to alert journalists of their existence, which increases the chances that reporters will reach out to them in search of information. When journalists contact PR agents, there is typically ready-made information to hand out to them. Larsson said “some of the journalists interviewed in the present study stated that PR agents facilitate the journalistic task in this

way.” The study asked PR professionals how they influence the news and they responded that they “inform, tip and give suggestions, or perhaps the most common one – that they deliver ideas for news – as part of their work” (Larsson 2009).

One reason why journalists use PR as a source for news because “Journalism is expensive, investigative journalism ferociously so. PR news is not just cheap, it is free” (Weever 2003).

According to Frank Greve, author of the article *Journalism in the Age of Pseudoreporting*, the rapid increase of bloggers, news channels, web news sites, and trade and specialty publications give public relations professionals more options to infiltrate the news. “Web sites and bloggers are great outlets for spin because they're understaffed and grateful” (Greve 2005). Online news moves faster than mainstream media, like newspapers, and function well as agenda-setters. Another element in the increase of online news journalists working with public relations is that “mainstream news cycles still tend to be daily, and that allows reporters time to check out spin more thoroughly” (Greve 2005).

## Chapter 3

### *Methodology*

This chapter presents the methods used to collect data for the study. Such methods include data sources, collection and presentation of the data, and limitations and delimitations during data collection.

#### **Data Sources**

The content analyzed for this study originates from *PR Newswire*, a major public relations organization that acts as a distribution outlet for public relations industry content around the globe. They are “The world's largest network,” and are paid by individuals and organizations to distribute their content to over 200,000 media points and 8,000 websites. They say that they offer “the most ways to reach your audience online and off.” Data for the study also comes from *Google*’s search results and newspapers in the *LexisNexis Academic* database.

#### **Data Collection**

The data for this study was collected through the internet from May 1, 2014 to May 29, 2014 using the *PR Newswire*, a basic *Google* search and the *LexisNexis Academic* database. The author randomly selected 10 stories on *PR Newswire* and tracked whether and where they appeared in news content via a *Google* search using keywords from the stories. Many of the headlines searched on *Google* showed up on many pages, so while I will state the exact number of results, only the first page of results will be looked at and used for this project. There were typically 11 or 12 results on the first page of the *Google* search. All results from *LexisNexis* newspaper searches will be documented.



## **Data Presentation**

Data from the internet search was interpreted for the purposes of this study. The collected data will be presented in the form of bullet points, with one bullet point per press release. The bullet point will include the headline of the original press release, followed by information on if the press release showed up in *Google* and *LexisNexis* searches, and how many results appeared. The data will then be shown in graphs.

## **Limitations**

The senior project course the author took to compile this study is only 10 weeks long. Due to time constraints, the author elected to read 10 headlines on the *PR Newswire* and the first page of the *Google* results that showed the headline being searched. There were many more results that the author could not document. The data collected is only a fraction of how many places the *PR Newswire* story really turned up in. The author was unable to analyse broadcast news because of time constraints, and difficulty tracking the sources of their content. This study presents limitations due to the timeframe it was conducted and the type of data collected.

## **Delimitations**

The author chose to only look up PR stories that appeared on the *PR Newswire*. The author also chose to only examine newspapers listed on *Google* and *LexisNexis*. *PR Newswire*, *Google* and *LexisNexis* do not represent the totality of all press releases and news. There are many other PR sources besides just *PR Newswire* and other journalistic places besides *Google* and *LexisNexis*.

*Google* and *LexisNexis* do not have a record of all newspapers. The PR stories probably showed up in other journalistic places that the author was unaware of.

Despite the constraints, the author believes the data, collected randomly and free of bias, offers a valid snapshot of the presence of public relations content in news.

## Chapter 4

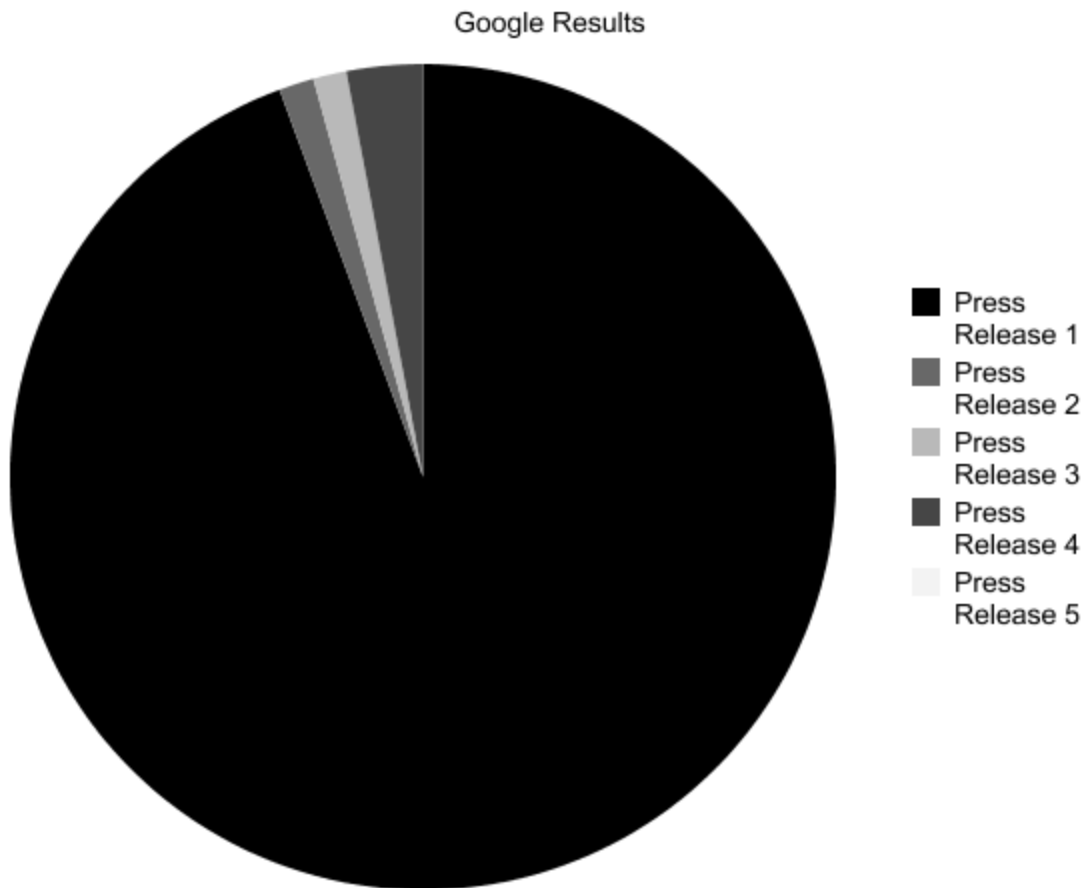
### *Data Analysis*

This chapter provides a summary of the data that was collected from *PR Newswire*, the total number of *Google* search results and the first page of the results, and newspapers in the *LexisNexis Academic* database. There are 10 examples of press releases that were followed.

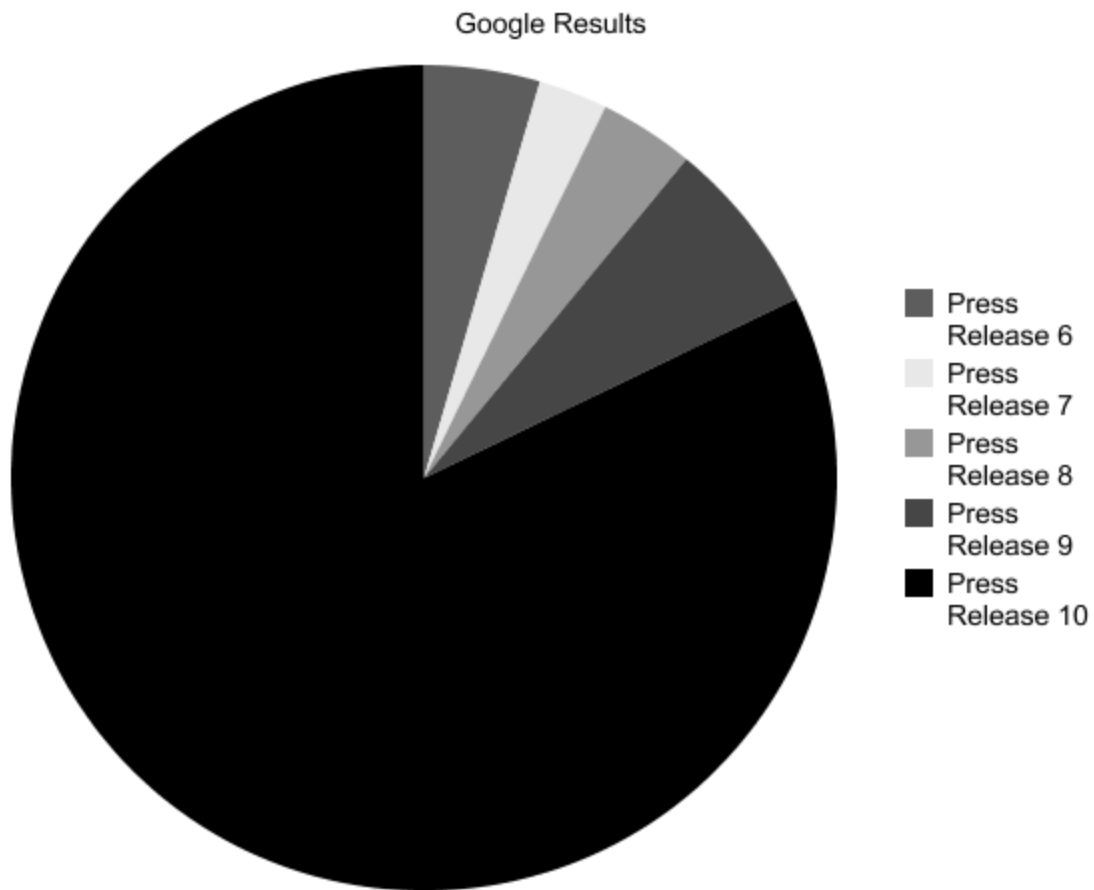
- A May 1 press release on *PR Newswire* was headlined: *Michael Jackson's "Love Never Felt So Good" First Single From XSCAPE Premieres Tonight at the iHeart Radio Music Awards*. A *Google* search showed that this story showed up in 2,150,000 results. *Rolling Stone*, *Huffington Post* and *New York Daily News* were among the four news sites on the first page that covered the story. None of the sites mentioned *PR Newswire* as a source. A *LexisNexis* search turned up the story in 23 conventional newspapers.
- A May 1 press release from the *PR Newswire* entitled *Kohler's Touchless Toilet Technology Marks a New Era in Toilet Flushing* showed up on gadget and three news websites on the first page of *Google*, with a total of 31,300 results. The story also showed up in 17 traditional newspapers, like the *New York Times* on *LexisNexis*.
- A May 2 *PR Newswire* press release was called *Cheap Jay-Z & Beyonce Tickets: BuyCheapTicketsToEvents.com Unleashes Cheap Seats for Jay-Z & Beyonce's Joint "On The Run Tour" for 2014*. This headline did not reappear in any news sites on the first page of *Google*, but it was present in 29,800 *Google* results and on websites such as *iWantPop*, *redorbit*, *imnotobsessed* and *followingthenerd*. *iWantPop* cited the *PR Newswire* as their source but most other sites did not. This story did not turn up in any newspapers in the search results of *LexisNexis*.

- The May 2 *PR Newswire* headline *Statement of US Secretary of Labor Perez on April employment numbers* turned up in 67,700 *Google* results. It showed up in two news sites on the first page of *Google*'s search results and one newspaper in *LexisNexis*.
- The May 2 *PR Newswire* headline *Aviv REIT Announces \$71 Million Of Acquisitions* showed up in 7,740 *Google* results. The press release reappeared on nine traditional news sites on the first page of results, such as *The Wall Street Journal* and television news sites. It showed up on one other site- *Aviv REIT*. The story showed up in 11 newspapers on *LexisNexis*.
- A May 9 *PR Newswire* headline entitled *Vipshop to Announce First Quarter 2014 Financial Results* turned up 17,200 *Google* results and showed up on six traditional news sites on the first page of results, plus the *Yahoo* finance section. The story appeared in one newspaper from *LexisNexis*.
- A May 11 *PR Newswire* press release called *Accounting Firm Gettry Marcus Shares an Arbitration Case Study Conducted by the Firm* showed up in 10,300 *Google* results. *Google* showed that the story appeared in seven traditional news sites on the first page of results, and every site cited the *Newswire* as their source or said the story was from a press release. The story appeared in one newspaper on *LexisNexis*.
- A May 17 press release called *Kraft Foods Group Voluntarily Recalls Select Cottage Cheese Products Due to Out-Of-Standard Storage Temperatures* showed up in 14,100 *Google* results, with nine traditional news sites, and a story on *Yahoo News* on the first page of results. The story was covered in three newspapers on *LexisNexis*.

- A May 23 press release headlined *Sydney is Filled with Colour and Light for the Sixth Annual Vivid Sydney Festival* showed up in 26,200 *Google* results. It was on two news sites and *Yahoo* finance on the first page of results. The story appeared in 16 newspapers on *LexisNexis*.
- A May 29 *PR Newswire* press release titled *Microsoft and salesforce.com announce global, strategic partnership* appeared in 312,000 *Google* results, with 0 news sites on the first page of results covering the story. *Forbes* and *SF Gate* both reported the story, as well as two newspapers on *LexisNexis*.



*Figure 1. Google Results.* This figure illustrates the number of *Google* results for press releases one through five.



*Figure 2. Google Results Continued.* This figure illustrates the number of *Google* results for press releases six through 10.

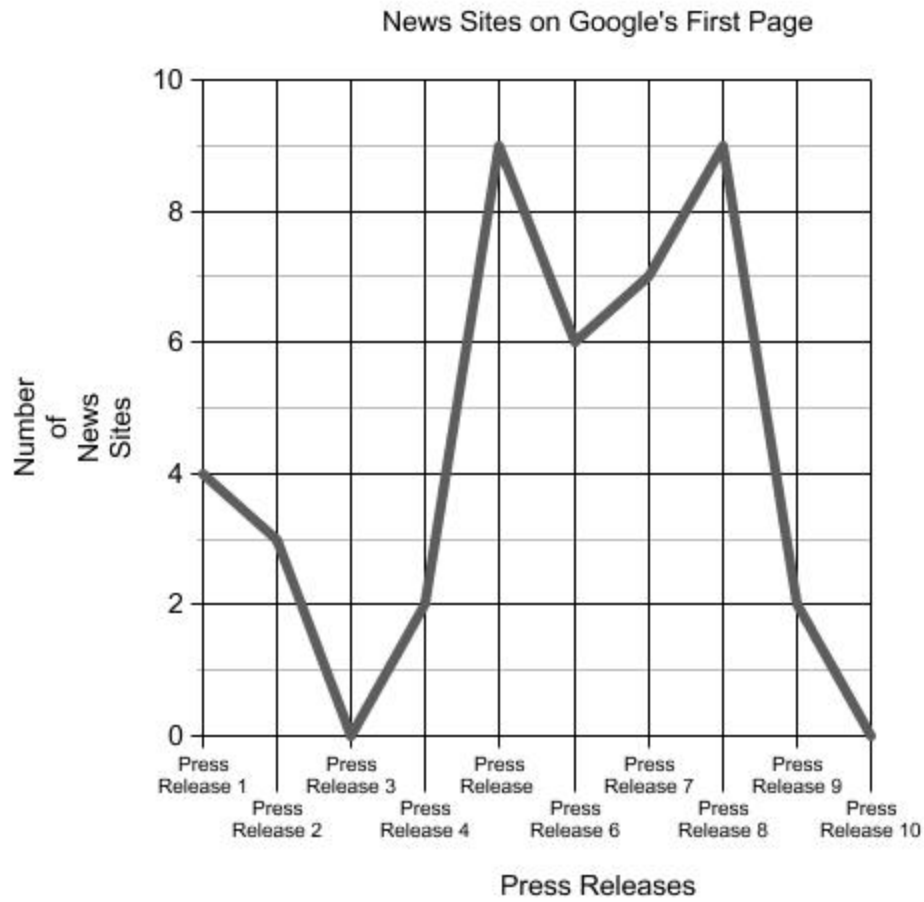
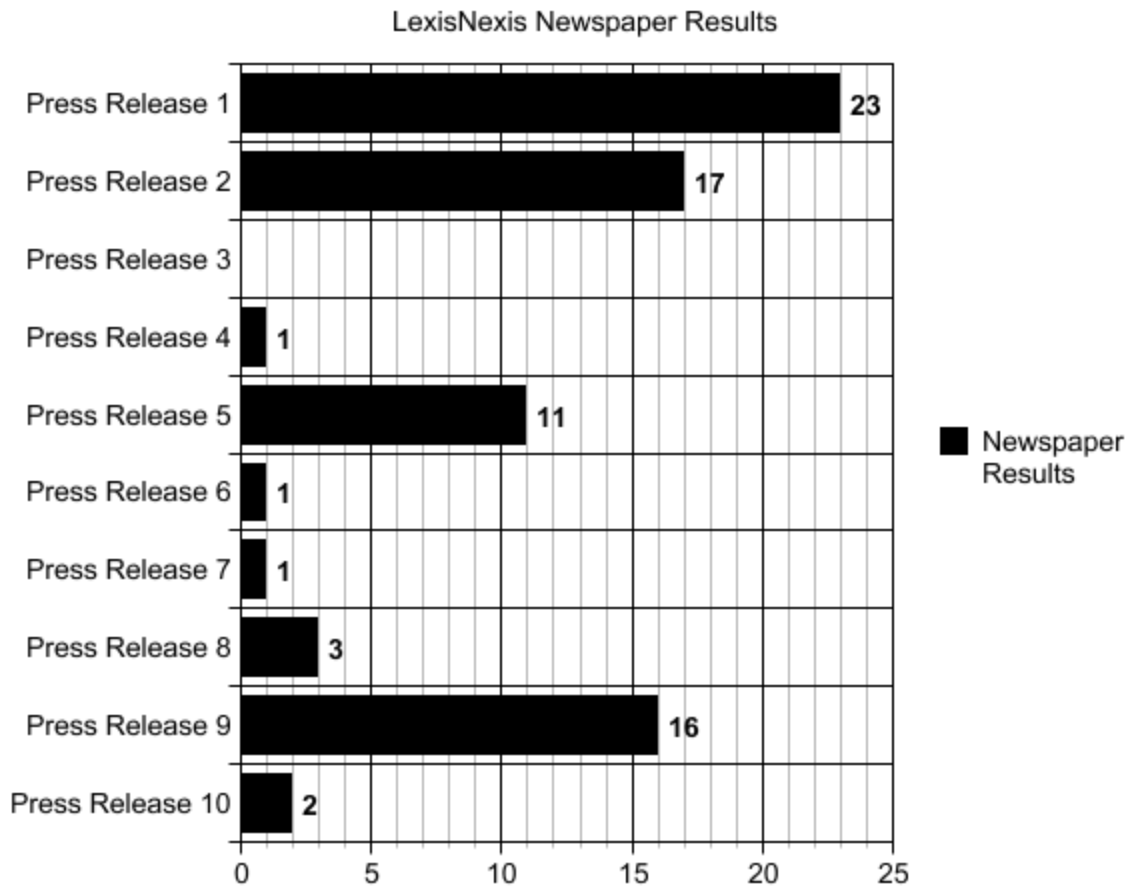


Figure 3. News Sites on *Google's* First Page. This figure illustrates how many news sites on the first page of *Google* contained each press release.





*Figure 4. LexisNexis Newspaper Results.* This figure illustrates how many press releases were presented in newspapers found on the *LexisNexis Academic* database.

## Chapter 5

### *Discussion and Recommendations*

#### **Summary**

This study was performed to uncover the role of public relations in news. Today, news is heavily influenced by the public relations industry. Out of the 10 press releases examined from *PR Newswire*, all showed up on various websites through a *Google* search, and nine appeared in newspapers in the *LexisNexis* database. Collectively, those 10 press releases resulted in 2,666,340 website pages, 42 news sites on the first page *Google* results, and 75 newspapers on the *LexisNexis*.

#### **Discussion**

Analysis of the data discovered in Chapter 4 displays that the press releases and stories collected provide supporting evidence to the existing literature in Chapter 2, which allows for conclusions to be drawn that most press releases are later portrayed as news.

By comparing data from Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, the following conclusions were reached regarding the research questions.

Research Question #1: What kind of presence does public relations have in the news?

Public relations has a strong presence in news.

The data collected in Chapter 4 coincides with the first research question and proves that content from the field of public relations, such as press releases, often shows up in news, and on other websites.

Research Question #2: How has the paradigm of gatekeeping changed?

Gatekeeping has shifted from the traditional print and broadcast news that has editors and producers gatekeeping, to online news, which calls for individual gatekeeping (Lee 2012). The quality of news that people consume online is not as high as the news people consume in print or watch on broadcast. In print and online the most important news is highlighted, while online the news read tends to be whatever is most popular (Lee 2012).

A 1986 study called *Public Relations' Influence on the News* analyzed “how much influence one group of sources—public information officers for six state government agencies—had on daily newspaper content through the information they provided journalists.” The study concluded that about half the PIO’s information turned up in the news (Turk 1986). Now that there has been a decline in the gatekeeping function, public relations content in news has certainly increased since the ’80s.

Research Question #3: What strategies do PR professionals use to get their content displayed as news?

PR professionals visit journalists themselves, and if they don’t contact journalists directly, they also have ready-made content ready to deliver to journalists at any given moment. They alert journalists of press releases and stories via networking. Those working in the public relations industry steadily feed their content to journalists by informing them directly and offering tips, suggestions and ideas for future news (Larsson 2009).

Trevor Morris and Simon Goldsworthy, authors of *PR: A Persuasive Industry: Spin, Public*

*Relations and the Shaping of the Modern Media*, said that public relations “works primarily through the use of media relations and other forms of third-party endorsement” (Morris & Goldsworthy 2008).

Research Question #4 In what ways is the relationship between PR professionals and journalists symbiotic and how does that account for PR presented as news?

Studies cited in Chapter 2 concluded that PR professionals and journalists have a close and ongoing relationship that is mutually beneficial. Those working in the public relations field tend to make contact first and supply journalistic organizations with press releases and stories that are then used by the journalists to create news (Larsson 2009).

News sites, blogs, alternative websites etc...use public relations industry content because it is cheap or free, easy and there are fewer journalists in newsrooms to go out and get original material.

Research Question #5: What are the long term effects on the news audience of having news that is derived from PR?

People are consuming content that they falsely believe to be news. Journalism is supposed to be about supplying people with the truth, not spreading PR spin. Running press releases and other PR content as news spawns an uneducated audience. Michael Schudson and Danielle Haas discussed a study about the public’s declining opinion of news media in a scholarly article. People’s distrust in the media has skyrocketed in the last 30 years. The percentage of people with “hardly any” confidence in the press tripled from 15 percent in 1973 to 43 percent in 2004 (Schudson & Haas 2007). People will

continue to catch on and realize that they are essentially being tricked and fed false information. A general distrust of the news will increase.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Through the research collected in the literature review and the data collected from the internet, it is evident that public relations and journalism have a close relationship and that PR feeds what is presented as news. Recommendations for practice include journalists using organic sources and not public relations, or if they have to use PR as a source, then journalists should clearly label who the sources behind news are. “The smokescreen of anonymity, in which the great majority of PR contributions remain unattributed, addresses the interests of both professions, although aggravating the public’s already limited capacity to evaluate news information and reassess its source credibility” (Reich 2010). Journalists should hold to their code of ethics and strive to educate their audience no matter the cost, not aggravate them. *The Society of Professional Journalists* has a set of ethics that has been “improving and protecting journalism since 1909,” and it is a prime example of how journalists should model their work. The code calls on journalists to seek truth and report it, minimize harm, act independently and be accountable.

### **Study Conclusion**

The findings of this study show that public relations has a strong presence in journalistic news. Almost every press release in the study reappears somewhere else as news. If the press release doesn’t appear in news, it certainly appears in thousands of results elsewhere on the internet. Often times the

reader is never told the source, and are therefore unaware of the fact that they are reading public relations spin and not news.

The end result of portraying public relations as news is the effect it has on the public's opinion on the news and on journalists. A study in *Political Communication* called *Disdaining the Media: The American Public's Changing Attitudes Toward the News*, traces people's attitudes towards the media for the past 30 year and reveals that the public's opinion on news media has declined. People distrust the press and do not have confidence in journalism (Schudson & Haas 2007). A large amount of news stems from PR, so as a result people don't have a favorable opinion of news. If journalists keep portraying PR as news, without revealing their sources, that unfavorable opinion is only going to increase.

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