

AHRC Seminar - Exploring creativity in everyday and literary language, March 16, Open University, Milton Keynes.

‘PR language –what is it; is it creative; does it help or hinder democracy and competitive markets?’ by Kevin Moloney, Bournemouth University.

Version of 14.3.07; wordage of 1,989.

As a citizen and a consumer, I take public relations very seriously because I don't like being the object of it. Being the object of desire is very pleasant in personal relations; but in promotional relations, it's your vote, wallet, opinion or allegiance which is desired. Something is always wanted back. On the other hand, as an academic studying PR, I come over all cool and objective and undesiring!

I hope you expected me to make this sort of opening statement in a scholarly seminar because when we talk promotional culture (Wernick, 1991) and PR, we are talking about an unsettling matter which is near universal in our sort of society: our immersion as citizens and consumers underneath a great Niagara of persuasive messaging which is the consequence of living in a pluralist, market-orientated, liberal democracy (Moloney 2006). We are drowning in PR promotion.

The various forms of advertising are the other great rivers feeding this Niagara, alongside of PR. All of these promotional forms are acts of self-presentation-for-attention-and-advantage. I concentrate here on PR because that's my field, and because the major medium for delivering the PR message is language, spoken and written, via the mass media. I have

come to pay more attention to words in PR recently. I note that most of the 50 or less PR teachers at universities in the UK do not pay them much attention, for they are under the influence of the Grunigian paradigm for their conceptual architecture of PR. For most of them, PR is explained at the macro level of institutional and group needs. I want to be micro and focus instead on message meaning and delivery, and message reception by people.

I have three questions. As a former PR man, a non-linguistic and now a critical theorist about PR, I want to explore how language is used in PR; second, is PR writing creative, and third, how it helps or hinders access to two very important public institutions – democracy and consumer markets. I present the following both as my biography of writing PR and as a student of PR.

The use of language by PR

As a PR writer, I mostly felt that I did bad things to language. It was often verbal putty, protecting the institution from the ill winds of attack. Otherwise, it was puffery. I wrote as an agent for an interest – a business, a university, a charity – building up some behaviour (corporate social responsibility) or some product (double glazing in my case). I served the strategic and tactical needs of my (paying) principals and I tailored language to their interests. I wrote mostly for the media. I was given my brief and used language instrumentally to serve their needs. Ideas which were risky in relation to those needs were out; vocabulary which threatened other than the safest expression of the institutional interest were out. I wrote to avoid weaknesses in the institutional case and attacks on it. Humour was out. So was metaphor, and simile. The word patterns were formulaic, and there was the dead hand of the hierarchy checking

copy. When I wasn't using words to protect the institution, I was using them to promote their products.

My account is of a dispiriting relationship with words. But this verbal putty and puffery work often served good and important interests. One of my virtuous examples comes from the OU. I worked here for nine years in the 1970s/80s and defended it in the media against attacks from Black Paper authors and the Conservative Secretary of State for Education Keith Joseph that it was a hotspot of Marxist bias. (It wasn't but there was a small number who spoke their mind in the normal academic way.) I claim also that I invented the category of 'working class OU student as graduate hero'. I was here when the first graduates emerged. We wrote to them all to build profiles for press and TV, and had a London press conference with brickies, bus drivers, footballers, and nurses – all in cap and gown. Great promotion to attract more students. I have to ask, therefore, whether virtuous organisations such as the OU can exist without promotion!

When I told my students at Bournemouth about my writing experience above, they reacted mostly with horror and declared me to be an old fuddy duddy who worked for boring institutions! On their 40 week placements in the PR industry, many had experienced writing as the verbal froth of *The Sun*, *The Mirror*. They were promoting hair care products, holidays, mobile phone services, yachts. Yes – I have forgotten how modern consumer capitalism has multiplied the ways we can be consumers. But the students have not realised something as well: my PR was/is mostly in defence of corporate interests (The Open University in the past; and now 280 academics at Bournemouth who are UCU members

and where I'm Branch chair). Verbal froth rarely serves the defence of these interests.

PR as creative writing

I find it hard to define creativity in PR writing. It is easier to define it in advertising where brevity is favoured as a sign of quality writing. This is not so in PR. Thus I can see creativity in the advertising slogan 'Go to work on an egg'. This has verbal compression and maximum imagery and meaning. PR writing is not disciplined enough to seek brevity, for it wants to defend its paymasters in every which way. And most paymasters think that a high word count means more promotion of goods and services, and protection from critical attack. PR is always persuasive communications, and as a non-linguist I find it hard to believe that always writing in one emotional dimension releases the creative muse. Doesn't the creative come from jumbles of emotions, facts and images jostling for expression? How can PR creativity pass through the hurdles of writing to a brief, and writing to get passed the media gatekeepers?¹

I do however know that PR people can have creative ideas and that journalists can turn these wheezes, stunts, events into good copy. I think we did that here at the OU when we invented the idea of the dustman or working mum as graduate hero. And Max Clifford did it when he got *The Sun* to write the front page headline 'Freddie Starr ate my hamster' (13.3.86). Maybe PR people can be *agents provocateurs* persuading freer agents to be creative. I think Richard Branson of Virgin is the master of visual PR, of the newsy stunt and photo call. I remember his many cheesy

¹ PR people know also that as journalists are their natural enemies, they will not be kind to creative PR writing because it is a threat to the hacks' professional status. Imagine a journalist praising a PR person for good copy. Impossible! See the *72 Point* blog for the standard, dismissive and crude way journalists speak about PRs. (<http://www.72point.com/blog/> accessed 7.2.07). *72point* is an interesting hybrid of news agency and PR agency.

photo settings but only one sentence of his – his recent compliment to Ian Black, the train driver in the recent Grayrigg crash – sticks in my mind.

There is a literature about how to write for PR but I won't go into it here it mostly avoids creativity and goes for formula writing.² Let's instead move PR writing away from writing for the media, and towards writing for corporate branding. You know that you are in this territorial when you hear cliques such as 'cutting edge', 'fun' and 'caring' applied to institutions. The potentially creative step here is the art of corporate story telling and narrative creation. Again back to the OU in the 1970s and we told the story of the University of the Air, open to all adults who had missed out on the dream of a degree and now had a second chance to catch up on their dreams. This was a story which worked because it resonated with tens of thousands of hard working, talented adults who had been held back because they failed the 11 plus. I used to hear a good story from the Body Shop. Can you think of current examples?

There is an exception to this writing-as-institutional-promotion. Anne Surma (2006) has an entirely different focus for PR writing: it should dialogue with less powerful people. She encourages (p.45) PR writing by business that does not use language as organisational domination and

² Some literature on PR writing gives mixed messages about creative writing. Treadwell and Treadwell (2005) view writing from systems theory, organisational and stakeholder perspectives. After that they urge writers to be persuasive. Their book has no index references to creativity, story telling or narrative, and you doubt that it will deal with the topics when you read on page one that 'Public relations writing is based on theories of behaviour and attitude change' and on page seven 'Public relations writers are links in a system'. There is, however, something of a disjuncture in their text for their preface urges 'adaptable PR writers' to think critically and creatively. Smith (2003) attempts to integrate PR writing as systems thinking and as creation. He treats writing as a process skill of steps, tactics and objectives and your heart sinks when you read the sub-title of 'Writing Process Workbook for the Profession'. But he also notes (pp5/6) that creative (imaginative) and functional writing (purpose, format and objective emphasised) can be combined. He says (p.6) that 'It's more like a seesaw'. I think that is quite a helpful simile The PR writer has to serve her usually unimaginative paymaster who usually thinks in business and bureaucratic speak, but now and then she can smuggle in thoughts, images and phrases which enliven by inverting this systems thinking.

instead uses language as negotiation to settle disputes and promote harmony with their publics. She wants (p.43) writers to be responsible for their words and imaginative enough to know that there is another person receiving their text.

Does PR language help or hinder consumers in markets and citizen in democratic debate?

Surma may base her views, I think, on the wider belief that consumer capitalism should be more economically democratic. She is attracted to the idea of corporate social responsibility and she encourages the concept of a PR writing practice that is responsible and respectful. Her implied ethical position is that a corporate body should honestly and wholeheartedly enter into dialogic communications with its consumers, and stakeholders.

I do not take this view for I believe that self-interest is embedded into organisations through their goals and strategies; through their participation in competitive markets and in public policy making. For Surma, the single business can transform its external language into respectful dialogue with a significant other. I'm sure this is occasionally true of one organisation, but for me, such a 'one' is an 'exceptional one' and so uncommon as not to initiate system change by example. For me, a change to dialogue with stakeholders will only become a more common behaviour through competitive pressure on the systems in which the 'one' is organically situated. For me, only systemic pressure will change business, public sector, trade union, cause and pressure group behaviours into real dialogue. I side with Mickey (2003, p.3) who sees PR commercial texts as constructing a worldview 'with self-interest at heart'. That worldview is dominant, I argue, and it will accommodate the

narrative (and behaviour) of social responsibility only by enforced imitation.

If Surma's goal is a state of democratic (respectful and negotiating) commercial dialogue, can we hope that spurred by exceptional examples our politics (as well as our markets) will yield the dialogue she wants? Again I doubt it for the desire to compete with other parties and maximise votes leads to the self-interested language behaviour we call 'spin'. This is the demotic, shorthand term used for the aggressive political public relations done by New Labour since the mid 1980s. It is manipulation of journalists and of us citizens via language to a very high order of effectiveness. (See Fairclough 2000) I suggest that the only way to counter this is to ensure that politics is a public market place for ideas and personalities where political news management, media reporting, citizen involvement creates a loud cacophony of voices seeking communicative advantages. It is in this way that the 'hemispheric communicators' of PR (Jensen 1997) with their half truths, omissions and emotions will be recognised and judged by voters and consumers. In the last resort, I make the judgement, as citizen and academic, that the truths and untruths of all persuasive communications are best detected by the John Stuart Mill percept that in the clash of opinions truth will drop out in the end. That outcome has to be socially engineered but that is another story (Moloney 2006).

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