



Journalism–PR relations revisited: The good news, the bad news, and insights into tomorrow’s news



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ABSTRACT

Extensive research over the past 100 years has shown that the interrelationship between journalism and PR is tensioned and paradoxical, with negative perceptions of PR among journalists and trivialization and demonization of PR as ‘spin’ contrasted by claims of ‘symbiosis’ and evidence that 40–75% of media content is significantly influenced by PR. However, studies have been predominantly quantitative and most predate the recent ‘crisis in journalism’ and rapid growth of new media formats. This article reports in-depth interviews with senior editors, journalists and PR practitioners in three countries that provide new insights into journalism–PR relations today and identify trajectories for future research, education and practice.

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1. Introduction

In 2006, Sallot and Johnson (2006, p. 151) reported that “more than 150 studies have examined some aspect of relations between public relations practitioners as news sources and journalists as media gatekeepers since the 1960s”. Public relations and the abbreviation PR are used here to include closely related and largely synonymous roles such as corporate communication, corporate relations and public affairs and focus is on the media relations and publicity functions in these fields of practice. With a number of studies dating back to the early 1900s (Bleyer, 1973), and some conducted since 2006, it is likely that the interrelationship between journalism and PR has been examined in 200 or more research studies. While this may suggest that the interrelationship is well understood, or even over-analyzed as claimed by Smith (2008) in a recent book review, several factors point to a need for further research and analysis.

First, the interaction between journalists and PR practitioners remains paradoxical. While Sallot and Johnson (2006, p. 151) found that some journalists acknowledge a positive contribution from and even “valued” PR, most studies have found highly negative perceptions of PR among journalists, as reported in the following literature review. PR is also trivialized, marginalized and demonized in public discourse ranging from criticism in the media and books (e.g., Davies, 2009; Stauber & Rampton, 1995) to lampooning in TV drama shows and films such as *Absolutely Fabulous* (Matchett, 2010), *Spin City* starring Michael J. Fox, and the 2006 Golden Globe nominated movie, *Thank You for Smoking*. Nevertheless, research studies show that up to 75% of the content of allegedly independent media is sourced from or significantly influenced by PR (see Section 2), prompting some scholars and practitioners to claim that the two fields are “symbiotic” (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008, p. 35; Currah, 2009, p. 66), “two sides of the same coin” (Evans, 2010), and “mutually dependent” and/or “interdependent” (Erjavec, 2005, p. 163; Gieber & Johnson, 1961, p. 297).

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A second reason for further research is that the vast majority of studies of journalism–PR interrelationships have been based on quantitative surveys and content analysis, which suffer from several limitations. In addition to the bias introduced through self-reporting in surveys, which can be significant when feelings run high as they do in the journalism–PR nexus, quantitative studies do not allow in-depth probing of perceptions, relationships, practices and issues of interest. Furthermore, management studies show that survey questionnaires are typically completed by junior to middle level employees, with the most senior and experienced practitioners usually not responding to surveys (Reichheld, 2008, pp. 81–82). This study specifically focused on addressing this limitation through qualitative research among senior practitioners.

The third reason that further research is required is that new media formats and practices are changing the nature of journalism and PR and traditional approaches of media relations and publicity. As Smith (2008) noted, user generated content and social media need to be considered in understanding the influence of PR on media today. New types of ‘owned’ media enabled by online publishing, which bypass ‘gatekeepers’, and the development of new sponsored content formats referred to as *embedded marketing*, *native advertising* and other terms are potentially increasing the influence of PR and warrant close attention.

2. 100 years of journalist–PR relations research

2.1. Highly negative perceptions of PR

While Sallot and Johnson (2006) reported that journalists’ recognition of the value of PR increased between 1991 and 2004 and Cameron, Sallot and Curtin (1997, p. 111) concluded that “assumptions of outright animosity may be exaggerated”, numerous studies reveal negative perceptions of and attitudes toward PR (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Jeffers, 1977; Kopenhaver, 1985; Kopenhaver, Martinson, & Ryan, 1984; Ryan & Martinson, 1988; Sallot & Johnson, 2006; Stegall & Sanders, 1986; White & Shaw, 2005; Wilson & Supa, 2013). In their historical review of journalist–PR relations, DeLorme and Fedler (2003, p. 101) concluded that the relationship is “tense and complex”. A recent report produced by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, noted that “in many accounts, PR has been framed as an inherently negative force, a cancer eating away at the heart of modern journalism” (Currah, 2009, p. 62).

Also, professional and popular discourse is fraught with attacks on ‘spin’ and ‘spin doctors’ (e.g., Davies, 2009; Ewen, 1996; Stauber & Rampton, 1995). While the term ‘spin’ originated in relation to political communication, it is now applied broadly to “any type of commercial PR” (Andrews, 2006; Esser, 2008, p. 4785). PR is also widely described as a “dark art” (Burt, 2012) and “the dark side” by journalists and media professionals (Parker, 2011) and over the years it has been pejoratively labeled “bunco” (Green, 1940; Zolotow, 1949), “ballyhoo” (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003, p. 103), “boosterism” (Boorstin, 1961), “flack” and “flackery” (Salter, 2005; Stegall & Sanders, 1986, p. 341), “puff” and “puffery” (Kinnick, 2005, pp. 721–723), “hype” (Wilcox & Cameron, 2006, p. 14) and “propaganda” (Moloney, 2006, p. 41). PR practitioners are accused of being “obstructionists” (Jeffers, 1977; Kopenhaver et al., 1984, p. 860), “shysters” (Sallot, 2002, p. 150), “liars” (Cohen, 2009, para 6 and 9), “fakers and phonies” (Blessing & Marren, 2013, para. 6), and described as “unethical, manipulative, one-sided and deceptive” (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003, p. 99). In *Flat Earth News*, Davies (2009, pp. 172–193) accused PR practitioners of being “fabricators” of “pseudo-events”, “pseudo-evidence”, “pseudo-leaks”, “pseudo-pictures”, “pseudo-illnesses” and “pseudo-groups”. While some of these criticisms have been identified as results of ignorance (Kopenhaver, 1984), resentment and envy (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003, p. 113; Sallot & Johnson, 2006, p. 152), and ideologically based bias in journalism education (Aronoff, 1975; Jeffers, 1977; Stegall & Sanders, 1986), they nevertheless reflect attitudes and frame interaction.

PR influence on media content is also problematized as “surreptitious” and lacking transparency, as noted by Cutlip (1994) in his history of PR. In his latest critical media analysis, McChesney (2013, p. 183) warned that media news is “increasingly . . . unfiltered public relations generated surreptitiously by corporations and governments”.

2.2. The ‘love–hate’ relationship

Based on long-standing anti-PR rhetoric and concerns about PR influence on media among journalists, paradoxically co-existing with high and arguably increasing media usage of PR information, Sallot and Johnson (2006) and Tilley and Hollings (2008) described the interaction as a “love–hate” relationship – a view echoed by Harcup (2009, p. 72) in a contemporary UK journalism text. The relationship is also ambiguously described as both “antagonistic” and “symbiotic” (Merkel, Russ-Mohl, & Zavaritt, 2007).

2.3. More than half of news is PR/‘spin’

Despite reported perceptions and statements of journalists and editors that suggest non-cooperation and hostility, a substantial body of research shows extensive use of PR material by media, referred to as “information subsidies” (Gandy, 1982). A number of such studies have been reported and reviewed elsewhere, such as in DeLorme and Fedler (2003) and, more recently, in Macnamara (2012), so some noteworthy examples only will be summarized here.

In a history of American journalism, Bleyer (1973, p. 421) reported that even before World War I the “system of supplying newspapers with publicity and propaganda in the guise of news became so popular that a census of accredited press agents” was conducted by New York newspapers. This identified around 1200 press agents working to influence public opinion

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