

Dutch public relations practitioners and journalists: Antagonists no more

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Received 14 February 2006; received in revised form 12 May 2006; accepted 29 May 2006

Abstract

The increasing interdependence of public relations and journalism and the demands they make on each other raise the question how they perceive and evaluate each other. How do they view their roles, methods, relationship, and quality of media reporting on organizations? How do government and business public relations differ in this respect? Our survey of a representative sample of Dutch journalists and public relations practitioners in both government and business ($n = 791$) showed that while there were differences of opinion between the two professions, these were neither predominantly negative nor fundamental. Our results, therefore, do not confirm the difficult relationship between the press and public relations that was identified in research carried out in the United States between 1970 and 1990. Given the Dutch tradition that the government practitioner be a neutral servant of the public interest rather than a spokesperson for the organization, the general absence of differences between government and business public relations was striking. Our findings indicate that government public relations professionals have adopted the same norms and standards as their colleagues in business organizations.

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Keywords: Relationship PR-Journalism; Cross perceptions; Role perceptions; Government PR

1. Introduction

A tragic example of the consequences of public relations and journalism occurred in the United Kingdom in 2003. BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan, Prime Minister Tony Blair's press officer, Alastair Campbell, and Tony Blair himself, became subject of a heated debate and an official inquiry by an independent committee for their roles in the debate leading up to the Iraq war and the suicide of the arms expert and government adviser, David Kelly, who apparently took his own life because he could not deal with being the subject of controversial publicity.

For government public relations, the relationship with journalism is crucial: the battle for the public's trust increasingly takes place in the media rather than in the parliament. The news media are a platform where the government establishes or loses its credibility. The media are crucial for corporate public relations as well, because of the extensive relations companies have with such diverse publics as pressure groups, authorities, customers, financiers, and the labor market. The perceived importance of media for both business and government has led to a tremendous growth of communication departments and has fuelled further professionalization of the profession. That means that an ever-

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increasing number of practitioners and other media strategists use the media to try to influence the formation of opinions and the decision-making process on a daily basis.

At the same time, there have been significant developments in the media as well. The explosive growth in media supply has resulted in increased competition between journalists and an intense contest to “make the news.” The attention of the media has shifted from content to incidents, controversies, quarrels and the exploitation of emotions (McChesney, 1999; Brants, 2000). Rolling cameras, open microphones, and ambush tactics are weapons in the struggle. The competition is fierce, and so are the emotions.

The increasing interdependence of journalism and public relations, coupled with the increasing “demands” both professions have of each other, raises the question how they perceive and evaluate each other. What do they think of their roles, methods, relationship, and the quality of reporting in the media? How do government and business public relations differ in this respect? We conducted a study among a representative sample of Dutch journalists and practitioners in both government and business to find answers. Most empirical research relating journalism and public relations has been conducted in the U.S.A., almost all of it is 15–30 years old, and it has seldom considered government public relations. Our study aims to address this in several ways. First, we want to describe the present state of affairs. Second, we will study journalism and public relations in the Netherlands, as part of the understudied European context. Third, we will include practitioners from both business and government, and study differences and similarities between the two groups. Our study aims to get a better understanding of the interaction between the professions that are responsible for our daily news, and of the possible positive and negative effects thereof.

2. Previous research

2.1. *The U.S.A.*

Thus far, all the studies on the relationship between journalism and public relations have showed that journalists have a negative opinion about practitioners. “It seems that journalists relegate practitioners to a lower status not only because of perceived poorer job performance and lower ethical conduct, but also because they perceive practitioners to have less honorable intentions” (Stegall & Sanders, 1986, 347; see also Aronoff, 1975; Jeffers, 1977). These views coincide with the opinion of journalists that the “news values” of practitioners are opposed to their own (Aronoff, 1975): according to the journalists, public relations officials think about the needs of their organization first, and less about what journalists need (Ryan & Martinson, 1988). Journalists view public relations officials as withholding information, not being objective, and not focused on the public interest (Belz, Talbott, & Starck, 1989). Sallot, Steinfatt, and Salwen (1998), however, showed that the two groups shared similar news values, but that journalists, in particular, were unaware of this similarity.

On the other hand, practitioners were found to be less negative about journalists. Kopenhaver, Martinson, and Ryan (1984) and Stegall and Sanders (1986) found that public relations officials were quite capable of assessing the opinions of journalists. They had a positive view of journalists and were eager to work with them. Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1971), however, concluded that public relations officials were not happy with the tendency of the press to seek negative and sensational information, and they felt the press did not pay sufficient attention to what they viewed as constructive information.

Delorme and Fedler (2003) argue that the tension between journalism and public relations has a long history and dates back to the end of World War I. The newspaper industry and the journalists feared that the free publicity provided by practitioners would reduce advertising income, and started a campaign against the “space grabbers”.

On the other hand, it must be noted that both professions work with each other on a daily basis. Studies show that newspaper reporters often make use of information provided by practitioners. Cooperation and conflict appear to be necessary dimensions of the relationship: the professions are “interdependent economically and must negotiate and compromise in order to exchange resources and accomplish their goals” (Delorme & Fedler, 2003, pp. 3–4).

2.2. *Government PR in the Netherlands*

The function of government public relations people in the Netherlands is subject to intense debate, colored by the fear for state propaganda. A recurring point in the discussion is the question whether influencing opinions is allowed, and if so, under what circumstances. In 1946, after the experiences of Nazi Germany in World War II, the government

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