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# Dirty dancing: Health journalists and the pharmaceutical industry a multi-method study on the impact of pharma PR on magazine health news

Rebeca De Dobbelaer\*, Sarah Van Leuven, Karin Raeymaeckers

Department of Communication Studies, Ghent University, Korte Meer 7-9-11, 9000 Gent, Belgium

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#### ABSTRACT

Applying a multi-method approach, the purpose of this paper is to analyze the complex ways in which Belgian magazines deal with health information supplied by PR practitioners related to the pharmaceutical industry. First, we conducted two waves of quantitative content analysis of health items published in 2013 and 2015 in a representative sample of magazines to get an overview of the sourcing practices of Belgian magazine journalists as visible in the news output. Second, we included 16 in-depth interviews with leading magazine health journalists and their editors-in-chief to confront the findings of the content analyses and search for additional evidence of how the pharmaceutical industry directly and indirectly tries to influence health news. The findings confirm that academic and medical experts are the most important sources. They help to explain and contextualize often complex and technical health issues, and they credit authority and credibility to a journalist's story. In contrast, we found very little explicit references to pharmaceutical industry sources in journalistic content. Nevertheless, the findings of the interviews suggest that pharmaceutical PR creeps into health coverage in a more indirect and much more sophisticated manner, for instance by offering additional services such as contacts with scientists or patients. In addition, editors-in-chief admit they try to anticipate the needs and preferences of advertisers in aligning editorial and commercial content. We conclude that the influence of pharmaceutical PR in magazine health news is stronger than would be expected based solely on quantitative analyses of editorial content.

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## 1. Introduction

The current news ecology is characterized by tendencies of cost-cutting, globalization and digitization. Regardless of media type or news domain, research demonstrates that a severe drop in advertising revenues, combined with fragmented audiences and a rise in production costs, resulted in decreasing profit margins (Carsten, 2004; Franklin & Carlson, 2011; Webster, 2011). Media concentration and competition open the door to what McManus [1994](2009) calls 'market driven journalism'. Efficiency considerations and cost-cutting measures reduce the editorial staff, and journalists must therefore produce more content in less time and with fewer resources. Journalists' workload has increased even more due to the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [Rebeca.dedobbelaer@ugent.be](mailto:Rebeca.dedobbelaer@ugent.be) (R. De Dobbelaer), [Sarah.Vanleuven@ugent.be](mailto:Sarah.Vanleuven@ugent.be) (S. Van Leuven), [Karin.raeymaeckers@ugent.be](mailto:Karin.raeymaeckers@ugent.be) (K. Raeymaeckers).

increasing number of pages, supplements and online editions (Raeymaeckers et al., 2013; Curtin, 1999; Davies, 2008; Davis, 2000a, 2000b; Franklin & Carlson, 2011; Lewis, Williams, Franklin, Thomas, & Mosdell, 2006). In these circumstances, 'desk journalism' increasingly substitutes active news gathering outside the newsroom. Davies (2008) contends that many journalists have transformed into 'information brokers' that mainly recycle existing content in a process of 'churnalism'. Combined with the professionalization of sources that have overwhelmingly started to use public relations tools, it is no surprise that ample research shows that journalists habitually incorporate PR material or 'information subsidies' into the news output (Curtin, 1999; Davis, 2000a, 2000b; Franklin & Carlson, 2011; Gandy, 1982; Lewis et al., 2006; Paulussen & Ugille, 2008; Reich, 2010, 2011; Salter, 2005; Van Hout & Jacobs, 2008). As such, studies indicate that mainly elite actors as governments and companies possess the necessary financial and social resources to produce PR material, leading to privileged news access when compared with non-elite actors as civil society organizations (Cottle, 2000; Curtin, 1999; Franklin, 2011; Davis, 2000b; Gans, 1979; Lewis et al., 2006). In addition, studies find that news organizations are not very transparent towards their readership and tend to mask the use of PR material implying that it is often presented as independent information checked and balanced by journalists (Broersma, 2009; McIntosh White, 2012; McChesney, 2013; Reich, 2011; Salter, 2005; Van Hout & Jacobs, 2010). Therefore, concerns are growing about newsrooms' increasing reliance on churnalism practices and subsidized content (Van Leuven, Deprez, & Raeymaeckers, 2015; Broersma & Graham, 2012; Cottle, 2003; Davies, 2008; Kroon & Schaafraad, 2013; Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008; McChesney, 2013; Reich, 2010; Zelizer, 2004). This is especially the case in the field of health journalism, which has been found to be an important source of information for audiences to manage their own health (Dunwoody, 2008).

Research of Len-Rios et al. (2009a) illustrates that health journalists compared to other news specialties are even more susceptible to information subsidies (e.g., from experts, universities and research centers, pharmaceutical companies, etc.) due to their lack of (scientific and/or health) background and knowledge. Furthermore, research shows that especially the pharmaceutical industry is a present source offering subsidized content, thus responding to journalistic needs and influencing journalistic content directly (Goldacre, 2013). Moreover, we notice a more indirect influence of the pharmaceutical industry on health journalists as well, for example in the practice of aligning editorial content and advertising, especially in magazine news (Dunwoody, 2008; Len-Rios et al., 2009a, 2009b; Macnamara, 2014; Peters et al., 2008). Yet, a lot of questions remain about the routines and processes behind these practices (Bucchi & Mazzolini, 2003; Dunwoody, 2008; Metcalfe & Gascoigne, 1995; Picard & Yeo, 2011; Secko, Amend, & Friday, 2013). Considering the low transparency about PR material in the news, the often rather implicit copy-pasting techniques and the many informal contacts between both parties, the biggest challenge is to indicate precisely how far pharmaceutical companies tentacles reach in health news reports, (Van Leuven et al., 2015; Davis, 2000a,b; Franklin & Carlson, 2011; Reich, 2011; Sallot & Johnson, 2006). The purpose of this research is, therefore, to highlight the direct and indirect impact of PR practitioners, especially of pharmaceutical companies, on health journalists' magazine news selection and sourcing practices.

In what follows, we will give an overview of previous studies to shed light on this issue and then present the multi-method data combining quantitative content analysis and in-depth interviews. More specifically, we will zoom in on the precarious situation of the Belgian magazine market, which of all Belgian media is most severely challenged by takeovers and reorganizations, layoffs, concentration and convergence, withdrawing advertisers and dramatically declining circulation/sales (VRM, 2015). As a consequence, we expect that the influence of PR on health issues will be highly visible in Belgian magazines.

## 2. The influence of 'Big Pharma' on health news

Dealing with PR is a common-or-garden reality for most journalists, but particularly in health and science journalism it appears to be a distinctive and frequently occurring practice (Reich, 2010). Yet, the amplitude of studies investigating the amount of PR subsidized content in journalism and especially the erratic results of different studies indicate that analyzing sourcing practices, and even more measuring the incorporation of PR in editorial content, is a complex and tricky task. A complicating factor is that production processes are difficult to trace in the news output. Studies show that journalists are often not transparent about the use of PR sources in the news (Van Leuven et al., 2015). In addition, press releases are seldom the sole source serving the journalist's story which makes it difficult to determine their exact influence (Reich, 2010). Journalists often avoid to verbatim copy-paste PR material but instead try to search for additional information contextualize the content, paraphrase parts of press releases and reflect opinions of other parties involved to create their own unique story (Van Leuven et al., 2015; Dunwoody, 2008; Hijmans et al., 2003; Sallot & Johnson, 2006; Van Hout & Jacobs, 2010). To gain more insight in the phenomenon, Sallot and Johnson (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of more than 150 different studies that map the use of PR sources in the news since the 1960s and concluded that the observed amount of articles containing PR material varied between 25% and 80%. In the ten years since their analysis, the number of studies has continued to grow resulting in comparable findings (e.g. Boumans, Vliegenthart, & Boomgaarden, 2014; Jackson & Moloney, 2015; Kroon & Schaafraad, 2013; Macnamara, 2014; Reich, 2010; Scholten & Ruigrok, 2009), also in the Belgian context (Van Leuven et al., 2015). Importantly, studies suggest that health journalists use significantly more content from information subsidies compared with their colleagues covering other specialty areas (Len-Rios et al., 2009a). Tanner (2004) found that the top two resources used by television health journalists were news releases and public relations. A common explanation for these findings is that abstract topics as science and health demand a greater level of expertise while journalists usually don't have an expert background in life sciences. In addition, specialized health or science journalists are increasingly replaced with

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