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## Public Relations Review



# The new publicity: From reflexive to reflective mediatisation

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### ABSTRACT

In the second half of the 20th century, more than 150 studies explored relations between public relations and the mass media and they found that between 20 and 80% of the journalistic media content was influenced by some sort of 'information subsidies' provided by public relations. In the past 30 years, the number of journalists per 100,000 Americans dropped from .36 to .25. At the same time, the number of public relations practitioners per 100,000 Americans rose from .45 to .90. Now there are five public relations practitioners per one journalist. From providers of information subsidies, public relations is transforming into media producer and distributor, and creator of news and stories. The paper suggests that new mediated realities of public relations go beyond traditional publicity.

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## 1. Introduction

The emergence of public relations in the early 20th century was largely fuelled by the rapid mediatisation of society. As journalists gained power as middlemen between organisations and society, framing news and setting the public agenda in the mass media, organisations (corporations and governments alike) responded by introducing counter-parts on their side: public relations practitioners as middlemen between the mass media and organisations (Merten, 2004). Public relations practitioners enabled organisations to become reflexive to the mass media expectations and adjust their behaviours to journalistic needs – i.e. influence the news media (Hall Jamieson & Kohrs Campbell, 1997). Media relations – management of relations between organisations and the mass media, 'an area of public relations that many nonpractitioners see as the *only* function of public relations' (Zoch & Molleda, 2006, p. 279) – is the most practiced area in the public relations sector (Swerling, Thorson, & Tenderich, 2012; Wilson & Supa, 2013; Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, Moreno, & Verčič, 2011). In the second half of the 20th century, more than 150 studies explored relations between public relations and the mass media and they found that between 20 and 80% of the journalistic media content was influenced by some sort of 'information subsidies' provided by public relations (Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997; Merten, 2004). But that was when journalism as a profession was at its peak and public relations was only becoming an aspiring practice. The numbers on changes in the relative weights of the two sides since the middle of the previous century speak for themselves. In the past 30 years, the number of journalists per 100,000 Americans dropped from .36 to .25. At the same time, the number of public relations practitioners per 100,000 Americans rose from .45 to .90 (McChesney & Nichols, 2010). From less than one public relations practitioner per one journalist in 1960 (the ratio was 0.75-to-1 [McChesney & Nichols, 2010]), there are now five public relations practitioners per one journalist (Williams, 2014). Between 2000 and 2009, the newspaper advertising revenue in the US dropped from \$49 to \$22 billion. Between 1997 and 2007 revenues of the US public relations agencies went up

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from \$43.5 to \$8.75 billion. The number of US newspaper reporters and editors dropped from 56,900 in 1990 to 41,600 in 2011. The number of people employed by the US public relations agencies increased from 38,735 in 1997 to 50,499 in 2007 (Sullivan, 2011). These numbers are from the US and they are different around the world, but the trend seems to be the same in the whole Western Hemisphere: in relative balance between journalism and public relations, public relations is gaining and journalism is losing (Lloyd & Toogood, 2015).

While the introduction of public relations practitioners since the 1920s has led to reflexivity in media relations, what is emerging today leads to a new phenomenon of reflective mediatisation: non-core-media organisations (business companies and government agencies, NGOs and movements) are reflectively mediatising themselves. From providers of information subsidies (Gandy, 1982), public relations is transforming into media producer and creator of news and stories. The Coca-Cola Company is experimenting with its own 'brand journalism' in its digital magazine – <http://www.coca-colacompany.com> (Working, 2013). In September 2013, Alex Aiken, the Executive Director of the UK Government Communications, declared: 'The press release is dead' (Magee, 2013). In January 2014, Kim McKinnon, the Canadian Government's Communications Community Officer, published the following statement on the Canadian Government official website: 'The Government of Canada is retiring the traditional press release format in favour of a more digital-friendly product that makes the key messages of announcements clearer, quick facts more accessible and integrates more effectively with social media channels' (McKinnon, 2014). These examples highlight changes in relations between public relations and the media (PR Daily, 2014).

The article starts with the notion of reflexive media relations, presents reflective mediatisation, and raises questions on organisational and societal consequences of these processes and the described changes.

## 2. Reflexive media relations

Media are extensions of our senses (McLuhan, 1964) and we use them to make sense of the world beyond our physical reach. Media systems help us in a wide world by reducing its complexity for us. Until the invention of the newspaper in 1609, knowledge of the world was limited by authentic observation; newspapers increased breath of knowledge but at the expense of its authenticity. While media are reflexive in constructing reduced (edited) media realities for us, it is only natural that we as parts of that reality try to influence its construction. That is how Merten (2004) sees the role of public relations (reducing it to media relations): 'Public relations is a strategy for using communication processes to generate desired effects by constructing desired realities' (p. 45). No wonder then that so much of public relations work is focussed on the media (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009).

A practitioner handbook explains: 'One of the primary functions of public relations is to get fair – or, even better yet, favourable – coverage from the media' (Kosmicki & Bona, 1996, p. 59). A marketing textbook explains the importance of public relations in the following way: 'Public relations uses several tools. One of the major tools is *news*' (Kotler & Armstrong, 2014, p. 473). From a public relations academic point of view: 'Publicity is probably the most widely visible tool of public relations' (Pavlik, 1987, p. 53). Public relations is a broader term than media relations, covering all communication between organisations and their various stakeholders: 'Public relations/communication management describe the overall planning, execution, and evaluation of an organization's communication with both external and internal publics – groups that affect the ability of an organisation to meet its goals' (Grunig, 1992, p. 4). The importance of media relations within the totality of public relations is supported by empirical research (Swerling et al., 2012; Wilson & Supa, 2013; Zerfass et al., 2011), yet Larsson (2008) notes that 'the PR-media relation is an underdeveloped research area' (p. 2997).

Within liberal democracies of the 20th century, mass media were largely divided in two parts. One was reserved for advertising and it was for sale. Commercial interests were in principle free to publish whatever they needed as long as they were able to pay for time or space. The other part was what was defining mass media (print, radio, and TV) in liberal democracies, edited news content. That part was in the focus of public relations in its media relations function. Hall Jamieson and Kohrs Campbell (1997) list several strategies organisations can use to influence news coverage: manipulating deadlines (e.g. by releasing important information late in relation to a broadcast or print deadline it is likely that it will be reported uncritically), manipulating access (e.g. if there are more journalists interested in reporting an event than there are available places, selection of who gets access can influence the tone of reporting), manipulating news assignments (e.g. by releasing stories to selected journalists), using media competition (e.g. by using coverage in one important medium to influence other media), selection of language and symbols, manipulating live coverage (which is practically impossible to edit), prepackaged news (pseudo-events, news feeds, news conferences, and prepared editorials). In Zoch and Mollada's (2006) words:

Becoming proficient in media relations is a complex process involving a deep understanding of media routines, interpersonal relations, and message construction; a savvy regard for timing, organizational factors, and news values; good research, both internal and external; awareness of current and potential environmental and public issues; and familiarity with organizational stakeholders, publics, and interest groups. Each of these areas holds potential for further research into the media relations process. (p. 302)

But understanding PR-media relations only in terms of PR influencing the media is incomplete. Günter Bentele, Tobias Liebert, and Stefan Seeling developed an 'intereffication model' to conceptualise how the media and public relations mutually work upon each other (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008). This goes well beyond influencing news coverage on the media side: organisations and their leaders are not only 'preparing managers to interact with journalists in interviews or news

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