

***The Impact
of PR
on the Media***

A research report by

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The mass media regularly make claim to independence and objectivity. Often this claim is absolute and unqualified. If one accepts journalists' and editors' statements at face value, they are uninfluenced by any forces or motives other than dedication to truth and justice. At times, dare it be said, the high moral ground, self-professed rectitude of the media takes on the naïve hyperbole of a superhero.

Media claims and statements quoted in this paper and in the research cited illustrate an entrenched tendency to reject suggestions of bias or influence in their reporting of news.

Yet there has been an extensively documented history of bias in commercial media because of their ownership structure. Academics such as Humphrey McQueen have tracked and analysed media coverage in Murdoch, Packer and Fairfax media in Australia and identified direct and indirect influence by the owners.¹

The Mass Manipulative Model of the Media proposed by academics such as Stuart Hall cites "structured ideological biases" as significant influences on the selection and presentation of news by the media.²

At a practical level, there have been numerous studies showing osmosis and hegemony – passed down attitudes and practices within the culture of media organisations – exerting a major influence on media reporting.

Increasingly in the past few decades, public relations has been cited as a major influence on modern mass media, but journalists reject such suggestions too and cling to an ideologically-based notion of independence and objectivity.

This paper examines the relationship between the media and PR, and is timely given worldwide growth of the PR 'industry', a number of recent controversies involving the media and PR, and conflicting claims over the role and impact of public relations.

Journalists and Public Relations

Journalists commonly take a dismissive and moralising position on public relations. For example, the editor of leading information technology magazine *InformationWeek*, Richard Wood, in an editorial headed 'The dark side of communications' stated: "IT journalists ... resent the constant nagging of PR people who, quite simply, get in the way." He went on: "Many PR people think they are actually the drivers of the news ...".³

Wood also provided an example of journalists being self-righteous and arrogant of their role as guardians and defenders of truth. He concluded his editorial: "We're constantly on guard against that sort of circus act and I'm sure you'll concur that the results in this publication, and on our news site itnews.com.au, speak for themselves."

As well as being overtly self-congratulatory, is that not a blatant plug for *InformationWeek's* online service from a journalist who attacks PR for 'selling' and 'putting a spin' on information?

In a reply to a series of letters the following week, Wood further affirmed an oft-claimed view of the media that public relations materials and activity have no impact or influence. He stated: "... the idea that journalists would call a PR person for stories is simply weird" and "... strong stories virtually never come from PR people."⁴

¹ Humphrey McQueen, *Australia's Media Monopolies*, Widescope, 1977, et al.

² Stanley Cohen and Jock Young, *The Manufacture of News, Deviance, Social Problems and the Mass Media*, Sage Publications, 1973, p. 15.

³ Richard Wood, 'The dark side of communications' in *InformationWeek*, IDG Communications, Sydney, 25 June, 2001.

⁴ Richard Wood, 'Editor replies' in *InformationWeek*, IDG Communications, Sydney, 9 July, 2001.

In a recent PhD thesis on the 'Interactions between Australian Public Relations Practitioners and Journalists', Clara Zawawi found that, while PR practitioners claimed high 'hit rates' of coverage for material sent to the media, "all journalists interviewed complained that the press releases they received were ill-conceived with little or no news value; poorly written and often addressed either to the wrong person or even with names misspelt ... The journalists ... thought that very little of what appeared in the newspapers came from public relations sources", she reported.⁵

Richard Wood deigned to acknowledge that "there might be a legitimate role for PR", but he went on to describe it as "in effect, being a personal assistant on the communications side".⁶

Such patronisation indicates the antipathy that exists between many parts of the media and public relations, as well as a fundamental ignorance of public relations that is rampant in the media. Most journalists think that the entire public relations industry exists for no other function than trying to manipulate or stonewall the media, leading to negative and often paranoid attitudes towards PR.

Accordingly, the growth of public relations is viewed with fear – and some loathing – by many journalists. US PR firms grew by an average of 32% in 2000. The US Council of PR Firms reported that global revenues of the top 25 US PR firms reached almost US\$3.5 billion in 2000.⁷

Internal PR departments are growing even more rapidly. An annual survey of over 4,000 US PR executives reported that in-house PR budgets grew by 80% in 2000.⁸

However, several basic facts about public relations need to be understood for any informed discussion of the relationship between PR and the media to take place.

Firstly, **the majority of public relations activities are not related to the media.** US research reports that around 60% of PR

budgets in 2000 were for functions other than media relations and publicity. Other PR functions included internal communication (10%); special events (10%); investor relations (8%); community relations (7%); fundraising (6%); public affairs and government relations (9%), with other funds spent on advice, research and issues advertising.⁹

With many non-media PR functions such as community relations and fundraising being in the lower budget end of PR, it is believed that up to 70% of PR executives primarily perform functions unrelated to the mass media – such as producing **publications** like annual reports, and newsletters; managing **employee communication**; developing **Web sites** or **Intranets** and **Extranets**; organising **events**; carrying out **community relations**; **lobbying** governments; writing **speeches**; producing **multimedia programs**; etc.

The growth of communication as a discipline within management is commendable. It recognises that modern educated publics want to know what is going on. Employees want to know what is happening in their company or organisation. Communities expect local councils and associations to keep them informed. Shareholders demand regular information, and often this is required by regulation. Seldom if ever do the mass media meet these growing requirements for specialised information.

Furthermore, and ironically, the media themselves have contributed to the growth of public relations. Economics have forced the shrinkage of reporting staff in most media. Many small town and suburban newspapers and many trade journals are produced by one or two people. From days when 'roundsmen' proactively covered all key areas of civic and business activity ('beats'), today many companies and organisations have no likelihood of the media contacting them. They have to take their news to the media, or directly to their target audiences, or they will not get their message across.

Public Relations Handbook for Clubs & Associations, a PR guide for small organisations, points out that many important groups in the community become "disenfranchised" in the media because of the changing structure and technological

⁵ Clara Zawawi, "Feeding the Watchdogs - An Analysis of Relationships between Australian Public Relations Practitioners and Journalists", unpublished PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2001.

⁶ Op cit.

⁷ *PR Week* Worldwire, 23 April, 2001.

⁸ Thomas L. Harris/Impulse Research Public Relations Clients Survey, USA, 2000, www.cyberpulse.com/harris.

⁹ Ibid.

sophistication which has made the media increasingly remote from many sources of information.¹⁰

Secondly, of those public relations practitioners involved in media relations, many of whom are former journalists themselves, much of their time is involved in assisting the media gain access and stories. This includes 'educating' management on the needs of the media (what is news, the need for quick response, etc), and encouraging management to talk to the media. Many executives instinctively, or because of past experiences, want to hide behind 'no comment' or avoid the media.

PR executives frequently play an 'information broker' role, identifying potential news and facilitating the release of information through statements or interviews. Indeed, without public relations executives, it is fair to say that journalists would be unlikely to get interviews or information from many companies and organisations where busy management are focussed on operational matters or closeted behind a cordon of corporate lawyers.

Thirdly, much of the time of many public relations executives is occupied by answering journalists' questions and providing information at the media's request or invitation. An anecdotal study of time sheets in a leading PR firm working for several high profile companies found senior PR practitioners received more incoming calls from journalists than they made outgoing calls to the media.¹¹ This contradicts generalisations such as Richard Wood's that the media are harassed by unwelcome PR calls. While no doubt sometimes true, CEOs or other senior executives are rarely if ever available to give basic facts and figures or background a journalist. PR staff provide an information service on a daily basis to the media which is seldom acknowledged.

The media also actively solicit news from PR sources. An example was an e-mail sent from a leading national TV program, *Good Medicine*, to 86 PR firms with health, medical and pharmaceutical clients. It read: "Hi all, just a quick reminder. If you have any

suitable health/medical stories, please let me know. Cheers (name)" (dated 31 July, 2001).

Some journalists do acknowledge the presence and impact of public relations, although usually this is in a highly negative context such as the introduction of a major cover story in the *Sydney Morning Herald GoodWeekend* magazine which commented on PR: "It's the invisible hand behind much of the news, the sophisticated spin machine that can rescue reputations or crucify a competitor. And some of its practitioners will stop at nothing."¹²

Writer Jane Cadzow reported on unethical practices in PR, including a senior Sydney practitioner and former NSW President of the Public Relations Institute of Australia who had been censured for unethical behaviour, and another case before the court in Victoria. Media reporting or acknowledgement of public relations tends to be confined to PR blunders and misdemeanours.

Investigative journalist and author of *Secrets and Lies*, Bob Burton, who has written extensively about the public relations industry, makes a telling observation. He says: "Some PR activities are genuinely in the public interest. A lot of campaigns are mostly harmless. But it's the invisibility of it all that's the biggest concern."¹³

That invisibility is as much or more the result of the media's attitude as it is a characteristic of public relations. The ongoing denial by most journalists that public relations influences their knowledge, awareness of issues, story selection or the content of their work, stifles exploration of the issue and maintains an illusion of media independence and PR ineffectiveness.

But several areas of research into the impact of public relations on the media are available and inform the debate from an independent perspective.

PR Impact – The Facts

A survey of 417 journalists and editors in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Canberra undertaken as part of a Masters Degree by research in 1992, found 86% reported 'Very Frequent' contact from PR practitioners. More

¹⁰ Jim Macnamara, *Public Relations Handbook for Clubs & Associations*, Information Australia, Melbourne, 1991, Foreword.

¹¹ Anecdotal study of time sheets, MACRO Communication Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1997.

¹² Jane Cadzow, 'The Hidden Persuaders' in *Sydney Morning Herald GoodWeekend* magazine, 26 May, 2001.

¹³ Ibid.

than 74% reported receiving 20 or more PR communications (news releases, phone calls, faxes, etc) per week.

In the same period, 150 news releases from 27 different companies and organisations were obtained and content analysis was undertaken of the media in which the journalists were employed over a 12 months period. Articles were identified using a national press clipping service which provided 2,500 articles on the topics of the news releases from the selected media.

The study found:

- **768 stories (31%) were wholly or partly based on the news releases** (including exact extracts or facts and figures without alternative attribution). While 360 (47%) of these were published in trade or specialist media, 245 stories (32%) of PR-based stories were published in national, State or capital city media;
- **Up to 70% of the content of some small trade, specialist and suburban media was PR-sourced;**
- Only nine news releases out of 150 tracked **(1.2%) were not used at all** by the media;
- The average usage rate of news releases was **seven times** each;
- One news release (on a Lindeman Wines product) was published in **69 newspapers**, many with a photograph provided by the PR firm.¹⁴

This study was undertaken using strict word and content matching methodology. Where facts were quoted, these were not counted as PR sourced if an alternative source was identified or possible. The results were considered to be conservative.

A more recent analysis of media content has been carried out by Clara Zawawi as part of a PhD thesis. Zawawi conducted an analysis of 1,163 articles published by three leading metropolitan newspapers, *The Courier-Mail*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* to identify the origin of media stories. Her research was able to confirm the origin of 683 of the articles, of which 251 (37%) were directly the result of public relations activity. Furthermore, Zawawi found that surveys, papers and submissions sent to journalists with the intent of gaining media coverage could also be regarded as PR and

these accounted for another 88 articles. In total, she concluded that **47% of articles in these three major metropolitan media were the result of PR activity.**¹⁵

Other academic and professional studies have also shown substantial correlation between PR activity and media coverage. Ian Ward explored the impact of political public relations on the *Courier-Mail* in 1992; Paul Grabowski and Paul Wilson examined the relationship between police and reporters in 1996; and Rodney Tiffin reported that PR practitioners in Sydney estimated (although did not substantiate) that up to 80% of the content of metropolitan newspapers was provided by public relations.¹⁶

A second area of objective research which informs this issue is the growing field of commercial media content analysis conducted by companies and organisations to evaluate their public relations. In the UK, there are more than 20 major research firms specialising in media content analysis and a number operate in the US and Australia.

CARMA International, the world leader in media content analysis, tracks media coverage for more than 300 companies worldwide. Media coverage is analysed using powerful database and statistics software to identify the share of voice of various sources, the key messages presented to the public, and to evaluate the amount of coverage triggered by clients' PR activities such as events or news releases.

CARMA's methodology includes matching the content of media coverage to news releases and, in some cases, identifying date and information correlation with interviews, news conferences or other events.

Findings from five years of CARMA media analysis are overwhelmingly conclusive. Where active public relations activity is conducted, companies and organisations receive a higher volume of and more favourable media coverage than companies and organisations not actively using PR.

For instance, prior to the Sydney 2000 Olympics, an analysis by CARMA International of media coverage of Olympics sponsors compared with non-sponsors

¹⁴ Jim Macnamara, *Public Relations & The Media*, unpublished MA thesis, Deakin University, 1993.

¹⁵ Clara Zawawi, "Feeding the Watchdogs - An Analysis of Relationships between Australian Public Relations Practitioners and Journalists", unpublished PhD thesis, Queensland University of Technology, 2001.

¹⁶ Ibid.

conducting active PR campaigns on an Olympics or sport theme (labelled 'ambush marketing' in extreme cases), found several non-sponsors gained equal or more media coverage in relation to Olympics sponsorship than official sponsors. **In 56 major Australian media articles in a three months period, the highest number of mentions of Olympics sponsorship was gained by a non-sponsor** (also an alarming statistic on media accuracy).

If the media, as frequently claimed, independently and objectively researched the facts, official sponsors would surely have received more mentions of Olympics sponsorship, and non-sponsors conducting campaigns masquerading as Olympics-related should have received less coverage – and possibly even criticism or censure for their attempts to pass themselves off as sponsors. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending your point of view, active PR campaigns gained major media exposure for non-sponsors.

This is not to say that there is not critical media coverage of companies and organisations with active PR campaigns, or that PR can prevent negative media coverage. Companies such as Exxon, Nike, Ford and Firestone have found that no amount of PR can prevent criticisms when their operations damage the environment, company policies fall short of industrial or social expectations, or products fail. But, when two companies or organisations are in an equivalent position in terms of products and policies, the one with active, well-conducted PR will usually gain greater and more favourable media exposure.

Despite media protestations that PR does not influence them, the converse is shown in numerous research studies – both academic and commercial media analysis.

Ironically, several leading newspapers including the *New York Times* have published attacks on CARMA International and other companies conducting media analysis, claiming it is done to "target journalists" and that it infringes freedom of the media by giving clients "dossiers" on the media.

It is baffling to understand how the media can object to analysis of reports that they release into the public domain and voluntarily attach their names to in the case of by-lined articles. The outrage expressed by the media

to studies that closely examine and scrutinise their work and practices presents a curious inconsistency in an institution with a self-appointed role of scrutinising others.

What is not reported in any of these studies is the degree of 'agenda-setting' or 'agenda-priming' provided by PR through briefings to journalists, tip-offs, arranging trips (eg. overseas visits or tours), providing products for evaluation, or organising interviews with sources. An assumption is often made that interviews are mostly or always initiated by journalists but, in reality, this is far from the case. Visits by VIPs, actors, rock stars, experts and even Heads of State are regularly arranged as part of PR campaigns and the media queue up for interviews arranged by the PR executives.

'Agenda setting' is a concept discussed by many media academics such as Warwick Blood and Martin Gurevitch. The didactic view that the media set the agenda of public debate advanced in earlier media theory has been softened by Gurevitch and others, but there is widespread agreement that the media, in the least, play a role of 'agenda framing' or 'agenda priming'.¹⁷

But "who sets the media agenda?" asks Warwick Blood, with good cause.

The research cited suggests that public relations plays a key role in both 'agenda framing' or 'agenda priming' and in shaping media content in contemporary societies.

PR Training for Journalists

Given a demonstrated influence and impact on the media, both in terms of agenda-framing and content, it is clear that journalism courses and training programs are deficient in not educating journalists to understand public relations. Ideologically-based dismissiveness of PR creates journalists ill-equipped to fulfil their role and responsibility and naïve to the influences that shape the modern communication environment.

From a societal point of view, this is an alarming situation. While ever the media purport that PR does not influence reporting, journalists go on living in their ivory tower and

¹⁷ M. Gurevitch, J. Blumler, and D. Weaver, 'The Formation of Campaign Agendas in the US and Britain', paper to International Communication Association, Chicago, May, 1986.

PR people go on eagerly applying their skills in an “invisible” and unregulated way.

The MA thesis quoted concluded: “Many media consumers are unknowingly reading press releases every day in both the popular and quality press, obscured behind a veil of complicity between journalists and public relations practitioners.”¹⁸

That complicity is not the result of a cosy relationship, but brought about by an equally concerning stand-off, with the media choosing to pretend that they are autonomous, incorruptible and immune from the human trait of subjectivity.

PR is Not Without Fault

Having identified that public relations plays a major role in company and organisational communication and is a significant influence on the mass media, it is important to note evidence that PR is sometimes used in an unscrupulous way to disseminate misinformation or to obfuscate.

As reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald GoodWeekend* feature, the activities of a number of international PR firms working for milk formula companies in Third World countries, arms manufacturers and governments of nations in breach of human rights and UN obligations, as well as the activities of a number of individuals involved in proposed smear campaigns or alleged falsified letter writing campaigns, send a warning signal on the potential of professional communication skills to be used for unethical purposes by PR practitioners.

Even more alarming is a survey conducted by *Asia PRWeek* in mid-2001 which found **29% of PR consultants admitted they had “knowingly told lies to the press about a client”**. Of those respondents, 21% claimed they had been pressured by their clients to lie, while 8% admitted lying without client pressure.¹⁹

Professional PR bodies condemn such behaviour and promote Codes of Ethics. These are voluntary and, as a result, are sometimes criticised as “toothless”. However, the PR industry argues against imposed regulation on the basis of freedom of speech

and points to attempted regulation of lobbyists in the US and Australia which has been ineffective.

If these arguments are accepted, self-regulation to improve standards and prevent abuses is an important issue for the public relations industry – and for the media and society generally.

The very failure of the media to recognise public relations as a real and increasing influence may be contributing to instances of poor standards in public relations. This is not an attempt to shift blame, but to conclude that because PR connected with the media is conducted in a vacuous environment, it continues to operate in a shadow land beyond the illumination of public recognition and scrutiny.

Greater recognition of public relations practices and influence would bring PR into the open, and wider understanding by journalists, by clients and employers, and by the community would inevitably force better standards and practices.

The Media Glass House

Equally, the media live in a glass house and need to take a much more open and objective look at their own performance instead of pointing the finger at public relations as a corrupter or media integrity.

In many parts of Asia, journalists have to be paid to attend news conferences or write stories. This is common in countries such as Indonesia where the practice is thinly disguised under euphemisms such as ‘transportation allowance’.

The International Public Relations Association (IPRA) in 2001 called for an end to *Zakazukha* in Russia – cash for editorial. The *Zakazukha* issue was exposed when a PR agency in Moscow issued a fictitious news release on the opening of a new store. No less than 16 publications subsequently initiated negotiations to run the story, without any checking of the facts, in exchange for payment. Invoices were issued by 13 media which then published articles reporting on the opening of the non-existent shop, Svetophor. This occurred despite Russian law which requires paid advertising to be clearly identified and separated from editorial.²⁰

¹⁸ Jim Macnamara, *Public Relations & The Media*, unpublished MA thesis, Deakin University, 1993.

¹⁹ “Industry admits to lying to media”, PR Poll in *Asia PR Week*, 10 August, 2001.

²⁰ International Public Relations Association e-group, ipra@yahoogroups.com, 10 March, 2001.

Media apologists will say that's Russia; it doesn't happen in Australia or the US or UK. But it does. The 'cash for comment' scandal involving Sydney radio announcer, John Laws, and others in 1999 is a case in point.

Also, 'supplements' and 'Special Features' appear in many major newspapers and magazines and, in addition to traditional advertising, contain pages of text and photographs laid out in editorial format. But these pages are often purchased.

In some cases, a small notice such as 'Advertising Feature' may appear at the top of pages, but this is often in the smallest type available, and many media do not identify paid for copy at all.

The sale of editorial space in supplements and features is not done under duress or even persuasion from public relations. Media advertising and special features staff actively solicit sales of what is referred to as 'advertorial'.

And it is not only small or B-grade media which indulge in this practice. National newspapers and magazines including *The Australian*, *Australian Financial Review* and *The Bulletin* have all published paid for features disguised as editorial.

A State newspaper, *Northern Territory News*, sold a complete wraparound cover to the AustralAsia Railway Corporation to commemorate the start of the Alice Springs to Darwin railway project, with a PR photo of the Prime Minister, the Chief Minister of the NT, the Premier of South Australia and the CEO of transport company, Franco Moretti, on the cover.²¹

This practice is also common in Asia and other parts of the world.

'Junkets' – acceptance of or sometimes even the demand for free trips – are another area where the media feed off public relations. Despite a crackdown by some media on journalists accepting trips from companies or organisations with an expectation of receiving favourable editorial, the practice continues and is rife in some sectors such as the travel industry. Major carriers such as Singapore Airlines regularly receive requests from journalists for Business Class and often First Class international tickets with promises of a favourable mention in a story.

Practices such as *Zakazukha*, media supplements containing paid-for editorial and 'junkets' need to be addressed by all sections of the media. In making accusations of lack of ethics in public relations, the media are sometimes correct, but it is a case of the 'pot calling the kettle black'.

Conclusion

The media need to abandon old prejudices and recognise the pluralist communication environment of the Information Age, including the pervasive influence of public relations, and develop methods of working with the forces that characterise and shape modern society.

The growth of PR is clear evidence of the market telling us something. PR is not going away and needs to be recognised.

Indeed, there is considerable evidence that public relations can and does do good. Organisations such as the Red Cross would not have enough blood, charities would lack funds, and communities would be unaware of important government programs without public relations campaigns.

Perhaps the best example of the power of PR was provided by Noble Peace Prize winner, Jose Ramos Horta. He told the 2000 National Conference of the Public Relations Institute of Australia that his first qualification was a Diploma in Public Relations from a Portuguese institute and that it had been instrumental in his worldwide campaign to raise awareness of the plight of the Timorese people and ultimately liberate a nation.

At the same time, unethical practices that mislead the public and distort information need to be recognised and addressed in both the media and public relations through objective, open and transparent review.

Jim Macnamara is a former journalist who spent 20 years in public relations working with national organisations and corporations including the National Farmers' Federation, Microsoft, Vodafone and Singapore Airlines. He completed an MA by research in evaluating the impact of public relations on the media in 1993 and today runs a media research company, CARMA International (Asia Pacific). He is also the author of nine books on the media and public relations and is the National President of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (2000-2001).

²¹ Northern Territory News, 18 July, 2001.