The continuing convergence of journalism and PR: New insights for ethical practice from a three-country study of senior practitioners

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Abstract

The influence of public relations on media content has been shown to be substantial, and research indicates that it is growing through new media practices. However the interrelationship between journalism and PR remains obscured by paradoxical discourses and stereotypes such as 'spin doctors'. This article identifies gaps in the literature and current understandings, and reports findings from in-depth interviews with senior editors, journalists, and PR practitioners in several countries that provide new insights into how the fields of practice interact which debunk some myths, but also expose a need for improved transparency and standards to ensure ethical media practice.

Keywords: Journalism; PR, spin, churnalism

Why further study of the journalism-PR nexus is necessary and important

Extensive research has shown that journalism and public relations, whether willingly or reluctantly, are bedfellows in media production. Somewhere between 150 and 200 studies of the interrelationship between the fields of practice that have been conducted over the past 100 years (Sallot & Johnson, 2006; Macnamara, 2014) indicate that 50–75% of mass media content is provided or significantly influenced by PR, as discussed in the literature review informing this analysis.

Furthermore, the influence of public relations on journalism and public communication generally is growing, according to a number of studies and research reported here. The 'crisis in journalism' (Curran, 2010; Jones, 2011) caused by collapsing media business models and journalists' job losses, continuing growth of PR worldwide, and the so-called "democratization of media" (Siapera, 2012, p. 55), which is providing new avenues for media content production and distribution, are escalating the influence of PR. This increasing influence, along with gaps in understanding of this often controversial interrelationship, makes further research necessary and important.

Notwithstanding deep ideological as well as significant methodological differences, journalism and public relations (abbreviated to 'PR' from here on for convenience) are not 'strange bedfellows'.[1] Interaction is to be expected, even necessary, given that journalists depend on sources of news and information (Gans, 1979; Manning, 2001; Reich, 2009, 2013; Sigal, 1986 and that a major function of PR is acting as organization 'gatekeepers' managing the flow of information on behalf of their employers (Ruth-McSwain, 2011). Some go as far as arguing that the two fields are "two sides of the same coin" (Evans, 2010), "mutually dependent/interdependent" (Erjavec, 2005; Gieber & Johnson, 1961), and even "symbiotic" (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008; Currah, 2009).

However, despite a long history of dealing with each other, the interrelationship between journalism and PR has been and remains a strained bedfellowship, with a number of studies showing that journalists hold highly negative perceptions of PR (Delorme & Fedler, 2003; Jeffers, 1977; Kopenhaver, 1985; Kopenhaver, Martinson, & Ryan, 1984; Ryan & Martinson, 1988; Stegall & Sanders, 1986; White & Shaw, 2005; Wilson & Supa, 2013), which they generalize pejoratively as 'spin' (Burton, 2007; Ewen, 1996; Macnamara, 2014) and accuse of contributing to *churnalism* and corrupting the media and the public sphere with *pseudo-events*, *pseudo-evidence*, *pseudo-groups*, *pseudo-leaks*, *pseudo-pictures* and even *pseudo-illnesses* (Davies, 2009, pp. 172–193). In an historical review of journalist-PR relations, DeLorme and Fedler concluded that the relationship is "tense and complex" (Delorme & Fedler, 2003, p. 101). In a New Zealand study Tilley and Hollings described the interaction as a "love-hate relationship" (2008, p. 1) – a view echoed by Harcup (2009) in a contemporary UK journalism text.

Irrespective of the valuable body of research already produced, and despite claims by some that the topic has been over-analyzed (Smith, 2008), further research is desirable and necessary for three reasons. First, outside of specific disciplinary literature focussed on PR, the field of practice is poorly understood. Analysis of media studies texts reveals either a blindspot in relation to PR, or glib generalizations and ideologically-based rhetoric rather than informed critical analysis. For instance, even in its sixth edition, McQuail's classic text, *Mass Communication Theory* does not discuss PR (McQuail, 2010). In his extensive writing on media, Curran identifies that "modern media fell under the sway of public relations" in the twentieth century (Curran, 2002, p. 34), but he discusses PR only in passing in relation to its growth since 1980 and Habermas' concerns about corruption of the public sphere (Curran, 2011, pp. 131, 194). Other than John Hohenberg's (1973) classic but now out-of-print book, *The Professional Journalist*, most journalism research monographs and textbooks also mostly ignore PR (e.g., see Loffelholz, Weaver, & Schwarz, 2008; Mencher, 2010; Williams, Wu, Williams, & Wu, 2015), or discuss it in superficial ways under glib headings such as 'When the spin-doctors spin out' (Lamble, 2011, p. 77).

Second, gaps in understanding remain because, as shown in the literature review, the vast majority of studies of journalism-PR interrelationships have been based on quantitative surveys, which suffer from several limitations. In addition to the bias and distortion inherent in self-reporting, which can be significant when feelings run high as they do in the journalism-PR nexus, survey questionnaires are typically completed by junior to middle level practitioners, with the most senior and experienced practitioners usually not responding to surveys.[2] In-depth purposively targeted qualitative research is needed to look beyond the simplistic tick-a-box ratings and scores that practitioners give themselves and each other in surveys and question the rhetoric, discourses, stereotypes, and media myths that quantitative studies are unable to unpack, and even perpetuate.

Third, and perhaps most importantly of all, the seismic changes sweeping the mediascape are creating new media and new content formats, which are sites for PR as well as journalism and user-generated content. As Smith noted, "journalism and public relations are converging around new developments in social media" such as blogs, microblogging, social networks and online photo and video sharing sites and analysis of the intersections of journalism and PR need to be updated to include these significant developments (2008, pp. 925–927).

This article reports in-depth qualitative research undertaken through interviews with senior journalists and PR practitioners with 20 or more years of experience – and several with 30 or more years of experience – working in the US, UK and Australia, combined with critical analysis of scholarly and professional literature. The findings reveal a number of paradoxical

discourses that have been constructed, which obscure the reality of media practice today. Beyond the rhetoric, stereotypes, and media myths that sustain these discourses, this study identifies five specific characteristics of contemporary journalism-PR interaction that require urgent scholarly and professional attention to ensure ethical media practice and that the public interest is protected.

100 years of journalism-PR relations: What the literature tells us

A review of the literature shows that somewhere between 150 and 200 studies have examined the interrelationship between journalism and PR over the past 100 years. Key findings from the literature are only briefly summarized here, as they have been reported in detail elsewhere. However, it is important to note the major findings from previous studies and the dominant themes and issues of concern reflected in discussion and debate.

The influence of PR from the early twentieth century

In a history of American journalism, Bleyer (1973) 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 (p. 421). This identified around 1,200 press agents, a popular term at the time, working to influence public opinion through mass media in the early 1900s. Another historical review by Bird and Merwin (1955) reported that newspapers "faced a choice between accepting the releases of press agents, or failing to report many facts needed for the record" (p. 521).

The growing influence of PR 1920–2000

A number of studies of the growing influence of PR, referred to as press agentry and increasingly as publicity, media relations, public relations, and other terms[3], were conducted through the twentieth century, each showing substantial and growing influence of PR. For instance, a 1926 study of *The New York Times* found 147 of the 256 news stories in the newspaper (57%) had been suggested, created or supplied by PR practitioners (Bent, 1927). Another early twentieth century study by Bixler (1930) concluded that women's pages in newspapers were almost totally dependent on publicists and that many stories in business sections were also heavily influenced by these early PR practitioners. In 1934, Walker identified that 42 of 64 local stories in one newspaper "were written or pasted up from press agent material: a little more than 60%" (1999, p. 147).

In the second half of the twentieth century, a number of studies consistently showed PR to a significant and growing influence on mass media content and raised concerns about this trend. Noteworthy among these were analyses by Sigal in 1973 and Gans in 1979. Sigal's study of 1,146 stories in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* found that 75% resulted from what he called "information processing" as opposed to proactively researched information. Around two-thirds of media stories originated from news releases, handouts and other documents handed to reporters by news sources, increasingly through PR practitioners (Sigal, 1973; Grossberg, Wartella, Whitney & Wise, 2006, p. 352). The widely-reported content analysis of US national TV news and news magazines by Gans (1979) found that 75% of all news came from government and commercial sources and much if not most of this could be classified as PR.

Gans was also one of the first to examine specific 'beats' or 'rounds' such as business and finance, crime, transport, entertainment, travel, and sports reporting. He noted that "beat reporters are drawn into a symbiotic relationship of mutual obligation with their sources, which both facilitates and complicates their work" (1979, p. 133). For instance, a content analysis of health reporting in major US newspapers in 1979–80 by Brown, Bybee, Wearden and

Straughan (1987) found that 80% of wire service stories relied on official proceedings (e.g., of conferences and seminars), press releases and press conferences. A number of other studies during this period consistently found 50% to 80% of newspaper, radio, TV, and wire service content sourced from PR, such as those of Abbott and Brassfield (1989), Sachsman (1976), Turk (1986), and Grossberg et al (2006).

Research in Europe has gained similar findings, such as that by Baerns in the 1970s and 1980s, which found journalists are heavily influenced by PR in terms of both topics and timing (as cited in Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008, p. 34). Similarly, several studies in Australia in the 1990s found PR influence on media content ranging from more than 30% to 70%. For instance, based on content analysis of more than 1,000 articles in Australia's three leading capital city newspapers, Zawawi (1994, 2001) found that 37% were directly the result of PR. Furthermore, Zawawi argued that reports, papers, and submissions sent to journalists by organizations could also be regarded as PR and these took PR-influenced media content to 47%.

PR-ization of media in the twenty-first century

Studies of the influence of PR on media continued in the early twenty-first century. For example, Sallot and Johnson (2006) analyzed 413 reports of interviews with US journalists conducted between 1991 and 2004 and found that, on average, journalists estimated that 44% of the content of US news media was the result of PR contact. Journalists' estimates could be expected to be conservative, given frequent denials of PR influence and negative attitudes towards PR as discussed in the next section.

In the UK, an extensive 2008 study of 2,207 newspaper articles and 402 radio and TV reports spanning crime, politics, business, health and entertainment conducted by Cardiff University found that 60% of Britain's leading newspapers and 34% of broadcast stories was comprised wholly of wire service copy or PR material. The study reported that "a further 13% of press articles and 6% of broadcast news items were unconfirmed but categorized as 'looks like PR'. In other words, the Cardiff University study suggested that more than half of the content of leading British newspapers and broadcast networks was influenced by PR in some way. Only 12% of British press articles could be established to be entirely independent (Lewis, Williams, Franklin et al., 2008).

Recent studies in Australia and New Zealand, such as a 2010 study by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism at the University of Technology Sydney ("Over half of your news is spin", 2010) and a 2011 study involving ethnography in two newsrooms in New Zealand by Sissons (2012) have continued to report high reliance on PR. Sissons concluded that "journalists are in many instances not carrying out the traditional practice of checking information. Instead, journalists appear to be replicating the material given to them by public relations professionals" (p. 274).

The use of PR material is not only a Western media phenomenon. Erjavec (2005) conducted an ethnographic study observing news gathering and production operations inside four daily newspapers in Slovenia over a 12-week period – one of the few qualitative studies on this issue along with that of Sissons – and reported that "PR sources are a main source of information" (p. 160). From extensive empirical data, it can be concluded that between 30% and 80% of media content is sourced from or significantly influenced by PR, with estimates of 50–75% common, with the range related to types of media (e.g., quality news vs. trade) and 'rounds'.

The fourth media revolution: 'We the media'!

It further needs to be noted that most of the studies of the influence of PR on media have not included recent developments such as social media and emerging formats that further blur the boundaries between editorial, PR, and advertising. This expansion of the channels of communication available to PR is emphasized in the notion of "PR 2.0", which is widely and somewhat gleefully discussed in PR literature such as Breakenridge's (2008) book *PR 2.0: New Media, New Tools, New Audiences*. PR industry surveys show that social media including blogs, microblogging, social networks, and video sharing on sites such as YouTube are increasingly a major focus for PR (Wright & Hinson, 2014). These new media allow organizations to become publishers and broadcasters directly distributing their messages to audiences in the spirit of Gillmor's (2004) *We The Media*. Also, new forms of paid media content are emerging, which Wasserman describes as "the hoary advertorial dressed up in 21st century clothes" (Wasserman, 2013, para. 1). These formats, which have been little researched to date, are increasing the scope for PR to create and influence media content, as noted by a number of participants in this study.

Dominant discourses about journalism and PR

Review of scholarly and professional literature reveals a number of prominent discourses within journalism scholarship and practice in relation to PR, as well as several widely propagated discourses about what public relations is and what it does within PR scholarship and practice. The term discourse is used here both in its general linguistic sense denoting a body of discussion and in the critical postmodern sense in which it is seen as a social construction of reality that both usefully informs us of 'truths' as well as being potentially misleading and misrepresentative.

The discourse of denial

Despite the overwhelming evidence available from studies such as those cited, analysis of discussion reveals a *discourse of denial* among many journalists about using or being influenced by PR outputs, commonly referred to as "information subsidies" (Gandy, 1982). In an historical analysis reviewing journalists' attitudes towards PR, DeLorme and Fedler (2003) concluded that journalists rarely acknowledge PR practitioners' contributions. Davies similarly noted in his discussion of PR contributing to *churnalism* that "newspapers do not admit to this" (2009, p. 52). Australian media researcher Graeme Turner also concluded that "journalists, for their part, tend to deny that public relations activities have much influence on what they print" (2010, p. 212) – what McChesney calls "the dirty secret of journalism" (2013,p. 90). The discourse of denial in relation to PR is shown by extensive research to be unfounded and fallacious. But rather than comprising naivety or intentional obfuscation by journalists, there is an interesting explanation revealed by this research, as discussed later.

The discourse of spin

When journalists do refer to PR, it is mostly as part of the *discourse of spin*. While the term 'spin' originated in politics, it is now applied generally to PR, with its implications of twisting and fabrication derived from its original reference to yarn and fabrics (Andrews, 2006). Dozens of books and hundreds of articles have been written about PR as spin, notable among them Ewen's (1996) *PR: A Social History of Spin*.

While pejoratively naming PR spin seems to suggest transparency and critique, in reality it achieves the opposite as it generalizes, marginalizes, and trivializes PR. The term spin is applied so broadly that, like all generalizations, it masks diversity and presents a falsely coherent, unified view of PR that is a stereotype. Furthermore, while being demonized, spin is

also marginalized and trivialized as something that is innocuous and not worthy of serious attention because journalists allegedly avoid or reject it. Such rhetorical techniques and discourses lull media consumers into a false sense of security. As Atkinson concluded in relation to political PR: "demonized spin is a derogatory form of news discourse where journalists pose as heroic fighters against manipulative politicians and their staffs" when, in reality, research shows "glaring blindspots" in relation to "the media's own contributory role" in spin (2005, pp. 17–18). The role of journalists and other media producers in soliciting and co-creating PR and spin is discussed in the following findings from interviews with senior practitioners.

The discourse of victimhood

On occasions when journalists admit to being influenced by PR, many invoke a *discourse of victimhood*, pointing to declining staff numbers and lack of time to research and report independently as the cause of "PR-ization" of the media (Blessing & Marron, 2013; Moloney, 2000, p. 120). In *Flat Earth News*, Davies claimed that "structurally vulnerable media" have been victims of the "huge industry of manipulation" that is PR (2009, p. 167).

However, this discourse too is misleading for two reasons. First, research shows that there were high levels of influence and usage of PR material during the 1970s and early 1980s when newspaper circulation and journalist staff levels were at their highest (Newspaper Association of America, 2012). Second, many journalists willingly and often enthusiastically embrace PR and seek out PR leads, contacts and content, as is shown in the findings reported from this study.

The discourse of honest brokers

Meanwhile, PR professionals claim that they are "honest brokers of information" (Hohenberg, 1973, p. 351) and have sought to distance themselves from the taint of propaganda inherited from Edward Bernays (1928, 1955). Notwithstanding Bernays' attempts to redefine propaganda and legitimize the role of persuasion, critics point to "contradiction between what Bernays' said concerning the ethical behavior of a public relations counsel and what he did himself" (e.g., in relation to General Electric's Golden Jubilee celebration of electric light), which Bivins says "reveal[s] a loosely constructed personal and professional ethic" (2012, n.p.). In the Public Information model of PR, and particularly in more recent *two-way asymmetrical* and *two-way symmetrical* models espoused in PR Excellence theory, PR practice is defined as truthful presentation of information to publics, dialogue, and building and maintaining relationships between organizations and their publics and stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; J.Grunig, L. Grunig, & Dozier, 2006) .

The discourse of symbiosis

Some go further and claim that PR is complementary to journalism, referring to the fields of practice as "symbiotic" (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008, p. 35) or "two sides of the same coin" (Evans, 2010, p. 31). Others go as far as saying that "PR plays a major role in resolving cases of competing interests in society" (Black & Sharpe, 1983, p. vii). Most journalists and journalism, media studies, and some PR scholars reject such claims, and evidence presented in a number of studies and from interviewees in this research point to key differences between journalism and PR and problematic practices in both fields in need of redress.

Methodology

Pilot study

Informed by a review of previous studies and critical analysis of the literature, this research began with a pilot study among a purposive sample of information technology (IT) journalists (n =4) and IT sector PR practitioners (n = 5) in Australia. This was undertaken to develop and fine-tune an interview question guide for international use. This sector was selected for the pilot study as IT companies are among leading spenders on PR ("World PR Report", 2013), and the industry is reported by a substantial contingent of specialist media and writers. The pilot study was geographically determined by the researcher's location at the time.

Sample

Then, to gain more broad-based and informed insights, 20 interviews were conducted in 2013 with senior editors, journalists and PR practitioners with 20 years or more experience across multiple industries and 'rounds' in the UK, US and Australia. Because these and the nine pilot study interviews were conducted in highly developed countries with Liberal, Social Responsibility, or Democratic Corporatist models of media (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956; Hallin & Mancini, 2004), three further interviews with two journalists working in the Solomon Islands and the senior PR manager for a major aid organization conducted as part of another research project were included in the study to gain a Developmental media and communication perspective (Baran & Davis, 2009, p. 122). Thus, in total, this study is based on interviews with 32 senior practitioners working in journalism and/or PR respectively. Practitioners working within a Polarized Pluralist model of media identified by Hallin and Mancini in Southern Europe and new democracies were not studied.

Noting the limitations of surveys as discussed earlier, gaining access to senior experienced journalists and PR practitioners was a key objective of the study. A number of interviewees had experience in both journalism and PR, a not unusual occurrence due to the long-standing trend of journalists moving into PR (Lancaster, 1992), and it is considered that this enhanced the sample's insights by affording multiple and comparative perspectives. Several interviewees had between 30 and 35 years of experience in journalism and/or PR and one had more than 40 years professional experience. Overall, the 32 interviewees had an average of 21.5 years of experience in journalism and/or PR, with IT journalists interviewed in the pilot study being younger than others in the sample, which is characteristic of the field. The main sub-sample of 20 interviews had an average of 27 years of experience in journalism and/or PR.

As in the pilot study and as is common in qualitative research, purposive sampling was used in main study. This was operationalized by identifying the senior PR/communication professional in or recently retired from a number of large multinational corporations, large government agencies, and international PR consultancies across a range of sectors, as well as journalists in senior roles in major newspapers and broadcasting networks. The sampling frame prescribed that interviewees were drawn from general news and a range of industry and specialist sectors (i.e., 'rounds' or 'beats') including business and finance, health, energy/petroleum and gas, food, agriculture, consumer products, transport, politics and the non-profit sector, as well as IT and telecommunications.

Openness and frankness were aided by offering anonymity to interviewees – both for their name and their organization's name. However, many were happy to speak on the record, including a number of very senior and experienced PR practitioners and journalists. These included former editors, executive producers of major TV programs, a former award-winning BBC reporter, and heads of PR and communication for major corporations and US and UK

government departments and agencies, as well as the CEOs of several of the world's leading PR consultancy firms.

Limitations

The study set out to obtain a balanced mix of journalists' and PR practitioners' views, but the imbalance crept in during conduct of the research project because of a greater reluctance among journalists to be interviewed and comment freely on the topic. At the time of the study, nine interviewees were working as full-time journalists. But this figure is misleading in terms of proportionality in viewpoints, as another nine interviewees had worked for substantial periods of their careers as professional journalists. For example, Martin Frizell had spent more than 15 years working as a journalist including a decade as editor of the top-rating morning TV program GMTV in London before becoming a PR interviewee as Director of Media for PR firm Golin Harris in London and subsequently returned to journalism shortly afterwards. A more relevant statistic that shows the sample to be strongly representative of both fields is that participants had almost 300 years of journalism experience and slightly more than 400 years of PR experience in total.

Data collection and analysis

Most interviews were conducted face-to-face and many involved multiple discussions, particularly e-interviews which utilized telephone, Skype or Microsoft Lync conversations and/or multiple e-mail exchanges. All face-to-face interviews except one conducted in a noisy place were digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcripts and text from interviews were analyzed using qualitative textual/content analysis techniques based on categorization and coding (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Manual coding of interview transcripts and notes was undertaken at two levels. At an initial *in vivo* or open stage (Glaser, 1978), content of interview transcripts was coded into 16 broad *a priori* categories informed by the research questions and to establish certain demographic data such as role and years worked in the field, as shown in Table 1. A second level of *axial* coding, also referred to as *pattern* coding, was then undertaken to identify the specific views, perceptions, practices, concerns, proposals and recommendations that emerged in relation to these issues and reveal patterns and 'clusters' of views (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Punch, 1998, pp. 205–211). In accordance with inductive qualitative research practice, participants own words and statements were used in creating axial/pattern codes and in reporting (e.g., direct quotes). Furthermore, to ensure 'trustworthiness' and 'credibility' of the data and findings as proposed for qualitative research by Lincoln and Guba (1985), all quotations and paraphrasing of participants' statements used were provided to them for written confirmation that they accurately reflected their views.

Research questions

This study set out to explore a number of inter-related research questions as follows:

1. How do journalists and PR practitioners view each other and their respective roles?
2. How do journalists and PR practitioner negotiate widely-identified tensions and regularly interact, as research shows they do?
3. Do journalists and PR practitioners maintain integrity and ethics in dealing with each other? If so, how?
4. What, if anything, should be done in journalism and PR education and training to address the issues raised in empirical studies and this research?
5. What other mechanisms, if any, should be put in place to ensure accuracy and independence of media content, while maintaining free media, free speech and freedom of expression?

Key findings

Journalists not only use PR 'handouts' but seek out PR

Overall, senior journalists interviewed confirmed substantial use of PR material and interaction with PR practitioners. This occurs both proactively as well as reactively. For instance, UK journalist Martin Frizell, who worked for Reuters, Sky News, and ITV before becoming editor of the top-rating London morning TV program GMTV, said:

> I think journalists like to put out the impression that they're getting scoops out of their own endeavours, their own originality. But a lot of the time they're not. A lot of the time they're getting things that are coming to them, referred to in the trade as handouts (personal communication, June 24, 2013).

Former editor in chief of *The Sydney Morning Herald* and 35-year veteran journalist David Hickie said that his experience had been that:

> Making contact with the public relations or the public affairs representative of an organization is valuable to your accuracy and to the story generally … because a journalist may not be exactly up to date with … the latest developments in an area. The [PR] practitioner in a specific area … is an expert or can direct you to an expert in the organization" (personal communication, October 24, 2013).

Unlocking the paradox of PR-journalist relations

The co-existence of such acknowledgements and empirical data showing high usage of PR material on one hand, and a discourse of denial as well as the discourses of spin and victimhood that reveal underlying negative perceptions of PR among journalists on the other, present a paradox and raise a puzzling question. How do journalists and editors explain and justify regularly using PR material and relying on PR contacts, while at the same time holding negative perceptions and being publicly critical of PR? Probing discussions with senior journalists and PR practitioners in this study revealed two explanations that serve to answer this question and explain this paradox at the heart of the journalism-PR nexus.

One factor explaining why many journalists appear to lie about using PR emerged from descriptions of PR by journalists including BBC journalist turned PR practitioner Andy Winstanley who said "journalists mainly classify PR material as that given in press releases, events and news conferences". He added that "many would not classify information gained in briefings and from those they view as 'contacts' as PR material" (personal communication, September 2, 2013). Several other journalists interviewed described PR in similarly narrow terms. The research revealed that journalists identify some traditional media relations practices as PR, but do not recognize many other sophisticated communication strategies as such. For instance, most of the information on government and corporate Web sites is PR-generated or PR-related, as is much of their social media communication. Similarly, research studies and reports, exclusive interviews, and visits by international VIPs who journalists flock to meet and quote, are often largely and sometimes even wholly PR activities, conceptualized and coordinated by PR practitioners. Winstanley's observation is a significant insight that partly explains the paradoxes and contradictions in journalism-PR relations and indicates that the discourse of denial is not intentional lying or deceit. While it reflects naivety in relation to PR, its root cause is a cultural interpretation of what constitutes PR framed within a narrow media-centric view that has long characterized journalism and media studies and which needs to be replaced with a broader sociological perspective, according to scholars such as Couldry (2010).

A second important insight into the long-standing paradox at the heart of journalist-PR relations was gleaned from close analysis of statements by journalists about PR practitioners generally compared with responses given in relation to PR practitioners with whom they admitted personally having professional and often regular interaction. A marked difference first emerged in content analysis of pilot study responses in which a number of IT journalists confirmed what is referred to as the *Jeffers' Syndrome* – the finding by Dennis Jeffers (1977) that journalists view PR practitioners who they know personally more favorably than they do PR practitioners generally.

However, this study went further and contributed to an expansion of the concept. Not only do journalists tend to more favorably perceive PR practitioners who they know and work with often compared with PR practitioners generally, but they *re-categorize* them within their conceptual and professional frameworks. For example, when it was pointed out to journalists that one or more of their named sources was a PR practitioner, responses included: "Oh, she's not really a PR, she's more of an industry specialist" and, in another case, "I don't know what his job title is, but he's an expert in the field" (personal communication, June 26–27, 2013). Andy Winstanley brought this fully into light when he said "the best PRs are actually not seen as PRs but as good contacts" (personal communication, October 8, 2013). Along with 'specialists' and 'experts', other terms used to describe these 'transported' PR practitioners are "authorities" and even "trusted sources". Thus, as well as not recognizing many forms of 'information subsidies' and public communication practices as PR, journalists are prone to exclude their positive personal interrelationships with PR practitioners from what they perceive as 'PR'.

This latter tendency is referred to and theorized here as *PR acculturation* because not only do journalists adapt their view of some PR practitioners, but when relationships build up over time, they mentally remove them from the field and rubric of PR and they become acculturated into journalists' inner circle of 'contacts' and 'trusted sources'.

Lack of knowledge about PR.

An underlying factor affecting much discussion of the interrelationship between journalism and PR and the previous findings is considerable misunderstanding and even ignorance of PR among journalists and some journalism academics. This is not presented as an attempt to dismiss journalistic concerns and mount a defense of PR. The following findings focus on some serious ethical and professional issues in PR. But before turning the blowtorch on PR, it is important to note a number of generalizations and misunderstandings that distort many journalism and media studies perspectives of PR.

First, journalists and journalism scholars frequently view PR as solely focused on influencing journalists and gaining media publicity. This conflation of public relations with media relations and publicity leads to a 'bunkered' attitude among many journalists who point to the size of the PR industry and its global growth ("World PR Report, 2013) as evidence of a powerful behemoth targeting a declining number of overworked journalists. Such a view is seriously flawed, as PR is today a broad field of practice incorporating many sub-fields such as employee relations, shareholder/investor relations, and community relations, and involving communication through a range of channels such as 'house' publications (e.g., newsletters, brochures, and annual reports), events, and Web sites. A substantial part of PR is not related to mass media reporting.

Second, a number of former journalists who 'crossed over' to work in PR reflected soberly on the shift and acknowledged a lack of knowledge about PR and highly pejorative attitudes that they later found to be at least partly unfounded. None of the journalists interviewed had

undertaken any courses in PR, whereas most PR practitioners had studied journalism and media. Martin Frizell frankly admitted to being misinformed about PR before he spent three years as executive director of media at Golin Harris PR in London 2011–2014 (he has since returned to journalism illustrating the porous boundaries between the fields of practice). In discussing journalists' attitudes towards PR, he said: "There's snobbishness, there's an absolute snobbishness". He recounted his experience attending college in Edinburgh, which taught both journalism and PR, saying:

> There was this thing which came from our tutors … that clearly we were better than public relations people. They were failed journalists, they just didn't have that inquisitive, challenging, ethical, moral part of their backbone" (Martin Frizell, personal communication, June 24, 2013).

Former BBC journalist Andy Winstanley reported a similar introduction to PR during his journalism studies, saying:

> I can tell you that I did get a negative impression of PR. In fact, one lecturer said that most members of the course would probably end up as PRs as they wouldn't make it as journalists. To him, PR was a second rate profession and this is the perception that many journalists start out with (personal communication, September 2, 2013).

In the US, the managing director of global research for the PR firm Ketchum and a former journalist with *Times Mirror* magazines, David Rockland, acknowledged that "PR practitioners are by definition biased" – they openly present a client's or employer's perspective. In contrast, he said "journalists see themselves on a pedestal as purveyors of all truths with no bias" (personal communication, October 18, 2013). Lingering Modernist perceptions of singular truth and claims of 'objectivity' taint many journalists' views, creating elitist attitudes and an inability to effectively engage with messy pluralities, diversity, and relativity, including the perspectives and claims presented by PR practitioners.

The dual personality of PR

Having said all that, the PR field is far from faultless in the tensioned relationship with journalism. The paradox of journalist-PR relations also needs to be examined from the PR side – why do highly negative perceptions of PR persist when some – even many – PR practitioners are acculturated as trusted contacts or sources of journalists? This exploration revealed that, not only is PR comprised of multiple sub-disciplines and practices, but interviewees identified that within media relations and publicity there is a problematic dual or 'split personality' of PR. Gordon Welsh, group corporate communications manager of Dana Petroleum based in Aberdeen, Scotland, who has spent 14 years in PR after nine years working as a journalist, said "the problem is not PR per se, but in the large number of inexperienced practitioners who have come into PR" (personal communication, August 16, 2013). Both journalists and PR practitioners interviewed agreed that media relations is often delegated to junior employees in PR departments and consultancy firms. Colin Browne, who was head of PR for British Telecom for seven years and director of corporate relations for the BBC for five years, said that the image and reputation of PR is largely shaped by journalists' experiences in "dealing with junior PR people" (personal communication, June 26, 2013). Producer of *Health Report* for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), Dr Norman Swan said "many PRs are unsophisticated. They send out press releases and think they will be used. And then there are the follow-up phone calls. Often these are made by very junior staff" (personal communication, December 3, 2013).

While interviewees in this study primarily put the blame for unethical and unprofessional practices on inexperienced PR practitioners, it has to be noted that research literature reports more than a few unsavoury incidents involving senior experienced PR practitioners (e.g.,

Stauber & Rampton, 1995; Ewen, 1996). Hence, conclusions and recommendations presented seek to address PR deficiencies broadly.

Resistance to transparency

Not surprisingly, journalists interviewed strongly opposed any form of regulation in relation to use of PR material and, with some justification, pointed to the importance of freedom of the media. Interestingly, most PR practitioners interviewed also rejected regulation, saying it would be impractical and an infringement of freedom of speech. More alarmingly, both journalists and PR practitioners expressed strong opposition to suggestions for greater transparency. Both journalists and PR practitioners argued for self-regulation, but neither field of practice offered any specific suggestions to address the lack of transparency in relation to 'information subsidies' used by journalists and new hybridized PR/advertising/product placement formats and sites of journalism-PR convergence. Journalists and PR practitioners interviewed pooh-poohed suggestions for source disclosure statements on PR-sourced media content[4] and tracking of PR content using plagiarism software or 'churn engines' such as those used by media watch Web sites (e.g., http://churnalism.com in the UK; http://churnalism.sunlightfoundation.com established by the Media Standards Trust and the Sunlight Foundation in the US; PR Watch (2014); and Spinwatch (2014).

Convergence is growing

Recent developments in what is referred to paid content, also euphemistically referred to as 'content integration' and 'editorial integration' as well as 'embedded marketing' and even 'stealth marketing' are leading to a further blurring of the boundaries between journalism and PR and make critical analysis more important than ever (Lloyd & Toogood, 2014; Macnamara, 2014). In the wake of the 'crisis in journalism' caused by collapsing media business models, many media organizations are open to and actively soliciting new forms of paid media content. While some refer to these formats as 'native advertising' (Wasserman, 2013) because they involve paid content, many present information in a pseudo-editorial format such as paid interviews; sponsored content in chat, lifestyle, and infotainment programs; and sponsored blog posts; as well as celebrity endorsements and even embedded messages in TV dramas and sitcoms.

The key characteristic of these formats according to contemporary critiques is that they seek to "hide the truth" about their promotional intent, making them different to traditional product placement (de Pelsmacker & Neijens, 2010, p. 1). While some codes and guidelines have been developed such as that of the American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME, 2013), critics such as journalist Tanzina Vega of *The New York Times* points out that "sponsored content runs beside the editorial on many sites and is almost indistinguishable" (2013, para. 15).

A further example of convergence of journalism and PR is the birth of a new category of media publications in which cash-strapped media companies are offering their journalistic staff and production facilities to companies and organizations to produce bespoke digital publications under the editorial direction or even full control of the client organization. Examples can be seen on the Web site of Atlantic Media, publisher of the prestigious monthly *The Atlantic*. In addition to its independent publications, Atlantic Media now publishes a number of sponsored digital publications such as *Ideas Lab* (http://www.ideaslaboratory.com). *Ideas Lab* is "a partnership between GE and Atlantic Media Strategies, a division of Atlantic Media" – a commercial arrangement that is revealed only in the words "made possible by GE" on the masthead (Atlantic Media, 2014). Journalists interviewed unanimously expressed concern and alarm about these developments.

There are clear signs that new formats and approaches will expand in future. In mid-2013 the New York head office of the world's largest PR consultancy firm, Edelman, issued a report titled *Sponsored Content: A Broader Relationship with the US News Media* that acknowledged "major ethical hurdles" in relation to embedded paid content, but noted that, like many other PR and marketing communication firms, Edelman was "teaming up" with media companies in sponsored content partnerships (Edelman, 2013).

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on this analysis, and widespread agreement that independent journalism is a key ingredient for effective functioning of the public sphere and civil society, four key conclusions along with corresponding recommendations are offered as a contribution to discussion on this important topic.

Rules of engagement

Veteran PR practitioner, Nick Hindle, who is senior vice president of corporate affairs for McDonalds Restaurants (UK and Northern Europe), said "I think the rules of engagement are rarely made clear on both sides. The rules of engagement are too often left unsaid" (personal communication, June 19, 2013). While rejecting formal regulation, he and a number of other PR practitioners and journalists agreed that more specific codes of practice and guidelines are required – particularly in relation to new forms of paid content.

Educating journalists

A former head of PR for British Airways and Bupa, Peter Jones, acknowledged that 'educating' journalists about PR could be seen as "inviting the fox into a hen house" (personal communication, June 20, 2013). But he and most interviewees – journalists and PR practitioners – agreed that there is a need for education of journalists about PR to equip them to understand and work with PR. While 'academic wars' have occurred and continue in some institutions between the fields of journalism, mass communication and PR (White & Shaw, 2005; Wright, 2005), interviewees agreed that appropriate PR education would increase journalists' ability to identify, analyze and evaluate PR messages, which Holladay and Coombs (2013) refer to as "public relations literacy", as well as disrupt stereotypes and prejudices based on misunderstanding and myths.

Head of Public Affairs for the US Department of Homeland Security, Bob Jensen, said "it would make great sense for courses of study in journalism, communication and public relations to all include introductory courses about the other" (personal communication, September 14, 2013). ABC producer Dr Norman Swan said "I definitely support students studying journalism receiving information about how PR works and what it does", although he added the proviso that "it has to be ethical PR that is taught" (personal communication, December 3, 2013).

Educating PR practitioners

Interviewees and critical PR studies support the case for more ethics training of PR practitioners. A survey of more than 1,800 PR practitioners in North America, Australia, New Zealand and the Middle East found that 70% had not received any training in ethics" (Bowen & Heath, 2006, p. 34) and a 2014 analysis by Fawkes concluded that PR ethics is "often incoherent and aspirational rather than grounded in … practice" (2014, p. 8). Given the criticisms of inexperienced PR practitioners identified in this study, as well as the all too frequent public controversies in relation to PR reported in the media and academic literature as cited, education of PR practitioners requires both academic attention in PR courses as well as ongoing professional development in the industry.

Disciplinary engagement and debate about theory and practice

A strong case is also made for informed discussion and debate among scholars and practitioners in journalism and PR to replace the stand-off that has characterized many journalism and PR departments in the academy and sniping in professional practice that are unproductive and perpetuate stereotypes, clichés, misleading discourses, and myths. But, whereas the previous conclusions and recommendations primarily relate to practice issues such as codes and training, as well as teaching of media workers in each field, important as these are, this study suggests that a deeper level of engagement is required at a conceptual and theoretical level.

Both journalists and senior PR practitioners interviewed rejected suggestions that the fields of practice are or should be symbiotic. While they agree that they have a significant level of interdependency, senior PR practitioners and journalists see each field having a distinctly different role and even go as far as arguing that some tension between them is necessary and a sign of health in the media ecosystem. But how to move beyond the dominant discourses, stereotypes, and myths identified? Perhaps the three key findings from this study can facilitate more open debate and contribute to renewed theory building – that is journalists are confused rather than lying about their relationship with PR because (a) they acculturate some PR practitioners into their inner circle of contacts and trusted sourced and (b) see 'PR' narrowly and as a separate field with which they do not engage. At the same time, PR practitioners and professional bodies justifiably reject generalized condemnation of their practices and labels such as 'spin', but fail to adequately recognize and address the 'split personality' of PR, part of which is responsible and even socially necessary, while the other 'side' requires remedial intervention. Better understanding of these issues can inform a rethinking of transparency and contribute to ethics and standards in both fields to help maintain an effective public sphere.

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Notes

[1] The term 'strange bedfellows' is derived from the proverb "politics makes strange bedfellows", which refers to politicians sometimes forming peculiar associations to win votes and maintain power. The phrase also appeared in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (2:2).

[2] While studies have not been done of respondents to surveys in journalism and public relations, studies of market and customer surveys have found that "busy executives will ignore them or delegate them to junior clerks" and concluded that most feedback comes from the least important and valuable sources. For example, see Reichheld (2008, pp. 81–82).

[3] For a list of the largely synonymous terms used for PR, see Macnamara (2012) and Wilcox and Cameron (2010).

[4] For example, as proposed by the UK Media Standards Trust as part of its Transparency Initiative (http://mediastandardstrust.org/projects/transparency-initiative).

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