

## Public Relations and Newswork

### A Neglected Relationship

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My concern with television news lies primarily with its production and dissemination to large publics. My view of news creation is that it is best understood as a form of cultural argumentation - as an unending battle between a multitude of differentially powerful parties over the definition of reality. From that starting point, I would like to see more research on television news that grapples with a neglected aspect of this unending battle: the influence of the public relations industry on the news process.

The scholarly neglect is curious. Certainly members of the press are quite aware that public relations is a driving force behind what gets on television and into print. A recent journalistic exposition of PR's activities on the American news scene (Blyskal & Blyskal, 1985) put the matter succinctly:

Since World War II, PR has grown from a one-dimensional "press agency" function into a sophisticated communications network connecting the most powerful elements of our society. Through this network, corporations, unions, government, non-profit organizations, and other interest groups attempt to influence the various "publics" with which they must deal all the time consumers, employees, voters, investors, regulators, and other groups. Publicity messages sent along this network are carefully constructed to put the interest group, its goals or its products, in the best possible light, so that the specific "target publics" will think and behave in a manner beneficial to the special interest group. (pp. 26-27)

People who train reporters and public relations practitioners have also noted the overwhelming importance of PR materials for the contemporary press. The *Columbia Journalism Review* and similar publications routinely decry news stories that were reprinted verbatim from press releases in several newspapers. But Cutlip (1962), whose textbook on public relations has been popular for decades, sounded neither downbeat nor defensive when he told editors as far back as the early 1960s that about one-third of newspaper news is based on press releases. The same tone was taken by an assistant managing editor at the *Wall Street Journal*, who estimated that 50% of his paper's stories are spurred by press releases (Blyskal & Blyskal, 1985, p. 47). In fact, a *Columbia Journalism Review* ("It's in the Journal," 1980) study of a single edition of the *Wall Street Journal* found that 53 news stories had been based upon PR releases. Thirty-two of the releases were printed almost verbatim, and 20 of those carried the attribution, "By a Wall Street Journal Staffer." Asked about this labeling, one *Journal* reporter said, "At least we don't put our bylines on press releases, the way they do at the *Times*" (p. 35).

Journalism textbooks generally take a suspicious-but-tolerant attitude toward public relations that recognizes an inevitability to the symbiotic relationship in the contemporary news system. One such handbook (Strentz, 1977) advises neophytes that "it would be folly to write off an organization or its potential news value simply because of stereotypes of public relations in general" (p. 79).

But while public relations is a common topic in journalistic circles, one has to look hard in studies of news work to find the public relations industry as a special subject for analysis. Studies of the "selling" of the presidency and other political offices do track the rise of media consultants during elections of the past few decades. Yet researchers virtually ignore the role of public relations in structuring everyday news about governments, corporations, and the shifting fashions of life. What mention there is of this subject usually takes place fleetingly among a larger discussion of reporters' "sources." The discussions typically gloss over distinctions in influence between PR positions within an organization, autonomous PR firms that organizations hire, and the PR industry as a whole. Likewise, the comments about PR generally conflate into one phenomenon such varied activities as the circulation of publicity handouts, the use of satellites to entice news broadcasters with finely honed reports that look like news stories, and the computer-aided planning of PR strategies.

This tendency toward making PR sound sociologically nonproblematic holds up across writings with quite different scholarly emphases. For example, Fishman's (1981) detailed exploration of the "professional" logic of news work mentions PR only in passing. Fishman is primarily interested in the way journalists make generalizations about the credibility of their sources, so it is understandable that he eschews investigation of the PR industry itself. Yet it is puzzling that he and others concerned with journalistic thinking (for example, Tuchman, 1978) do not explore how the multileveled work of public relations practitioners affects reporters' constructions of reality.

We might ask, for example, whether journalists share distinctions between forms of public relations activities when they make judgments about news stories. Is a briefing by a press attaché deemed more believable than the output of a large PR firm? Or is credibility always contextual despite the type of PR source? More challenging questions regarding a journalist's "sense making" norms arise when the actual source of a story is unclear. A news item in a trade magazine or a speech during a legislative committee may reflect the subtle agenda-building power of an "image management" firm for whom the author is a witting or unwitting surrogate. To what extent are journalists concerned about such ambiguities? To what extent have they developed a professional logic to deal routinely with them? People who study news work have been silent on the matter.

Even more curious from this standpoint is scholarly work on the ability of various governmental and corporate entities to shape the news. Despite the high visibility of PR in business and politics, that literature generally avoids more than the most superficial discussion of the public relations industry. One typical tack is followed by Bennett (1988), who, despite many wide-ranging abstractions about news influence, reduces all those "who work for newsmakers" into "press strategists" or "image makers" and gives little hint of the varied industrial structures, technologies, and tactics involved in the process. Another common approach is that of Linsky, Moore, O'Donnell, and Whitman (1986). Although their book is titled *How the Press Affects Federal Policymaking*, their case studies focus narrowly on incidents in which individual government press representatives had to contend with reporters who smelled a controversy. Not mentioned is the daily but more subtle influence on federal policymaking that occurs when public relations firms working for major Washington lobbies insinuate their ideas into hard news stories with the aim of attracting lawmakers' attention.

One book that does suggest how research on public relations can illuminate the exercise of social power is Gandy's (1981) *Beyond Agenda Setting*. Gandy pays a good deal of attention to the rich mix of media strategies that major PR firms use. He shows how those tactics are

linked to clients' larger agendas in national as well as international policy making arenas. More significantly, he underscores and broadens the conceptual importance of PR by linking it to the term *information subsidy*.

Giving an information subsidy means supplying materials to an information user (a TV station, a wire service, a newspaper) for free or below the cost the user would ordinarily pay. The reason public relations practitioners are so successful in the news business, Gandy points out, is that media outlets need materials and welcome activities that reduce the resources necessary to create those materials. As he notes, "Faced with time constraints, and the need to produce stories that will win publication, journalists will attend to, and make use of subsidized information that is of a type and form that will achieve that goal" (p. 62).

The key criterion involved in a journalist's use of subsidized material is, of course, credibility, and, according to Gandy, the public relations industry has evolved a gamut of approaches to maximize the chances that targeted media outlets will carry their messages. On the most widespread level, that has involved cultivating a complex symbiotic relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners through which the norms of giving and receiving are continually negotiated. Sometimes, it involves departing from those norms and, instead, trying to enhance a message's credibility by hiding its origins from reporters. The aim is to give news people an impression that the story originated with sources who do not have a stake in the policy or product involved. To that end, a novel claim might be planted in arenas reporters typically consider untouched by PR strategists- independent scientific journals or legislative investigations, for example - with the hope that journalists will offer it to large publics as factual and newsworthy.

Actually, direct contact with media personnel is only a small part of what public relations is about. As far back as the 1920s, sophisticated PR practitioners such as Edward Bernays were manipulating legislators, not just serving as press agents. Of course, the management of executive and legislative activities ends up affecting the work of reporters and editors profoundly, by leading them to cover certain parts of the world and not others. Although Gandy does not discuss this facet of PR work, one could, in fact, argue that such activities are indirect information subsidies in the sense that they shape the activities that eventually become news fodder for journalists.

Tying the public relations process to the notion of information subsidy widens news research avenues in a number of important ways that can only be hinted at here. It raises fascinating questions about media organizations and their symbiotic relationships with sources. It suggests a range of questions about the role "issues management" firms play in directing as well as hindering agenda building. It points to the importance of understanding how the public relations industry is using new technologies to reach audiences in spite of - or perhaps to take advantage of - the fragmentation of audiences that the contemporary fractionalization of media channels has engendered. And it implies the necessity of looking at the international scope of the process.

The idea of PR as information subsidy takes on added power when one realizes that PR work often involves encouraging the movement of ideas across media boundaries - for example, from the wire services to newspapers to radio to television to magazines and even perhaps to the book, record, and film industries. Elsewhere (Turow, 1984) I have called such transmedia impulses linking pin activities. Their prevalence suggests the need to study the news process across media boundaries, with an eye toward the political, economic, cultural, organizational,

and industrial crosscurrents that push certain subjects in front of spiralingly large audiences despite an increasingly fractionalized media world.

The public relations industry's deep involvement in linking pin activities at all media levels also implies that the separation researchers often make between journalistic material and "entertainment" as areas of study is not always useful. Public relations practitioners use both news and entertainment - as well as increasingly popular blends of the two sometimes called "soft news" and "infotainment" - to implement their clients' issues-management goals. Prime-time television fiction, magazine pieces, theatrical movies, and daytime TV talk shows are among the vehicles PR people consider suitable for the subtle cultivation of clients' products, services, and policy concerns.

From a public relations standpoint, a major purpose of sliding ideas unobtrusively into entertainment and soft news materials is to distance the notions from the overtones of controversy that hard news typically carries. The idea is to implement a political agenda without seeming political. An example from the entertainment area is the link that the American Medical Association's PR arm evolved with the U.S. television networks and production firms. For years, the relationship helped to ensure that the AMA's model of medicine was dominant on the home tube (see Turow, 1989). Fueled by a quiet you-scratch-my-back-I'll-scratch-yours attitude that was understood (but not publicized) by all parties, the AMA's prime-time intentions meshed well with the organization's PR efforts on the news front.

Of course, a public relations source will often try to mask its political agenda from media practitioners as well as from the public. Carrying out research on the production of soft news on TV in 1981, I came across an example of how a seemingly apolitical talk show topic can mask a range of national and even international vested interests. In that case, the display of large diamond brooches was part of a large-scale effort to enhance the position of a critical South African export on the American market. During the mid-1980s, the sale of diamonds - particularly large diamonds - began to slump. The dip signaled a problem for the South African economy, from which virtually all of the new diamonds on the world market come. DeBeers Consolidated Mines, the South African-based diamond monopoly, embarked on a several-pronged effort to elevate diamond sales while taking care to avoid bringing the volatile issue of helping the South African economy to public attention.

The cornerstone of the strategy seems to have been the coordination of a multimedia ad campaign with a cross-media PR campaign. The advertising used variations on the time-proven diamonds-are-forever pitch that linked the giving of large stones to long-term, settled love. The PR push saw a female representative of the Diamond Information Center, a publicity arm of De Beers, cross the country to appear in malls, on TV talk shows, and on news programs to exhibit impressive examples of diamond-wear. None of the ads or PR materials noted the socioeconomic reasons for the push. (My inferences about the link came from an article in *Business Week* magazine ["Diamond Glut," 1981] about DeBeers's economic situation and its consequent attempt to emphasize large diamonds.) DeBeers itself was mentioned only in small print at the bottom of the ads and unobtrusively in the public relations press kits. The talk show host I studied had ignored the press kit reference until I brought it up. He saw no significance in it for his soft news spot. South Africa was not mentioned at all in the press kit. Moreover, the polished talk by the woman who exhibited the brooch combined with the norms of soft news to minimize the chances that the politics of diamond trading would arise. The resulting 5- to 10-minute spots seemed to reinforce the ad campaign while adding a key dimension missing from that approach to the media: the credibility offered through an enthusiastic reception by genial talk show hosts.

My entry into the DeBeers campaign was limited to its appearance in the local market where I was studying the general soft news process (see Turow, 1983). It seems clear, however, that this spot was the tip of an iceberg. An illuminating case study of the Diamond Information Center would explore the extent to which, and way in which, its public relations activities tie into broader politico-economic strategies by DeBeers and South Africa. It would examine the way in which trade, legislative, and media activities interlink; compare the ways in which these activities are carried out in different countries, and examine the roles that reporters, editors, and publishers play in the multi leveled process. It would also broach a number of basic questions that seem to have been ignored when it comes to public relations and the news:

- Under what conditions might attempts at Image management in the entertainment and soft news areas be accompanied by attempts to discourage hard news coverage of the same topics?
- The past decade has increasingly seen public relations firms working closely with advertising agencies. Will that exacerbate the historic tension between journalistic outlets' perceived cultural mandate to be free of outside editorial constraints and their financial need to provide a conducive editorial environment for their advertising clients?
- To what extent will the multiplication of print and electronic channels in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere lead individual media outlets to devote increasing amounts of time to free, prepackaged PR spots that are on the surface indistinguishable from news reports?

These questions might be considered take-off points for intensive research which, in turn, will raise other issues. They also point to a seldom-raised normative issue - the importance of encouraging journalists and other media practitioners to make audiences aware of the PR agendas and vested interests that may lie behind media works and sources I feel that such an approach is crucial. News and entertainment are products of cultural argumentation that takes place even before the stories reach the general public. The winners of these arguments get the right to structure realities for millions of people. My hope is that increased research on the PR industry's role in this process will highlight the importance of analyzing the sources *behind* the news as key elements *of* the news.