

Journalism & PR

*Unpacking
'Spin', Stereotypes,
& Media Myths*

JIM MACNAMARA

The interrelationship between journalism and public relations (PR) is one of the most contentious in the field of media studies. Numerous studies have shown that 50–80 per cent of the content of mass media is significantly shaped by PR. But many editors, journalists, and PR practitioners engage in a ‘discourse of denial’, maintaining what critics call the dirty secret of journalism—and PR. Media practitioners also engage in an accusatory ‘discourse of spin’ and a ‘discourse of victimhood’. On the other hand, PR practitioners say they help provide a voice for organizations, including those ignored by the media. Meanwhile, the growth of social media is providing new opportunities for governments, corporations, and organizations to create content and even their own media, increasing the channels and reach of PR.

This book reviews 100 years of research into the interrelationship between journalism and PR and, based on in-depth interviews with senior editors, journalists, and PR practitioners in several countries, presents new insights into the methods and extent of PR influence, its implications, and the need for transparency and change, making it a must-read for researchers and students in media studies, journalism, public relations, politics, sociology, and cultural studies.

“Jim Macnamara sets the stage for a long-needed dialogue between journalism and public relations, defining their respective roles and the relationship between the two fields. The evidence of their interdependence is abundant, and this dialogue is essential in today’s crowded communication landscape. Both journalism and PR have fringe operators and high-minded operators...significant codes of practice grounded in transparency must become paramount in both journalism and PR. The scholarly background needed to advance professional excellence is detailed in this book.” —MAX MCCOMBS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

“A sharp and astringent account of the love that dares not speak its name—PR and journalism. Jim Macnamara’s book challenges stereotypes and makes a compelling case for the positive role PR can play in our democracy and our media, while at the same time cautioning about some PR practices and calling for improved standards and transparency in both journalism and PR.” —CATHARINE LUMBY, MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY



Jim Macnamara (Ph.D., University of Western Sydney) is Professor of Public Communication at the University of Technology Sydney, a position he took up in 2007 after a 30-year professional career spanning journalism, public relations, and media research. He is author of 12 books including *The 21st Century Media (R)evolution: Emergent Communication Practices* (Peter Lang, 2014) and *Public Relations Theories, Practices, Critiques* (2012).

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*Unpacking 'Spin',
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Jim Macnamara, PhD, FPRIA, FAMM, CPM, FAMEC



Foreword

The interrelationship between journalism and public relations (PR), which is also referred to as public affairs, corporate communication, publicity and other similar titles, is one of the most contentious and controversial in the field of media studies, and it is also an issue of concern in discussion of politics and the public sphere. Politicians today are surrounded by teams of press secretaries, media advisors, and PR consultants who are colloquially referred to as 'spin doctors' and their utterances generalized as 'spin'. The term is highly pejorative, alluding to the process of fabrication in the manufacture of thread and textiles. It also carries connotations of twisting and stretching—applied in a contemporary context to truth in the hands of a secret army of media and communication intermediaries whose work and influence is mostly unknown to the public.

Many journalists and commentators now apply the term 'spin' to all information distributed by governments, companies, and organizations, which is increasingly undertaken in contemporary societies by communication professionals in roles referred to in this book as 'PR' for short. Industry studies and employment data show that PR is growing at the same time as journalist positions are declining. Courses in PR are now more popular than those in journalism in many countries—for instance, more than 300 US universities offered degrees in PR in 2010 (Wilcox & Cameron 2011). Concerned scholars and media professionals

ask what this says about contemporary society and what implications it will have for society.

Some editors and journalists deny that PR influences their work (Davies, 2009, p. 52; Turner, 2010, p. 212). But such claims are either naivety or obfuscation. A century of quantitative research involving many dozens of studies has shown that the growing practices of PR have a significant and substantial influence on what we read, hear, and see in our media every day. Research reported in this book shows that PR practitioners frame the agenda, prime the agenda, build the agenda, set the agenda, and sometimes cut the agenda of what is reported and discussed in our media. Their influence extends beyond the news to so-called lifestyle programs and publications, *infotainment*, and entertainment, where the latest techniques of marketing and promotion are referred to as 'embedded' because they involve promotional messages embedded invisibly into the comments of media personalities and even the storylines of drama shows.

Some of these techniques of promotion are described as advertising rather than PR in some professional texts, but they are not transparent in the way that advertising is. While Vance Packard (1957) collectively labelled both advertising and PR as *The Hidden Persuaders*, advertising is explicit and visible because of its characteristic presentation format in print publications and on Web sites and as 'commercials' on radio and TV. Transparency, more than legitimacy, is a major concern raised in relation to PR. In free speech societies, organizations and their advocates and professional communicators explicitly, or at least implicitly, have the right to present their views, including promotional messages and partisan views. But media consumers don't know when they are consuming PR. They don't know what interests have influenced what they are told—and what they are not told. PR practitioners have been called "the invisible hand" behind the news (Cadzow, 2001). Author of *Inside Spin: The Dark Underbelly of the PR Industry* Bob Burton stated in an interview: "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" (as cited in Cadzow, 2001, p. 21). In his 2013 book, media critic Robert McChesney warned that the news is "increasingly... unfiltered public relations generated surreptitiously by corporations and governments" (p. 183). McChesney (2013) says that "one of the reasons the amount of PR is less appreciated than, say, advertising, is that PR tends to be much more effective if it is done surreptitiously" (p. 58).

While McChesney could be expected to be critical of PR, being a political economist with a particular interest in journalism and a free press², the same point is made by a number of other scholars such as Joseph Turow (2011) who says to students in his widely used textbook:

You are probably much less familiar with public relations (PR) than with advertising. In fact, it wouldn't be surprising if you've never talked with anyone about a public relations campaign. Most people aren't aware that many of the media materials they read, hear, or watch are part of a PR campaign. That's OK with public relations practitioners. They try very hard to avoid getting public recognition for stories that appear in the press, because they believe that, for their work to be most effective, viewers and readers should not know when TV programs and newspaper articles are influenced by the PR industry (p. 560).

In reviewing Nick Davies' popular book, *Flat Earth News*, one senior journalist admitted "the fingerprints of PR are all over the news" (Cosic, 2008, para. 7). But how did they get there? Do they matter? If not, why are the practices of PR surreptitious? Why are they largely invisible and little talked about except in dismissive clichés—even denied? What really happens in journalism and PR behind the stereotypes of *Thank You for Smoking* and *Spin City*? Looking ahead, are social media really 'citizen media' expressing the voice of the people and contributing to democracy? How is the public interest protected and served in contemporary media practice? Is it being protected?

Some scholars and commentators argue that PR and spin have been over-analyzed and that the discussion is now out-dated, given new developments in social media in which everyone potentially becomes a journalist—and a PR person (e.g., Smith, 2008). In a critical review of the book *A Complicated, Antagonistic, Symbiotic Affair: Journalism, Public Relations and Their Struggle for Public Attention* (Merkel, Russ-Mohl, & Zavaritt, 2007), Brian Smith states that "journalism and public relations are converging around new developments in social media" such as blogs, message boards, social networking sites, and online videos that disseminate opinion, commentary, and advocacy mixed with news and researched information (2008, p. 926). Smith suggests that user-generated content and social media should be the focus of analysis. In many respects he is correct—and these significant developments are discussed in this analysis and are addressed elsewhere in considerable detail (e.g., Macnamara, 2014). The evolution of new types of open 'gatekeeperless' media and the development of new content formats such as 'embedded marketing' make it more relevant and important than ever to study the interrelationship between journalism and PR. PR is developing new tactics and techniques at the same time as journalism is struggling to adapt in a digital networked world and these developments and evolving interconnections need to be examined.

However, in traditional as well as emerging forms of media and public communication, the functions, role and influence of PR are poorly understood. Far from being over-analyzed, there is a blind spot in journalism and media studies, sociology, cultural studies, and even in many political economy analyses in

relation to PR. Furthermore, the discourse of denial propagated by many journalists and the generalized labelling of PR as 'spin' and 'puffery', which are discussed in Chapter 1, serve only to marginalize and trivialize PR. As New Zealand political scientist Joe Atkinson eloquently says, "media complaints about spin are both disproportionate to the offence and inadequate for its repair" (2005, p. 27). Despite its massive growth and complaints about its increasing pervasiveness, PR is largely unstudied and unexamined outside the specialist disciplinary field of public relations scholarship.

For instance, in mass communication and media studies, Denis McQuail's classic text, *Mass Communication Theory*, even in its sixth edition (McQuail, 2010), does not mention PR, even though it devotes sections to discussing the influence of advertisers and interest groups (pp. 290–292). Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese's widely used text devoted specifically to examining internal and external influences on media content, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influence on Mass Media Content* (1996), contains just two and a half pages discussing PR. *The Media Book* by Chris Newbold, Oliver Boyd-Barrett, and Hilde Van den Bulck (2002) contains one small section with 37 lines (less than one page) specifically discussing PR, along with two other brief mentions. In his numerous texts, eminent media scholar James Curran identifies that "modern media fell under the sway of public relations" in the 20th century (2002, p. 34), but he discusses PR only in passing in relation to its growth since 1980 (2011, p. 131) and Habermas's concerns about corruption of the public sphere (p. 194), despite his focus on media sources (p. 104) and the effects of commercialization and market liberalism/neoliberalism (pp. 196–204). In *Understanding the Media*, Eoin Devereux (2007a) says, "researchers have examined news media organizations with a view to understanding more about the workings of agenda setting; the use of particular sources in writing news stories, and the increasing importance of other media professionals such as PR experts who attempt to generate a 'spin' on specific stories" (p. 121). But this otherwise informative media text does not analyze or comment on PR beyond this one reference. Devereux's other text on media studies also only mentions PR in passing (Devereux, 2007b). The third edition of *The Media and Communications in Australia*, edited by Stuart Cunningham and Graeme Turner (2010), contains a chapter on PR but, while usefully identifying PR as part of 'promotional culture', it is short (just nine and a half pages) and mainly presents a historical perspective. Furthermore, despite the admonition in this chapter that "it might be wise to acknowledge, rather than merely lament, the structural importance of publicity in order to understand better how the media work today" (Turner, 2010, p. 212), the fourth edition of this media text released in 2014 (Cunningham & Turnbull, 2014) does not have a chapter on PR. Joseph Turow's *Media Traders: An*

Introduction to Mass Communication (4th edition) is one of the few media studies texts that addresses PR in any serious way, with a 37-page chapter on the 'The Public Relations Industry' (Turow, 2011, pp. 558–595).

For all the concerns expressed by some journalists and journalism scholars about PR, journalism textbooks also remain surprisingly silent on PR. Some do not mention PR at all. Others make brief references under glib headings such as 'When the Spin-doctors Spin Out' (Lamble, 2011, p. 77). This heading is followed by just 19 lines about PR with statements such as "our state and federal governments in particular, but also many local governments, employ small armies of public relations staff and media advisers: 'minders' whose sole responsibility is to do their utmost to portray their governments to the public." The role of PR is then described as "two-pronged" involving "blowing their own trumpets" and "targeting journalists with a deluge of media releases and deflecting criticism". Ironically, the same section adds: "But on the positive side, media releases can sometimes provide great story leads" (Lamble, 2011, pp. 77–78). *Melvin Member's News Reporting and Writing* (e.g., Mencher, 2010), a long-standing journalism text in the US, includes a chapter on writing news releases but does not address PR. *The Professional Journalist*, written by long-time Columbia University journalism professor and administrator of the Pulitzer Prizes for more than 20 years John Hohenberg, is one exception to what is either ostrich-like denial or shameful reticence in relation to PR within journalism. The third edition of this book, which was highly recommended to me by a former editor when I was a very young wide-eyed journalist, has a full chapter devoted to 'The News Media and Public Relations'. This opens with the acknowledgement that "a powerful and ever-growing public relations apparatus filters much of today's news flow before it ever reaches the reporter" (1973, p. 346). However, the last (5th) edition of this book was published in 1983 and it is now listed on Web sites among rare books. Despite much protest and populist rhetoric, journalists are very short on research and rigorous analysis of PR if journalism texts are anything to go by.

Despite Pierre Bourdieu (1984) naming public relations as part of the 'new petite bourgeoisie' involved in "presentations and representation" and "providing symbolic goods and services" in contemporary societies along with advertising, marketing, and other 'cultural intermediaries' (p. 359), sociologists and cultural studies scholars similarly have a blind spot or only peripheral vision in relation to PR. In his examination of promotional culture, Andrew Wernick (1991) focuses on advertising as stated in the title of his seminal book *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression*. Other studies such as that of Mike Featherstone (1991), who broadly critiqued the role of cultural intermediaries in

in the music industry in the US and UK; and examinations of the popularizing of art by art institution marketers (e.g., Durrer & Miles, 2009) usefully highlight the role of new types of cultural intermediaries, but mostly ignore PR. Jonathon Gray (2010) notes "the omnipresence of promotion in much media and popular culture" (p. 815), but only Negus refers to PR in saying that "studies have shown that the cultural intermediaries of marketing and public relations can play a critical role in connecting production and consumption" (2002, p. 507). Beyond Bourdieu's passing mention of PR and Negus's inclusion of PR in the "cluster of occupations" involved in cultural mediation, there has been little examination of PR practitioners as cultural or promotional intermediaries in cultural studies.

More recently in discussing the origins of objectivity in 20th century journalism, David Croteau, William Hoynes, and Stefania Milan (2012) say: "At the same time, the field of PR emerged, and professional publicists became early 'spin doctors'" (p. 131). However, no further discussion of PR is offered in their *Media/Society: Industries, Images and Audiences*. Nick Couldry's many highly regarded books and articles on media ignore PR, even though his focus on media practices (2004) provides an ideal lens for examining the journalism-PR interface, and his critique of the effects of neoliberal capitalism on media (2010, 2012) invites political economy analysis of the role of PR.

While Robert McC Chesney expresses concern about PR in his recent writing (e.g., McC Chesney, 2013), he does not examine its practices in any detail, and a number of political economy critiques, even those specifically focussed on media and communication, make no mention of PR at all (e.g., Vincent Mosco's *The Political Economy of Communication*, 2009).

It needs to be acknowledged that these texts have other work to do and make valuable contributions to knowledge. But the point is, outside of PR journals and texts, PR receives limited attention, and discussion that does occur is mostly superficial because it is based on clichés, stereotypes, and, in many cases, media mythology, as will be shown.

When editors and journalists do grudgingly acknowledge the influence of PR, claims of victimhood are often advanced. These cite the decline in journalist jobs, which has resulted in reduced time for research and writing, as the reason for the 'PR-ization' of media (Blessing & Marren, 2013; Moloney, 2000, p. 120)⁴. However, research shows that there were high levels of influence and usage of PR material even during the halcyon days of mass media when journalist staff levels were at their highest, as discussed in Chapter 5.

Meanwhile, PR texts often sound like 'PR for PR' rather than scholarly research and critical analysis. Claims that PR is about building mutually beneficial relationships and engaging in dialogue with 'publics'⁵ and 'stakeholders'⁶ are

normative and rarely applied, even in the view of some PR scholars (e.g., Murphy, 1991). The widely advanced image of PR practitioners as 'honest brokers' of information (Hohenberg, 1973) is frequently sullied by episodes such as those described in *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You* (Saubert & Rampton, 1995), the farcical untruths perpetrated by several governments and their 'PR machines' about 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq, cover-ups of the damage caused by dangerous products such as asbestos, and many other examples of misinformation and manipulation discussed in this book and others.

These gaps, contradictions, paradoxes, stereotypes, discourses, and myths mask an important interrelationship that warrants close examination—now more than ever. The fingerprints of PR are not being erased and the independence of journalism is not being enhanced in the 21st century. To the contrary, this analysis will show that these issues remain problematic and may be of even greater concern in the era of collapsing media models, widespread concern about a 'crisis in journalism', and open Internet communication in which there are fewer and sometimes no 'gatekeepers', little regulation, and therefore greater potential for misinformation and disinformation.

This book has two important and timely objectives. First, it summarizes and synthesizes existing research and diverse, often conflicting, perspectives on the topic to present an informed overview and balanced insights. Second, it reports new in-depth qualitative research that looks beyond the numerous quantitative surveys and anecdotal claims that have been reported to explore how journalists and PR practitioners interact despite denials and tensions, how and why media-PR interdependency is increasing, how PR is also bypassing journalists to directly create and distribute media content, and the implications of these practices for journalism, media independence, and the public sphere. Findings presented, based on in-depth interviews with senior practitioners in both fields as well as case study analysis and autoethnographic reflections, are relevant and important for researchers, educators, and students in journalism, public relations, and media studies in particular. They also help address the blind spot in sociology, political science, and cultural studies in relation to public relations.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 32 senior journalists and PR practitioners in the US, UK, Australia, and one developing country, mostly during 2013, to gain contemporary information. To gain informed insights, the sampling frame for interviewees was journalists and PR practitioners with 20 years or more of experience in their field (some had experience in both fields). Several had 30-35 years of experience in journalism and/or PR. The sample of interviewees was drawn from general news as well as a range of specialist sectors (i.e., industries or what media refer to as 'rounds', or 'beats') including business and finance IT

and telecommunications, health and pharmaceuticals, energy/petroleum and gas, food, transport, politics, and non-profits.

Some journalists and PR practitioners were reluctant to speak openly. However, the offer of anonymity, as well as use of some snowball sampling in which interviewees gave introductions to others in their field, paved the way for cooperation, trust, and frankness in the interviews. A number were happy to speak on the record and their seniority and years of experience provided insightful vantage points and authenticity. For example, interviewees included the principal deputy assistant secretary of the Office of Public Affairs in the US Department of Homeland Security. Prior to his senior role with DHS, he was deputy director of external affairs for the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in Washington, DC, where his experiences included setting up government communication field operations and handling media and public communication following the Haiti earthquake and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010 and during Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Other positions he has held include assistant press secretary for foreign affairs at the National Security Council based at the White House, executive officer and acting spokesman in Baghdad with the State Department, and director of communication operations for the US Department of Defense in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2006 and 2008.

On the corporate and PR agency side, interviewees included the senior vice president, corporate affairs of McDonalds (UK/Europe); the former head of PR for British Airways for a decade, the global head of corporate affairs for one of the largest American food and agriculture companies, and the CEOs of a number of the largest global PR agencies as well as several specialist in-house communication heads and consultants working in fields such as finance, engineering, transport, and not-for-profit.

Experienced journalists interviewed included a former executive editor of Britain's top-rating morning TV program, a multi-award-winning BBC reporter, a former 'Fleet Street' editor, senior reporters from one of the major wire services and one of the leading newspapers in the US, a former editor in chief of one of Australia's leading daily newspapers, as well as a number of senior business, finance, technology, health, transport, and media writers and broadcasters in the US, UK, and Australia.

Their frank comments, combined with analysis of other research studies and first-hand observations reported in this book, provide deep insights into this influential area of media practice that for too long has been obscured by stereotypes, media mythology, contradictions, ambiguity, ambivalence, and institutionalized acrimony that belie the reality of media and public communication today.

Jim Macnamara

Notes

1. This notes that freedom of speech is not guaranteed in the constitution of some countries, as it is in the United States, but it is a convention in most democratic countries.
2. Robert McC Chesney founded the non-profit group Free Press (<http://www.freepress.net/>).
3. The term 'gatekeeper' was coined by social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1947) and was used to refer to editors, producers, and journalists who control access to and content of media by David Manning White (1950) and a number of other media scholars since.
4. Eric Louw (2010) also referred to the 'PR-ization of politics' (p. 93) and the 'PR-ization of warfare' (p. 150).
5. While the singular term 'the public' is often used to refer to citizens generally or to groups of people, eminent sociologists such as John Dewey (1927) and Herbert Blumer (1948) have critiqued the notion of a single mass public, pointing to the diversity of interests and groups that comprise societies. Sociologist and political scientist Nina Eliasoph (2004) called for broad-based replacement of the term 'public' with the plural 'publics' to recognize sociological diversity. Based on this thinking, PR theoreticians Jim Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984) and others use the term 'publics' (plural) to refer to various groups of people with whom interaction is desirable or necessary (see further discussion in Chapter 3).
6. 'Stakeholders' is an alternative term for 'publics' used in public relations and by some researchers and political scientists to refer to individuals and groups of people who have an interest in an issue or the activities of an organization, or who are affected by the issue or organization (see further discussion in Chapter 3).