



Media & PR Ethics

The Pot Calls the Kettle Black

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The mass media regularly turn the heat on public relations with accusations of unethical behaviour adding to the already suspicious and sometimes hostile relationship between journalists and PR practitioners.

A major cover story in the *Sydney Morning Herald Good Weekend* magazine in May 2001 commented on PR: “It’s the invisible hand behind much of the news, the sophisticated spin machine that can rescue reputations or crucify a competitor. And some of its practitioners will stop at nothing.”¹

Writer, Jane Cadzow reported on alleged unethical practices in PR, including a senior Sydney practitioner and former NSW President of the Public Relations Institute of Australia who had been censured for unethical behaviour and another case in Victoria which led to successful legal action against a PR practitioner.

The *Good Weekend* feature also pointed to international PR firms working for milk formula companies in Third World countries, arms manufacturers and governments of nations in breach of human rights as examples of how PR seeks to corrupt media integrity and mislead the public.

The public relations industry is almost certainly not without blemish. A survey conducted by *Asia PRWeek* in July 2001 found 29 per cent of PR consultants surveyed admitted they had “knowingly told lies to the press about a client”. Of those, 21 per cent claimed, they had been pressured by their clients to lie, while eight per cent admitted lying without client pressure.²

Professional PR bodies condemn such behaviour and promote Codes of Ethics. These are voluntary and, as a result, are sometimes criticised as “toothless”. However, public relations practitioners, many of whom are former journalists, point out that the media are not in a position to throw stones.

The Media Glass House

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

The International Public Relations Association (IPRA) in 2001 called for an end to *Zakazukha* in Russia – a Russian word meaning acceptance of bribes by journalists in exchange for editorial. The *Zakazukha* issue was exposed not by the media, but by a PR agency in Moscow which issued a fictitious news release on the opening of a new store. No less than 16 publications subsequently initiated negotiations to run the story without any checking of

¹ Jane Cadzow, “The Hidden Persuaders” in *Sydney Morning Herald GoodWeekend* magazine, 26 May, 2001.

² “Industry admits to lying to media”, PR Poll in *Asia PRWeek*, 10 August, 2001.

the facts, in exchange for payment. Invoices were issued by 13 media which then published articles reporting on the opening of the non-existent shop, Svetophor. This occurred despite Russian law which requires paid advertising to be clearly identified and separated from editorial.³

Media apologists will say that's Russia; it doesn't happen elsewhere. But it does. The International Public Relations Association, tired of PR being attacked by self-righteous media as a principal cause of media corruption, conducted a global survey of media practices in 52 countries and found "cash for editorial" and other unethical practices rife in the print and broadcast media of many countries.⁴

Almost two thirds (63 per cent) of respondents in Eastern Europe believe that the practice of *Zakazukha* is common in their country. In Southern Europe, Africa and the Middle East, 40 per cent of respondents report that media editorial can be bought.

OK, so it's not just Russia. But it only occurs in Third World and developing countries, right? Wrong.

The 'cash for comment' scandal involving Sydney radio announcer, John Laws and other leading media figures in 1999 is a case in point.

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

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

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

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

A State newspaper in Australia, *Northern Territory News*, sold a complete wraparound cover to the AustralAsia Railway Corporation to commemorate the start of the Alice Springs to Darwin railway project, with a PR photo of the Prime Minister, the Chief Minister of the NT, the Premier of South Australia and the CEO of transport company, Franco Moretti, on the cover.⁵

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

³ International Public Relations Association e-group, ipra@yahoogroups.com, 10 March, 2001.

⁴ International Campaign For Media Transparency, global survey by International Public Relations Association, report, 14 June, 2002.

⁵ *Northern Territory News*, 19 July, 2001.

The motoring media is another example of the media lining up at the trough. While some leading motoring magazines and columnists retain their integrity and independence, a plethora of motoring columns publish regular glowing reports of products which they have had free use of for several days or sometimes weeks.

Women's and fashion magazines openly offer space in their editorial columns for products from manufacturers of prestigious brands that support them either through advertising or free samples.

And lifestyle television shows in most major markets including the US, UK, Europe and Australia are little more than product showcases with an increase in media marketing strategies to sell 'appearances' of products ranging from cars to restaurants in so-called editorial content.

There is no doubt a cadre of ethical, independent journalists and editors at the centre of the news media. But media leaders and commentators need to remove ideological blinkers and apply some peripheral vision in assessing media performance. A large, diverse collection of publishers and broadcasters of varying standards, the news media cannot multilaterally shield under the mythic mantle of elite journals such as *The Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* or behind philosophical slogans such as 'watchdog of society', 'seekers of the truth' and the Fourth Estate. While attacking the unethical and unsavory fringe of PR, the media need to adopt a less self-righteous approach and recognise their own manifold corrupt elements.

Unethical practices that mislead the public and distort information exist and need to be exposed and addressed in both the media and public relations.

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