

Media Release

FAO: News desk, media desk

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Title: Fourth Rate Estate? Cardiff University research uncovers massive reliance on PR copy in UK news media.



After years of debate about the role of PR and the quality of British journalism, the Journalism Studies research group at Cardiff University have published the first study which delivers striking and incontestable facts about the reliance of UK journalism on the public relations industry. The study, funded by Rowntree in collaboration with Mediawise and the Guardian found that:

- Most journalists are now required to do more with less time, a trend that inevitably increases their dependence on 'ready made' news and limits opportunities for independent journalism. *While the number of journalists in the national press has remained fairly static, they now produce three times as much copy as they did twenty years ago.*
- The content of domestic news stories in our quality media is heavily dependent on 'pre-packaged news' - whether from PR material or from wire services (there is, obviously a difference between these two kinds of sources, although, the report suggests, not as much as is sometimes supposed). Overall, our research suggests that *60% of press articles and 34% of broadcast stories come wholly or mainly from one of these 'pre-packaged' sources.*
- The study identified an 'editorial ladder' which allows PR materials to climb into editorial copy via news agencies' operations. PR relations materials are widely used by journalists working in the major news agencies to inform their stories which, in turn, are selected by journalists working in the 'quality' national papers and used to fill their columns. Similarities between the original press release, the agency story and the final editorial draft are striking and on occasion verbatim.
- In terms of PR material, 19% of newspaper stories and 17% of broadcast stories were verifiably derived *mainly or wholly* from PR material, while less than half the stories we looked at appeared to be entirely independent of traceable PR.
- The main source of PR is the corporate/business world, which is *more than three times* more successful than NGOs, charities and civic groups at getting material into the news. At a time when news groups are talking more and more about the power of citizen journalism to inform news agendas, we found that only 2% of home news stories in the press originated from citizens and public opinion.
- The most PR influenced topic was health, followed closely by consumer/business news and entertainment/sport (a finding that confirms the suspicion of some of the journalists we spoke to). Politics appeared to be less reliant on PR, although this may be because government PR leaves fewer traces.
- Most journalists we contacted felt that there was less checking and contextualising of stories than previously. *Only half the stories in our press sample made any visible attempt to contextualise or verify the main source of information in the story*, and in less than one in five cases was this done meaningfully. Broadcast news does better, with 42% of cases involving thorough contextualisation or verification, although it is clear that this is not the norm in either form of news.

This picture was confirmed by our survey of journalists most of whom felt that the pressure to produce a high number of stories daily has intensified, and that this increased their reliance on recycling material rather than reporting independently. One section editor on a UK national newspaper stated:

We are churning stories today, not writing them. Almost everything is recycled from another source [...]. It wouldn't be possible to write so many stories otherwise. Yet even more is expected, filing to online outlets is now considered to be part of the job. Specialist writing is much easier because the work is done by agencies and/or writers of press releases. Actually knowing enough to identify stories is no longer important. The work has been deskilled, as well as being greatly amplified in volume, if not in quality.

Prof Justin Lewis, who headed up the research team said:

Our research paints a picture of news gathering and news reporting in which meaningful independent journalistic activity is the exception rather than the rule. We are not talking about investigative journalism here. The everyday practices of news judgement, fact checking, balance, criticising and interrogating sources that are, in theory, central to routine day to day journalism practice have been eroded. In other contexts this would be regarded as straightforward plagiarism. But we have to be careful not to blame journalists for this. It's clear that most journalists operate under economic, institutional and organisational constraints which means they have to produce too many stories to be able to operate with real freedom and independence.

Notes to editors:

Read the full report at: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomec/en/school/39/419.html>

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