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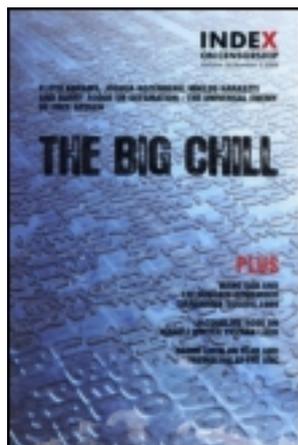


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LIES, LIES & DAMNED PR

MICHAEL FOLEY

It is becoming increasingly popular to view the suspicion in which many journalists hold the public relations industry as a form of childish disorder that hacks should grow out of; they should embrace the real world where hacks and flacks cooperate and work together.

Increasingly in the US and the UK, public relations modules are being tacked on to journalism courses for fear that journalism itself will not attract sufficient numbers. And while journalists still debate whether they and what they do constitutes a 'profession', the public relations practitioner is joining institutes and presenting business cards with so many initials after their names they look like typing exercises. While the media is being attacked for its lack of accountability, PR people are busy debating codes of conduct named after cities as if they were international treaties.

It suits the PR industry to suggest that there is no real difference between journalism and its own branch of activity, or that the relationship is a symbiotic one. But there is a difference: one serves the public interest, the other a private interest. If that sounds pompous it is probably because journalism has not been doing its job very well and has surrendered control of the agenda to the PR industry.

Journalists too readily accept and publish stories of dubious provenance: they take short cuts. Although there can be no excuse for bad journalism, journalists are facing new pressures with fewer resources. Print journalists are filling more pages, more supplements and colour magazines, and often an online breaking news service before starting on the newspaper. On TV, there are 24-hour news programmes to be produced; on radio, it's hourly news bulletins.

Into this chaos step the public relations people with their promise of exclusives, interviews and instant stories, but all at a price that emasculates the copy. The public interest is no longer paramount, it is the private. If a client does not want a question asked, it is not to be asked. According to PR executive Julia Hobsbawm, 75 per cent of entertainment stories and 50–80 per cent of news and business stories emanate from public relations. She adds: 'It is understandable that journalists can resent their reliance on us.'

Public relations learned its first lessons in war, and in the battle between public and private interest the latter has the big artillery. We know PR companies will lie for their clients. One of the world's most successful companies, Hill and Knowlton, spread the lie that babies were thrown out of incubators in Kuwait by the invading Iraqi army; we know it was a lie, as it was to suggest that Bosnians were willing to kill their own people for gain – another PR invention; we know that pictures are doctored; and we know that PR companies establish fake lobby organisations, seemingly working in the public interest, to promote a private cause.

Earlier this year, the *Observer* reported on one such organisation that had duped a number of famous women into supporting a campaign to promote a cervical cancer-screening test. The paper revealed that the organisation had been clandestinely set up by a PR company to promote a pharmaceutical company that stood to make millions if the National Health Service in the UK accepted its product. The *Observer* stated: 'Our investigation reveals increasingly covert methods that health care and pharmaceutical firms are using to push their products in this multi-million pound market. From hiring ghost writers to getting favourable articles published in medical journals to setting up allegedly independent campaign groups, the whole purpose of this strategy is to obscure the involvement of drug corporations that stand to make a fortune from selling their product to the public.'

The rich and powerful now call their PR consultants as quickly as their lawyers. When a famous chef was found guilty of possession of child pornography in Ireland last year, he came out of court with his PR man, who arranged for pictures and issued statements on the spot.

This is not simply an old hack's rant. The increasing power of public relations and the consequent decline in journalism has contributed to a collapse in public trust. The confusion of public and private makes it difficult for the public to judge the information it is given. With the increased sophistication of PR in public life, the journalist's only defence is to assume every time that the bastards in politics, business or public life are lying until proved otherwise. This cannot be good for our civic culture. □

Michael Foley is a lecturer in journalism at the Dublin Institute of Technology and was formerly with the Irish Times