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Introduction

In many countries, the PR industry has undergone significant growth in recent decades. In Sweden today, the number of active communications experts is seven times that at the beginning of the 1990s. Through this significant growth, PR agents have established themselves as an important group alongside parties traditionally considered being part of the democratic process.

Public relations have become a significant and powerful industry, particularly in recent decades. This industry and its actors mainly work through the media to spread information, persuasion and opinions to the public on behalf of their clients. Publicity is the predominant goal. Networking, relation-building, news production and activities intended to be published in the media are thus part of the everyday work of PR agents such as information officers and PR consultants. The PR phenomenon needs to be examined and scrutinized as a new party and power in the democratic process. In recent years, some international studies have taken on this mission, but there is scope for more studies on different aspects of the phenomenon.

In this work we are focused on the relation between the PR industry and the news media.

The main themes and questions are: What characterizes the relation between the PR industry and the media or between PR agents and journalists? The work starts by outlining some of the pertinent circumstances concerning the relation between the parties as well as their view of each other.

Theoretical Starting Points

The news media are the most outstanding, common, and important channel for interest groups to get their messages out and influence their surroundings. A focus on media has, in fact, grown in importance to these agents, especially concerning those active on the scene of policy shaping in the broader sense. The media work has become a more central part of political activity in recent years.

Studies of the relation between the PR industry and the news media show that PR actors and journalists often establish close relations in order to fulfill a mutual need.

The influence of the PR industry appears in many different shapes in daily life. It involves anything from traditional press conferences and press releases to various more or less successful long-term agenda-setting-related activities. Among other things, strategies for controlling the news agenda are based on producing and serving the media with material that promotes the instrumental purposes of the senders' interests. This type of media influence and strategies for controlling the news agenda are today often referred to by the concept news management. Meanwhile, news material from sources outside the media may also be seen as a contribution to journalistic work and as a way of cutting costs. Observations in line with this point of view have made way for the theory of information subsidy, meaning efforts by policy actors to increase the consumption of persuasive messages by reducing their costs. A reasonably large proportion of published articles originate from external sources - in fact, more than half of the studied published articles stem from material originating from outside sources.

There is reason to argue that, in recent times, the theory of information subsidy has increased its relevance to the everyday journalism reality as a consequence of the financial and personnel cutbacks many news organizations have undergone. Some analysts claim that this type of contact and exchange has forced journalism to become increasingly dependent on, and more easily affected by, outside influences - a transformation of professional conduct that has resulted in a more alienated journalism. According to Davis (2002), the cutbacks are one explanation of the fact that PR practitioners have come to strongly influence today's news agenda. He argues that the material they present has become extremely successful in passing itself off as 'real news', and thereby, to a great extent, PR people have "worked to erode the autonomy of journalists at the micro level". Other researchers follow this line:

What passes for news of politics is often an inextricable mixture of messages from different sources. Advertising, public relations, reports of opinion polls, and propaganda become mixed up in the news product along with facts and editorial opinions. It certainly tends to undermine any simple faith in the reliability and independence of news.

Media and PR in Society

The news media are the most prominent instrument for disseminating information in society. The media have become an increasingly important stage for organizations' external communication. Editor of a business magazine:

«Today, the media are the most important marketplace - all important deals are settled in the media sphere /.../. And as everyone is squeezed together on the same media scene, it becomes very loud, very crowded and very short of oxygen. That's where the PR business comes in» (Editor, business magazine).

The media, however, do not constitute a platform with actors of equal importance to PR practitioners. Rather, the media sphere appears as a media hierarchy. Typically, the largest radio and television stations along with the large national newspapers constitute the most important targets for PR activities. Within television, news programmes are especially sought after, followed by talk shows and entertainment programmes. For PR activities directed at the print media, the editorial and debate pages of the daily morning newspapers are essential targets. When it comes to activities such as product promotions and launches, trade magazines and other types of specialized press increase in ranking and become a high priority. For opinion-generating campaigns, regional and local media are also of interest. However, the latter types of media organizations pick up PR-related information mostly through news agencies, and thus their journalists experience little direct connection with PR agents.

The features of the relationship between PR agents and news journalists vary with the type of organization or consultancy they represent. Journalists often claim a skeptical approach to those representing commercial interests, as journalistic norms have long deemed textual product placement despicable. Representation in the interest of political organizations, on the other hand, sets a different tone because of these organizations' position as being fundamental to a democratic society and therefore considered to be legitimate opinion leaders. Their actions thus become "in the interest of the public". Public authorities are also by their nature obvious targets of media observation.

Between the corporate interest groups and the political groupings stands a middle-category - the non-profit organizations. Non-profit organizations with a clear social ideology are often treated much like a party or public authority by the media. Furthermore, representatives of non-social ideology groupings often aim for publicity by trying to pass off their PR-activities as relevant to policy or community matters, regardless of whether this is actually the case. In other words, they attempt to move the characterization of a specific organization and its activities from the commercial sphere up to the societal/political one. However, one can say that the media's perceived understanding of the potential social impact of the organizations the PR-agents represent largely determines the conditions for the relation.

The Editorial Conditions

The impact potential of the news media is of course a crucial factor in why journalists are a prioritized target of actions taken by the PR industry. However, there are at least two additional reasons for why media publicity is considered the best way to reach the public - and thereby to achieve a desired image and swing public opinion or parts of it in a favorable direction.

First, publication in the media has a higher level of credibility than other communication channels do. Second, compared to advertising, media publicity is a cost-effective method.

It should be added that today's senders, whether they are professionals within an organization or hired consultants, find it fairly easy to get material published in newspapers. The prevailing conditions are the result of decreases in editorial staff in recent years and increasing demands for raised production goals for each journalist. "Today, we are so pressed by shrinking advertising revenue and diminishing circulation rates, that we try to save, we cut back wherever we can", said one editor. The work climate has created an increasingly stressful situation and resulted in less time for journalistic fieldwork, especially with regard to investigative efforts. That, in turn, has created an increased need for access to raw material from sources outside of the news desks. The senders - or agents promoting a specific interest - are well aware of the situation and use it consciously:

The everyday work of a journalist is very stressful /So/ they often consider contacts with PR agents as useful, if we practice serious work conduct and do no gold digging. Because we know exactly what journalists want (PR Consultant).

The information flow directed towards the editorial staff has thus allegedly increased, partly as a result of a much more flexible attitude towards promotion-related activities from the communications sector.

Today the news desks experience an in-flow of information never seen before, especially from the corporate sector. The input is overwhelming - if previously it was a stream, it's now more like a river. Handling this flood of information is problematic, and there is a risk that journalists will get caught up in it and thereby decrease their ability to control the news agenda.

This raises questions of whether the media may become dependent on this subsidy of information and material. Some journalists reflecting over their own work situation suggested there is a risk that reporters will become dependent on the influence of different activist experts. Even journalists with special beats sometimes experience a lack of knowledge, especially those within technical, medical and natural-science-related subject areas: "While we become too specialized we also become too dependent", said one public service TV journalist.

PR people call both openly and under cover to try to sell an idea to us. It's presented in a very feasible way and then we're under extreme pressure to put together a paper for the next day. They know our work situation and they know exactly what things to pull.

By serving the media with news material, the activities of PR actors have caused their industry to move towards taking on the shape of a news desk located outside the media.

PR Agents' and Journalists' Perceptions of Each Other

The PR experts' and journalists' views of each other differ a great deal. It seems that, in principle, many representatives of the PR industry have great respect for journalism and the media's role in society. They underline the media's obligation to review the PR sphere just as they expect journalists to do with other social phenomena. At the same time, some of the PR actors in reality showed less respect for the media's professional task, as attempts to manipulate or steer the media in a favorable way seemed acceptable. Even among those who claimed a profound respect for the media, instrumental aims became discernible.

Hardly any of the journalists expressed a corresponding respect for the PR agents. In principle, PR experts, especially consultants, were described as opponents, in line with the general normative thinking of journalism, which supports the view that PR people are to be kept at a distance. They are "my most important opponents," claimed one journalist of a national newspaper and continued by saying that the group has become so "unbelievably much more clever with what they do". As PR agents inevitably exist in the media professionals' work context, journalists are forced to respect them in the same matter as one has to respects an opponent:

I dislike the phenomenon /PR consultants/ terribly. But I do realize that 'this is the way it is' and what am I to do? They're a part of today's society. And an influential part too (Editor, evening newspaper).

Journalists' mainly skeptical approach to PR is familiar to those working in the PR sphere. It is mirrored in the strategies of the latter - how to present material as well as how to present themselves in order to establish contact - and perhaps also in their professional self-image. Some of the consultants pointed to the fact that they are always straightforward in their contacts with the media and always explain whom or what interests they represent.

In their comments on PR agents, a journalists tended to group information officers and consultants. The journalistic approach seems to be that there is actually no need for any PR agents. Meanwhile, in reality, the relation in itself may function differently depending on whether a PR person is placed inside or outside an organization - the latter case often making it more restrained. Still, some journalists claimed to make use of consultants in terms of information overviews and ideas for suitable sources. In addition, while they also fill a censoring role, information officers admittedly seem to be useful in negotiating contacts higher up in the organizations. Journalists, however, often find these officers annoying, as they want to speak with the person in charge; they do not to wish to get the answers "filtered through representatives one has to go by".

In this specific matter, journalists and PR consultants actually seem to agree. The latter claimed they should never be the voice of the organization they represent. Rather, their work is to organize the contact set up. It is always the client who should talk to the journalists, and "it would be absurd to have a consultant between the journalist and the corporation". Yet many journalists claimed that they are constantly subject to information flows controlled by PR consultants. The discrepancy in the perception of the situation is likely to be a result of opposing relational perspectives on who controls the terms for the contact and in whose interest it is taken.

Journalists' mainly skeptical and negative approach to PR experts was accompanied by an attitude of rejection towards them when discussions during the interview sessions lead to the topic of what the relationship is actually like in reality. When the PR agents, on the other hand, voiced their opinion about the same reality, it was largely through opposite understandings of good and well-working relationships, common interests and sometimes collaboration.

Conclusion

The news media are the main channel for disseminating information and controlling public opinion in favour of a particular group's interests. Accordingly, obtaining media publicity is an important aim of the PR industry. This fact leads to the almost trivial assumption that there is a connection between those who aim to influence the media and those who work in the news business.

The contacts between PR agents and journalists are extensive, in the sense that they are frequent, and mainly initiated by the former. Thus, journalists are constantly the designated targets of PR activities. According to both parties, personal relationships generally appear to be rare.

The views of the two parties are divided. PR agents commonly declare a high level of respect for the norms of journalistic conduct and for the media's role in a democratic society. They also view their relation with the media as well functioning. The journalists, on the other hand, generally express less respect for people working with PR and claim they do not have any established relations with them, even if they admit to often being approached by PR agents.

Furthermore their views on the outcome of this relation differ significantly. PR actors claim that they often succeed in their efforts to get publicity out of the news material produced. But, as they declare, there is no attempt to influence journalism; they just "deliver news ideas". Editors and journalists, on the other hand, agree that they frequently receive promotional materials from different organizations or consultants, but more or less resolutely state that they hardly ever consider using that type of material. In other words, the flow of PR material is no great problem in their eyes, as they are usually able to unmask the instrumental ends. In other words, the gatekeeper function works.

The PR actors' high level of respect for journalism, its role in society and its integrity should be contrasted to PR work practises that inevitably aim at providing publicity for a particular version of reality. Meanwhile, journalists' generally sceptical attitude towards PR activities should be measured against reality: the media clearly publish news stemming from PR material. PR sphere is highly successful in achieving its aims, that is, the media do in fact publish material originating from this sphere to a quite great extent. Even if the contacts are said to be mostly one-sided - and mainly initiated by the PR sphere - they might well, in reality, constitute a two-way process. Through networking activities, the PR agents create awareness among journalists about their existence, which in turn increases their chances of being contacted by reporters in search of information. Thus, the PR industry always has suitable informative material ready for delivery. Some of the journalists interviewed in the present study stated that PR agents facilitate the journalistic task in this way.

PR actions and activities within the frames of the PR industry result in an in-flow of news material and a constant marketing of ideas directed at the news desks. Simultaneously, editorial staffs are - and have been for some time now - subject to increasing restraints in personnel and resources, meaning less ability do conduct in-house research and a greater dependence on material sent from outside sources.

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