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Journalism, Public Relations, and Spin

William Dinan and David Miller

INTRODUCTION

Public Relations (PR) is an expanding and increasingly significant feature of the contemporary media-scape. Despite academic and popular interest in propaganda, especially in times of armed conflict, understanding of routine domestic propaganda—PR or spin—is rather limited. The conventional view is that modern PR was invented in the United States in the early twentieth century, and later exported around the globe. A closer historical analysis suggests that spin was adopted as a strategic response by capital (and the state) to the threat of the extended franchise and organised labour (Miller & Dinan, 2008). The subsequent growth of the public relations industry is closely linked to corporate globalization (Miller & Dinan, 2003) and to forms of neoliberal governance, including deregulation and privatization (Miller & Dinan, 2000).

This chapter will outline an argument for rethinking the role of PR in contemporary society by critically examining popular theories of spin in the light of available evidence and trends. In particular this chapter offers a critique of the appropriation of Habermas (1989, 1996) by apologists for PR, and argues for a new synthesis of theories of communication, power and the public sphere, drawing on Habermas. This conceptualization problematizes the understanding of source studies as simply the communicative relationships between sources (e.g., spin doctors), the media and the public. Instead, we argue, the media are often by-passed by public relations as it seeks to speak directly to particular publics, such as elite decision-makers and power brokers. To be clear, we are not arguing that the media are unimportant, indeed we do see the role of the media in amplifying and helping to legitimate "systematically distorted communication" as a problematic function of journalism. However, it is also clear that elite communications have their own conditions of existence and outcomes.

We consider in particular the reshaping of the field of journalism in the UK and the US, and we argue that the potential of the new relations of journalism is to dissolve independent journalism in the fluid of commercial values, fake news and source originated content. Given the tendencies evident in the commercialization of news production and the ways in which professional public relations tends to serve powerful interests we could call this process the "neoliberalization of the public sphere." We also believe that while the tendencies we discuss below are most developed in the US and UK (home to the largest PR industries in the world), there is clear evidence of the same processes and practices in operation right across the globe.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Alex Carey (1995, p. 57) identifies three important inter-related developments that in many ways characterised the twentieth century:

> The growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy.

The twentieth century saw the birth and inexorable rise of modern spin. With the promise of a wider franchise, intellectuals and elites on both sides of the Atlantic began to worry about the "crowd" and how the newly "enthroned" masses (as PR pioneer Ivy Lee remarked in 1914) would impact on advanced liberal democracy (Hiebert, 1966). Important figures in journalism such as Walter Lippmann (1921, p. 158) began to see how the consent of the crowd could be manufactured by elites to ensure the best functioning of democracy: "Within the life of the generation now in control of affairs, persuasion has become a self conscious art and a regular organ of popular government." Those at the centre of this enterprise were the captains of industry and their appointed propagandists. Perhaps the most famous early pioneers of PR were Edward Bernays, Carl Byoir and Ivy Lee in the United States. They had their less celebrated counterparts in the UK, in figures like Basil Clarke and Charles Higham (see Miller & Dinan, 2008).

What united these people was their belief in the necessity of managing public opinion, and their efforts in the service of political and business elites seeking to thwart or manage democratic reform. All these early pioneers of PR were deeply influenced by their experiences of using propaganda in times of conflict and crisis: for British propagandists this meant their experiences of repressing Irish nationalists during and after the 1916 rising and the efforts to defeat the Germans in the first World War; for the founders of the US PR industry their experiences inside the Creel commission (which sought to promote the US entry into WWI and the subsequent war effort) were formative (Miller & Dinan, 2008). These propagandists emerged from the war acutely aware of the power of propaganda to shape popular perceptions and behaviours, and the strongly held conviction that the lessons of war-time propaganda could be applied to the management of democracy during more peaceful times.

World War II saw renewed and intense interest in the application of propaganda techniques. Joseph Goebbels, the chief Nazi propagandist, was inspired by Edward Bernays book, *Crystallising Public Opinion*, a fact about which Bernays kept quiet until much later in his life (Tye, 1998). In the wake of World War II, those involved in propaganda and intelligence also came out of the services with a strong sense of the power of propaganda. The rise of Nazism was understood in conventional wisdom as testament to the power of propaganda. But the history of propaganda and PR shows that much was learnt by the Nazi's from the Western powers (Miller & Dinan, 2008).

Where are we today? The current media ecology is characterised by the continuing expansion of media outlets and the increasing conglomeration of media industries (McChesney, 2004). These trends are evident across the promotional industries too, with the emergence of a number of mega corporations like Omnicom, Interpublic and WPP, each owning many global public relations consultancies and networks (Miller & Dinan, 2008). There has been very strong growth in professional PR (consultancy & in-house) in the past couple of decades. For instance, in 1963 there were "perhaps" 3,000 PR people in Britain (Tunstall, 1964). In 2005 a "conservative estimate" suggested some 47,800 people were employed in public relations in the UK (Chartered Institute for Public Relations [CIPR], 2005, p. 6).

As media outlets cutback on journalism, there is a growing reliance on "information subsidies"—press releases, video news releases, briefings, trails, and exclusives offered by spin doctors to increasingly pressurised journalists (Curran, 2002; Davis, 2007; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Miller & Dinan, 2000, 2008). While these trends are most acute in the US and UK, the same dynamic is in play throughout the globe. The scale and scope of the modern PR industry is such that the idealised models of the investigative journalist, independent newsgathering and the institutional role of press as the critical fourth estate are increasingly unsustainable. Thus, it may be time to revisit some of the theories of public communication to better diagnose the current "communication crisis."

THE DEATH OF NEWS

The pressures unleashed by the shift to the market from 1979/80 onwards have had dramatic impacts on news. In the UK, writes Nick Cohen (1998), "the number of national newspaper journalists has remained the same since the 1960s, but the size of newspapers has doubled; the same number of people are doing twice the work. News is the chief victim." The emptying out of Fleet Street as newspapers re-housed themselves in Docklands in East London, was emblematic of the segregation of many journalists from first hand experience of the political process. As Cohen (1998) notes most journalists are now based "in the compounds of Canary Wharf and Wapping, where barbed wire and security patrols emphasise their isolation from a public whose lives they are meant to report. News comes on the telephone or from PRs; from the Press Association (which has itself cut back its once comprehensive coverage) or the temporary enthusiasms of a metropolitan media village."

The convergence between the media and PR business's is visible especially in companies like United Business Media, which owns CMP a provider of events, print and online publications. UBM is also a major shareholder of Independent Television News [ITN] (20 percent) and the Press Association (17.01 percent) (United Business Media [UBM], 2007). But UBM also owns PR Newswire, a publicity service for corporations and the PR industry which distributes content to news outlets such as ITN and the Press Association. PR Newswire is also the parent of another subsidiary, eWatch, a controversial internet monitoring agency which advertised a service to spy on activist groups and corporate critics. After it was exposed by *Business Week* in 2000, the page promoting this was removed from the eWatch Web site and PR Newswire even claimed that it had never existed. (Lubbers, 2002, p. 117)

The integration of the PR and media industries is in its early stages. But it is a tendency that undermines the possibility of independent media. This tendency is reinforced by the rise of "infomediaries" and "fake news." Amongst the developments is the trend towards the direct corporate control of information media. An early example of this was the joint venture between ITN and Burson Marsteller, one of the biggest and least ethical PR firms in the world. Corporate Television News was based inside ITN headquarters with full access to ITN archives and made films for Shell and other corporate clients. In 1999, one of the UK's leading lobbyists Graham Lancaster (then of Biss Lancaster, now owned by global communications giant Havas) expounded his view that PR firms "will increasingly" own their own channels for delivery to customers superceding "media." PR channels will become "infomediaries." But the important quality that they must have is apparent independence—they must be, in other words, fake news channels (G. Lancaster, personal communication, October 1999).

A new venture by one of New Labour's favourite PR people, Julia Hobsbawm, attempts to blur the lines between spin and journalism even further. Editorial Intelligence involves a range of

professional communicators including journalists, PR people and lobbyists. Back in 2001 before its creation Hobsbawm (2001) had written that

> The role of PR is to provide information, to "tell the truth persuasively", and to allow journalism the right to interpret, for good or bad. [...] PR has nothing to hide. We send out press releases and give briefings openly (they are called press conferences and launches). With the exception of the mutually beneficial "off the record" quote, PR is transparent. But journalists' egos often make them demur when admitting the involvement of public relations, hence years of running doctored interviews rather than admit intervention.

Hobsbawm's argument attempts to "level" journalism and PR to suggest that one is, at least, no worse than the other. Journalist-source conflict is pointless and Editorial Intelligence is a kind of balm on the wound. Hobsbawm says that "ei" will combine "the consulting and analysis of a think-tank with the accurate data of a directory and the inside scoop of a newspaper." It aims to break down the "traditional hostility between journalism and PR by getting the two to mix at lunches, dinners and speaking events. 'Cynicism is so over,' she says" (Jardine, 2005). The venture came in for criticism from some in the mainstream. Alluding to the ei strapline—"Where PR meets journalism"—Christina Odone (2006) wrote:

> PR meets journalism in Caribbean freebies, shameless back-scratching and undeclared interests. A link to a PR firm should spell professional suicide for a journalist, rather than a place on a high-falutin advisory board. Journalists should meet PR in a spirit of hostility—treating the information passed on as suspect, scrutinising possible motives and investigating possible links. As it is, the Westminster village pens into a confined space politicos, hacks and PRs, making for an often unhealthy, if informal, proximity. An organised "network" such as EI's, where more than 1,000 hacks and PR figures formally join hands, risks institutionalising a clique where who knows who will influence who writes what.

In the domestic context efforts to dominate the information environment are furthest advanced in the United States, where there are extensive networks of think tanks, lobbying firms, and front groups associated with neoliberal and neoconservative tendencies. One pioneering example is Tech Central Station (TCS), which appears at first glance to be a kind of think tank cum internet magazine. Look a little deeper and it is apparent that TCS has "taken aggressive positions on one side or another of intra-industry debates, rather like a corporate lobbyist" (Confessore, 2003).

TCS is published by the DCI Group, a prominent Washington "public affairs" firm specializing in PR, lobbying, and "Astroturf" campaigning: "many of DCI's clients are also 'sponsors' of the site it houses. TCS not only runs the sponsors' banner ads; its contributors aggressively defend those firms' policy positions, on TCS and elsewhere" (Confessore, 2003). James Glassman, who runs Tech Central Station has:

> Given birth to something quite new in Washington: journo-lobbying [...] It's an innovation driven primarily by the influence industry. Lobbying firms that once specialized in gaining person-to-person access to key decision-makers have branched out. The new game is to dominate the entire intellectual environment in which officials make policy decisions, which means funding everything from think tanks to issue ads to phoney grassroots pressure groups. But the institution that most affects the intellectual atmosphere in Washington, the media, has also proven the hardest for K Street to influence—until now. (Confessore, 2003)

Such developments pose an enormous threat to independent journalism and proper scrutiny of public institutions and policy making. The PR industry certainly needs the appearance of

independent media in order to sustain a patina of credibility, but the trajectory outlined above points to newly emerging political communication source strategies which aggressively seek to colonise or dominate the information environment. Thus, our models for understanding contemporary political journalism need to account for the spread of promotional culture and these new forms of spin.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND FORMS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The public sphere has become a very popular and influential model for analysing political communication. Perhaps part of the attraction of the concept is that it is elastic and sufficiently flexible to allow a variety of applications. As Garnham (2000, p. 169) suggests, the utility of Habermas's theory is that it seeks to "hold liberalism to its emancipatory ideals," by focusing on the links between institutions and practices in democratic polities, and "the necessary material resource base for any public sphere" (pp. 360–361). Much of the debate about the public sphere is media centric, in that it tends to focus on the role of the mass media in shaping public discourse. However, Habermas has a more nuanced understanding of political communication and the model allows for public and private communications, meaning a broader conception than simply the role of mass media and including also online and virtual communications, as well as elite communications and processes of lobbying. It is the latter which is a crucial element in our argument for the continuing utility of the model of the public sphere.

A repeated criticism of theories of the public sphere relates to its idealised (liberal-rational) model of public communication. Habermas champions forms of rational-critical debate, wherein argument and reason are paramount, and participations are truthful and consensus seeking. There is no place in this idealised model for strategic communication and the presentation of private interests as generalizable public interests. Therefore, much of the practice of PR has no place in a rational, deliberative democracy. Of course, in the real world PR is increasingly important in political and public communication, so the model of the public sphere needs to be revised to account for this empirical reality. To date the most developed area of research in political communications addresses political parties, their news management and spin tactics. It often excludes business and NGO media relations, and neglects the less public communicative activities of such groups, including lobbying and corporate social responsibility (CSR), think tanks and policy planning activities. This lacuna is partially explained by a tendency to focus on media rather than more broadly on communication. In our view this implicit model should be turned on its head and start with economic, social and political institutions, focusing on their attempts to pursue their own interests (including by communicative means). Seen from this vantage point, news and political culture are one part of wider communicative strategies employed. Starting from the media—all too often—results in a tendency to forget or ignore wider issues and (for some) a tendency to focus on media discourse as if it was divorced from other forms of communication, and most importantly from social interests and social outcomes (see Philo & Miller, 2002).

The model of the neoliberal public sphere proposed here is sensitive to the variety of communicative practices deployed by the array of competing interest groups and coalitions that form to seek social and political outcomes. It explicitly acknowledges the power and resource advantages in play in political communication and lobbying and how this fits into a wider power/resource context. It recognizes strategic communication and stresses those aspects of political communication not directly targeted at the mass media and the general public, but rather at specific decision-making, or "strong," publics. A strong public is a "sphere of institutionalised deliberation and decision making" (Eriksen & Fossum, 2000). Contrary to some discussions which see such

"publics" as facilitating democratic (Habermasian) deliberation, they can equally be understood as undermining democracy by insulating decision making from popular pressures. The communicative strategies of social interests can be focused on a range of overlapping fields—mass media are one, intra-elite communications and policy planning another. But the point equally applies to all arenas of communication and socialization such as education, religion and science.

Any cursory review of the voluminous literature on collective political action and organised interest group politics indicates the centrality of business, particularly large corporations, as key participants in public policy debate. Even the literature on the collective action of new social movements (such as Beder, 1997; Crossley, 2002; Gamson, 1975; Klein, 2000; Sklair, 2002; Tarrow, 1998) which asserts a more fluid conceptualisation of political organisation, issue contestation, and agenda setting, often demonstrates the presence of organised private sector actors (be they individual corporations or collective business lobbies) in opposition to the demands and agendas of social movements, and local communities (Gaventa, 1982; Eliasoph, 1998, Epstein, 1991). Yet, very often journalism studies has turned its gaze away from these actors and their communicative agency.

For our purposes—theorising the role of spin as strategic political communication—we can draw upon aspects of Habermas's model, foregrounding interpersonal communication and those actors who are the prime movers of "systematically distorted communication" (Habermas, 1996) and allowing for questions of strategy and interest. However, before interrogating these dimensions of political communication it is necessary to offer an interpretation of the public sphere that proceeds from a broad framing of the concept to a more focused application of the theory to questions of PR and actually existing democracy. Thus a recent (re)definition by Habermas seems a useful point of departure:

> The public sphere is a social phenomenon just as elementary as action, actor, association, or collectivity, but it eludes the conventional sociological concepts of "social order" […it] cannot be conceived as an institution and certainly not as an organisation. It is not even a framework of norms with differentiated competences and roles, membership regulations, and so on. Just as little does it represent a system…the public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view […] the public sphere distinguishes itself through a *communicative structure* that is related to a third feature of communicative action: it refers neither to the *functions* nor to the *contents* of everyday communication but to the *social space* generated in communicative action. (p. 360)

By attending to the importance of social spaces opened up through communicative activities Habermas is correctly emphasizing the significance of the networks and interactions of political actors. For Garnham (1992) a virtue of a Habermasian framing of the public sphere is the escape offered from binary debates about state and/or market control over public discourse. Indeed, the issues raised by Habermas and his critics are now pressing: "What new political institutions and new public sphere might be necessary for the democratic control of a global economy and polity?" (pp. 361–362).

PROMOTIONAL CULTURE, SPIN AND SYSTEMATICALLY DISTORTED COMMUNICATION

An integral characteristic of the idealised public sphere is its capacity to make the political process open and transparent. Habermas (1989, p. 195) emphasizes the "democratic demand for publicity" as fundamental to an accountable and democratic polity. Here the traditional watchdog

role of the press as the fourth estate is clearly evident in the idealised model. The accessibility of the arena of politics, and thereby its participatory potential, seen through the optic of critical publicity, rests very much upon the communicative practices of those engaged in politics. How then does Habermas conceive of PR as political communication? Initially public relations is understood as a specialized subsystem of advertising, part of a wider "promotional culture" (Wernick, 1991), and it is noted that in class conscious society the "public presentation of private interests" must take on political dimensions; thus "economic advertisement achieved an awareness of its political character only in the *practice of public relations*" (Habermas 1989, p. 193).

The theory of the public sphere is clearly informed by an appreciation of the role of PR, particularly its early and persistent deployment by business interests. Habermas mentions pioneers of PR on behalf of corporate America, and notes that "in the advanced countries of the West they [PR practices] have come to dominate the public sphere [...] They have become a key phenomenon for the diagnosis of that realm" (p. 193). The notion that the public sphere is structured by power and money, and the assertion that those in the developed west live in societies of 'generalized public relations' points to the role of corporations, states and interest groups systematically distorting (public) communication to their own advantage. In essence this analysis chimes with other critical historical accounts of the development of corporate political power.

Corporate PR seeks to disguise the sectional private interests of powerful actors. Thus, the more PR ("the publicist self-presentations of privileged private interests") is involved in public affairs, the greater the likelihood of a collapse of rational-critical debate, undermined by "sophisticated opinion-moulding services under the aegis of a sham public interest" (Habermas 1989, p. 195). Such practices have profound consequences for democracy as "consent coincides with good will evoked by publicity. Publicity once meant the exposure of political domination before the use of public reason; publicity now adds up to the reactions of an uncommitted friendly disposition" (ibid.). So, for Habermas, PR is actually central to the refeudalisation (or, as we suggest, neoliberalisation) of the public sphere. Political discourse is driven toward the lowest common denominator:

> Integration of mass entertainment with advertising, which in the form of public relations already assumes a "political" character, subjects even the state to its code. Because private enterprises evoke in their customers the idea that in their consumption decisions they act in their capacity as citizens, the state has to "address" its citizens like consumers. As a result, public authority too competes for publicity. (Habermas 1989, p. 195)

This line of analysis complements historical scholarship on the entrance of commercial interests into the field of public policy (Carey, 1995; Cutlip, 1994; Ewen, 1996; Fones-Wolf, 1994; Marchand, 1998; Mitchell, 1989, 1997; Raucher, 1968; Tedlow, 1979). It suggests that realising liberal democratic theory in praxis is dependent on reforming governance so that systematically distorted communications cannot unduly influence the processes of deliberative democracy. The kinds of concrete steps necessary to secure such conditions for policy making must, at the minimum, be grounded in principles of openness and transparency. Journalism is integral to this model—fulfilling a watchdog function, defending and articulating the public interest and acting as a surrogate for disorganised publics. Critically, the example of lobbyists (a significant and under-researched area for communication studies) is seen by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu as problematic for the realization of participatory democracy:

> The neoliberal vulgate, an economic and political orthodoxy so universally imposed and unanimously accepted that it seems beyond the reach of discussion and contestation, is not the product of spontaneous generation. It is the result of prolonged and continual work by an immense intel-

lectual workforce, concentrated and organised in what are effectively enterprises of production, dissemination and intervention. (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 12)

Certainly, such interventions (or lobbies) are underpinned by "systems of information gathering, assessment, and communication. The problem is to open up both the actions and the related informational exchanges to processes of democratic accountability" (Garnham, 1992, p. 371). Under the conditions of neoliberal, or corporate-led, globalization it is clear that this model of the public sphere and political communication does not simply pertain to developed liberal democracies. The promotional impulse, and promotional agents, increasingly operate around the globe (Mattelart, 1991; Miller & Dinan, 2003; Taylor, 2001). There is now a well developed field of political communication studies examining the role of PR in election campaigning. But scholars and critics are beginning to turn their attention to the role of spin in routine corporate communications and governance.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION, MEDIA STUDIES, AND SOURCE STRATEGIES

There has been a perceptible shift in media and journalism scholarship towards studying the activities and intentions of sources in seeking to shape perceptions and political agendas. Much of this work has been influenced, explicitly or implicitly, by theories of the public sphere in academic discourse.

> On account of its anarchic structure, the general public sphere is, on the one hand, more vulnerable to the repression and exclusionary effects of unequally distributed social power…and systematically distorted communication than are the institutionalised public spheres of parliamentary bodies. On the other hand, it has the advantage of a medium of unrestricted communication. (Habermas 1996, pp. 307–308)

On such a reading deliberative politics is shaped by the political economy of the mass media, processes of institutionalized will formation ('strong' publics), and the informal opinion formation of the 'wild' public sphere. This provides a point of intersection between dialogic approaches to political communication, and those informed by theories of capitalism and ideology. The former are favoured by advocates for PR who want us to see public communication as somehow free from material resources and interests; the latter is a necessary corrective to this. Taking each in turn let us examine writing on public relations, much of which adopts a Habermasian framework, and—in our view – somewhat perversely produces a normative justification for the increasing use of PR in public communication.

Grunig and Hunt's model of excellence in public relations (1984; see also Grunig, 1992) has become an obligatory point of reference for many studies of contemporary public relations. The model is particularly favoured by authors concerned with the professionalization and legitimation of PR. The Grunig and Hunt schema recommends a two-way symmetrical dialogue between organizations and their stakeholders. This model borrows from the Habermasian ideal speech situation, where notions of power and interests are evacuated to make way for consensus seeking and truth. The model identifies four different forms of PR. The most basic is "press agentry" which is essentially promotional media work; a more developed type of PR is "public information" which uses one way communication to promote messages; a more sophisticated model is two-way asymmetrical PR which allows feedback from audiences, using market research or public opinion polling, which of course can be used to refine messages and /or more effectively manipulate audiences. Finally there is the exalted two-way symmetrical model, which through

dialogue is alleged to help "create mutual understanding between an organization and the public." This approach "is considered both the most ethical and most effective public relations model in current practice" (Grunig, 1996, pp. 464–465).

According to the dominant paradigms in communications studies, organizations must manage their relations with other actors and publics. It is recommended that two-way symmetrical communication between organizations and their publics, mediated by professional communicators, is the best form of communicative agency (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1992). Such communication is characterised by openness, mutual trust and responsiveness. However, this theory is in effect an ideal type that has been used as an apologia or legitimation for the (mal)practice of public relations. It conspicuously avoids questions of strategy and interests in the political communication process, beyond the vacuous assertions that communication in itself is a positive virtue and that liberal democracy is based on the right to communicate, petition and make representations to governance actors. As many commentators have noted "organizations and their stakeholders may well be partners in two way communication, *but rarely will they be equals in terms of power*" (Coombs & Holladay, 2006, p. 37). Thus, one of the most influential models of PR in effect has little explanatory power. The model further suggests historical progression from bad to good.

Research and scholarship on public relations is a rather niche specialism across the social sciences and business disciplines. Within media and communication studies PR is usually located as a sub-category of work undertaken on production. In the business schools PR is but one, junior, element of the wider marketing mix. In many ways public relations research is still marked by its origins: "public relations grew out of a highly practical context and subsequently developed a theoretical apparatus to support the analysis and legitimation of its professional activity" (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, p. 167). Thus, there is a strong emphasis in the PR literature on issues of technique, efficacy, strategy and professionalization. Professional anxiety is manifest in the literature around the twin concerns of the status of PR vis-à-vis advertising and marketing (and securing a rightful seat on the corporate board as strategic counsel) and the dubious status of PR in society at large.

Research on PR technique, strategies and efficacy is often undertaken in terms of organizational goals and management objectives. In this line of work there has been considerable interest in questions of inter-cultural communication and how PR fosters relationships and facilitates communication in a globalised context. One strand of work in this area examines the interplay between the global communication strategies of transnational corporations and the local cultures where the publics, or audiences, for these communication programmes are located. Another approach to understanding contemporary corporate PR examines the aspects of globalisation from above and below. The former focuses on the role of PR in securing "license to operate" for business and promoting neoliberal governance (Beder, 2006), whereas the latter critically examines the role of corporate PR in managing debates about social responsibility and supply chain practices (Knight & Greenberg, 2002). What is striking about much of the contemporary research on PR is the fact that media-relations are but one aspect of corporate communication. This means that our understanding of PR must refocus from questions of media coverage and representation to source strategies and communicative power beyond the media.

Research into relations between sources and the media has moved away from the "media-centrism" (Schlesinger, 1990) of studies focused only on the view from media workers. Source-media studies examine the role of sources and their communications strategies aimed at the media and general public. Research examining contested media discourses, where official and oppositional (or institutional and non-institutional) actors struggle over policy debate in the mass media, is now well established. Recent reflections on this field of inquiry include Deacon (2003)

and Davis (2002, 2003, 2007), both much more advanced than the PR apologists and both attuned to questions of power and ideology. Davis (2002, p. 3) suggests that:

> Behind the current media interest in a few key "spin doctors" a substantial layer of "cultural intermediaries" has evolved with a significant impact on news production and decision-making processes. Politics has become further "mediatized" as a form of public relations democracy has developed.

However, the framework Davis offered in his analysis of the UK's public relations democracy precluded investigation of some very significant PR activities—namely those *private* "public relations" in the form of lobbying, government relations, and regulatory affairs. Davis focuses on the news and media agenda (what Lukes,1974, terms the first face of power) largely neglecting how PR and lobbying can actually keep issues off the media and public agenda (the second face of power), and how corporate community relations, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes, think tanks, elite policy planning groups and other such micro initiatives act to prevent grievances and issues being recognized as such by publics (the third dimension of power), and thus keeping legitimate interests disguised, dispersed and disorganized.

Davis does allude to corporate and state power, acknowledging the "conscious" attempts at control that can be pursued through ownership and management, and hinting that factors such as ideology and the economy play a role news production. He criticizes radical political economy accounts of media power as lacking "a substantial focus on micro-level influences and individual agency," objecting to research that is "too reliant on work that stresses macro and wider political and economic trends and have not adequately tested this thesis with micro-level empirical work that observes active agents" (Davis, 2002, p. 6). Research on source-media relations offers some redress to this problem. However, the central question for Davis is whether the expansion of PR undermines journalism, rather than the broader question of whether the expansion of PR undermines democracy.

SOURCE RELATIONS AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS: SCOPING A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA

In a significant development of his position, Davis argues that "critical inquiry on the links between media, communication and power must look beyond the elite-mass media-audience paradigm" (Davis, 2007, p. 2). In particular he urges us, correctly, to consider intra-elite communication and the activities of sources at the key sites of power in contemporary society, placing proper emphasis on "the micro and less visible forms of communication at these sites, and on the private actions of powerful individuals" (p. 10) whose networked actions and decision making have wider social implications (p. 170). Davis applies this approach to his study of financial elites at the London Stock Exchange, the political village at Westminster and the policy networks of development NGOs. This approach is careful not to assume elite cohesion or unity of purpose, but is instead concerned with how elites use media and communication and also how elites, institutions and their networks are influenced by the media. In this scenario journalists don't simply report on the powerful, but are actually a resource for elites to draw upon in their scan of the policy and political horizon. Despite this orientation the emergence of professionalized communications, cultures and associated elite networks which exclude journalists appear to be increasingly significant (p. 174). Davis cites diplomatic, financial and international trade networks as displaying these "disembedded" tendencies. Davis' argument has moved a considerable distance. But in our

view there is still further to travel. It is necessary to conceptualise this as a question of communications and power as distinct from the role of mass media institutions in power relations. The latter misses the wider questions about lobbying, think tanks and policy planning organisations in which communication and mediation play a key role. In our view these communications networks and fora are among the least visible, most exclusive and most politically significant spaces of the contemporary public sphere. There would appear to be an absence of critical publicity surrounding these spaces, which is somewhat puzzling given the emerging consensus in advanced liberal democracies of the declining important of the parliamentary complex.

Classic liberal pluralist conceptions of competition between policy actors can be revised to account for the resources devoted to lobbying and political PR by business and the observation that the state's interests regularly coincides with those of organized capital (Domhoff, 1990; Miliband, 1969; Offe, 1984, 1985; Sklair, 2002). In this respect the analysis resonates with some of Habermas's observations regarding the role of organized interests in the public sphere.

Organized interests (e.g., business groups) don't simply emerge from the public sphere, but "occupy an already constituted public domain…anchored in various social subsystems and affect the political system *through* the public sphere. They cannot make any manifest use in the public sphere of the sanctions and rewards they rely on in bargaining or non-public attempts at pressure" (Habermas, 1996, p. 364). This implies that business can only convert its social power into political power to the extent that it keeps policy negotiation private or convinces general opinion in the public sphere when issues gain widespread attention and become the subject of public will formation. The need for organized interests to convince the public doesn't arise in many day-to-day settings, which suggests the necessity of looking beyond the media for the locus of communicative power in our public relations democracy.

Davis (2003, p. 669) urges a "focus on processes of elite policy making and how media and culture affect elite decisions. From this perspective inter-elite communications and the culture of elites is […] significant for sustaining political and economic forms of power in society." This line of reasoning re-engages media studies with debates in political science and sociology that have kept the agency of elites in focus. Surprisingly perhaps, in so doing, Davis rejects theories of the public sphere as a useful way of developing this endeavour. It has been our argument that the public sphere is a useful concept both because of its normative dimension and because it recognizes the private communicative activities which have become increasingly important in the neoliberal period. In his own contribution to the debate, Deacon (2003, p. 215) identifies—we think correctly—a widespread failure to "appreciate how powerful institutions and individuals seek to exert influence and construct political discourse in arenas other than the media."

But, Deacon (2003, pp. 215–216) worries that "if the media are perceived as just one of the many arenas in which political and public discourses are formulated and contested, there is a risk of returning to the residual position of traditional policy analyses in which media systems are seen as subordinate to political systems, and a peripheral part of the 'environment' in which policy choices are formulated and implemented." For us it is not a question of returning to a confined model from the political science or sociology of yesteryear. We think that media and journalism studies have nothing to fear from empirical research or from orienting towards a wider picture. The communicative processes involved in reproducing or subverting power relations should be of interest wherever they occur. They are more pressing now because the world is changing. These changes have markedly affected the worlds of journalism and strategic communications. The neoliberalisation of the public sphere is threatening the basis on which independent journalism can exist and is providing at the same time new ways for social interests to interact with power elites, the defining characteristics of which are insulating power from democratic accountability.

Part of the future agenda for research on spin and information control should attend to the

interests and communications strategies of powerful sources. This focus is of a piece with journalism that seeks to scrutinise democracy as practiced today. Both must, in our view, avoid the pit-falls of media-centrism. Critical media scholarship (and indeed investigative journalism) can make a considerable contribution to understanding and analysing communicative power by addressing the communicative strategies of organized interests alongside or outside the "strong publics" of governments and parliaments. There is much work to be done on elite communications such as lobbying, policy planning and the role of think tanks in terms of shaping information environments. The mass media may be a resource for such research, but equally grey literature such as trade, specialist and professional publications should be of interest. The World Wide Web also opens up possibilities for tracking communicative strategies, virtual ethnographies and accessing rather specialized discourses neglected by the mainstream media. In conjunction with standard social research techniques, the creative and determined researcher can find ways (admittedly rarely first-hand) of accessing and analysing elite communications.

CONCLUSIONS

In our view recent developments in strategic communication show a marked dislike for independent media. Recently authors like Davis (2003, 2007) have argued for media studies to reorient its attention toward the private communicative practices of the powerful. The value of public sphere theory in this context is firstly that, in Garnham's words, it seeks to hold liberal democracy to account and secondly that it is able to conceptualise the closed communicative processes of "strong" publics which are increasingly replacing democratic structures under neoliberalism. Combining a strong normative framework with a recognition of systematic distortion of public communication by powerful actors the public sphere offers fertile ground on which to build theories of elite communication, agency and spin, and its positioning in terms of countervailing forces emanating from civil society.

Habermas' theory of systematically distorted communication has been criticized on the grounds that it is an idealised model which is difficult to operationalize while holding to notions of power, interests and strategy (Crossley, 2004). Nevertheless, the diagnosis of public communication offered by Habermas remains cogent: public discourse is structured and shaped by power and money, this serves the interests of the powerful and acts against the realization of deliberative and participative democracy. By taking this ideal type—and the embedded challenge within critical theory to focus on emancipatory praxis—we are left with the empirical task of researching political communication within a framework that recognizes that, in essence, this is not what democracy is supposed to look like. It also retains some sense of how a rational democratic public sphere should operate. By focusing on spin and propaganda the heuristic power of the public sphere is clear. The rational foundations of claims making, the agency of claims-makers and the political economy of the public sphere (i.e., access to communicative power) all become central objects of analysis. The neoliberal tendencies within the public sphere are thus a key feature of political communication that must be analyzed in relation to their role in sustaining or undermining neoliberal governance.

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