


# Public Relations and Journalism: Time for a Truce?

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Public Relations and Journalism have always pretended to hate each other, possibly because they have so much in common. But is the time now right for a new relationship?

 As a journalist I know that much of what I have produced over the years has been dependent on or conditioned by public relations. As Trevor Morris and Simon Goldsworthy explain in their new [book\\*](#), it is a relatively small industry but one that has grown exponentially in the last couple of decades.

Even if you separate the PR business out from lobbying, marketing and 'communications' it is still a vital cog in the modern mass media machine. It furnishes press releases, interviews, story ideas, tips and copy to any journalist with space or time to fill.

This has always been the case. The amount of genuinely new, original and properly researched journalism has always been a small part of the whole. Much of what the mainstream media has written and broadcast over the last 50 years has been driven by an agenda set by other organisations or simply recycled from other media outlets.

The growth in lifestyle journalism, the expansion of the media space and the relative decline in reporting resources in mainstream media has tipped the balance of influence even more favourably towards PR. Should we worry?

 Well, Nick Davies is certainly concerned. His hugely popular, influential and passionate diatribe against PR, [Flat Earth News](#), correctly identified how many sections of mainstream journalism are being swamped by a deluge of pre-prepared and partial PR material. Nick shows in gory detail how some of this PR is untrue and pernicious.

I have my differences with Nick over his historical perspective and how New Media might impact on this all. I tend to think that – apart from most of Nick's work – journalism has never been quite as innocent or noble as Nick implies. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be worried about the predominance of PR should it? Morris and Goldsworthy don't pretend that PR is an unmitigated blessing. They don't make the mistake of claiming some moral high ground or deep social purpose for PR as some have done in the past.

Their survey of contemporary PR makes it sound quite a bit like journalism. It's a profession, but one that you succeed in through natural cunning, charm, instinct, hard work and skill rather than thanks to qualification, wisdom or virtue.

It is a trade that can service both good (charities, market competition, political campaigns) or bad (Nazis, tobacco companies, celebrities). But they insist that it is vital:

*"PR is a wholly legitimate aid to the exchange of information and ideas in society...the right to persuade is inseparable from democracy and the workings of a free market...Without PR the modern media would collapse."*

Morris and Goldsworthy also touch on the future of PR in a digital age. They correctly point out that the Internet and citizen media have opened both PR and journalism to the public. Now the consumer can be the creator of PR and journalism. And there is suddenly much greater power to the individual to use Online resources to check the claims of both. So as traditional journalism faces up to its gravest crisis in the last 100 years – or as I would put it, it's biggest opportunity – should it come to a deal with PR? Should it admit its dependency and throw in the towel of

editorial independence?

I put this in a wider context. The mainstream news media (outside of tax-supported broadcasting) was founded on the business model of advertising (and to a lesser degree, subscription) paying for journalism. That lovely deal is breaking down now. Advertising is going off to other platforms and journalists are losing their monopoly over news.

Increasingly, journalists are going to have to seek support from other sources including NGOs, foundations, social networking sites, search engines, governments, public bodies and other organisations. Why not PR as well?

Well, it depends. I think that the future journalist will have to be much more open and honest about where they get their information from and what they are doing with it. This transparency will manifest itself through hyperlinks and disclosures but it will be policed by the accountability mechanisms that thrive on the Internet. Both journalists and consumers will become more media literate. The free media market online will drive out false information as trusted sources prove their worth over time and attract the most traffic.

This is the new reality of trust in the digital age. Yes, lies and puffs will fly around the Internet as fast as your broadband connection can carry them. But the evidence is that they are hunted down or ignored much more quickly than they were when they were in newspapers or on TV. Amidst the welter of digital information there is a flight towards quality, authority and reliability. That is why BBC Online is thriving.

Journalists have nothing to fear from this process. Public Relations has nothing to fear either, if it is honest. Together they should continue their mutually sceptical and dependent relationship.

\* *PR – A Persuasive Industry* Trevor Morris and Simon Goldsworthy (Palgrave MacMillan 2008)



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