

A2 LEVEL

FACT FILES

Journalism

For first teaching from September 2013

For first AS award in Summer 2014

For first A Level award in Summer 2015

Journalism and the
Communications
Industry

FACT FILE

journalism

in the Media and Communications Industry (JMC)



Learning Outcomes

Students should be able to:

- Analyse and evaluate issues related to the following key debate area, citing examples from their own study and practice throughout the course: Journalism and Communication.



Content

Advanced Media Concepts, Contexts and Debates in Online, Print and Broadcast Journalism

(page 12, specification)

What is the communications industry?

Most organisations of any size – including multi-national companies, small and medium businesses, political parties, charities and arts organisations – have a department, or at least a staff member, who deals with the flow of information between the organisation and the public, including the media. Many powerful or well-known individuals, such as politicians or celebrities, also employ their own communications experts. A communications industry professional may have various job titles but is often known as a public relations practitioner (PR).



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The PR industry has not always had a straight-forward reputation. In 2001, a press advisor to the Labour government, Jo Moore, was forced to resign after she sent an email on September 11 suggesting it was a good day to 'bury' any bad news the government did not want widely covered by the media.

The Labour governments of Tony Blair and later Gordon Brown developed a reputation for 'spin', with high-profile 'spin doctors' such as Alastair Campbell being accused of blurring the lines between legitimate PR and media manipulation.

However, in the UK, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations has a strict Code of Conduct which its members must abide by. It says members must 'maintain the highest standards of professional endeavour, integrity, confidentiality, financial propriety and personal conduct' and 'deal honestly and fairly in business with employers, employees, clients, fellow professionals, other professions and the public.'

Chartered Institute of Public Relations Code of Conduct, www.cipr.co.uk.

What is the relationship between the communications industry and journalism?

The relationship between the journalism and PR industries is a complex but often mutually beneficial one. Journalists want information – including statistics, facts and figures, pictures and copy as well as access to powerful people – to produce their stories. PR practitioners want to get their clients' message across or protect their reputation by minimising unfavourable coverage (although they are increasingly using social media platforms to communicate with the public directly).



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However, the relationship can be problematic as the objectives of journalists and public relations executives are frequently at odds. Journalists are expected to be impartial and balanced in their work, whereas PRs are expected to promote their clients' interests.

In a column in the Sunday Times in May 2003, the journalist Bryan Appleyard gives his opinion on the PR industry: "Hacks still naively pursue something they like to call the truth. Their problem is that it no longer exists. For truth has been destroyed by public relations executives, or 'scum' as we like to call them."

Quoted in www.guardian.co.uk/media/2003/nov/17/mondaymediasection3

Few journalists hold such extreme views but many are concerned about the balance of power between the two professions.

A changing balance of power between journalists and PR?

Some commentators believe the tensions between journalists and PRs are growing as journalism (especially print journalism) declines. The main factors behind this decline are generally believed to be the recession and the increased popularity of online news. Figures published in March 2012 by the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), the industry body for media measurement, showed that the sales of every national daily newspaper had fallen since the previous year.



Estimates of how many journalists and PRs are working in the UK vary but the media editor of the Financial Times, Andrew Edgecliffe-Johnson, said in an article from October 3 2012 that PR had become "big business" (www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4ce3ec34-0d3b-11e2-99a1-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2lhqapUmV). He points to a US study by the American academic Robert McChesney and the journalist John Nichols which estimates that the ratio of US PR practitioners to journalists grew from 1.2 to one in 1980, to nearly four to one in 2010.

Other sources back up the view that the PR sector is growing as the media declines. On his blog, www.forthemedia.blogspot.co.uk, the journalist and academic Francois Nel estimated there were around 40,000 journalists working in the UK in 2010. The CIPR estimates the total number of PR practitioners may have grown from 48,000 to 60,000 in the past five years.

As media organisations suffer staff and budgetary cutbacks, some commentators believe the balance of power has shifted away from journalism in favour of the growing PR industry. As journalists are asked to produce more work with fewer resources, they may come to rely more heavily on PRs as sources of news, damaging the accuracy and impartiality of journalism as a result.



In his book, *Flat Earth News: An Award-winning reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media*, the Guardian journalist Nick Davies criticises what he calls 'churnalism' – when press releases are published as news articles without corroboration or much material added.

"Journalists who no longer have the time to go out and find their own stories and to check the material which they are handling are consistently vulnerable to ingesting and reproducing the packages of information which are provided for them by this PR industry. At the very least this involves their being directed into accepting stories and angles which have been chosen for them in order to satisfy somebody else's commercial or political interests. At the worst, this embroils them in the dissemination of serious distortion and falsehood."

Davies, N (2008) *Flat Earth News: An Award-winning reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media*, Chatto and Windus, p203.

A 2006 Cardiff University study also suggested that PR material was being used heavily by journalists when setting the news agenda and producing stories. It found that '41% of press articles and 52% of broadcast news items contain PR materials which play an agenda setting role or where PR material makes up the bulk of the story'.

Franklin et al, 2006, *The UK 'Quality Press', Broadsheet Journalism and Public Relations*, Cardiff University



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Journalists should also be wary of letting PRs set the news agenda (by relying on press releases to inform story ideas for example).



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In Northern Ireland, the political commentator Newton Emerson revealed on a 2012 edition of BBC Hearts and Minds that the Executive employed 161 press officers – more than all the newspaper journalists in Belfast. On the March 1 2012 edition of the programme he claimed: "Most news in Northern Ireland isn't generated by news outlets, it's generated by government and bodies funded by government."

Conclusion

The economic and other pressures on journalism mean journalists should be especially wary of relying too heavily on material from the increasingly powerful PR industry. Material from PRs is not necessarily unreliable and can be a valuable source of information for journalists. However, journalists should remember that there is an agenda behind every piece of information from PR sources. It is a general principle that journalists do not simply repeat information – from whatever source – without verifying the facts, for example with documentation or other reliable sources who are ideally prepared to 'go on the record'.

Revision Questions

1. How does the role and responsibility of a journalist differ from that of a public relations practitioner?
2. Explain the term 'churnalism'.
3. What steps could a journalist take to verify information given to them by a PR practitioner?

