



MASS MEDIA Vs PR – INTERACTION OR CONFLICT OF INTERESTS?

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ABSTRACT

Organizations conduct communication with the mass media to reach out to their external public. The media bridge users to organizational messages. PR treats media as a communication channel, and as a key social group of stakeholders; it interacts with the public and informs by means of the media to build public trust and mutual understanding. This is the point of view of PR. But does it match the point of view of the mass media? By exploring the theoretical dimensions of the problem, this work will try to answer the following questions:

How does mass media perceive PR messages and how does it react to them?

Is there any interaction, is it active or passive?

Or else, their relationship represents conflict of interests?

Modern society depends entirely on the communicative reality. Mass media does not simply reflect reality, mass media construct it. Man lives in two worlds – the real one, and the world of symbols, the communicative world. At the point of intersection, where reality and communication meet they create communicative mechanisms that unfold and fuel sciences which aim at synchronizing actual and communicative reality. We live at this point of intersection, too. Therefore, the most important window to reality in our lives and the tool we use to shape our view of life are the media.

Yet, if 96% of media content has a non-journalistic origin, who stands behind the formation of our worldview?

Key words: Mass media, PR, mass communication, Bernays, Grunig, clash of conceptions, lack of conclusive, interaction, relationships.

1. Mass media as a window to the world.

Mass media are an informational system established by the public, serving public interests, and performing public functions. Mass media conveys almost all news that we learn about, and most entertainments, too. Mass media sell goods, provide education, deliver incessant flows of information and knowledge, carry out political campaigns (1-51), give updated models of social orientation, rationalize our behaviour reactions, transmit social experience from generation to generation (2).

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Mass media are our largest window to the world's knowledge. Analogue culture of the 20th century, the trust in image, in the image-track, have enormously expanded human horizons and have turned the world into a global village. Consumed media reality transcends experienced reality, yet it is integrated in the personal experience of recipients to create a new cultural reality in which experienced and consumed merge through the media. Man can be wherever the text, the camera and the microphone lead him to be, he is a “witness” who widens his own experience by what he has witnessed.

Press disseminates knowledge in space, electronic media – in time. In printing, the basic communication structures are coded in the text itself, in its architecture, and in the text-accompanying illustrations. Communication in electronic media has a non-

static, cyclic nature, and its interactive flexibility guarantees (3):

◆ Maximum coverage and unrivalled efficiency. Regardless of time and geographical location, media messages reach unlimited audiences allowing them to follow events in real time – documentary and authentic.

◆ The effect of “being present” and direct communication. The recipient is not only a consumer of the information, but a participant in the process itself, because he forgets about the mediating role of the communicator. The contact is constant and the communication – unceasing.

◆ Mass character and extensiveness. Unlike print media and other media, electronic media does not need circulation and attendance. Electronic messages reach out to the illiterate, sightless, deaf... The infinite number of consumers and the simultaneity of the impact produce an unparalleled psychological effect. Due to the unlimited in time and location opportunities for establishing contact, and the universality of the means of communication, mass media create a communicative reality that has been permanently absorbed by the people. Media consumption ranks third in the quantity of time we spend for our twenty-four-hour activities, following sleeping and working, and this is easy to explain (4). Moreover, liberal neomedia represent the fourth power because they turn truth into a communication product created in the communication process for the purposes of communication. They give power in the hands of the audience over and above the power of the institutions by provoking public debates. As long as the world nowadays depends on the media interpretations, rules and analyses, the relationship between PR people and journalists must ensure maximum efficiency and fruitfulness. The very nature of the PR profession requires supply of information to the media, and it is the media that “have the last word” (5-259).

Mass media “have the last word”! In fact they have yet another enormous power – to shape, voice and change public opinion. This power gives rise to the concept of Die Schweigespirale of Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, the increasing knowledge gap thesis of Tichenor, Donohue and Olien from the Minesotta Univerisy in the early 70s, as well as the Agenda-Setting hypothesis of MacCombs and Shaw.

In simple terms, Agenda-Setting rests on the assumption that media affects not only attitudes, reactions and actions, but it works cognitively on attention, knowledge and consciousness. According to the Agenda-Setting hypothesis, mass media determine not so much the way we think, but rather what we have to think about. MacCombs and Shaw built their hypothesis by exploring the media behavior at the presidential elections of 1968 in three directions (6): Awareness Model – the audience is particularly attentive to certain issues or group of issues because the media conveys them to the public; Saliency Model – the audience considers certain issues to be significant because the media’s attention is focused on them. Priority Model – ranking of the issues on the media agenda corresponds to the ranking of those same issues on the public agenda.

Typical of the age are also the perceptions that: media distort and deform reality; media reality does not correspond to objective reality; every media presents only the events it deems to be important and ignores a lot more equally important events. Obviously, the established structure of topics in the daily media flow stems from the complex relations between the media organizations and other parts of the social system which, ultimately, make the audience live with mass media head lines, with the informational fields that are important for the mass media without even suspecting the existence of any other issues, even if those issues were of greater significance. Even if media do not necessarily affect the audience opinion, they still do by depriving recipients from the bulk of events in favour of the selected issues featured on their agenda.

The age of television invasion and its upswing to a dominant mass media gave birth to even more radical views. By analyzing media as an integral part of society and an active component of the social process that creates our perception of reality, Marshall McLuhan concludes that media not merely reflect reality, they construct it. In the 60s and the 70s, he concludes that: media produce society; societies are influenced by the media and not vice versa; the specifics of the media is important to such extent that one and the same message transmitted by different media becomes a different message. He calls the world a global village because thanks to the direct TV broadcasts people from any corner

of the world can witness and directly participate in the Vietnam War.

However, since the beginning of the 90s, the role of television in turning the world into a global village has been minimized by the Internet – the global communication infrastructure for transmission of media content in which reality is constructed more tangibly than in any other previous channel.

Internet shakes up the roles of the communicator and the recipient and creates a multidimensional combination of interpersonal, group and mass communication in unlimited, high-speed exchange.

Global society transforms into a collection of private visual mosaics of users who surf and choose independently what, who and how. According to Manuel Castells, 'We are not living in a global village, but in customized cottages, globally produced and locally distributed.' (7-336).

Certainly, the planetary communicative infrastructure of the Internet predicting a new rearrangement of the world and the end of mass communication is still a prophecy. We live in the age of mass communication in which free, market mass media perform fundamental political functions (6-337): continuous monitoring of events which have a positive or negative impact on the wellbeing of citizens; identifying the key social and political issues, their origin and the possibilities of finding their solution; providing public platform to the individuals who represent and protect the interests of the audience; broadcasting diverse information from and about different points of view and groups of the political discourse; ensuring informational exchange between the potential government officials and the masses; keeping a close eye on civil servants, authorities and governmental structures to ensure their actions and policy are under control; informing and stimulating the citizens to actively participate in the political processes instead of remaining simply passive observers; opposing external forces attempting to destroy the independence of the media; providing positive feedback for the audience and for active, socially engaged citizens.

Gurevitch and Blumler define these functions as both a purpose and a standard for the media of democratic societies, unfortunately, rarely achievable, not because of any external

pressure at that. In order to attract more recipients or draw greater interest, news outlets often depend on pseudo-events, focus on entertaining subjects and tend to dramatize factual situations. There are also a number of other reasons why the standards and purposes of media cannot be achieved. Even when it comes to trivial media coverage such as escorting politicians overseas, journalists tend to see only the bright side of the moon – press conferences, official statements, posing in front of the cameras, and to report events that have been planned and organized to be reported – a real informational theatre featuring a director, scene, actors and scenery. Even at longer overseas visits, covering conflicts, wars, elections... objectivity is discredited. Media correspondents' accommodation is in the capital cities where the situation is not representative of the entire country. In extreme situations, journalists will not go to the battlefield. They work from a distance and convey the information they are given most often by official sources, and, rarely, from their own investigations and observations. The media coverage of the Gulf Wars, the war in Afghanistan and this year's military actions against the regime of Gaddafi in Libya are also evidence indicative of the "distortion" of events (in fact, we receive distorted information on a daily basis), which leads us to the previously discussed ability, practice and power of the media to insinuate events and create a second reality which is different from the objective one but rather a customized reality perceived by the recipients to be the only and the real one.

2. The end "real" journalism?

Media are a window to the world, the fourth power, they shape and modify public opinion and have the power to construct reality. And still, there is even more to say! According to Andrea Kükelhaus, PR, just like journalism, similarly contributes to shaping public opinion by presenting different points of view and ensuring pluralism and variety in society. Besides, not only does PR participate in the communication processes, but it has already become an established communication mechanism facilitating the synchronization of the interests and actions of organizations and their audiences (9).

Zdravko Raikov reveals that 84 per cent of the information used by journalists nowadays comes from the PR departments of different

governmental institutions, private companies and specialized PR agencies. Around 12 per cent derives from press conferences (also organized by PR), and only about 4% results from independent journalistic research (1-66).

Is it possible that PR messages and not the media that shape and modify public opinion and have the power to construct reality? The results of New York Times survey in 1973 reveal that only 25% of published materials are made independently, 15% are derived from other informational structures, and the majority of 60% come from press releases, press conferences and special events reports. The conclusion is: media content is in glaring dependence on the organized PR information flow (5-259).

However, prevalence in terms of volume is not the single source of media dependence on public relations. How do media treat materials of PR origin? This question has been raised by Barbara Baerns (Germany) who finds out that in 42% of the cases, outgoing published materials are practically restating incoming PR feeds with some minor cosmetic editing (most often small cuts); another 32% of published texts have been subject to more substantial editing but, again, their content comes from a PR prime source. Nissen and Menningen have similar observations – they think that the transformation of prime source texts is limited – three fourths to nine tenths of texts remain unchanged and lack comment. (6-221).

Rene Grossenbacher makes a study on Swiss press and he finds out that media using ready PR messages achieve greater volumes, and that published texts even lack journalistic form and commentary which he identifies as a mere reiteration without any journalistic contribution. Another conclusion that he makes is that it is not the event itself but rather its organization, the media event, the press conference that determines to a great extent the actuality of an issue (10-140).

In 1985 and 1991, Barbara Baerns concentrated her studies on the most fundamental source of the media – the agencies. Informational giants that belt the whole world with a network of correspondents are not simply necessary but an inevitable step in depicting international events. The local and international information used by the media originates from the agencies by virtue of

affiliation (media group, chain, etc.) subscription or specific agreements.

Agencies [For example, the American mastodon AP has a history of 150 years. It has 3700 employees working in 242 offices to supply informational products to 17 000 newspapers, magazines, televisions, radio stations, radio and television networks from 121 countries. The activity of the other American giant UPI is similar in magnitude, as well as dozens of their competitors. Here we may add the British agency Reuters, the French AFP, Japanese Kyōto, New China News Agency. They form only a small part in the world informational network. On the other side, there are specialized PR agencies that supply only PR information to agencies and national, regional, local, specialized, public and political media (11-287)] broadcast information to all media regardless of their topos (local, regional, national, etc.) or type (newspapers, magazines, radio², television, etc.). They ensure efficiency and access to issues which media cannot obtain on their own. Specialized PR agencies [One of the first PR agencies is PRN. It has been serving New York media since 1954. The number of similar agencies rapidly grows across the entire country, then across England, Europe, Australia, South America, etc. They vary in size and specifics, yet fundamentally, they are systems for PR news messages of any kind (text, audio, video). PRN is able to deliver materials via satellite, cable or internet to 22 000 media at any place in the world, absolutely free at that. (12)] in their turn feed both agencies and national, regional, commercial and public media with PR information only.

Consequently, it is obvious that direct PR influence on a world informational agency wielded in the desired direction guarantees a multiplied effect because media considers the products originating from agencies as completely trustworthy and reliable enough to remain unverified. The role of the media is limited to simply correctly cite the source of information. The study of Baerns proves that PR departments' priority is to supply information to the agencies - 55%, whereas direct messages released to the press are 25%, 33% - to the radio, and 17% to television. The conclusion is that independent journalistic activity has become "comparatively limited". In addition, media's respond to the informational PR products is characterized by

optimum efficiency and depends on the specifics of the media – radio and television respond on the same day, newspapers – with the very next issue (6-222).

A survey (made by Rossmann in 1993) on the PR activity of Greenpeace in Germany provides even more convincing results. The media cover and publish their messages without even commenting on them because of the general assumption that Greenpeace is almost an “enterprise” for reliable informational services on environmental issues. There isn’t any journalistic critical attitude whatsoever.

On the contrary, Greenpeace has full control on both the topics and content of information related to ecological issues. Thus, proceeding on the assumption that PR is a customized representation of particular interests by means of information conveyed in all techniques and forms of written, oral, photographic, film and audiovisual journalism, Baerns leads up to the determination thesis, namely: setting topics, and, to a great extent, journalistic contribution to the topics are not determined independently by journalists but by the communicators-prime sources. PR feeds media with information thus relieving journalists of the burden to take the lead, to hunt topics and investigate; journalists are becoming increasingly powerless because PR specialists are familiar with media laws, they have fair knowledge of the specifics in journalistic work, and try to direct its course unnoticed. (10-221); the interplay between PR and journalism in constructing media content is based on influence and power – the greater the influence of PR, the weaker the influence of journalism. The entire media system is marked by the dominant influence of PR.

Bentele, Liebert и Seeling claim that Baerns’ thesis is to some extent one-sided because it mostly examines the influence of PR on journalism. The three of them develop the intereffication model as a model of the mutual conditionality between journalism and PR. They insist that the term “determination” should be replaced with the more precise and neutral concept of “induction”, yet, they acknowledge that (9-117): almost two thirds of publications on specific topics are based on PR materials, journalists underestimate the induction on behalf of PR and overestimate their own activity and initiative; small-size publications are entirely based on PR press

releases, the same applies only partially for larger publications, although they use the main message, numbers, facts, graphics, pictures, and data sourced by PR.

Stephan Russ-Mohl also questions the determination thesis but he reached to the same conclusion: new communication technologies make media dependent on PR messages, and the better PR agencies work, the better information media will have (9-111).

The time has come for journalists to accept PR agencies as partners who assist not only the organizations whose interests they stand for, but also the entire public; certainly, public relations have already become an indisputable part of modern media communication system. In 2002, Klaus Merten makes an overall summary of all hypothesis and theories on the relationship between PR and journalism existing as yet, underlines their major disadvantages and calls for recognizing the PR system as a perfect structural analogue of the communication system having the primary function to develop and ensure public consensus (9).

Although many do criticize Baerns’ determination thesis, nobody denies the empirically obtained data and the basic characteristics of the “new” type PR-determined journalism called narrative by Petra Dorsch (1982), and (informationally) subsidized by Kunczik: very rarely do journalists add to external information something made on their own. Recipients remain unaware of media’s heavy dependence on public relations because journalists present the information as their own; practically, the process of newsmaking is to a large extent PR’s doing – it determines the actuality, supply and priority of the topics, and prepares ready to use information serving as a model to comment on. Most often, however, comments have been saved (10-141); PR specialists (communicators-prime sources as termed by Nissen and Menningen, informants - by Baerns), and not journalists set the news agenda going and control journalistic reality; practically, journalistic research on a particular topic (if present) can, at best, be only taken as a by-product; the need of disseminating particular information is created by press conferences and press releases, and not by the potential value of the story or event itself, or any journalistic criteria; PR has gained full

control over media timing as well – the speed of response (efficiency), and the time when PR messages will be released (published or broadcasted). Put that way, “information subsidy” is in direct conflict with media’s fundamental purposes within the normative and controlling function [In democratic countries journalists are both mediators and controllers. They observe events rather than cause them. Their major role is to criticize those in power, the super heroes of today, society and economics. Without the controlling function of the media, democracy is futile. (13-24).] of journalism because the independence of the sources of information is in question. The assumption that journalists are those uncompromising critics of negative public phenomena who chase their topics with the relentless fervor of a hunting dog is doubtful, too.

Information received from public relations people is taken on trust, it is not verified, and is considered as a natural journalist product, although, in theory, ‘journalists gather, at their own initiative, information on issues which, for the greater part, have been previously determined by them alone. Informants are left with a rather passive role in the process of investigation’ (10-137). It turns out (according to Barbara Baerns, at least) that the existence of journalism as an autonomous and informative system is rather random and rests merely on the public significance it has. Informational diversity wanes under the different estimation of the results of public work, as a result of customized selection and/or biased interpretation, or because it is carried out through media techniques and dramaturgy. What is most alarming: freedom of speech and the assumption that the media is the fourth power are at stake because PR obviously dominates journalism.

3. Resistance.

Undoubtedly, communication activities of public relations exert influence on media; however, this should not be set as an axiomatic prerequisite for a constant relation of determination only. Mass media are not a passive and indifferent mediator.

A. There are journalistic choice, will and information sieve, for which there are objective reasons and prerequisites. It is a fact that PR messages can be disseminated anywhere, only somewhere or nowhere in their

original form at that, they can be edited (even beyond recognition) or completely rewritten. Rapidly increasing competition promotes (even due to financial considerations only) differentiation of media products. It is a fact that one and same organizational PR messages have different coverage in different media. A survey made in France shows that 45% of PR people who have forwarded messages to the media can hardly recognize them in publications. The economic principle of diminishing marginal utility is generally applicable. The more PR people try to control media, the less it will submit to their wishes – only 5 of 100 of PR messages sent to the media have been published or broadcasted [In 1996 Weischenberg, Löffelholz and Scholl conduct a major study on German media which revealed that only 16% of journalists confess that PR organizational activities greatly influence their work. (10-138)] (14-107). Saffarnia (Austria) studies the messages related to internal political affairs published in a local newspaper for a period of 14 days. His findings show that only 33.7% of the publications have a PR prime source origin, and a large part of the same has been additionally investigated. (6-225).

B. The distrust that journalists have for PR practitioners is historically substantiated by the activity of press agents at the dawn of the profession. Journalists consider press releases procession, press conferences and special events coverage as a normal journalistic activity in which they play the leading role. What is more, their attitude towards press officers and official speakers is rather preconceived. The American slang term for a PR practitioner is “flack” (a combination of “flattery” and “hack” – an newsmaker with many years of experience). The term denotes the tendency towards manipulation, exaggeration and endeavour to achieve someone’s popularity (15-18). The prevailing opinion is the PR practitioners are better paid and their efforts concentrate on one thing – to make free advertising and to attract public attention by revealing only the information that will best serve the interests of their clients, regardless of the truth.

C. In times of crisis, the relationships between PR people and journalists can hardly be described as cooperative. In times of crisis, mistrust towards organizations deepens; even when the media reports the message of the

organizer, 'it is presented in indirect speech' (10-143), and the symbiosis of the typical workday relationship disappears. Why? The situation comprises at least four components (16-90): 1. The actual need of society; 2. Media's interpretation of the needs of society; 3. The actual need of the organization; 4. Organizations' interpretation of the needs of society. These elements happen to be synergetic extremely rarely. And the more PR people try to convince that the need of organizations reflects the need of society, the more suspicious the media become, and the more they start to perceive organization representatives as an entity that exploits them to reach the general public. In times of crises organizations are tempted to storm media and ignore the real needs of society.

Henrike Barth and Wolfgang Donsbach undertake to assess press conferences related to ecological problems. They find out that in situations of crisis, journalists doubt PR information and search other sources. Their conclusion is that the influence of PR over media in crisis is weaker than in normal situations, especially when journalists have negative attitude towards the organization (10-143). Journalists cast doubt on reporting and commenting press conferences during times of crisis; they search other sources, and, in most cases, publish the information obtained by the latter.

D. Despite the fact that many researchers call the coverage of press conferences and special events protocol or proclaiming journalism, unprejudiced receipt of PR messages (according to Barth and Donsbach) depends entirely on their informational value, and the attitude of the media towards to source of the message (6-225). Journalism gives power in the hands of society to influence on organizations exactly by ensuring publicity and providing opportunities for debate.

E. Even in purely operational terms (according to Grossenbacher) the emergence and development of public relations is a logical consequence of the development of the so-called informational society. In this society PR and the media are not competitive but complementary systems (6-224). The relationship between them is a relationship of interdependence. Media need PR products in the same way as PR products need the media. Media lack sufficient information and by

providing it to them PR officials gain the popularity which the media guarantees. This is why their messages are adapted to the journalistic criteria, regulations, specifics and rules. Certainly, it is impossible for any media to cover all events that take place on the planet, and in this aspect, PR information is indispensable. Besides, PR products have a weight off function for the constantly working under time pressure media. (10-142).

4. In lieu of conclusion.

Klaus Kocks claims that PR spokespersons are parasites whose interests obligate an incessant need to feed journalism which is the nest they parasitize (9-114). However, according to Stephan Russ-Mohl the growth of the media sector (in comparison to other service providing sectors) records high profits. But while editorial budgets are increasingly shrinking, PR headquarters mushroom (9-114). And when, on the one hand, commercial media is financed by advertisements: 50% in magazines, two-thirds in newspapers, and up to 100% in radio and television, and on the other – big informational agencies and PR departments are the main news supplier, who is the real parasite and what are mass media in fact (the journalism, too) – institutions with cornerstone social functions or parasites living at the expense of advertising and PR?

What if Zdravko Raikov turns out to be right, and already 96% of the information used by journalists nowadays, originates from the PR departments of various governmental institutions, private companies and specialized PR agencies (1-66)?

Minka Zlateva is yet another one to ask who formulates the messages disseminated by the media, and reveals that: first and foremost, these are the public relation experts who support organizations in making their strategy of communication policy, then it is implemented through a series of initiatives and events that are carefully planned and purposefully organized to be put on the front burner of media interest (9- 188).

But if media deprive people from the bulk of topics in favour of the issues on their customized agenda, who dictates 96% of this agenda?

Let's add up that media does not merely reflect reality, they tailor it and even construct it,

which leads up to the question who constructs 96% of this reality?

Let's also add up the eight basic functions that media performs in democratic societies, and think about how they are actually performed if 96% of the information flow is of non-journalistic origin?

Man lives in two worlds – the real one, and the world of symbols, the communicative world. At the point of intersection, where reality and communication meet they create communicative mechanisms that unfold and fuel sciences which aim at synchronizing actual and communicative reality. We live at this point of intersection, too, therefore the most important window on reality in our lives and the tool we use to shape our view of life are the media.

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