

The Impact of Public Relations on News

**Senior Project
Cal Poly Journalism**

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Abstract

Understanding who has influence over what stories make the news is essential when one considers the fact that the press alone has the power to build support for wars, sink businesses, and create instant celebrity. PR professionals are paid to get positive press coverage for their clients. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between these PR professionals and the media, and quantify to what degree does the PR industry determine news content. This paper looks at the state of the news industry (declining) in relation to the PR industry (booming) and what can happen when PR professionals vastly outnumber newspeople. An equally important purpose of this research is to learn consumers' perceptions of how news is initiated. This is essential because, regardless of how news ends up being news, it gains instant credibility once it hits the pages and airwaves. To answer these questions, I conducted two types of surveys. First, I surveyed a cross section of people who get their news from traditional media sources – newspapers, magazines, TV, radio – and analyzed their attitudes about the newsgathering process. Second, I conducted personal interviews with journalists to gauge how much influence PR professionals wield with them. The results suggest that today's media, particularly print, depend on PR folks to supply many of their stories. At the same time, their readers, viewers and listeners seem largely unaware of this fact. This raises questions about how reporters, editors, and producers can effectively use PR material while maintaining journalistic standards. The research also uncovers a need for consumers to learn techniques for “spotting the PR” so they have a better understanding of the third party who may be behind a news story.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Purpose of Study

For 25 years, my job has been to secure positive media coverage for my clients' products and services in traditional print and broadcast media outlets (magazines, newspapers, TV, radio). By developing creative story angles and then pitching editors and producers via press releases and personal contact, I have achieved tens of thousands of dollars in equivalent advertising print space/air time. My experience has given me insight into the symbiotic relationship between the public relations and news industries. Journalists depend on public relations professionals to help them package the news, keep current on popular trends, and provide access to newsmakers. This is especially true in today's economy, as many traditional media outlets have cut staff to cope with a loss of ad and subscriber revenue due to competition from digital news sources. The remaining journalists become more dependent than ever on information disseminated by PR professionals – they simply cannot do it all.

I believe that today the majority of the news that we read or hear in traditional media outlets is initiated by public relations professionals who are promoting a particular product, service, or agenda. What would happen if each story contained in a newspaper, magazine, radio show or TV news/talk show, was analyzed to determine where and how it originated? I believe in many circumstances – particularly with “soft news” outlets such as talk shows, magazines, and community newspapers – that a story *begins with a publicist*. This study will explore that assertion by surveying editors, reporters, and producers about the origin of the stories appearing in a particular issue or show. The sample will include a cross section of local market (Seattle) newspapers, magazines, and

broadcast stations. This paper will also explore existing academic research studies on this topic.

Furthermore, it is questionable whether audiences understand how the news they consume is manufactured. Indeed, this is the reason for media relations playing a strong role in the marketing mix. Editorial placements carry a “stamp of authority” as audiences believe *it must be important to be selected from the myriad of possible stories*. What would be the response if people were asked how media stories are generated? I suspect most would say journalists come up with their own ideas and the role of the publicist would rarely be mentioned as a significant factor. This study will explore this assertion by asking a cross section of people who regularly get news from magazines, newspapers, TV, and radio (limited to those not associated with the communications industry) a series of questions about how they think content is selected. This paper will also explore existing academic research studies on consumer perceptions of news origin.

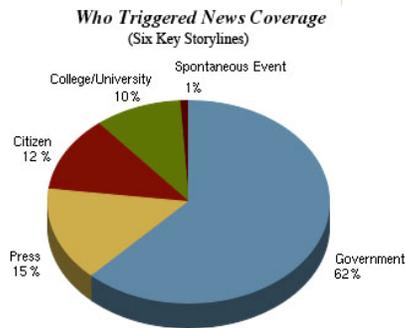
The importance of understanding how news is manufactured and packaged cannot be underestimated in a society where the press has the power to sway public opinion, create awareness, bestow or take away credibility, and make or break businesses. The purpose of this study is to explore the true nature of the relationship between publicists and the media, and identify who initiates the news gathering process. The study will also analyze public perception of how content is generated in newspapers, magazines, TV and radio, and determine if that perception matches reality.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

My review of existing literature on the topic of PR influence on traditional media is divided into four sections: 1) examples of PR influence on the news; 2) considerations that create a favorable environment for PR's influence; 3) trends in use of traditional media; and 4) audience awareness of PR influence on news content.

PR's influence on news is not new but it is growing.

Since the birth of the modern public relations movement in 1906 when Ivy Lee produced the *Declaration of Principles* to officially define the relationship between the PR professional and the press (Turney, 2000),¹ efforts on behalf of government, educational institutions, non-profits, professional organizations, celebrities, and businesses to influence news content has grown into an \$8.8 billion worldwide industry (Holmes, 2011).² According to Robert McChesney, communications professor at University of Illinois, author of 23 books, and recognized expert on the public relations industry, "In the '60s and '70s, about 40 to 50 percent of news came from public relations. Now, 86 percent of the news comes from public relations and those stories have no editing" (Hoggs, 2010).³ Several specific studies support McChesney's claim. A study by the Pew Research Center followed the production of news in 52 media outlets in Baltimore over a one-week period in July 2009. The study authors followed news reports related to six major storylines and found 84 percent of the reporting could be traced to PR efforts from the government (62%), citizens (12%), or education institutions (10%). Only 15 percent of the reporting originated within the walls of the newsroom (Pew Research Center, 2010).⁴



From: “How News Happens”, Pew Research Center, January 11, 2010 ⁴

It is not just the American press that closely partners with the PR industry. “Spinning the Media,” a 2010 study by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, revealed that 55 percent of news stories in ten newspapers during a five-day period were initiated by public relations efforts (Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, 2010).⁵

Despite the desire to silently work behind the scenes, the PR industry has at times become the subject of its own news story. President George W. Bush’s government-sponsored PR campaign to sell the Iraq War to the public prompted a 2005 investigation by *The New York Times* that revealed \$254 million was spent on public relations contracts in Bush’s first term alone. (Barstow and Stein, 2005).⁶ Reporter David Barstow went on to write a series of Pulitzer Prize winning reports about Bush’s PR machine, which detailed the Pentagon’s employment of retired military officers to deliver the military’s message on TV news programs (Barstow, 2008).⁷ Another tactic uncovered by Barstow, the use of government-produced, ready-to-air Video News Releases (VNRs), prompted two nation-wide investigative studies by the Center for Media and Democracy.

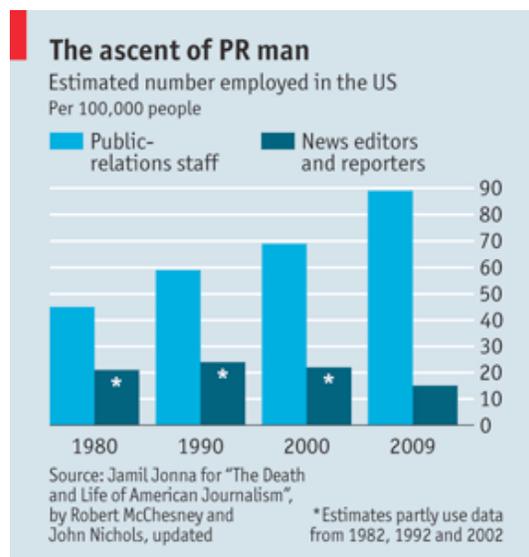
These studies found widespread use of VNRs in TV markets and uncovered the common

practice of stations passing them off as their own reporting without revealing the source (Farsetta, 2007).⁸ In a recently publicized example of PR gone amuck, Burson Marsteller, an international PR agency, made news when it was outed for attempting to get negative stories written about Google yet refusing to reveal that Facebook (Google's rival) was paying for the lobbying (The Economist, 2011).⁹

The media environment is favorable to PR.

PR influence on the news is well documented as the examples above illustrate. But why do journalists allow PR professionals such power over the content of news? The likely answers are money and time. A May 2011 article appearing in *ProPublica* and co-published by Columbia Journalism Review provides insight into the numbers. The amount of money spent on PR grew from \$3.5 billion in 1997 to more than \$8.75 billion in 2007. Over the same period, PR agency employment grew by 30 percent. Contrast that with the fact that the number of newspaper reporters and editors are at an all-time low of 40,600 and employment in TV news is less than half of what it was in the 1980s. In the article, John Sullivan acknowledged the power imbalance: "Journalism, the counterweight to corporate and government PR, is shrinking" (Sullivan, 2011).¹⁰

Research by Jamil Jonna of the University of Oregon highlights the growing gap between the number of journalists and PR professionals. The following chart shows how the ratios have grown over the decades to six PR professionals for every one journalist in 2009 (The



Economist, 2011).¹¹

Source: “Slime Slinging: Flacks vastly outnumber hacks these days”. *The Economist*. May 19, 2011.¹¹

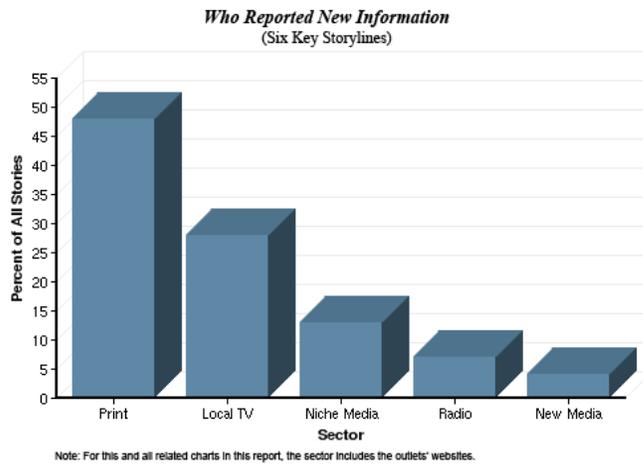
This ratio will no doubt continue to climb. *U.S. News & World Report* cites Bureau of Labor statistics that project public relations employment growth of 22.5 percent between 2010 and 2020. Because of this promising outlook, the magazine has ranked the public relations profession number 41 on its 2012 Best Jobs list. (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2012).¹²

Understaffed newsrooms are one reason why journalists turn to the surplus of PR pros for story generation. Another reason is that the remaining journalists are actually producing more stories in today’s 24-hour news environment. The authors of the 2011 Media Content Survey by PR Week summed it up this way: “Media is in survival mode.” The study found the top three factors affecting employees in traditional media outlets were decreasing budgets (37%), increasing volume of content (29%), and more outside responsibilities such as web content (18%). Seventy one percent say they have more work than the prior year (Gordon, 2011).¹³ Dean Starkman of the Columbia Journalism Review calls this non-stop production of news “the hamster wheel”. Starkman studied the *Wall Street Journal* and found that staff numbers dropped 13 percent from 2000 to

2008. At the same time, the number of stories per year went from 22,000 to 38,000 (Starkman, 2010)¹⁴.

Americans still rely on traditional media.

The fact that PR influences the content of news media is relevant today because Americans continue to turn to traditional outlets as their primary source. A Pew Research Center study that closely looked at media consumption showed that Americans are spending more time reading, watching, and listening to news. The study found that traditional media outlets are still the most used source of news and that there has been “no overall decline in the percentage saying they watched news on television, and even with the continued erosion of print newspaper and radio audiences, three quarters of Americans got news yesterday from one or more of these three traditional platforms” (Pew Research Center, 2010).¹⁵ Another survey by the Reynolds Journalism Institute referenced in the journal *Public Relations Tactics*, shows more than 60 percent of U.S. adults prefer news stories produced by professional journalists and 70 percent agree that professional journalists play an important role in society (Public Relations Tactics, 2012).¹⁶ The 2010 Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism study of the Baltimore “news ecosystem” suggests that most of what the public learns is still overwhelmingly driven by traditional media—particularly newspapers. The study also showed that traditional media outlets are the ones who are originating content and their digital cousins are simply re-posting and re-tweeting (Pew Research Center, 2010).¹⁷ The following chart shows who was responsible for the original reporting that occurred during the one-week study in Baltimore.



Source: Pew Research Center, January 11, 2010¹⁷

While Americans still turn to traditional media, research is mixed on how much they trust it. A recent USC Annenberg/Los Angeles Times Poll on Politics and the Press found that the most trusted news sources among voters are traditional outlets including local television, local newspapers, PBS, and national newspapers. The poll also found that Americans rate traditional news outlets higher (an average score of 6 on a scale of 1 to 10) than alternative sources such as blogs and social media. (Rainey, 2012).¹⁸ John Stauber, editor of PR Watch and founder of the Center for Media and Democracy, wrote about a startling example of Americans' trust in the news. Stauber pointed to a 2006 Harris Poll that found 50 percent of U.S. adults still believed that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction when the U.S. invaded Iraq. This was even after President Bush was forced to admit there were no weapons of mass destruction. Stauber said, "The reason that increasing numbers of Americans share a collective false memory is that they still remember being told, over and over again, that there 'absolutely' were WMDs. This story was boldly declared, not merely by the Bush administration, but also by leading U.S. news media. In fact, during the initial weeks of the US attack in 2003, the TV, radio and print media in the US repeatedly reported that WMDs were discovered, and although every single story was later shown to be false, the retractions were few and minor if they

were aired at all” (Stauber, 2006)¹⁹. In contrast, a more recent study by the Pew Research Center titled “News Media Credibility” found only a third of Americans say they can believe all or most of the news reported by 14 major organizations (Pew Research Center, 2010).²⁰ The Public Relations Society of America points out this contradiction by quoting a 2012 Reynolds Journalism Institute Study that showed while 60 percent of U.S. adults prefer news produced by professional journalists, only 37 percent said they trust mainstream media (Public Relations Tactics, 2012).²¹

More research needed to determine “PR Literacy.”

While there is plenty of literature verifying the existence of PR-driven material in the news, studies on audience awareness of this fact are virtually non-existent.

One UK study conducted at Bournemouth University queried students to determine if they were aware of the PR origins of news stories and, if so, were they able to identify the specific PR content. The study, presented at the 2011 Future of Journalism Conference, found a correlation between education levels and what the study authors call “PR literacy” – the ability to spot the PR in the news. They call for larger studies to verify the education/perception link and the eventual development of “PR literacy strategies” to be taught at the primary and secondary level of education (McQueen, 2011).²²

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Chapter 3: Research Methods

The research methods used in this study addressed two distinct audiences:

- 1) Adult consumers of traditional media.
- 2) Producers/editors of newspapers, magazines, and radio and TV news shows.

The Survey Method was selected because it is best for collecting the data relevant to this study. This included questioning media consumers about their personal beliefs on news origin. With regard to understanding the actions of the news professional, I first reviewed samples of news products and estimated the percent of stories that originated with public relations sources. However, to enhance the accuracy of my conclusions, I also needed to directly question editors about their use of information supplied by the public relations industry. This study used two types of Survey Methods – a written questionnaire for consumers, and personal interviews for media professionals.

Survey Method Considerations

- In order for surveys to be reliable, it is important that the questions are easy to understand.
- Open-ended questions allow for a greater variety of responses from participants but require additional work to code the data.
- Closed-ended questions are simple to analyze but limit the range of answers.

Advantages of Using Written Questionnaires for Survey Method

- Identical information can be sent to multiple people at the same time.
- They are quick and inexpensive to administer and complete.

- They allow the respondents to complete the questionnaire at their own convenience.

Disadvantages of Using Written Questionnaires for Survey Method

- Response rates can be low.
- They are not the best vehicles for obtaining detailed responses.
- The respondent does not have the opportunity to seek clarification.

Advantages of Using Personal Interviews for Survey Method

- One-on-one interaction increases the likelihood of obtaining higher response rates and quality answers.
- The flexibility allows for the opportunity to probe and ask follow-up questions.
- Interviews can be an easier way for respondents to adequately express their beliefs and opinions.

Disadvantages of Using Personal Interviews for Survey Method

- Interviews can be time consuming for all parties.
- The interviewer can bias the survey and can influence responses.
- There is no possibility of anonymity for respondent.

Constructing the Questionnaire

I sought to find users of traditional news media and obtain their opinions on where stories originate. I test-marketed the idea by asking random customers at Starbucks. It was not

productive so I abandoned this technique in favor of providing a written questionnaire to people I know. I considered the bias created by living and socializing in a highly educated circle. However, if my hypothesis is correct and respondents are relatively unaware of public relations' role in news, then I believe my results should be valid. If highly educated adults were found to be unaware that publicists play a key role in news generation then it would stand to reason that less educated adults would also be unaware. I avoided professional colleagues and others who know much about my work in the public relations field.

My questions focused on first qualifying the person as a consumer of traditional media. Second, I gave the respondent the opportunity to answer close-ended and open-ended questions about news story origin so they would have multiple opportunities to give input. I felt that this audience would be willing to share. My concerns were keeping the survey short and striking a balance between getting the information I was after while avoiding leading questions. I constructed the following three-question survey that takes several minutes to complete and is easily forwarded in an email:

Dear _____,

I am doing a research study for a college journalism class and would like to take a few minutes of your time to answer the following questions. Your participation is important to the success of this study. If you would like to receive the results, please provide your contact information. Please email your responses back to me at the address below. Thank you!

1. Do you read, watch or listen to traditional news media? If so, which?

A. Newspapers

B. Magazines

C. Radio news

D. TV News

E. Other (If other, please list.)

2. Where do you believe “soft news”* (not fast breaking) story ideas originate in the newsroom?

** In the news we read and watch every day, there is fast breaking hard news about disasters, emergencies, murders, fires, and national politics. There is also “soft news” that includes stories about companies, products, people, animals, events, etc.*

3. Who do you believe has the most influence over media professionals when they are selecting “soft news” stories to include in their news reports?

A. Editor

B. Citizen

C. Owner/publisher

D. Professional publicist

E. Reporter

F. Other (If Other, please list.)

4. Indicate your age group

- A. 18 – 29
- B. 30 – 49
- C. 50 – 65
- D. 65+

Constructing the Interview

I suspected news professionals would be more difficult to approach with a survey. They could be reticent to discuss and possibly hostile about “confessing” to the use of information supplied by public relations professionals. Therefore, I approached this from a disarming standpoint with a sympathetic introduction such as, “I don’t mean to imply that public relations dominates the news....just that the story or lead is given to you about a potentially newsworthy idea.” I met with several print editors who I know well to review newspaper issues involved with this study. I also approached others by group interview (conducted during a panel discussion at University of Washington), phone, or email to obtain an estimate of the percentage of stories that originate through public relations press releases. I believe that personal interviews were the best way to handle this task; overworked newsrooms hardly have time for such surveys.

Here is an example of my email query:

Dear _____,

I am conducting research for a college journalism class that explores the influence of public relations professionals on news content.

I would appreciate it if you would provide me an estimate of how many stories contained in each of your print issues or daily news shows originated from public

relations efforts on behalf of companies, government, non-profits, agencies, private citizens, etc. Perhaps you can look at two printed issues or daily news shows and indicate the number. I am not implying that public relations professionals control the content of news; just that they provide the original idea for a newsworthy story.

Thanks for your assistance with this important survey. Your participation is vital to its success. If you would like to receive the results, simply let me know and I will send it to you.

Sincerely,

Laura Follis

Survey Goals

For the consumer questionnaires, I attempted to achieve a cross-section of ages from young adult to senior. My goal was to have 50 people answer my survey. For the media interviews, I attempted to question two professionals each from TV, radio, newspaper, and magazines. For the most part, I was able to achieve or surpass these goals.

Consumer Questionnaires

- Out of the 50 surveys returned, 41 were consumers of traditional media and thereby qualified to answer the questions.
- The middle age categories were evenly represented with 11 to 15 surveys each. The 18-29 age group had just two respondents (nine from the 18-29 age group stated they did not use traditional media so were disqualified). The 65+ age group had five.
- Respondents were about equally split between men and women.

Media Interviews

- In-depth face-to-face interviews were held with Cathy Herholdt, former editor of the monthly Journal newspaper in Lynnwood, Washington, and Fred Fillbrook, editor of the bi-monthly Mill Creek View newspaper in Mill Creek, Washington.
- Group interviews were held with Brian Calvert, host of KOMO (Seattle ABC affiliate) News Radio; Gene Johnson, reporter for Seattle AP Bureau; George Erb, editor of the weekly Puget Sound Business Journal; Ed White, planning editor for KING (Seattle NBC affiliate) TV news; and Chris Legeros, reporter for KIRO (Seattle CBS affiliate) TV news.
- A phone interview was held with Sue Ramback, editor of the monthly Mill Creek Living magazine.
- Email interviews were held with John Carlson, host of the daily KVI radio news talk show; Steven Wilson, producer of KING TV'S New Day Northwest daily talk show; and Michael King, correspondent for KING TV's Evening Magazine daily news variety show.

Survey Analysis

Consumer Questionnaires

First, I disqualified the nine surveys returned by respondents who said they did not use traditional media for obtaining news. Second, I tallied the responses to question number three and assigned them to each of the four age groups. Third, I grouped the open-ended responses to question number two into four categories: 1) Internet; 2) publicist; 3) citizen;

and 4) news staff. Then I assigned the responses in these categories into the four age groups.

Media Interviews

Three of the print editors reviewed two issues each of their publications from cover to cover with me. I noted the origin of every story. The other media professionals provided me with more general impressions of the percent of PR generated stories that are used in each publication or broadcast. I grouped percentages reported by media type – newspaper, magazine, TV, radio – in order to see any variations among them.

I compared the information received from each of the media interviews with my own estimates on how many PR-generated stories I believe they used. In my estimates, I looked for typical signs of PR-supplied news such as references to press conferences and product announcements, spokesperson quotes, and use of Video News Releases. I looked for discrepancies between my own estimates and the media-reported statistics.

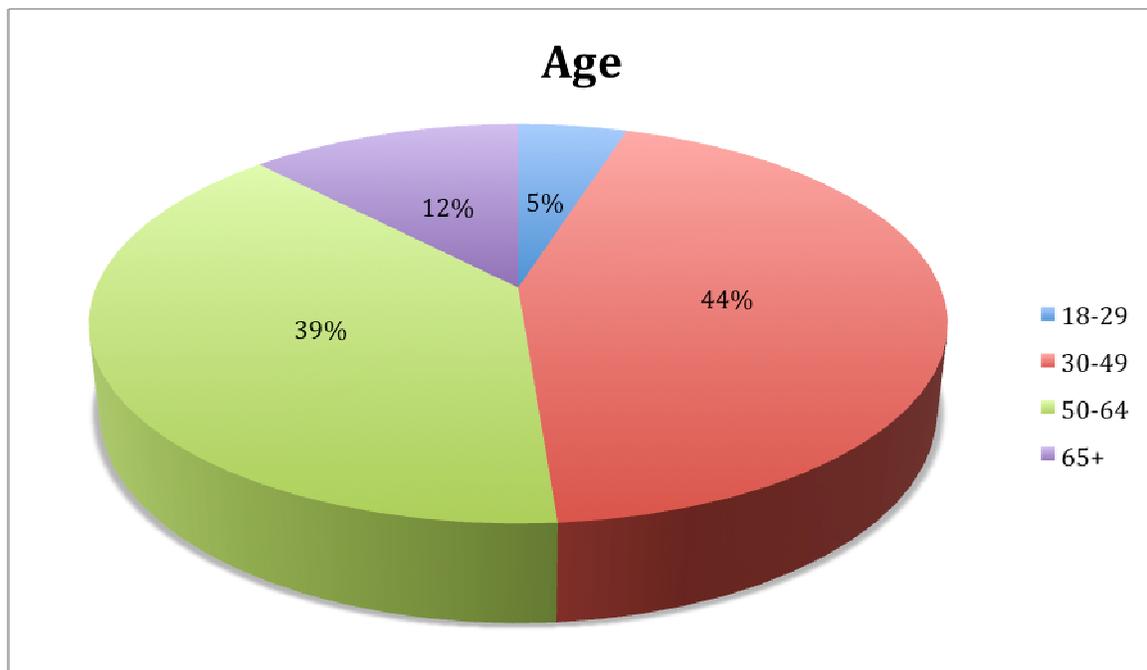
Chapter 4: Results

My research results are divided into two categories. The first category includes the results of the written surveys completed by adult consumers of traditional media. The second category includes the results of personal interviews with media professionals as well as my own review of publications and broadcasts to ensure that their estimates on use of PR material was consistent with my opinion. My ultimate goal was to identify any differences between the perceptions consumers have about the role of the publicist in the manufacture of news and what media professionals say is actually occurring.

Consumer Surveys

Profile of Respondents

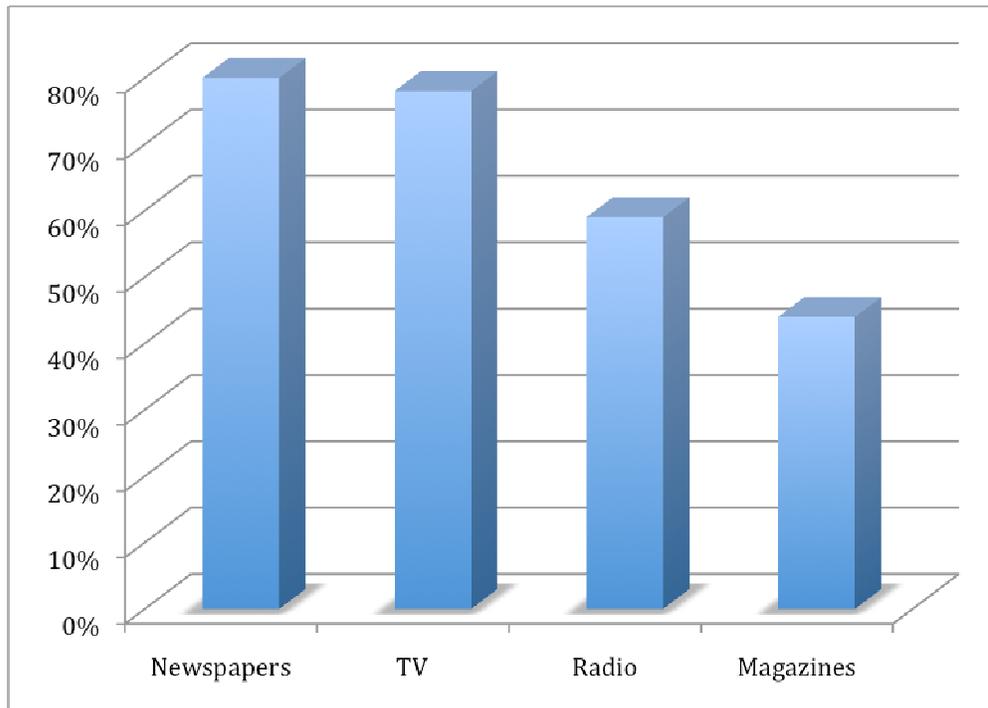
Forty-one surveys were tallied. Males and females were evenly split. Forty four percent of the surveys were from the 30-49 age group; 39 percent from the 50-64 age group; 12 percent from the 65+ age group; and five percent from the 18-29 year age group.



Type of Media Consumed

Many of those surveyed used multiple sources for receiving news, and all of the outlets were fairly evenly represented. All ages reported newspapers and TV as their top sources. Newspapers edged out TV with 80 percent of respondents getting some of their news from TV. Overall, magazines and radio news lagged behind but were more popular among the older age groups.

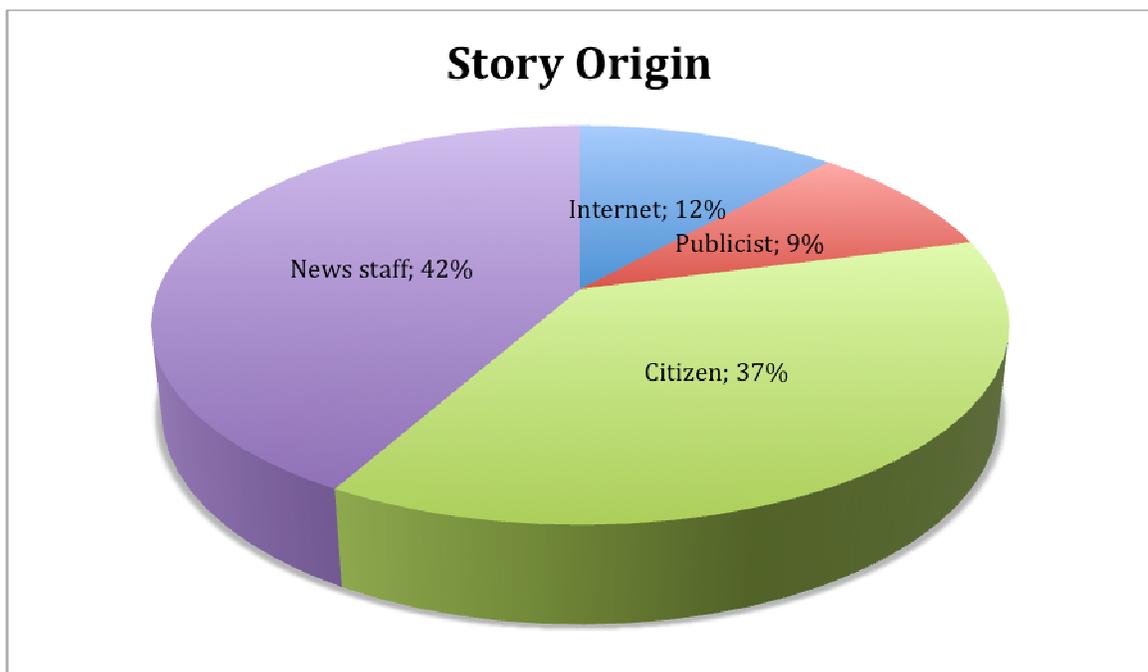
Use of Media Outlets



Story Origin

A key question of the survey – “Where do you believe ‘soft news’ story ideas originate in the newsroom?” – was open-ended and required me to analyze and group the results. I was able to place the answers into four main categories: 1) Internet; 2)

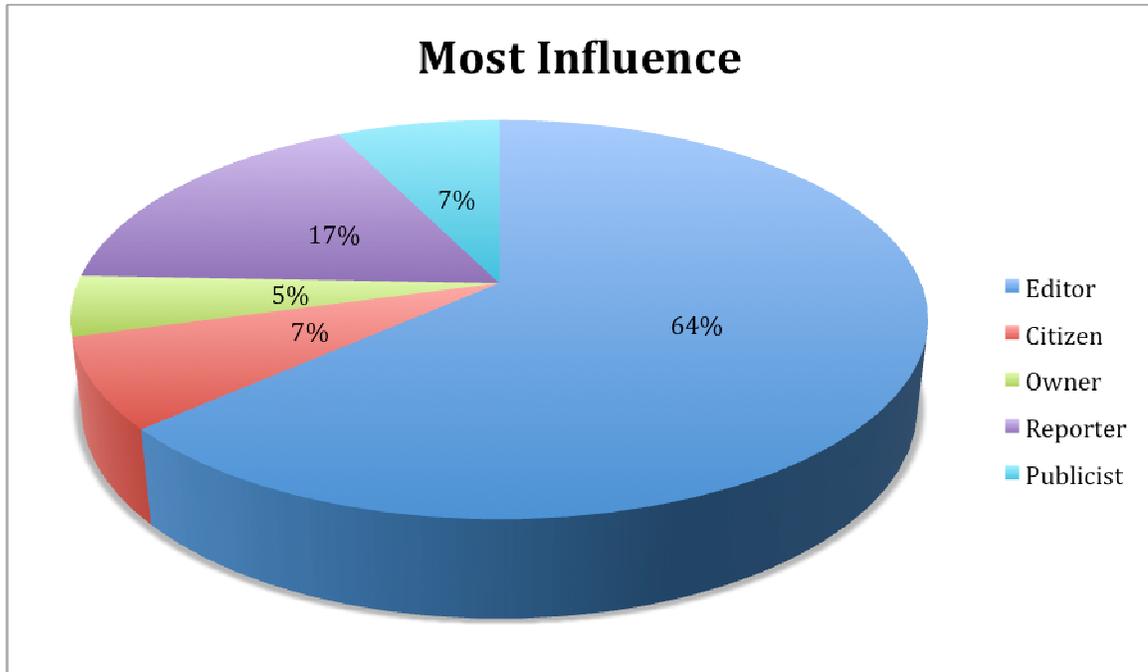
publicist; 3) citizen; and 4) news staff. (Some respondents listed more than one category.) Most of the respondents believed that soft news story ideas originate with editors and reporters. Citizens were a close second. Internet and publicist received a small number of responses. Of the five respondents who indicated publicists are the source of news ideas, two of them were in the 65+ age group. Only four surveys were received from the 65+ age group; perhaps this shows a trend but a larger sample would be needed to confirm this.



Influence

The next question – “Who do you believe has the most influence over media professionals when they are selecting soft news stories to include in their news reports?” – required the respondent to choose from a list what they believed was the most important influence. Even with the publicist offered as a choice, consumers did not give them much thought. Editors were the number one choice by far. Together, editors and reporters represent 81 percent of the responses. Clearly consumers believe these stories

originate within the walls of the newsroom. Once again, the 65+ age group shows a trend toward identifying publicists as influential versus the younger age groups.



Results

Overall, respondents gave little credit to publicists for soft news story idea generation, regardless of the type of media the respondent uses. News staff – editors and reporters – was seen as the most important sources for soft news by 81 percent of those taking the survey. Older respondents tended to select publicists more than other age groups.

Media Interviews

It was difficult to obtain in-depth analyses of complete news publications/programs by more than a few journalists since by nature they are typically under deadline and short on time. A number of editors, via email or phone conversations, provided me with a general idea of what percentage of their news stories originate through the efforts of a publicist. Finally, I obtained the opinions of a variety of print and broadcast professionals during a panel discussion that took place at the University of Washington.

In-person Interviews

The Journal: The Journal is a monthly news publication covering lifestyle topics in the Puget Sound region of Washington. I interviewed former editor Cathy Herholdt to review the origin of each story appearing in the March 2010 and June 2010 issues (the last two she oversaw production of). Her comments regarding the use of publicist-provided material included: “We usually generated our own ideas for cover and feature stories and then filled in the remainder with information provided by PR people. Sometimes we purchased written stories from a service but those stories may have originally been pitched by a PR person.”

March 2010 Journal: Out of 29 stories, 21 originated with paid publicists who were representing an organization. A regular columnist provided one story and two articles were purchased from a service that provides ready-made articles on various topics. Eight stories originated with the news staff. The cover story and first several stories of the issue were among these eight.

June 2010 Journal: Out of 37 stories, 30 originated with paid publicists. Regular columnists provided two stories. Seven stories originated with the news staff.

Again, the cover story and first several feature stories were among these seven.

Mill Creek View: MC View is a twice-monthly newspaper covering news for the city of Mill Creek, Washington. I interviewed editor Fred Fillbrook to review the origin of each article appearing in the August 1, 2011 and September 15, 2011 issues.

August 1, 2011 Mill Creek View: Out of 17 stories, two were generated in the newsroom, one was an editorial, and three were regular columnists. The remaining 11 story ideas came from public and private sector publicists. The two front-page articles were newsroom-generated.

September 15, 2011 Mill Creek View: Out of 16 stories, one was generated in the newsroom and featured prominently on the front page, three were letters to the editor, and two were regular columnists. The remaining 10 stories came from PR materials sent to the publication.

New Day Northwest: This is an hour-long daily talk/variety/information TV show directed at a female audience in Seattle, Washington. The segments cover a range of subjects divided into seven segments. I interviewed Steve Wilson, one of the producers of this show, who told me: “Management likes at least two out of the seven segments to be ‘pay-to-play’”. We will sell an entire six-minute segment to a client that would fit within

the parameters of our show. These segments are produced like a normal segment, but feature the client's message." The producer told me that of the remaining five segments "...at least 70 to 75 percent of our show comes from PR companies or a publicist representing one client. The rest we go after ourselves or find in the news."

Email/phone Interviews

Evening Magazine: Evening Magazine is a nightly one-hour lifestyle show in Seattle, Washington. Producer Michael King sent an email with the following statement: "Guessing here...I'd say about 25 percent (of content originates with publicists)."

KVI Talk Radio: This is a morning drive-time talk show in Seattle, Washington. The producer and host John Carlson summarized his thoughts in an email: "I'd say about 80 percent of our topics come from news, be it local or network TV, Internet news sites, newspaper stories, or tips from listeners. However, he cautioned me to keep in mind "...some of the media stories we cite on our show may have first originated from a PR pitch. By the time I find it, it's already news." He broke down the remaining 20 percent as supplied by publicists in the form of "...interesting books that publicists tell me about; interesting community or charity events worth covering; or a provocative report or finding from a university or policy center."

Mill Creek Living: This is a quarterly lifestyle magazine for the City of Mill Creek. Editor Sue Ramback told me over the phone: "I looked through the last two issues and I would say approximately 50 percent of our articles came to us by a PR person or someone acting in that capacity."

Group Interviews

I asked questions during a panel discussion with the following Washington State journalists: Brian Calvert, host of KOMO (Seattle ABC affiliate) News Radio; Gene Johnson, reporter for Seattle AP Bureau; George Erb, editor of the weekly Puget Sound Business Journal; Ed White, planning editor for KING (Seattle NBC affiliate) TV news; and Chris Legeros, reporter for KIRO (Seattle CBS affiliate) TV news.

Comments included:

Brian Calvert – “Radio news is almost exclusively from the wire service with little to no content generation of our own. I only talk to six publicists. They only pitch me on about one story per year but it’s always a really good one.”

Ed White – “Most of what I use does not come from PR folks but I may consult or get information from them on an existing story. I estimate that 10 to 15 percent of my daily ‘hit list’ comes from PR.”

Chris Legeros – “We do no feature work on the evening news so little opportunity for publicists unless they can give me a local tie to a national story.”

Gene Johnson/George Erb – “Always looking for an unusual story. Print allows us more time to talk to publicists and pursue more offbeat stories.”

Professional Review

I reviewed each of the publications discussed in the personal interviews to identify obvious signs of PR influence such as quoted spokespeople and references to “announcements.” I also reviewed the magazine, radio and TV show referenced in the email/phone interviews. In all cases, I found the journalists estimates to be on target.

Results

Overall, print journalists report much higher usage of PR material than do radio or TV professionals. As much as 80 percent of the stories in community publications can be traced back to the efforts of publicists versus approximately 15 percent for radio and TV. The exception is the New Day Northwest TV show, which is dominated by PR material and routinely allows third parties to purchase “pay to play” airtime that is indistinguishable to the viewer from non-paid content.

Compare this with just seven percent of adults surveyed who indentify the publicist as the most important influence in selection of soft news stories; and only nine percent who mention a publicist as having any role in the origin of story ideas. The trend toward older adults identifying the importance of the publicist may indicate that over years of exposure they begin to see and recognize PR influence in the news.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Based on personal interviews with news professionals and my own review of print, radio and TV news samples, I found the approximate percent of PR generated stories fluctuates from a low of 10 percent for TV and radio primetime news to a high of 80 percent for community newspapers. Of unknown origin are stories taken directly from news services and syndicates that many radio and TV stations rely upon for a good portion of their programs. (A percentage of these stories come from publicists who pitch writers at organizations such as Associated Press.) Depending on the skill of the PR professional and the ability of the media outlet to produce stories with its own staff, some PR materials are used as-is without editing. The Mill Creek View, for example, frequently offers the PR professional a by-line.

This does not mean that PR-generated news is un-newsworthy. The good news is that the media receive so many pitches from PR professionals (editors told me in the “hundreds” each month) that they can pick and choose from the best. Journalists say they work hard to create two-way conversations with PR representatives in the community to obtain story ideas that are targeted to their news audience and format.

The second question my research explored is whether news audiences are aware of the fact that paid publicists influence the content of soft news. Of the consumers surveyed, only nine percent noted the job of the publicist in developing soft news stories; just seven percent circled the choice of publicist as having the most influence in story generation. Clearly, the publicist’s role is barely visible and it brings up a troubling question. Are unsuspecting readers, listeners, and viewers being duped into thinking that the soft news

content is the result of an exhaustive search for the most important stories? Audiences need to be clued into the undisputed and indispensable connection between media and publicist and realize the fact that there simply are not enough reporters to scour the corners of their communities for news. Today, PR professionals greatly outnumber journalists and the gap continues to grow. We can safely predict this connection will remain strong and influence will continue to tip in favor of the PR industry. With consumer consumption of traditional media still high, it is also logical to assume that more people will be getting a portion of their daily news courtesy of PR-sponsored stories.

So it is incumbent upon viewers to question the source of news stories. I do not subscribe to the extreme view of the authors of the iconic book *Toxic Sludge* who admonish viewers to “question the experts and follow the money back to the public relations industry to challenge its hold on democracy.” However, I do believe that consumers have a responsibility to uncover sources and look for clues that a PR pro planted a story. This includes looking out for obvious signs of a press conference such as “announced today” quotes attributed to a spokesperson, or noticing identical stories running in more than one medium.

Combine an educated audience with good reporting practices that include questioning PR-provided facts, disclosing sources, and enhancing press releases with original reporting, and the final product can be an excellent piece of journalism. However, when press releases are run as-is, pre-packaged video news releases are run without attribution, and “pay-to-play” TV segments are not revealed, then PR is given too much influence at

the expense of unbiased reporting. No matter how talented at presenting newsworthy stories, a PR professional should not be treated like a staff writer for the simple reason that they work for someone else. It is the responsibility of the media to scrutinize press information and convert it into news. When this extra screen is in place, consumers receive a quality product. When it is not in place, the news becomes a reflection of clients with the largest PR budget.