

Parallel Session 10: Science communicator, is it a good profession?

THE DISTORTED VIEW ON SCIENCE. ON THE WEAKNESS OF JOURNALISM AND THE STRENGTH OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Prof. Winfried Goepfert

Freie Universitaet Berlin, Institut fuer Publizistik/Wissenschaftsjournalismus, Malteserstr. 74-100, D-12249 Berlin. Tel.: +49 30 838-70300, E-mail: goepfert@zedat.fu-berlin.de

Abstract

Science and technology are presently facing an acceptance crisis. One strategy to counter the lack of acceptance consists in strengthening public relations. The efforts of scientific institutions to boost their PR work meets with a period of weakness on the side of journalism. The number of published units is decreasing, competition between publishing houses is diminishing. Editorial departments are being reduced, journalistic spheres of competence outsourced, specialized editorial departments are shut down. On the other hand we are confronted with a growing number of PR workers. Public relations to a growing extent copies journalistic methods and exerts influence on journalists. Regarding the coverage of science in particular, one can state that the evaluation criteria of scientists leave their mark on the coverage of science journalism. This paper gathers some indicators for these general tendencies. Especially the illegitimate methods of taking influence shall be scrutinized and discussed.

Key Words: Science journalism, public relations, science coverage.

Text

For a long time science was perceived as something positive and presented favorably in the media. In the mid-seventies perception and media coverage became more critical (Kepplinger 1989, Bauer et al. 1995). Certain practices were no longer accepted by the population. Science and technology had gotten into an acceptance crisis. Scientists and researchers felt compelled to justify their work and campaign for more public support.

But this strengthening of public relations occurs in a quite peculiar situation, one might call it the weak phase of journalism. This weakness of journalism as a phenomenon is true for journalism as a whole and for science journalism in particular: Editorial staff is being reduced, spheres of competence are being outsourced, and PR products replace journalistic products without being sufficiently identified as PR.

In communication science, the relationship between journalism and public relations has recently been conceptualized by the determination hypothesis: "The more influence public relations gain, the less influence can be attributed to journalism and vice versa" (Baerns 1991, 17). In public communication, journalism and public relations have to fulfil different purposes. Journalists construct 'true realities' on the basis of constitutional preconditions and Public Relations create 'desirable realities' for the sake of the customer. Both, journalism and PR, have to play different roles. Nevertheless, recent developments seem to counterpoise this functionally important distinction between both communication systems.

Present statistics give proof of the decreasing number of published units and the resulting decrease of competing publishing houses. Traditional newspapers are threatened by advertising papers and free-of-charge newspapers. In 1980, the advertising papers already reached 700 titles, in 1998, their number amounted to 1,300 titles with an edition of 85 million copies (Rager 1999).

Editorial staff and journalistic spheres of competence are being outsourced. At the "Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung", specialized editorial departments were closed down and replaced by centralized editorial offices delivering theme pages like "health", "automobile", or "computer" to all regional newspapers (Röper 1997, 54).

The following tendencies may stand as proof for the growing influence of public relations:

- The number of PR workers grows dynamically
- Public relations increasingly copies journalistic working methods
- Public relations increasingly uses journalistic personnel
- Concerning science journalism: Evaluation criteria of the scientific community influence media coverage

The following figures show the development of personnel working in public relations: At the time being Germany has an estimated 60,000 journalists and 30,000 PR specialists. The number of PR workers is growing dynamically and is supposed to be reaching 50,000 in 2005.

Press information and PR kits are increasingly often presented in a journalistically useful style, so they can be directly integrated into the print system or broadcasting schedule without any further processing. In an analysis specifically dealing with science coverage Barbara Baerns comes up with the result: Two thirds of the science coverage of news agencies are based on information from public relations (Baerns 1990, 47). One might consider this a precarious and somehow imbalanced proportion. Because it means that only one third of science coverage is due to independent research of journalists.

The evaluation criteria of the science community influence journalistic coverage by their publishing habits and the accompanying public relations. In

a survey, Carola Pahl analyzed half a year of medical coverage on the science pages of eight nationwide daily and weekly newspapers in Germany (Pahl 1997, 10).

The survey researched the sources of almost 1,200 articles on medical topics. 450 could be directly derived from an article in a professional scientific journal, which equals to almost 40 percent of the total coverage. Interestingly, the source was not always mentioned. Only about 80 percent of the articles referring to a specialized publication bothered to mention their source. Most of the articles followed a simple principle by only summarizing what was said in the journal article.

Journals with a high "impact factor" get the most quotations among all journalistically processed scientific journals. The impact factor shows how often an article in a journal is quoted in other professional publications. In other words, it indicates the reputation of a journal within the scientific community.

By adhering to the publishing practice of the scientific community, journalistic coverage also copies its evaluation criteria. But the accompanying public relations also influence the media coverage. The professional journals usually issue press information, especially on articles they consider important. Additionally, these publications are highlighted in the respective journal's editorial. Analysis has shown that such highlighted articles very often become the basis of a newspaper article. Thus, press information and editorial comments substantially influence the subject selection of newspaper editors.

In the following some tendencies shall be highlighted that prove the increase in illegitimate forms of taking influence:

- Hidden sponsoring and subsidies
- Employing and influencing journalistic personnel
- No transparency in usage of PR material
- PR in pseudo-journalistic shape

Public as well as privately owned television and broadcasting stations are presently outsourcing editorial planning and production processes. In most cases, the most inexpensive bids are accepted, that quite often cannot even cover the production costs. Knowingly or unknowingly, both sides take into account that the producers will have to look for other funds to finance the project. As a consequence, radio or TV broadcasts are being sponsored by third parties, either by coverage in favor of a certain product or by seemingly accidental name dropping or demonstrations of a product. Sponsors often aren't even mentioned by name, but they influence the choice of topics and the tendency of coverage. W. Göpfert (1990) and Busche (1998) have discussed plenty of examples. This mixing of journalism with PR is by no means a new phenomenon, it has happened before. But never before has this tendency been accelerating like it is today.

A recent example may demonstrate to what extent public relations for science considers the assumption of journalistic tasks as a matter of course: At the "Badische Zeitung" in Freiburg, once a week the reports on science and research were no longer written by journalists. The newspaper leaved this task to the local university. The press office of the university edits the paper's science page and fills it with own news and articles. The credits on the science page mention the press office as an "editorial". However journalistic science coverage still exists but it is in parts being replaced by public relations. There are other examples: The weekly science page of the "Vancouver Sun", for instance, is created by the local "H. R. Macmillan Space Centre". The page is layouted like a regular newspaper page, and bears the centre's logo at the bottom.

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