

**PR, Journalism and Democracy: How individuals might  
guard themselves against the manipulation of public opinion**

**Robert Macmillan 2005**

A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the  
degree of Master of Arts in Communication Studies.

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### **Attestation of Authorship**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the qualification of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the acknowledgements.

Robert Macmillan 11/8/2005

## **Acknowledgements**

Firstly to myself for persevering to see this project through to its conclusion despite many, many instances of wanting to give up. To Brad Mercer, my primary supervisor, for having a large influence in shaping the project and making sure it was well written and thoroughly researched. Also to Alan Cocker, my secondary supervisor, for providing useful second opinions and guidance. To Nick Jeffs for being a good friend on campus and suggesting new places to eat Japanese in town. And above all to my parents, Michael and Anne, without whose love, encouragement and support none of this would have been possible.

## **Abstract**

This thesis is a series of four articles examining the interface of public relations and journalism and how this affects the information the public receives as news. The central research question it aims to answer is: ‘How can the public guard against manipulation of opinion?’ The articles are accompanied by an exegesis which explains the research process and the role of important sources in the project. The research draws on relevant literature as well as interviews with people involved in public relations, journalism and academia.

The first article *Public Relations & Democratic Society* looks at the various definitions of public relations and examines the debate over whether PR operates in the public interest. Article two, *The Production of News*, discusses the interface of public relations and journalism and also deals with the economic considerations affecting mass media outlets. *PR Under the Spotlight in New Zealand*, the third article, is a case study of a public relations campaign mounted by state-owned logging company Timberlands West Coast Ltd. The final article *Navigating the Information Environment* examines the current state of the interface between PR and journalism in New Zealand and sets out suggestions for how members of the public can avoid being manipulated.

The research found that in order to prevent manipulation it is up to members of the public to actively seek truth and not uncritically accept information received through the media. Due to the work of the public relations industry and the media there are many ways in which information can be filtered and massaged and it is knowledge of these processes that puts the public in the best position to see reality.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this thesis is to present a series of four in-depth journalistic articles examining the management and communication of information in the world today. In particular it looks at the roles of the public relations industry and the media and how these two groups interact. The pieces have been written from the perspective of what members of the public need to know to protect themselves from manipulation. Information in the media plays a crucial role in shaping our opinions, beliefs and behaviour and there needs to be an increased consciousness of the ways in which this information is managed and filtered.

This series of articles is pitched at people who take a serious interest in the world of news and current affairs but may not have much of an understanding of the ‘behind the scenes’ forces which influence news content. These are often subtle matters but they have considerable consequences and there needs to be more awareness of them. The public relations industry and the media prefer the public not to know about many of their activities and the often interconnected relationships between them. But this is to the detriment of public discourse and needs to be brought out into the open. To help people recognise the invisible forces of information management is the reason behind this project. The research may assist people in realising when truth is being subverted and ensure the practitioners of public relations and journalism are held more accountable for their actions. In terms of potential publication internationally it would suit publications such as *The Atlantic*, *Harper’s Magazine* and *The New Republic*. In terms of New Zealand publications it has been pitched to the readership of say *North and South* or *Metro*.

The first article *Public Relations & Democratic Society* looks to answer the questions of what exactly public relations is and how it operates. It begins with a history of PR to set the scene and describes its developments throughout the twentieth century. Then the two sides of the debate over the role of public relations in democratic society are discussed. First there are the supporters of PR who believe it is a valuable activity making a significant contribution to society. Then there are the critics of PR who believe it is a shadowy force working to craftily engineer consent for the activities of

government and business. From this debate it is clear there are many different forms of public relations and it has the potential to be used both for and against the public interest. The article goes on to profile the largest of the global PR firms as well as the communications conglomerates that bring together public relations, advertising, lobbying and marketing to provide what is known as integrated communications. These wealthy organisations exercise huge power over public discourse and need to be recognised.

Article two, *The Production of News*, is about how the nature of mass media outlets coupled with the interaction of public relations practitioners can inhibit the public's ability to comprehend reality. The article begins with a discussion of how public opinion is formed in what we might call the information environment. By looking at concepts such as the public sphere and the court of public opinion it sets the backdrop for examining how PR and journalism impact upon the public mind. The next critical issue is the interaction, or interface of public relations and journalism. The relationship between these two groups is characterised by both cooperation and confrontation, making for a fascinating spectacle. The superior resources available to public relations practitioners and other factors mean journalists are increasingly struggling with their role of presenting balanced, objective analysis of issues. The interaction of PR and journalism usually happens out of the public view so the article seeks to raise awareness and bring it out into the open. The next section of the article deals with the economic considerations of the mass media. The pressure to increase audience sizes and profits is resulting in a decrease of quality coverage of important political and social issues. The article concludes by examining the issue of trust in the media and concludes that people must take it upon themselves to assess the information they receive and be careful where trust is placed.

The third article *PR Under the Spotlight in New Zealand* is a case study of a public relations campaign run by the state-owned logging company Timberlands West Coast Ltd. Investigative researcher and author Nicky Hager was the recipient of leaked strategy documents and along with Bob Burton wrote the book *Secrets and Lies: The anatomy of an anti-environmental PR campaign*. The article analyses the allegations made in this book to see how they fit with criticism of public relations behaviour. Because of the detailed nature of the leaked documents the case provides an excellent

opportunity to evaluate PR strategies that usually stay out of public view. It also examines the ethics inquiry by the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand that resulted from complaints by Hager and Burton. There are different views on what is unethical and undemocratic and the Timberlands case provides a very valuable example for evaluating where we stand on these issues.

Article four, *Navigating the Information Environment*, draws together the content of the first three articles to answer the central research question of ‘how can the public guard against the manipulation of opinion?’ This article features the bulk of the primary research in the form of interviews with people involved at the highest levels of public relations, journalism and academia. Their views are canvassed on the state of the interface of PR and journalism in New Zealand in order to give readers a good understanding of the current situation. The different backgrounds and opinions of these people enables a lively debate about the roles of journalism and public relations. Finally there is a discussion about the things people need to know and do in forming their opinions on issues. In short, people need to understand how practitioners of PR and journalism operate, challenge what they are told and reach out to alternative media sources.

The purpose of the exegesis is to explain the research underpinning these articles. It provides a discussion of the research process, describing the areas of interest, the types of research undertaken, influential sources and the core research. It also looks at the reasons behind the choice of case study and why the thesis is structured as it is.

The four articles are designed to be read as a set, but can also stand alone as investigations into the specific areas each one deals with. The first three take a slightly more explanatory approach in order to lay the groundwork, while the fourth focuses on current views within the fields of journalism, public relations and academia. This approach was taken because of the complex nature of the subject matter. A solid discussion of theories behind public relations and journalism will enable readers to engage more critically with the words and ideas of the people interviewed.

## **One. Public Relations & Democratic Society**

*It is easier and less costly to change the way people think about reality than it is to change reality – Public relations adviser Morris Wolfe.<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction**

In his famous novel *1984* George Orwell created a world where truth is what the state decides it is and anybody who challenges the party line is swiftly and brutally dealt with by the thought police. Today's society has not descended to this nightmarish state, but we must stop to assess how close we are coming to such a reality. The rise of the professional information management industries, coupled with increasing commercialisation of the media is posing a serious threat to the public's ability to find truth and form accurate opinions. Just look at the way the Bush and Blair governments were able to sell the war in Iraq on false premises. If people are to see through this type of trickery there must be a greater understanding of how information can be manipulated.

Due to technological advancement we are increasingly bombarded with communications of many differing forms as we go about our daily lives. Information is presented in communications ranging from advertisements to news stories and from music to public service announcements. The chief mechanism for the spread of this information is the collection of communicative tools known as the mass media. Be it through television, radio, print or new media such as the Internet and mobile telephones, this is how we learn about the world.

This means the mass media play a central role in the shaping of ideas, attitudes, beliefs, opinions and behaviour. Because of the infinite amount of events and information in the world, past, present and future, we rely on the media to convey what is important. In doing so we often assume that the information in the media is

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<sup>1</sup> Nelson, J. (1989). *Sultans of Sleaze: Public relations and the media*. Toronto: Between the Lines, p.17.

truthful, balanced and will lead to opinions and behaviours in the best interests of society.

But this can be a dangerous assumption. When information in the media is manipulated by those with vested interests the well of public discourse is poisoned. This has serious ramifications for the functioning of democratic society. For it is upon the open and equal access to truthful information that the public decision-making of democracy is based.

In these articles I wish to discuss how, where, why and by whom manipulation of information in the media occurs. In particular I will examine the role of the public relations (PR) industry. The public relations industry is part of a wider network of information management that also includes opinion polling, advertising and mass marketing. It has been argued that the PR industry works out of the public view for the interests of government and business. But PR's relationship with society is complex, at the same time positive and negative, and requires careful examination. Also vital to the spread of information is the relationship between public relations practitioners (PRPs) and journalists. It is from the interaction of these two groups that the news content in the media is produced. I will also look at how economic considerations of the mass media affect the information they produce.

By way of a local case study I will discuss the roles of PR and journalism in the case of state-owned logging company Timberlands West Coast. These events drew worldwide attention to New Zealand when Timberlands was accused of hiring an international PR firm to run a deceitful campaign to discredit and undermine the efforts of environmentalists.

Through understanding the activities and motivations of the media, public relations industry, business and government I believe we can put ourselves in a much stronger position to prevent manipulation of our opinions. This idea is the basis of the final article which will look at how we can best interpret information in the mass media and thus participate more productively in the democratic process. This article will also examine how reform and change in PR and journalism could improve systems of communication.

My hope is that readers of these pieces will become more analytical, critical and savvy users of the media. By understanding the forces which shape the news we are in a much better position to judge how accurately it reflects what is really happening in the world.

### **What is public relations?**

Considering the power wielded by PR over our lives it is an activity that is generally poorly understood, with its presence and impact often going unrecognised. It is defined, viewed and labelled differently by people depending on their experience of it and their ideological standpoints. These views on PR can be very strong. Those who support and practice PR see it as highly beneficial to the operation of society. At the other end of the spectrum, those opposed believe it is little more than an instrument of social control. By taking a quick trip through the history of PR and visiting the different perspectives we should be able to build up a good picture of what it is and how it presents itself in different forms.

### **History**

Public relations techniques have always been used throughout history in communication between groups of people within society. When people have had information to convey they have used the available media to get their message across. Around 500BC the Egyptians were recording important events and information on papyrus, while the Romans were posting news in the *Acta Dicta* – a forum for daily events. As time progressed efforts to present information in particular ways became more organised. This was exemplified in the promotion of religion. In 1622 Pope Gregory XV established the *Congregatio de propaganda fide* (Congregation for Propagating the Faith) to handle missionary activity for the Catholic Church. Incidentally, it is from here that we have retained the word *propaganda*.<sup>2</sup> But what is today known as modern PR can be traced to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Like so many other elements of Western society, modern PR was born and nurtured in the United States of America.

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<sup>2</sup> Newsom, D., Turk, J. & Kruckeberg, D. (2004). *This is PR: The realities of public relations*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, p.24.

As the United States neared the beginning of the twentieth century it had become a highly industrialised nation. Large businesses were booming, but many workers lacked basic rights and sections of the public were upset over the inequalities they saw in society. What has been termed the ‘public be damned’ attitude of powerful capitalists<sup>3</sup> did not line up with notions of a free and open America. Consequently, for a period up until World War I the ‘muckraking’ press highlighted corporate and governmental indiscretions. Muckraking was a term coined to describe journalism that investigated and exposed to the public corrupt and otherwise illegal activity. One example is the work of Ida Tarbell whose investigation into John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil company altered his reputation and led to increased governmental regulation of the industry.<sup>4</sup> The result of this situation was that business interests knew they had to respond to this negative publicity. They realised it was necessary to communicate more with the public and gain a better understanding of public opinion on mutually important issues.

To accomplish these objectives, business turned to the social sciences. Theories from psychology, sociology and economics were used to develop techniques for communicating with the public. Two men played key roles in this development and are widely credited with founding modern PR. They are Edward Bernays and Ivy Lee.

Bernays was a nephew of Sigmund Freud and was intrigued by mass psychology and the idea of bringing order out of the chaos of the public domain. He held a very hierarchical and elitist view of society and believed it was the role of the intelligent few to inform the masses of what was best for society as a whole. He was also influenced by his work for the Creel Committee, also known as the Committee for Public Information, during World War I. This committee organised communication with the public concerning the US war effort. Following this he went on to work for many corporate interests including the tobacco industry.

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<sup>3</sup> Moloney, K. (2000). *Rethinking Public Relations: The spin and the substance*. London: Routledge,

p.65.

<sup>4</sup> Weinberg, S. (2001). *Ida Tarbell, Patron Saint*. Columbia Journalism Review, May/June, p.2.

Ivy Lee also believed in the importance of mass psychology in communicating with the public. He has been given credit for encouraging powerful businessmen to communicate more openly about their activities.<sup>5</sup> He is also recognised as the inventor of the press release. Influenced by his previous career as a journalist, he thought communication between organisations and the public would be greatly improved by providing journalists with relevant information they could use in writing news stories. The press release is a very important part of PR and will be examined later in more detail.

What is particularly interesting about Bernays and Lee is that they are often considered an embarrassment by the very people who practice and write about PR today. Their elitist view of society and ready embrace of the term propaganda do not agree with the self-image of today's PR. I will discuss the role of Bernays and the term propaganda further when I analyse the differing perspectives on PR.

As with Bernays, many other early PRPs worked for the wartime publicity departments and then continued on in the private sector after the wars. There was increased use of PR techniques in World War II and it has been argued this caused PR to develop into a fully-fledged occupation.<sup>6</sup> The success of communication strategies on both sides in getting the public behind the war effort made those in government and business sit up and realise the potential of mass communication for achieving their goals. In Nazi Germany Joseph Goebbels led a very powerful propaganda operation and has been quoted as saying: 'It would not be impossible to prove with sufficient repetition and a psychological understanding of the people concerned that a square is in fact a circle. They are mere words, and words can be moulded until they clothe ideas in disguise.'<sup>7</sup>

The 1960s and 1970s saw people the world over become increasingly sceptical of authority and challenge the status quo. This was particularly true of many young adults who protested against things such as the Vietnam War, capitalism and sexual strictures. The result was a public domain full of many new ideas, attitudes and

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<sup>5</sup> Moloney, p.69.

<sup>6</sup> Newsom et al., p.35.

<sup>7</sup> Barsamian, D. & Chomsky, N. (2001). *Propaganda and the Public Mind: Conversations with Noam Chomsky*. London: Pluto Press, p. 149.

political viewpoints. This increased pluralism led to often conflicting rises in the use of PR, as new and varying groups looked to communicate their messages.

Along with the increasing pluralism in society, the explosion in methods of communication also led to an increased role for PR. At the beginning of the twentieth century newspapers and magazines were basically the only media for communicating news and information. By the end of the twentieth century radio, television (both terrestrial and satellite), cinema, the internet and other instruments of the mass media were transporting information around the globe. People can now easily access all sorts of different perspectives on what is happening in the world. This has meant organisations have to compete much harder to express their messages. As a result, PR has developed into a multi-billion dollar global industry as well as a set of techniques that are used by individuals.

### **PR: good, bad or in between?**

While the importance of these events in PR history is widely agreed upon, the meaning given to them varies greatly among analysts of PR. By looking at PR from the perspectives of both those supportive and those critical we can deepen our understanding of its relationship with public opinion.

#### **From the supportive angle**

To begin with, I will look at how the Public relations industry defines itself and its role in society. One estimate is that there are at least 472 definitions of PR in circulation.<sup>8</sup> This would seem to make coming up with a single definition impossible, but there is enough overlap among many definitions to come up with something workable. American PR academics James Grunig and Todd Hunt, who set out the theoretical framework for much of today's PR, provide a definition widely accepted by PR scholars and practitioners. This is that PR is the management of communications between an organisation and its publics.<sup>9</sup> Practitioners see their role as using their skills to help organisations achieve the best possible communication with their publics. Patrick Smellie, a former journalist and now corporate

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<sup>8</sup> Newsom et al., p.59.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

communications manager for Contact Energy says he has been “struck by the ineptitude of many corporate leaders in the area of communications.”<sup>10</sup> He thinks many have naïve views about the media and need assistance to communicate effectively.

An organisation’s publics are understood to be the groups of people within society that have involvement with the organisation. Everybody belongs to many definable publics based on race, religion, sexual preference, membership of clubs and so forth. For instance, the publics of a company that manufactures sporting apparel would include people who play sport and people who just like to wear sports clothing. It is the job of the PRP to identify the publics that relate to a client’s organisation. Thus PRPs work as intermediaries, managing information so the public and organisations can better understand each other.<sup>11</sup> They must develop a good understanding of the organisation for which they are working, the publics of that organisation and how all these people fit into the political, social and economic climate of the day. Probably the most important thing to understand about PR is that its aim is to present clients to the public in the best possible light. This means drawing attention to information that reflects well on the organisation and putting out the preferred angle on things. Smellie describes this approach by saying “my job is to put the arguments which favour my employer honestly. So there’s on point in lying because you’ll get found out. But a lot of the time if nobody asks the questions that are the burning issues, you’re not going to volunteer it unless you decide it’s a good time to do it.”<sup>12</sup>

PRPs work with all sorts of organisations, groups and also individuals. These include all levels of government, statutory bodies and authorities, financial and educational institutions, small and large businesses, trade union groups, community and non-profit organisations.<sup>13</sup> As far as individuals go, many celebrities and high-profile athletes utilise PR to manage their public image. PRPs either work from within an organisation or from outside as consultants. There are many firms around the world which specialise in these services and I will discuss these later.

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<sup>10</sup> Smellie, P. (personal communication, May 27, 2005)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.2.

<sup>12</sup> Smellie.

<sup>13</sup> Tymson, C., Lazar, P. & Lazar, R. (2002). *The New Australian and New Zealand Public Relations Manual*. Chatswood, NSW: Tymson Communications, p.23.

In order to practice successful communications for a client the PRP carries out an array of activities. One of the most important is research. This entails finding out the communication needs of an organisation's publics and the public attitudes towards the organisation. The PRP also manages the image of his client. This includes seeking to build a favourable impression of the organisation and anticipating and correcting perceived false impressions. Presenting information is of course a very important PR activity. Issuing press releases to the media is the main method by which PRPs communicate with the public on behalf of their organisation. Information to do with the public is also presented to the organisation by PRPs. Helping the client understand the climate in which they are operating is another key activity. This means helping management read the signs of the times and predicting future trends that could help clients. Monitoring the media also helps understand the climate.<sup>14</sup>

In *The New Australian and New Zealand Public Relations Manual*, the authors describe five major areas of PR activity. These are relations with: the media, government, investors, employees and the community. Other specialised areas include crisis management, branding, environmental PR and event staging.<sup>15</sup> Thus we can see that PR is involved with all aspects of running an organisation. This underlines the importance of communication to the operation of society. Because communication is so vital, understanding the activities of its managers is a useful skill.

PR texts and practitioners publicly stress the importance of ethical behaviour. They proclaim PR's value lies in its ability to work in the best interests of society by contributing to healthy public debate. In order for this to occur standards of ethics and responsibility must be upheld. Paul Dryden, the executive director of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) says ethical considerations are extremely important to his organisation to help ensure that "honesty is always first and foremost."<sup>16</sup> These ethical standards are set down by the various associations of PRPs. The International Public Relations Association (IPRA) is a global organisation

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp.24-25.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>16</sup> Dryden, P. (personal communication, March 23, 2005)

representing practitioners in more than 70 countries.<sup>17</sup> There are also associations within many individual countries. In the United States there is the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), in Britain the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) and in New Zealand PRINZ. The PRINZ Code of Ethics is typical of public relations behavioural guides. It lists the values that guide the actions of PRINZ members: advocacy, honesty, expertise, independence, loyalty and fairness.<sup>18</sup> In regards to this investigation, the most important sections of the PRINZ Code of Ethics itself are:

A member shall: - 1iii: Be honest and accurate in all communications – and act promptly to correct erroneous communications.

- 1iv: Avoid deceptive practices.
- 2i: Promote open communication in the public interest wherever possible.
- 2ii: Respect the rights of others to have their say.<sup>19</sup>

Those who teach public relations at tertiary level tell their students that ethics are a very important part of the job. For instance the authors of the textbook *This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations* write: ‘A public relations practitioner should be measured by only one standard: ethical performance.’<sup>20</sup> The importance with which ethics are described by advocates of PR would seem to suggest that practitioners of public relations take them very seriously. But as we shall see later the reality is not this straightforward.

The general PR theory taught in many tertiary institutions today relies to an extent on the ideas of American PR academics Grunig and Hunt. In particular, their four-part typology to describe the evolution of PR. They describe the development of PR in these steps:

- 1) Press agency/publicity (1850-1900): PR served a propaganda role, with its practitioners spreading the ideas of an organisation, often through manipulation.

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<sup>17</sup> Newsom et al., p.394.

<sup>18</sup> *PRINZ Code of Ethics*. Retrieved April 7, 2004, from <http://www.prinz.org.nz>.

<sup>19</sup> ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Newsom et al., p.4.

- 2) Public-information (1900-1920): practitioners worked as journalists-in-residence, which meant making more of an attempt to present information in a balanced way, but still definitely working to promote their organisation.
- 3) Two-way asymmetric (1920-1960): the use of scientific persuasion. This entails finding out about the public through market research and opinion polls and using this information to design communication strategies. This form of PR is asymmetric in that the research about the public is solely for the purpose of helping the organisation achieve its goals, rather than helping the public understand the organisation as well.
- 4) Two-way symmetric (1960s-): PRPs as mediators. This is the ideal concept of PR, where PRPs communicate the organisation's objectives to the public and the public's desires to the organisation.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of symmetry is important to understanding the concepts behind public relations. For when there is symmetry, public and private interests are equal and there is open communication. When there is not, the public loses out from an unfair exchange of information. Grunig and Hunt's typology asserts that public relations has been gradually moving from a propagandistic, manipulative activity, to an open and fair one. But it must also be noted that when this typology was formulated in 1984, its authors estimated that only around 15 percent of practitioners were implementing the two-way symmetric model. The role of Grunig and Hunt's typology in understanding PR has been the focus of plenty of debate. The key question has concerned whether their theory was an honest appraisal of the development of PR, or if it was an attempt to legitimise PR's role in society and cast it in a positive light. The first two models of their typology rely on the use of propaganda to provide a one-sided image of the source organisation. Prior to the World Wars, the word propaganda did not hold the negative connotations it does today. Instead it was understood simply as information presented to the public, not necessarily with the intention of deceiving the public. But following the Western world's experience with fascist regimes in World War II and later the Cold War, propaganda acquired the stigma of a manipulative and deceitful activity. Therefore if the practice of public relations was to have a future its links with propaganda had to be broken. This fracture was theoretically achieved by Grunig and

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<sup>21</sup> Grunig, J. & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing Public Relations*. Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt Brace, p.22.

Hunt.<sup>22</sup> The answer to the debate lies in whether today's communication is more two-way and open than in the past.

By working ethically and trying to implement two-way symmetric communication, those involved in public relations believe their work is beneficial for society. Good examples of public relations helping society can be seen in public education campaigns regarding issues such as drunk driving and cigarette smoking. In these instances activities that cause problems in society are recognised and strategies devised to change public attitudes and behaviours. The public relations practitioners running the campaign research the issue thoroughly. They must find out which people are doing these things, why they are doing them and what the consequences are. This information is then presented to the authorities which are commissioning the campaign and it is then decided what information the public needs to receive in order for behaviours to change. This information is presented in forms such as advertisements, articles and through specially-organised events. In 2004 RoadSafe Auckland ran a campaign to promote child pedestrian safety among Pacific families in the Auckland region. The campaign was used to spread the message that 'Our kids are being run over, the road's no playground.' It utilised radio advertisements and a free concert at Ericsson Stadium featuring well-known performers to get the message across.

In addition to public education, it is argued PR is beneficial for society in other ways. Many of these revolve around its ability to help people participate in the open flow of information. In regards to the capitalist system, public relations is becoming an integral part of marketing, which helps both producers and consumers. It does so by allowing producers plenty of scope for promoting their goods, while at the same time providing consumers with large amounts of information on which to base their choices.<sup>23</sup> The persuasive nature of PR communications helps to stimulate purchasing and thus the economy.

Supporters of PR also believe it aids the political process. By enhancing communication between those in government and the citizenry, PR helps both these

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<sup>22</sup> Moloney, p.74.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.62.

groups of people understand each other better. The techniques of public relations enable politicians to find out what the key issues facing their constituents are. Then they can decide how best to communicate with the people to address these issues. Public relations is also important to the work of cause, interest and pressure groups. In a democratic society there are a multitude of groups wanting their voices heard and their policy ideas recognised. By using PR techniques these groups can at a relatively low cost gain access to public debate and politicians.<sup>24</sup> A recent example was the efforts of Greenpeace to protest bottom-trawling fishing techniques. Protesters dressed up in costumes as creatures of the sea in order to draw attention to their cause. This was accompanied by a press release sent to media organisations describing the protest and the reasons behind it.

In regard to the media, supporters of public relations believe it helps the media cover a wider range of stories and viewpoints. By sending information that otherwise might be missed into newsrooms through press releases, public relations practitioners provide journalists with inexpensive and readily usable content. This practice is referred to as the supply of information subsidies. While PRPs see this process as positive, it is a highly contentious issue and I will look at it in greater detail in the next article.

Another element of public relations worth mentioning concerns the individual rather than organisations within society. British PR lecturer and writer Kevin Moloney says that as well as being an organisational activity, the practice of PR can be a ‘personal kit’ for celebrities and aggrieved individuals.<sup>25</sup> In today’s celebrity-obsessed times the management of public perceptions is vital for the actors, musicians, athletes and others constantly in the public consciousness. Because celebrities live and die by public opinion, PR techniques are vital to helping them communicate with the public.

Aggrieved individuals who are unhappy with something that is happening in society can also adopt public relations strategies. An example could be a person upset about a local park being redeveloped as a shopping mall. Environmentalists John Elkington and Julia Hailes have drawn up a plan to help people contribute to the future they

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.43.

want. Their suggestions include: talk to people in the community about issues, write letters, start petitions and celebrate local traditions.<sup>26</sup>

The final area I would like to discuss in relation to the supportive view of public relations is the variety of names given to the activity. This can be a rather confusing issue which arouses a good deal of debate. There is disagreement over who can claim to be public relations practitioners and what the difference is between public relations and other activities such as marketing and advertising. While these debates are difficult to resolve I think the important thing is to be aware of their existence.

For an activity aimed at creating favourable impressions, public relations has ironically had little success in doing so for itself. PR is often associated with manipulation. As a result, many practitioners steer away from the term public relations, instead preferring other names for their work. Some prefer ‘communications’, while others use ‘perceptions management’, ‘public affairs’, ‘government relations’ or others.<sup>27</sup> Paul Dryden says “one of the biggest challenges facing PRINZ is defining public relations, I like to call it reputation management.”<sup>28</sup> The authors of *This is PR: The Realities of Public Relations* believe the term public relations is generally applied erroneously and that this can mean there are people on the fringes of the field who falsely call themselves public relations practitioners.<sup>29</sup> This claim seems to be an attempt to define public relations as a restricted-entry management activity. As we shall see in the next section public relations textbooks only tell part of the story.

To summarise, those supportive of public relations view it as an activity that helps organisations and the public to better understand each other. Paul Dryden says “we believe we’re making a significant contribution to society in terms of assisting people with their communications, how they go about their business and their daily work.”<sup>30</sup> PR’s supporters see it as a positive force that benefits publics as much as organisations. They believe that in a democratic, market-orientated society public

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<sup>26</sup> Elkington, J. & Hailes, J. (1998). *Manual 2000: Life choices for the future you want*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, p.358.

<sup>27</sup> Moloney, pp.22-23.

<sup>28</sup> Dryden.

<sup>29</sup> Newsom et al., p.50.

<sup>30</sup> Dryden.

relations provides the opportunity and means for groups to express themselves. Through this expression public relations practitioners believe they are helping their clients exercise the freedom to compete for public opinion that is inherent to democracy. Advocates of PR reject suggestions that their business is all about image making and false fronts, instead contending that it is about representing their clients as openly and honestly as possible.

### **From the critical angle**

While there are those who support public relations there is also plenty of criticism, a good deal of which comes from those involved in academia. Critics hotly dispute the way the public relations industry emphasises ethical behaviour and a desire for open communication. When the activities of the industry are examined closely a different understanding of PR often emerges. This alternative understanding paints a disturbing picture of our society, one in which things are not as they seem and elite interests work to manipulate the minds of the people.

Many of those critical of public relations use a Marxist analysis of society to develop their arguments. Karl Marx (1818-1883) has arguably been the most influential social theorist in history and his ideas have had a profound impact on the study of many academic disciplines. Marx was appalled by the massive inequalities he saw in the world. He felt that the workers in society were poorly treated and intentionally alienated from the decision-making processes. Thus he believed society was characterised by a class struggle between the exploiters and the exploited.<sup>31</sup> Marx envisaged a society where ownership and control of the means of production would be shared by all, rather than concentrated in the hands of a few. Not surprisingly, Marxist theory is highly critical of the mass media. Because the mass media are controlled by the exploiters their content is dominated by existing class relationships. The media work to reinforce the dominant values of society and to suppress voices of change.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the mass media are instruments used by government and big business to maintain their control over the masses. People who view the world in this way believe public relations is integral to this system of control. By presenting

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<sup>31</sup> Rogers E. (1997). *A History of Communication Study*. New York: Free Press, p.105.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.108.

information in particular ways, PR helps create a false idea of reality in the public mind.

While Marxism is now considered to be a dated theory I think that it is still very important to have an understanding of it. More recent advances in communication research have criticised its ideas of the unthinking masses being manipulated by the elite few. But at the same time I think it is very important not to underestimate the extent to which we adopt beliefs and behaviours without stepping back to consider what is really going on. In order to spot manipulative information in the media I think you have to at least be aware of the possibility that it is all part of a concerted effort to keep the public in the dark.

The history and development of public relations is the first area I will discuss in relation to the differences in outlook between supporters and critics of PR. As I have said already, PR's supporters see its development as a continuing progression from its beginnings in manipulation through to open two-way communication. Critics agree that it originated with manipulative behaviour, but are not so sure that much progress has been made.

Critics of public relations believe the muckraking period in US political history led business interests to feel the need to silence their critics in order to protect profits. Rather than wishing to initiate better communication and understanding with the public, business interests have been accused of using devious communication strategies to mislead the public. According to Noam Chomsky, corporate leaders realised the only barriers to their enterprises were the public mind coupled with 'the newly realised political power of the masses.'<sup>33</sup> This meant that if the public could be marginalised from the democratic process, then businesses could continue to do as they pleased.

Australian academic Alex Carey has been influential in arguing the case against public relations. His oft-quoted statement sums up this perspective:

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<sup>33</sup> Chomsky, N. in foreword to Carey, A. (1995). *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy: Propaganda in the US and Australia*; edited by Andrew Lohrey. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, p.x.

The twentieth century has been characterised by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy.<sup>34</sup>

It was his opinion that corporate power uses corporate propaganda to sabotage independent, critical thought on the part of the public. According to Carey corporate propaganda has two objectives: 1) identifying free-enterprise with cherished values; 2) associating interventionist governments and unions with tyranny.<sup>35</sup> Through these techniques the work of unions and also welfare and environmental policies can be halted. People can be told that this is because they reduce freedom, not for the real reason that they will cause the redistribution of wealth. Another propaganda technique described by Carey involves the use of powerful symbols to activate emotional responses. He points to the use, most notably in the US, of the Sacred and the Satanic. When people can be convinced that everything in the world is either good or bad, with no middle ground, they are more vulnerable to propaganda.<sup>36</sup> This strategy can be seen in the US today with George W. Bush's division of the world into those with or against the terrorists. Religious themes are not just used in America in regard to the War on Terror, either. An article carried by Reuters news service in July 2004 cited a study by a government agency, the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, that said countries where more people believe in hell have better economies because there is less corruption. Naturally the prime example given was the United States which has the world's highest per capita income and in which 71 percent of the population believes in hell.<sup>37</sup> Subsequent analysis has thrown serious doubt over the evidence used by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis to substantiate the claims made in the study.

As mentioned earlier, Edward Bernays and Ivy Lee were important figures at this early stage of modern public relations. The contradictory treatment of these two, particularly Bernays, in contemporary PR textbooks has been highlighted by critics of PR. Bernays saw the role of the leaders in society as the 'engineering of consent' for their plans among the public. He believed this was how democracy should work. By

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<sup>34</sup> Carey, p.18.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>37</sup> Bull, A. (2004, July 27). *Fear of hell makes us richer, Fed says*. Retrieved July 28, 2004, from <http://www.reuters.com>.

using knowledge of the social sciences to understand how people respond to messages and then using the most appropriate forms of communication, Bernays and his contemporaries felt they could gain public support for just about any cause they wished. They felt that with their superior intelligence and knowledge it was their duty to control the public mind for its own good. Walter Lippmann, who worked with Bernays on the Creel Committee, described this attitude by saying the public had to be ‘spectators of action’ not ‘participants.’<sup>38</sup>

The idea of the ‘engineering of consent’ has understandably not been popular among public relations practitioners and theorists, as it counters their ideas of PR as an unbiased mediator between organisations and the public. PR scholar Scott Cutlip has described it as ‘an offensive term...made to order for public relations critics.’<sup>39</sup> He also blames Bernays for the perception of public relations as exclusively the practice of persuasion.<sup>40</sup> Yet this criticism and distancing from Bernays is contradicted in Cutlip, Center and Broom’s textbook when they later redefine him as the precursor of ‘our open systems approach’<sup>41</sup> to public relations. This ambivalent treatment is characteristic of the tendency of PR texts to sidestep the unpleasant elements in the activity’s history. In her paper *There’s no two-way symmetric about it: A postmodern examination of public relations textbooks* presented at a 1999 International Communications Association conference, Margaret Duffy said:

In all of the historical treatments, unethical activities of public relations pioneers are downplayed, portrayed as unfortunate, or characterised as more primitive proto-public relations.<sup>42</sup>

Thus we can see that critics of PR believe its supporters do not present objective analyses of their craft. Instead they highlight instances which support their ideal of open, two-way communication and try to ignore evidence for the case that public relations is manipulation. Aside from this debate I think there is one very important

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<sup>38</sup> Barsamian & Chomsky, p.152.

<sup>39</sup> Cutlip, S. (1994). *The Unseen Power: Public relations. A history*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, p.187.

<sup>40</sup> Cutlip, S., Center, A. & Broom, G. (1999). *Effective Public Relations*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, p.2.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.223.

<sup>42</sup> Duffy, M. (1999). *There’s no two-way symmetric about it: A postmodern examination of public relations textbooks*. Paper presented to the International Communications Association Annual Conference, San Francisco, CA.

reason for having an understanding of Bernays' role in the development of PR. It goes back to my point about not underestimating the extent to which we uncritically accept messages. Bernays helped found the practice of PR and he believed that society functions best when the public is presented with a manipulated version of reality.

A look at two wars, World War I and the second Gulf War, shows things have not changed as much as the supporters of PR would like to think. During World War I both the British and American governments used communications to drum up public support for the war. The British Ministry of Information employed writers such as HG Wells to describe the German 'monsters' who used baby corpses as soup ingredients. Meanwhile across the Atlantic, Chomsky says the Creel Committee succeeded 'in turning a pacifist population very quickly into raving anti-German fanatics.'<sup>43</sup> Fast-forward to 2003 and a similar picture emerges. Looking to gain support for the invasion of Iraq, George W. Bush, Tony Blair and the other members of the 'coalition of the willing' initiated a campaign to establish Saddam Hussein as a serious threat in the public mind. The centrepiece of this campaign was the necessity of the invasion to neutralise Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction, which the administration has now admitted never existed. This public relations campaign also worked to create links in the minds of the American people between Iraq and the events of September 11 2001. Again, the administration has subsequently admit that this link is weak. From the critical perspective of PR this was a straightforward case of governments using the media to create consent for their actions.

It is the way in which public relations often operates behind the scenes that its critics find disturbing. They see it as a shadowy force, not obvious to the untrained eye. People's opinions are gradually modified without realisation of what is happening. It is when the public becomes aware of the ways in which it is manipulated that it can learn to see the truth and ignore the trash. The shadowy nature of PR is acknowledged by many of its practitioners and Dryden says "there are many cases where you'll never hear about the best PR."<sup>44</sup> When PRPs can get their message to be carried in a news story they have really succeeded. From a commercial perspective this is when advertising finds its way into editorial content. Politically, it is when a message is

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<sup>43</sup> Barsamian & Chomsky, p.151.

<sup>44</sup> Dryden.

presented as fact rather than opinion. Practitioners of public relations defend themselves by saying they are simply exercising their democratic rights to put any information they wish into the public domain, and that everybody else can do so as well. This seems fair on the surface but there is a catch and like so many things it comes down to the almighty dollar. The large PR firms have millions of dollars at their disposal because their clients are often extremely wealthy corporations. As a result their access to resources dwarfs that of ordinary citizens, meaning their voice can be much louder in the public arena. This is what makes public relations such a powerful industry. The way in which this power is used is a serious factor in the shaping of our world. Noted US PR critics John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton have described the situation this way:

Today's PR industry is related to democracy in the same way prostitution is related to sex. When practiced voluntarily for love, both can exemplify human communications at its best. When they are bought and sold, however, they are transformed into something hidden and sordid.<sup>45</sup>

New Zealand investigative researcher and author Nicky Hager agrees that resource inequality is a key factor in the power of the PR industry. In his opinion there are two kinds of undemocratic public relations. The first is the blatant, easily recognisable sort where somebody tells a lie or misrepresents who they are working for. The second kind is much more difficult to identify and involves the use of resources to subvert or swamp the democratic process. He says this is dangerous because an organisation that may only have one percent of the public on side, for instance, can make it look like it has fifty percent by expending resources and hiring a PR firm. He thinks this is undemocratic because even if the activities involved such as letter writing and advertising are ethical in themselves, the end result is undemocratic because of the inequality of resources on the different sides.<sup>46</sup>

A good example to illustrate the different perspectives on public relations is US president Bill Clinton's attempt at health reforms. Skyrocketing costs for health care were concerning many Americans and Clinton wanted to do something about it when he was elected to office in 1993. But his health reform bill failed to get through the

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<sup>45</sup> Stauber, J & Rampton, S. (1995). *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You: Lies, damn lies and the public relations industry*. Monroe, Me.: Common Courage Press, p.14.

<sup>46</sup> Hager, N. (personal communication, May 25, 2005)

legislative process. The reasons it failed are different depending on who you listen to. According to advocates of public relations it was because the White House lacked an effective communications strategy to consolidate public support. They believe the Clinton administration failed in its timing of the plan, the development of clear messages, in maintaining openness, choosing spokespersons and understanding the news media.<sup>47</sup> In the free-for-all that is communication with the public, the White House did not match the skills of its opponents. This view is contrasted by critics of PR who point to a scurrilous PR campaign on the part of corporate interests, in particular the insurance industry, to scuttle the reform. This campaign revolved around the Coalition for Health Insurance Choices, an industry front group (front groups are very important and will be examined later) funded by the National Federation of Independent Businesses and the Health Insurance Association of America.<sup>48</sup> Rampton and Stauber allege the CHIC and other coalitions used advertising, direct mail and right-wing media personalities to persuade the public that Clinton's reforms would bankrupt the country and reduce the quality of health care.<sup>49</sup> These different views show how supporters of PR believe anything goes in the realm of communications, while critics demand truth, transparency and integrity.

The observance of ethical codes of behaviour is another area where there is criticism of public relations. While the public relations associations and national bodies do have ethical regulations in place, there are two factors which interfere with their effectiveness. The first is that it is not a requirement for public relations practitioners to join their national body in order to practice and the majority do not. Here in New Zealand only around 800 of the country's estimated 3,000 practitioners are PRINZ members. The second is that even if a member is expelled, the body has no power to prevent them from continuing to practice public relations. Therefore while PR codes of ethics appear to be an important part of the practice, practitioners are not necessarily forced to abide by them. Dr Joe Atkinson, lecturer in the political studies department at the University of Auckland, expresses serious reservations about the

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<sup>47</sup> Steinhorn, L. 'The Clinton health care plan: What went wrong?' in Hendrix, J. (1998). *Public Relations Cases*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, p.69.

<sup>48</sup> Stauber & Rampton, p.96.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.97.

PRINZ code of ethics saying “it is fairly vague and you could drive a truck through it and PRINZ is unlikely to police its own people.”<sup>50</sup>

The impact of today’s information management industries – public relations, advertising, opinion polling and mass marketing – can be put into perspective by comparing their activities with those of the people that used to carry out similar roles in society. Joe Atkinson has described the difference as being between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ mediators. Among other things, the mediating elites within society tell citizens about their political obligations and rights, locate and train leaders for politics, identify social problems and modify public expectations about what issues should be on the political agenda. He believes these roles used to be carried out in New Zealand by families and schools, workplace, church or neighbourhood groups and by political groups. Around the late 1980s he says these old mediating groups began to be displaced by private public relations managers, media advisers, public opinion pollsters and mass marketers.<sup>51</sup> Over the last fifteen years or so this trend has increased, with the New Zealand government and businesses employing more and more professional information managers.

This situation can have negative implications for democracy. According to Atkinson, the old mediators had to meet standards of public accountability, either via democratic elections or by being indirectly accountable to Parliament. By contrast, the new mediators are usually employed as outside consultants or as personal staff members to cabinet ministers. As a result they act privately, rather than as servants of the public.<sup>52</sup> An important consequence of these changes is that politics is increasingly played out as a function of the mass media, with the new mediators holding huge power over public perceptions of events and issues. This results in the public becoming increasingly removed from the democratic process and instead reliant on the reconstructed reality presented in the mass media. Former *New Zealand Herald* editor Gavin Ellis has grave concerns about this situation because it is making access to the actual seated authority much harder to obtain. He believes state PR people “are there

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<sup>50</sup> Atkinson, J. (personal communication, March 11, 2005)

<sup>51</sup> Atkinson, J. ‘Mass communications, economic liberalisation and the new mediators’, *Political Science*, vol. 41, no. 2, December 1989, p.104.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.106.

to control information, not facilitate it.”<sup>53</sup> In order to find the truth the public must understand how this reconstructed reality is created and look past it to find what is really happening.

Having outlined the case against public relations it is time to discuss some of the techniques used by public relations practitioners that, while perfectly legal and even ethical, are seen as manipulative at best and at worst downright dishonest by critics. One of the most important of these is the creation and use of **front groups**. A front group is an organisation set up to promote the goals of a particular organisation whilst claiming to represent the public interest. The reason this is done is because people expect an organisation to promote itself, and realise its communications may well be biased. But when the organisation’s messages are coming from an apparently impartial source, people are much more likely to believe them. According to environmental activist and scholar Sharon Beder, front groups allow corporations to take part in public debates and government hearings under a cover of community concern.<sup>54</sup>

Front groups are named in such a way as to give the impression of social responsibility. Words which trigger a positive response in people are commonly used in naming front groups, such as: sound, sensible, reasonable, responsible, solutions, health and protection. In order to find the real purposes of such groups it is necessary to find out their sources of funding. For instance, the American Council on Science and Health sounds like an organisation looking out for the wellbeing of the public. But thanks to funding from Burger King, Coca-Cola, NutraSweet, Monsanto, Exxon and others it has worked to defend petrochemical companies, the nutritional value of fast foods and the safety of pesticides and growth hormones for dairy cows.<sup>55</sup> Another good example from the States is the National Smokers Alliance. Sponsored by tobacco companies it urges smokers to stand up for their rights and exercise their freedom to smoke.

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<sup>53</sup> Ellis, G. (personal communication, June 1, 2005)

<sup>54</sup> Beder, S. (2002). *Global Spin: The corporate assault on environmentalism*. Totnes: Green, p.27.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.28.

Front groups have also featured in the world of politics. The work of global PR firm Hill & Knowlton to promote US entry into the first Gulf War is both a classic and disturbing example. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait would ordinarily not have concerned the US very much. Kuwait's ruling oligarchy brutally suppressed democracy and intimidated and censored journalists.<sup>56</sup> But because oil was at stake the US decided action was needed. Therefore the US government under George Bush needed to paint the picture of a struggling democracy being harassed by an evil dictatorship. The Citizens for a Free Kuwait group, controlled by Hill & Knowlton, alleged there was evidence of Iraqi soldiers removing babies from incubators in Kuwait and leaving them to die on hospital floors. The allegations were backed up by testimony from a 15-year-old girl identified only as Nayirah who claimed to have witnessed such events first hand. These claims were instrumental in gaining support for the war from both politicians and members of the public. But it was later revealed that these events never happened and Nayirah was in fact the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the United States. It was also revealed that US\$11.8 million of the funds for the Citizens for a Free Kuwait account came from the Kuwaiti government and only \$17,861 from citizens.<sup>57</sup> This case shows PR firms are more than willing to get involved in the managing of opinions relating to grave political matters.

Along the same lines as the use of front groups is the creation of '**astroturf**'. This term refers to the practice by public relations firms of artificially creating grassroots support for issues. This strategy is requested by corporations that wish to convince politicians that there is broad support amongst the public for their plans, even though the opposite may be the reality. Techniques developed in marketing, such as telephone polling, focus groups, mailing lists and computer databases are used to identify public attitudes and opinions on the particular issue. Then those people more likely to support the issue are contacted via telephone and mail and urged to actively lobby their representatives in government to agree to the corporation's plans. The intended result is for politicians to feel there is a groundswell of support among their constituents for the corporation's position.

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<sup>56</sup> Stauber & Rampton, p.168.

<sup>57</sup> Wilcox, D., Ault, P., Agee, W. & Cameron, G. (2000). *Public Relations: Strategies and tactics*. New York: Longman, p.78.

To illustrate how astroturf works I will return to the case of the Clinton health reforms. Blair G. Childs, who has organised grassroots support for the insurance industry for many years, has explained how the Rush Limbaugh radio show was used to influence politicians. In the ad breaks which followed Limbaugh's criticism of the Clinton plan, listeners would hear an anti-health reform ad and a free telephone number to call for more information. People who called the number spoke briefly to a telemarketer who would then patch their call directly through to their congressperson's office. The congressional staffers taking the calls were generally unaware that the constituents had been worked up by Limbaugh and the radio ads.<sup>58</sup> These techniques clearly contravene PR codes of ethics which state that practitioners must avoid deceptive practices. These techniques look to mislead members of the public and are therefore known as '**grassroots**' PR.

**'Treetops'** PR is aimed at those involved in government and the formulation of policy. It looks to set policy agendas and shape important decisions. Treetops PR can threaten the democratic process by pushing policy in certain directions rather than allowing it to be the result of open debate. The central example of treetops PR are the institutions known as **think-tanks**.

Think-tanks are private research institutions that have grown vastly in numbers in recent times. Like universities, think-tanks present research on all sorts of topics. But the difference is that where university researchers aim for impartial treatment of subject matter, think-tanks are heavily influenced by the agenda of their sponsors. This means that think-tanks may be geared toward political activism rather than scholarship. So once again an examination of funding sources is the way to find the true intentions of these groups. Many think-tanks are open about their ideological leanings. For the majority this is an embrace of conservative philosophy and liberal economic policy.<sup>59</sup> The result is that they publish research which helps their corporate sponsors by claiming to prove that freedom for business is in the best interests of society. These 'findings' are aggressively pushed onto politicians, journalists and other opinion leaders. What is particularly concerning is that the media often presents

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<sup>58</sup> Stauber & Rampton, p.97.

<sup>59</sup> Beder, p.73.

think-tank employees as independent experts without checking to see if they are actually working as mouthpieces for corporate interests.

The Heritage Foundation in Washington is one of the largest think-tanks in the US. It only spends 46 percent of its budget on actual research, with the rest going on marketing, public relations and educational programmes.<sup>60</sup> Its donors include automobile manufacturers, coal, oil, chemical and tobacco companies. The Foundation promotes deregulation of industry, free markets and the selling-off of public lands. Its impact on the democratic process is undeniable, with the Foundation claiming 200 or more news stories in the US for each position paper it publishes.<sup>61</sup> Here in New Zealand the prime example of the Washington-style think-tank is the Wellington-based Institute for the Study of Competition Regulation. Its funding comes from the country's major monopolies – Telecom, Tranzpower, Natural Gas Corporation and New Zealand Post.

There are many examples of front groups, think-tanks and other corporate-funded groups influencing public opinion. The more you read about these activities, the more you come to realise the extent to which our perceptions of truth and reality may have been cunningly shaped. There are many fascinating examples from areas such as genetic engineering and global warming of the way in which information can be manipulated to influence opinions. The techniques I have described above are part of what is known as the ‘third party technique.’ This technique is what distinguishes public relations from advertising. Where advertising is the direct communication of a message from an organisation to the public, the third party technique uses a supposedly neutral organisation to communicate the message. The potential for manipulation is increased by the high use in the media of experts to discuss issues. In order to not be fooled by the third party technique we must actively question the motivations and allegiances of the people who are presented as independent observers.

The environment is an area where public relations has been heavily involved. Many corporations have been criticised in recent times for plundering natural resources and

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p.78.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

polluting the planet. Therefore they have decided it is useful to present an image of social responsibility and concern for the environment. These efforts have been labelled as '**greenwashing**' by critics. Greenwashing makes use of all the techniques I have mentioned above to try to persuade people that a) the environmental problems facing the world are not that serious; b) environmentalists who criticise corporations are conspiracy cranks who want to curb individual freedoms. Greenwashing can also make use of simpler tactics to present an environmentally friendly image. British Petroleum (BP) responded to environmental concerns in the late 1980s by re-painting all its property green and advertising its annual report with the slogan 'Now We're Greener Than Ever'.<sup>62</sup> Drive into many BP stations today and you will see a board proclaiming the amount of solar energy collected. Carefully considered façades like this allow companies that exploit resources to minimise public backlash against their operations.

In addition to greenwashing, techniques calculated to interfere with the work of environmental groups are also used to manipulate public perceptions. Such techniques include the infiltration of green groups and the labelling their members as extremists. Also used is what Stauber and Rampton have termed the '**good cop, bad cop**' strategy.<sup>63</sup> The good cop part of the plan involves organisations creating the impression that they are co-operating with mainstream environmental groups and helping with their work. This is achieved through sponsorships and other financial contributions. The bad cop part means attacking environmental groups that are not willing to accept money, or compromise in any way with business organisations. A 'divide and conquer' strategy is often used to make the most out of differences within the environmental movement and thus weaken its impact on public opinion. These techniques will be discussed in greater detail in relation to the content of the case study in article three.

The final strategy I would like to discuss is the use of what have been labelled **Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation** (SLAPPs). These are lawsuits brought by large organisations against individuals who speak out against their activities. The intention is to scare the individuals into submission and make them too

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.128.

<sup>63</sup> Stauber & Rampton, p.126.

afraid of financial ruin to continue to speak out. The organisations that use SLAPPs clearly wish to interfere with the public domain and manipulate the discourse therein. By silencing critics, organisations can make sure the communications about them are not balanced. This strategy began in the United States and is now being used in many countries to manipulate the democratic process. People have been SLAPPed for circulating petitions, writing to public officials, speaking at public meetings and organising boycotts. The cases do not usually go to trial because the objective of silencing critics can usually be achieved just by the threat of a court case. Because many of these cases would not stand up in court people threatened with SLAPPs need to take legal advice to determine whether they are actually at risk of conviction. One case which did go to court is what has been termed the ‘McLibel’ case in Britain. The McDonald’s corporation took legal action against two members of London Greenpeace for circulating pamphlets criticising the company. Helen Steel and David Morris conducted their own defence and while they ultimately lost the case it was a publicity disaster for McDonald’s with the court finding several of the criticisms of the corporation to be true.

In summary, the critical view of public relations is that it is a shadowy, often deceitful activity. Critics believe it is used by governments and corporations to create consent among the public for things the people would oppose if they knew the truth. From this perspective it could be described as the communicative arm of global capitalism.

### **What does all this mean?**

Out of all the definitions, debates and doubts, public relations appears to be the use of communication to gain advantage in an open and competitive environment. It can be carried out by governments, corporations, celebrities, aggrieved individuals and others. Analysis provides examples of PR working in the best and worst interests of society. Regardless of your perspective on it, public relations is an integral part of today’s world. The better it is understood, the better our chances of comprehending reality and making decisions that benefit society.

## **Who are the major players in the PR game?**

In order to bring the activities of powerful public relations firms into the spotlight it is obviously necessary to say who they are and with whom they are involved. In 2001 the ten largest PR firms by revenue (US dollars) and some of their current or recent clients were:

- **Weber Shandwick Worldwide**, \$426,572,018: ExxonMobil, Microsoft, Shell Oil, Real Estate Institute of New Zealand
- **Fleishman-Hillard Inc.**, \$345,098,241: National Association of Insurance Commissioners, the state of Illinois, Marriott Hotels and Ritz-Carlton Hotels
- **Hill & Knowlton Inc.**, \$325,119,000: Wal-Mart Stores, GlaxoSmithKline, Motorola
- **Incepta (Citigate)**, \$266,018,371: London Development Agency Innovation Unit, Met Office (UK), Criminal Records Bureau (UK)
- **Burson-Marsteller**, \$259,112,000: Indonesian government, Iraqi National Congress, US Treasury Department, Sony Electronics
- **Edelman Public Relations Worldwide**, \$223,708,535: YUM! Brands (KFC, Pizza Hut and others), Novartis, Apple Computer, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
- **Ketchum Inc.**, \$185,221,000: IBM, Starbucks, US Department of Education, Levi Strauss & Co.
- **Porter Novelli**, \$179,294,000: PriceWaterhouseCoopers, Hewlett Packard, Gillette
- **GCI Group/APCO Worldwide**, \$151,081,645: Coca-Cola, General Electric, Republic National Convention 2004, Turkish government
- **Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide**, \$145,949,285: DuPont, MasterCard International, Deloitte & Touche.<sup>64</sup>

According to the listings of the respected trade journal *O'Dwyer's PR*, Hill & Knowlton and Porter Novelli both have offices in Auckland and Wellington.<sup>65</sup> Porter

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<sup>64</sup> *Public relations firms*. Retrieved May 20, 2004, from [http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Public\\_relations\\_firms](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Public_relations_firms).

Novelli's clients in New Zealand include Vodafone, Air New Zealand, Goodman Fielder, MasterFoods and Television New Zealand.<sup>66</sup>

Most of the largest PR firms are owned by large conglomerates which bring together public relations, lobbying, advertising and marketing companies to provide what is known as integrated communications services for their clients. The biggest three of these conglomerates are:

- **WPP Group** (2001 turnover \$20 billion), owner of Hill & Knowlton, Burson-Marsteller, Ogilvy PR and ad agencies such as Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide.
- **Omnicom** (\$6.9 billion), owner of Fleishman-Hillard, Ketchum and Porter Novelli.
- **Interpublic Group** (\$6.7 billion), owner of Weber Shandwick Worldwide and advertising network McCann Erickson Worldwide.<sup>67</sup>

As you can see public relations and the wider area of integrated communications is very big business indeed. These rich firms wield enormous power when it comes to managing opinions in the interests of their clients. Communication, like every other part of the global economy, operates within the open market. A passage from David C. Korten's book *When Corporations Rule the World* highlights the power of these communications conglomerates:

In a political democracy, each person gets one vote. In the market, one dollar is one vote, and you get as many votes as you have dollars. No dollar, no vote. Markets are inherently biased in favour of people of wealth.<sup>68</sup>

By combining public relations, advertising, lobbying and other communication practices these conglomerates are able to exercise enormous influence over how people think and the decisions they make. The financial power of these conglomerates

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<sup>65</sup> *PR firms database*. Retrieved May 20, 2004, from [http://www.odwyerspr.com/pr\\_firms\\_database/prdp18.htm](http://www.odwyerspr.com/pr_firms_database/prdp18.htm).

<sup>66</sup> *Clients*. Retrieved May 20, 2004, from <http://www.porternovelli.co.nz/clients.asp>.

<sup>67</sup> *Public relations and lobbying industry: An overview*. Retrieved May 22, 2004, from [http://www.corporatewatch.org.uk/profiles/pr\\_industry/pr2.htm](http://www.corporatewatch.org.uk/profiles/pr_industry/pr2.htm).

<sup>68</sup> Korten, D. (2001). *When Corporations Rule the World*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, p.73.

and many of their clients means they have the potential to dominate the public domain and shape a good deal of thought and behaviour. If, as Korten says, markets are biased in favour of people of wealth, then the communication market would appear to be heavily tilted in favour of organisations that can afford to enlist the services of powerful public relations firms. If certain interests are able to use their wealth to shape public opinion then the democratic process is seriously threatened. In order to preserve the power of democratic decision-making the public, with the help of the media, must learn to recognise the use of manipulative public relations strategies. I agree with those who say that one of the public's chief defences against manipulation lies in the awareness that somebody is always trying to influence their opinions.

## **Two. The Production of News**

*The crisis in communication facing the United States and to varying degrees, the entire world, is one aspect of the broader crisis emanating from the tension of combining a highly-concentrated, corporate-driven economy with a free and democratic society – Robert W. McChesney.<sup>69</sup>*

Whenever we sit down to watch the television news, open the paper, or receive news any other way, the information we digest has been filtered and processed by various people. Media organisations must make decisions on which information to include and how to present it. These decisions can be influenced by public relations practitioners and other sources of information. The result is that by the time information reaches the public as news it may have changed considerably from its original form. In this article I will examine important forces which affect the newsmaking process. The two forces I will focus on are the interaction of public relations and journalism; and the economic considerations of the mass media. I will also look at the issue of placing trust in the media. We allow the media to have a large influence on our decision-making and it is worthwhile to ask how sensible this really is.

### **The information environment**

Before getting into the forces which shape the news I think it is useful to discuss some ideas about how public opinion is formed. The discussion and debate of information by the people that leads to the formulation of public opinion has been conceptualised in many different ways by communications theorists. The four concepts I will look at are: the public sphere, the persuasive sphere, the marketplace of ideas and the court of public opinion. While there is debate over which of these concepts best describes reality, they are all useful for developing an understanding of how information and ideas are accepted and rejected by society. They help us to see how government, business, the media and the public interact.

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<sup>69</sup> McChesney, R. (1999). *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication politics in dubious times*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp.318-319.

The idea of the public sphere has been credited to communications theorist Jurgen Habermas. He sees the public sphere as the place where the public can openly and rationally discuss the issues that have an important impact on society, free from the pressure of groups with vested interests. He identified the closest example of a public sphere in operation in eighteenth century Britain where a ‘bourgeois’ or middle class public sphere may have operated. In this example there was a wide range of newspapers and pamphlets being published which encouraged lively debate and a plurality of views. These publications and the resulting discussions were able to operate outside of commercial and state pressures. This meant that people had access to plenty of information that enabled them to exercise rational, independent thought in relation to their daily lives. But it must be noted that there has been criticism of the concept of the public sphere. There are some researchers who believe the early print market was not as free as Habermas suggests, but rather controlled by ‘booty capitalists’ looking to make a quick profit.<sup>70</sup> Another criticism is that Habermas’ view of this period is overly romanticised because the public sphere he describes was restricted to the middle class and therefore did not provide a forum for debate amongst all members of society. Despite these criticisms the public sphere is still useful when examining the relationships between government, business, media and public. Habermas’ central concern is the power of public opinion and he believes that at its most basic level the public sphere is the domain of social life in which public opinion can be formed.<sup>71</sup> Therefore while the public sphere is an idealised view of how communication should operate in a free and democratic society, it is a good starting point for assessing how the activities of public relations and the mass media have taken us away from this ideal vision. Today’s information environment has little in common with Habermas’ public sphere, as the influence of public relations and the commercialisation of the media have affected the public’s ability to openly and rationally discuss important issues. Recognition of how this change has come about is vital to enabling the public to reclaim a forum for open discussion.

The persuasive sphere has followed on from the public sphere as a method to conceptualise contemporary communications. It is argued that the rise of mass

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<sup>70</sup> Garnham, N., ‘The Media and the Public Sphere’ in Calhoun, C. (1992). *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, p.359.

<sup>71</sup> Habermas, J., ‘The Public Sphere’ in Marris, P. & Thornham, S. (eds.) (1996). *Media Studies: A reader*, Edinburgh: University Press, p.55.

communications and the increasingly competitive nature of the market place have made the public sphere redundant.<sup>72</sup> Those who make this argument believe the influence of public relations on all forms of communication means democratic discourse cannot be carried out free from commercial and state pressures, as the public sphere concept would hope. Supporters of the persuasive sphere concept believe the public sphere has had its time because it cannot handle the combination of PR and democracy.

But there are problematic features to the idea of the persuasive sphere and public relations involved with one of the central concerns. This concern is the relationship between reason and persuasion, concepts Habermas' public sphere has put in opposition. Because PR is always persuasive in intent and often in consequence, this issue requires careful examination. Using the public sphere concept, reason and persuasion cannot co-exist because persuasion interferes with the process by which reason is utilised to form opinions on issues. Proponents of the persuasive sphere have attempted to break down the barrier between reason and persuasion, because of the fact that PR is persuasive and it is an undeniable factor in today's information environment. The key question is whether the persuasive techniques of PR are based in reason and truth, or whether they are based in emotional appeals. While the PR most beneficial to society is based on reason, there is plenty of evidence of PR that utilises the emotions and preconceptions of its audience in order to persuade.<sup>73</sup> This shows that the separation of reason and persuasion is still necessary when conceptualising public communications. Members of the public need to be able to recognise the difference between rational argument and manipulative appeals to emotion if they are to form opinions that reflect reality.

The marketplace of ideas is another concept used to describe public communications. It is not concerned with the differences between reasoned and persuasive discussion, but instead asserts that everybody should be allowed to put whatever information they wish into the realm of public discourse. The concept entered common usage as the result of a 1919 court case in the United States. In the case of *Abrams v. United States* Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes filed a dissent in which he created the marketplace of

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<sup>72</sup> Moloney, p.13.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp.151-152.

ideas metaphor to encapsulate the concept of freedom of speech. Drawing on the work of philosophers John Milton and John Stuart Mill, Holmes stated that a free trade in ideas will yield the best results for society.<sup>74</sup> It was the belief of Mill that the suppression of any view, no matter how loathsome, works to the detriment of humanity.<sup>75</sup> Thus the search for truth is likened to the economic idea originally articulated by Adam Smith that putting one's own interest above the public good will result in the best outcome for society. The marketplace of ideas is a vital part of PR's defence of its actions. It allows PR to say that even if it does present one-sided information to the public, the workings of the marketplace of ideas will see that the truth comes to the surface. But as I mentioned in article one, applying market principles to the flow of information can be dangerous. This is because an imbalance of resources means wealthier interests can dominate public discourse and compromise the idealised operation of the marketplace of ideas. As is clearly obvious in capitalist economies, a system in which individuals solely pursue their own interest is biased in favour of those who possess wealth. It should also be noted that Adam Smith developed his notion of putting one's own interest above the public good in relation to small-scale communities. It is argued that this theory has since been applied erroneously to global markets as justification for the extreme concentration of wealth. By looking at the arguments for and against the marketplace of ideas we can see the complicated situation brought about by trying to balance freedom of speech and consideration for people with limited access to resources.

Similar to the marketplace of ideas is the concept of the court of public opinion. The idea here is that different groups present their views on a particular subject and on the basis of these cases public opinion is formed. Public opinion is what the majority of people in a particular public think and it expresses beliefs based on perceptions, not necessarily on facts. One instance of the operation of the court of public opinion is before and during high-profile court cases when lawyers take their perspectives to the public. All media are used as both sides battle for public support through the use of appeals that are often emotional.<sup>76</sup> It is not just particular cases that are tried in the

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<sup>74</sup> Levendosky, C. (1997, July 17). *Marketplace keeps speech free of government controls*. Casper Star-Tribune, p.6.

<sup>75</sup> Altschull, J. (1990). *From Milton to McLuhan: The ideas behind American journalism*. London: Longman, p.41.

<sup>76</sup> Newsom et al., p.106.

court of public opinion, issues affecting society can be as well. Hypothetically, if a referendum on an issue such as changing the New Zealand flag was to be held, those for and against it would work hard to have their opinions presented in the media in the lead-up to the vote. On the basis of this information public opinion would be formed, which would in turn be reflected in the results of the referendum.

The notion of the court of public opinion is also a good metaphor for looking at the work of public relations practitioners. Using the metaphor of a court, the PRP can be seen as an advocate representing his client and the client's point of view to the public. The court of public opinion implies that like a defence lawyer, the PRP is not required to disclose information that may incriminate his client. This makes up another part of PR's self-defence as it provides justification for the withholding of certain information. The court of public opinion approach to information flows can be seen as a good way to understand how information carried by the media leads to the formulation of public opinion. A drawback from this approach is that it is not directly concerned with whether the information presented to the 'court' is factual. This is a key consideration as public opinion reflects perceptions of issues and events.

From looking at these four concepts we can see that the information environment is a complex place which can be conceptualised in different ways. But regardless of whether it is seen as the persuasive sphere, marketplace of ideas or other things, it is the place where opinions, attitudes and beliefs are formed. By looking at how public relations and journalism impact on the information environment we can gain a deeper comprehension of the forces which shape our opinions. This puts us in a much stronger position to critically evaluate the information we are presented with.

### **When hacks meet flacks**

While the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists is a vital aspect of the production of news, it is generally something that occurs out of the view of news audiences. It is a relationship that is at times hostile and at times accommodating, as both parties attempt to achieve their goals while maintaining their own values. Their goals are very different, with journalists tasked with trying to present objective analysis to the public, while it is the business of PRPs to look to

influence news stories to favour their organisations. The two groups are brought into contact because they depend on each other to do their work. The negotiated nature of this process means there is potential for the truth to be massaged and manipulated. By taking a look at how things happen behind the scenes, we can hopefully get a better idea of when this is occurring.

The first aspect of the interaction between PR and journalism that I will examine is the production and use of information subsidies. The term information subsidies refers to press releases and other PR-generated work that is given to journalists by public relations practitioners. Press releases are generated with regard to all sorts of different information. They are usually written in a journalistic style and present information that particular organisations wish to put into the information environment. For example, press releases are issued by government departments to describe new legislation, by the police to give information about important cases and by businesses with a new product to which they want to draw attention. Newsrooms are constantly bombarded with press releases from many organisations. As well as print releases, television news departments are also sent Video News Releases (VNRs) by public relations personnel. VNRs are fully edited news segments for broadcast as part of television news.<sup>77</sup> The increasing reliance of many people on television for their intake of news and current affairs has led to expansion in the production of VNRs by public relations practitioners. According to a recent article in *The New York Times*, under the Bush administration the federal government in the US has made and distributed hundreds of television news segments on issues ranging from agriculture to the war in Iraq. Disturbingly for the democratic process, the article's authors found that many of these VNRs were subsequently broadcast on local stations across the country without any acknowledgement of the role of the government in their production.<sup>78</sup> There is no evidence of VNRs being produced in New Zealand currently, but it is worth being aware of them if the situation changes in the future.

The phenomenon of information subsidies shows the way in which PRPs and journalists need each other to operate. PRPs need to get their client's message to the

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<sup>77</sup> Beder, p.116.

<sup>78</sup> Barstow, D. & Stein, R. (2005, March 13). *The message machine: How the government makes news; Under Bush, a new age of prepackaged TV news*. The New York Times, p.1.

public and journalists need information to fill editorial space. While this may seem like a happy arrangement, there can be negative consequences for free and democratic discourse. Press releases always come from organisations that understandably have a natural desire to create the best possible impression on the public. Therefore it is the job of journalists to critically evaluate the content of press releases and undertake further research to get the best picture of the truth. But as I shall explain there are factors which mean journalists do not always do this.

While it is hard to tell exactly which news stories have come from press releases, those who study these matters have come up with varying approximations. According to Robert McChesney, surveys show that press releases account for 40 to 70 percent of what appears as news.<sup>79</sup> In her book *Global Spin* Sharon Beder says that various studies show press releases as the basis for 40 to 50 percent of the news content of US newspapers.<sup>80</sup> These figures show that press releases are a very important part of the production of news.

The potential for press releases to manipulate public opinion is a serious issue because they provide an invisible source of information. News articles do not need to acknowledge where certain information comes from, so the public has no way of knowing whether the information has been dug up by a journalist or submitted by a public relations practitioner. If the latter is the case, then the source carrying the story can become complicit in a persuasive campaign, rather than acting as an objective observer. Therefore journalists play the role of gatekeepers, deciding which information makes it through to their editorial space and which information is denied entry.

This gatekeeper role is becoming increasingly difficult for several reasons. The first is that journalists are outnumbered by PRPs and the gap in numbers is getting bigger. In 2001 PRPs in the US outnumbered journalists by 170,000 to 130,000.<sup>81</sup> Early in 2005 the Engineering Printing and Manufacturers Union estimated that there were 2,300 journalists working in New Zealand, while PRINZ believed there were around 3,000

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<sup>79</sup> McChesney, R. 'The rise and fall of professional journalism' in Borjesson, K. (ed.) (2002). *Into the Buzzsaw: Leading journalists expose the myth of a free press*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, p.369.

<sup>80</sup> Beder, p.113.

<sup>81</sup> Korten, p.148.

people working in public relations. Figures obtained under the Official Information Act show that since the Labour Government was elected in 1999 the number of PR staff in government departments and agencies has increased by 48 percent and PR spending has risen by 51 percent.<sup>82</sup> This trend can also be seen overseas, with a recent study by Congressional Democrats in the US showing that the Bush administration spent US\$254 million in its first term on public relations contracts, nearly double that spent by the last Clinton administration.<sup>83</sup> The second is that with the constant expansion in the amount of media sources, journalists are required to fill more editorial space. The result is that journalists are increasingly over-stretched and have less time to spend making sure they have a comprehensive understanding of the facts behind their stories. For this reason there is an increasing reliance by journalists on information subsidies to gather the requisite amount of information in order to have a story ready by their deadline. It also means an increased likelihood of press release material being reproduced verbatim, something that gives public relations practitioners a direct line to the public.

It must be remembered that journalists have the final say in deciding the words read and heard by news audiences, audiences public relations practitioners wish to influence. But because of the reasons above journalists are becoming more dependent on PR. Moloney believes this is causing disablement of their critical faculties.<sup>84</sup> If he is correct, then this is a serious threat to the process of public opinion formulation. The public relies to a large extent upon journalists to interpret and evaluate important issues and events. The ability of the public to form accurate opinions is therefore put at risk if journalists are overly reliant on information originating from public relations practitioners.

Another aspect of the relationship is the concept of ‘flak’. This term describes efforts to shoot down a potentially damaging story. Like the war strategy from which the term is derived, PR flak bombards the information environment with the intention of making it too difficult for opposing viewpoints to get through. Journalists also sometimes refer to public relations practitioners as ‘flaks’, a term those in PR are not

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<sup>82</sup> Taylor, K. (2004, September 25). *PR spending spins out of control*. Weekend Herald, p.B5.

<sup>83</sup> Barstow & Stein, p.3.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p.121.

fond of. The negative implications of flak for democracy are detailed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in their book *Manufacturing Consent: The political economy of the mass media*. Herman and Chomsky have devised a propaganda model that consists of six filters through which information passes before reaching the public. ‘Flak and the enforcers’ is the fourth of these filters. According to these authors, flak is the practice of putting pressure on media organisations to stop a particular line of investigation. It can take the form of letters, phone calls, petitions, lawsuits, speeches and other methods of threat.<sup>85</sup> Flak also comes from corporate-funded institutions which monitor the media. Examples in the United States are the Media Institute, the Center for Media and Public Affairs, and Accuracy in Media. Critics of PR hold the view that these sorts of organisations serve the specific purpose of producing flak.<sup>86</sup> According to Herman and Chomsky the Media Institute’s main concern has been with a perceived failure of the media to portray business accurately. It has also been involved with work such as John Corry’s allegations of a left-wing bias in the mass media.<sup>87</sup> Herman and Chomsky observe that despite the attacks on the media made by such flak machines, the media still treat them well, generally ignoring their corporate links and propagandistic role.<sup>88</sup> This would seem to contradict the allegations of Corry and others that the mass media are biased in favour of liberal perspectives. Satirist Al Franken’s book *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A fair and balanced look at the right* provides an entertaining analysis of this debate. He uses the words of Fox News presenters and other members of America’s right-wing to argue that the idea of a liberal bias in the mainstream media is nothing but a myth that does not stand up to any sort of detailed analysis.

The way in which PR and journalism are also accommodating of one another is visible in several other aspects of the relationship. One of these is the movement of workers between the two fields. Many journalists move into PR, lured by higher wages and increased job security. Patrick Smellie is a former journalist now working in corporate communications. He cites the lack of career structure as a factor in his decision. “I probably wouldn’t have left journalism if it wasn’t for the fact that I just

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<sup>85</sup> Herman, E. & Chomsky, N. (1994). *Manufacturing Consent: The political economy of the mass media*. London: Vintage, p.26.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p.27.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p.28.

kind of ran out of things to do. I got a bit bored with the scope of stories that are available in New Zealand.”<sup>89</sup> There are also a growing number of people who do a bit of both as the transferable nature of the skills required for each of the fields makes this possible. The result is a blurring of the boundary between journalism and public relations, which has serious implications for the information environment. Firstly, because PRPs who have also worked as journalists have an intimate knowledge of the way media organisations work and therefore know when and how to submit information to get the best possible coverage for their organisation. Secondly, a decrease in journalistic independence is not conducive to journalists finding and highlighting faults in society. Nicky Hager is of the belief there should be a stronger sense of peer pressure against people who switch sides and social disapproval of people who work against the public interest.

The convergence of the two groups is also apparent in instances when they come together to train and educate each other. Whether this helps or harms democracy depends on who is doing the educating. When it is journalists teaching PRPs about how to get maximum positive coverage in the media it may be harmful as it could help PRPs present manipulative information to the public. On the other hand, when it is PRPs informing journalists about how to make sure important stories are not shot down then it could be seen as beneficial to the potential for open, democratic discourse. When I met with Paul Dryden, the executive director of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand, he told me about a function his organisation had hosted for people from CanWest Media. He said that the function helped PRINZ members understand how the media work “so that when members of the public relations industry are liaising with the media there is an understanding of how their process works.”<sup>90</sup>

Another aspect of the interaction between public relations and journalism is the ‘freebie’ culture. This is the situation whereby journalists are given consumer goods, holidays, meals or are otherwise entertained by public relations people. While some journalists do declare these perks to their audiences, others do not.<sup>91</sup> If journalists

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<sup>89</sup> Smellie.

<sup>90</sup> Dryden.

<sup>91</sup> Moloney, p.125.

have received perks from organisations they claim to be objectively analysing then the public is being shortchanged.

The relationship between public relations and journalism is thus one of mutual dependence. They need one another in order to operate, but remain suspicious of each other's motives. Due to the factors outlined above the boundary between the two disciplines is dissolving, leaving an information environment increasingly favouring persuasive, rather than objective, discourse. In order to deal with this trend the public needs to develop a deeper understanding of the interaction of PR and journalism and how it affects news stories. The negotiated process by which information is placed in the media works best for both PR and journalism when it is kept quiet, lest any diversions from the truth be exposed. But the public would be better served if it was openly acknowledged and understood.

### **Economic considerations of the mass media**

The information presented to the public by the mass media is also influenced by a set of economic considerations. These considerations include ownership, the necessity to create profit for shareholders, the desire for the inexpensive gathering of information and pressure from advertisers. The result is that information may be omitted from news stories or presented differently because of these economic influences. When this occurs the public is at a disadvantage in terms of developing well-informed opinions.

Mass media sources, such as newspapers, radio stations and television channels, are businesses and therefore seek to make financial profits. Like any other business, if the shareholders are not happy with the returns on their investments then heads will roll. This has meant that many media sources have shifted their focus from informing audiences about important issues to increasing audience sizes and advertising revenues. This shift has become necessary for media sources to survive in an aggressive market. What the public must realise is that in this situation where profit is paramount, the most direct economic relationship is between producers and

advertisers rather than between producers and audiences.<sup>92</sup> Attracting the largest audience possible is the goal and the public interest is often relegated to a secondary concern.

Economic considerations have seen the information environment become increasingly dominated by fewer and fewer media companies. This threatens democratic discourse because it means the diversity of perspective and range of information within the media is decreased. As a result the public has less to work with when forming opinions. There are two important forces at work which are contributing to this situation. The first of these is the barrier to entry resulting from the large investments required to set up media sources. In order to create a media source that reaches a substantial amount of people, significant amounts of money are needed to purchase the necessary machinery and other capital. Then there is also the money required for advertising and marketing in order to compete with the established media operations. Some forms of media create higher barriers to entry, with the most wide-reaching sources, television and daily newspapers, being the most expensive to set up. In Auckland the *New Zealand Herald* controls the daily newspaper market as it would be a very expensive and risky undertaking to set up a rival paper.

The second force is the concentration of media ownership. The deregulation of the media which has been occurring throughout the Western world has enabled global conglomerates to purchase many smaller, local companies. The result is that the media landscape is now dominated by just seven extremely wealthy and powerful conglomerates: AOL Time Warner, The Walt Disney Co., Bertelsmann AG, Viacom, News Corporation, Sony and Vivendi Universal. The hostile environment of takeovers and takeover threats has led media managers to concentrate even more on making profits in order to survive.<sup>93</sup> The information environment is also threatened by this situation because of the editorial influence of the media conglomerates on their subsidiaries. The ownership of media sources throughout the world gives these large companies a certain level of control over when and how information is presented. A disturbing example of this control is the practice of self-censorship which will be

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<sup>92</sup> Atkinson, J. (1994). ‘The “Americanisation” of One Network News’, *Australian Journal of American Studies*, vol. 13, no.1, July, p.19.

<sup>93</sup> Herman & Chomsky, p.8.

discussed later. Media conglomerates also use the sources they own for the purpose of cross promotion. For example, a conglomerate that owns news outlets and movie production companies may run news stories about movies soon to be released. The inclusion of such stories can often come at the expense of news items concerning issues more important to the democratic process. The result is that the public are diverted away from important issues by stories that are effectively advertisements.

Because of their size and financial power large media companies are also linked with powerful, decision-making sectors of society. For instance, heads of major media organisations are involved with the Trilateral Commission, an organisation formed in 1973 to merge the economic interests of North America, Western Europe and Japan.<sup>94</sup> If media owners become involved in policy-making then there is the concern that they could use their influence on public opinion to sell the vision of society they have developed along with leaders of business and government. The *Sun* newspaper in Britain, owned by media mogul Rupert Murdoch, is a good example. This paper has been a staunch supporter of Tony Blair and his New Labour Party, blatantly favouring the Blair government's stands on many issues. On September 22, 2002 the lead headline declared "45 Minutes From Doom!" in support of the British government's claim that Iraq had weapons ready to strike Britain. Huge doubt was subsequently expressed over this claim and the issue became the centre of a heated debate over the role of the media in politics.

New Zealand was one of the earliest countries to deregulate its media and this is reflected in the level of overseas ownership of media sources. Aside from the government-owned Television New Zealand (which it should be noted the National Party has threatened to sell off in the past and may do so again in the future) and Radio New Zealand, and a few small media companies such as Allied Press, all of New Zealand's mainstream media sources are owned by five overseas companies: CanWest Global (TV3, C4 and Global Radio which runs More FM and others), Kerry Packer's Australian Consolidated Press (Metro, North & South, Woman's Day and others), Fairfax Holdings (owns Independent Newspapers Ltd which publishes the Sunday Star-Times, The Dominion-Post, Christchurch Press and others and has a 78

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<sup>94</sup> Korten, p.140.

percent share in Sky TV), Tony O'Reilly's APN News & Media (New Zealand Herald, The Listener, New Zealand Woman's Weekly, owns the Radio Network which has an estimated 60 percent share of commercial radio and owns Independent Radio News) and Prime Television Ltd (of which Prime Television New Zealand Ltd is a subsidiary). While this situation works well for these companies, it may not be in the best interests of the New Zealand public. It is unlikely the foreign shareholders of these companies have much concern for the integrity of New Zealand's information environment, compared to seeing a good return on their investments.

The focus on profit and the concentration of media ownership harm the ability of the media to inform the public about what is really happening in the world and the important issues affecting people's lives. Gavin Ellis explains how revenue considerations affect journalism: "If a newspaper or TV channel's revenue declines, inevitably they'll start cutting costs to maintain the level of profit." The problems arise "because if you have less money to do your newsgathering, your newsgathering can't be as comprehensive."<sup>95</sup> The focus on profit can lead to so-called soft news being favoured over the coverage of more complex political and social issues. This is combined with a concentration in media ownership which reduces the plurality of voices and the variety of sources of information. Under these circumstances it is harder for journalism to provide the public with information that will enrich the democratic process. Having described how economic considerations are affecting the structure of the mass media, I will now examine how journalism is influenced by these considerations.

Robert McChesney has advocated a theory which alleges the realm of professional journalism has three inherent biases built in which influence story selection.<sup>96</sup> This theory provides a good starting point for recognising the effects of commercial pressure on journalism. The first bias is the reliance on official sources which I will explain in greater detail below. According to McChesney, this confers upon those in government and business the power to set the news agenda. The second bias is that there must be a news hook in order to justify a story. This means that important social issues are not covered unless there is an event, such as a demonstration or release of a

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<sup>95</sup> Ellis.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p.367.

document, to justify coverage. The third bias is the ‘dig here, not there’ phenomenon. Rather than being politically neutral, professional journalism is skewed in favour of values favourable to the commercial aims of owners and advertisers. This is evident in the way that governments are placed under much greater media scrutiny than big business. The first two of these biases have helped to encourage the rise of public relations which has been able to take advantage of these factors.<sup>97</sup> This theory on professional journalism is not at all encouraging for hopes for mainstream media that serve the interests of the people.

The central issue to the relationship between journalism and profit orientation is that media managers now see the public as consumers to be satisfied and increased, not audiences to be informed and stimulated.<sup>98</sup> As a result the amount of entertainment and lifestyle pieces has increased, at the expense of reporting looking at more serious issues. The terms ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news have been used to describe this differentiation. Hard news refers to events involving top leaders, major issues or large disruptions in the routines of daily life. News that does not fit these criteria is defined as soft. Journalism as entertainment is perceived by media managers to be more popular in the mass market and therefore more likely to draw larger audiences. Terms such as ‘infotainment’ have also gained currency to describe the type of information the mass media are now presenting.

While including more soft news appears to be the accepted plan for increasing audiences, a study published in 2000 drew some interesting conclusions to challenge this idea. *Doing Well and Doing Good: How Soft News and Critical Journalism Are Shrinking the News Audience and Weakening Democracy – And What News Outlets Can Do About It* by Thomas E. Patterson looked out how changes in news content affect audience sizes. The study found that while soft news was on the rise news audience sizes in general were shrinking. It also found that bulletins of either hard news or soft news out rated those looking for a middle ground. Patterson concluded that by increasing the amount of soft news, news producers were letting down their core audience – people interested in hard news. In addition, fringe news audience members who were more interested in infotainment easily slipped away and in the

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p.368.

<sup>98</sup> Moloney, p.132.

long run preferred pure entertainment rather than soft news.<sup>99</sup> The study concluded the increasing amount of soft news is failing to attract new committed audience members and is driving away people who were committed.

Research in New Zealand has also shown changes in the style of news stories and changes in the attitudes of audiences. There is a reasonably large body of research on TV One's evening news programme since the deregulation of New Zealand broadcasting in 1989. The shifts in style have been summarised into eleven effects. Some of the more important are:

- *Commercialisation*. The size of the news-hole was reduced, while the amount of advertising was progressively increased.
- *Morselisation*. Bulletins were sped up, stories became briefer and there were quicker camera shots and shorter sound bites.
- *Tabloidisation*. A new emphasis on entertaining coverage of spectacular and sensational events.
- *Decontextualisation*. A reduction in the number of cited sources and references to verifiable evidence.<sup>100</sup>

These effects illustrate the powerful influence commercial pressures have on news broadcasts. A study by Dr Joe Atkinson into television coverage of the 2002 New Zealand election campaign also shows how the quest for ratings damages democratic discourse. He looked at the debates involving party leaders produced by both TV One and TV3. It was Atkinson's conclusion that television had created a public sphere that favoured entertaining and uninformative spectacle over serious policy discussion.<sup>101</sup> The programmes were set up to encourage shouting matches among the participants and were mediated by presenters who encouraged the denigration of the candidates and trivialisation of the issues. Like Patterson, Atkinson believes that this type of

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<sup>99</sup> Patterson, T. (2000). *Doing Well and Doing Good: How soft news and critical journalism are shrinking the news audience and weakening democracy – and what news outlets can do about it*. KSG Working Paper No. 01-001, p.15.

<sup>100</sup> Atkinson, J. 'Tabloid democracy' in Miller, R. (ed.) (2001). *New Zealand Government and Politics*. Auckland: Oxford, pp.284-285.

<sup>101</sup> Atkinson, J. 'The campaign on television' in Vowles J. et al (eds.) *Voter's Veto: The 2002 election in New Zealand and the consolidation of minority government*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, p.49.

media coverage is contributing to increasing levels of cynicism and alienation from the political process among members of the public who formerly took a serious interest. Democratic discourse is not in a good state when people who used to like to be informed are giving up in despair. But as long as advertising dominates mainstream news formats people may be forced to look elsewhere to find their information.

Bob Franklin has drawn the ideas of profit orientation influencing journalism into the concept of ‘Newszak’. He believes Newszak is news as a product designed to gain market share, with the emphasis on entertaining, unchallenging, personal items.<sup>102</sup> Newszak is usually delivered in small doses, leaving no room for detailed explanations and evidence. The rise of news concerning celebrities, fashion and style exemplifies the Newszak thesis. As I write this, New Zealand Fashion Week would appear to be much more important to the media than the outcome of a parliamentary inquiry into allegations of a governmental cover-up of the illegal release of GE organisms, for instance. When weightier issues are addressed, the ever-shrinking size of news articles means complex issues must be shrunk down into fewer and fewer words. This means public relations practitioners become more heavily involved in the news process as they seek to adapt complicated messages of their clients to the demands of ‘sound bite journalism.’ Celebrity and entertainment news also increases the role for PR as it is the chief provider of the pre-packaged information that satisfies media demand.

The practice of investigative journalism has also been affected by commercial pressures. Investigative journalism differs from ordinary reporting in that it looks to uncover information the public would not ordinarily be exposed to, rather than merely reacting to events as they happen. Hugo de Burgh describes the purpose of investigative journalism as drawing attention to the ways in which society’s systems of regulation can be circumvented by the rich, powerful and corrupt.<sup>103</sup> There are many examples of investigative journalism uncovering injustices and abuses of power. Overseas these include investigations into the Watergate affair, the Pentagon Papers and the My Lai massacre. In New Zealand investigative journalism has lead to

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<sup>102</sup> Moloney, p.45.

<sup>103</sup> De Burgh, H. (2000). *Investigative Journalism: Context and practice*. London: Routledge, p.3.

the overturning of the convictions of Arthur Allan Thomas and David Dougherty. More recently it has uncovered allegations of fraud against former MP Donna Awatere-Huata and an alleged incident of gang-rape by senior police officers. Unfortunately the cost and time required to carry out in-depth investigations means media outlets around the world are performing less investigative journalism than in the past. Gavin Ellis doesn't think investigative journalism is dying off but does believe it is "under financial pressure because it costs a lot of money to have a team of journalists tied up on one story for a long time. Inevitably this means smaller media don't have the chance to do it."<sup>104</sup> This situation is to the detriment of democratic discourse because it means corruption and subversion of the public interest have a better chance of passing undetected. It also means there is more scope for public relations techniques to be used to manipulate perceptions, as journalists are often working within a pre-set news agenda rather than searching for what they think is important, obscured or purposefully hidden.

The changes in information carried by the media can also be looked at in terms of a 'shift to content'.<sup>105</sup> Where Newszak describes the transformation of journalism into entertainment, the shift to content illustrates how many media outlets now define their output as 'content' rather than 'journalism'. The difference is that journalism is supposed to be an objective reporting of events, whereas content is news that has been processed and packaged with a particular audience in mind. As a result, media sources become companies that collect information and package it with advertising to create a product distributed by a variety of methods. This again shows commercial considerations taking priority over in-depth analysis. It is argued that one of the main purposes of 'content' is to market the technology and distribution means by which it is being delivered. Thus, rather than aiming to inform and educate the public, content is produced to stimulate interest in and sell technology such as the Internet and mobile telephones. This theory can be applied to the birth of public radio in New Zealand in the early 1920s. The first stations set up in 1922 to broadcast to a public audience were started by men who owned companies that sold radio sets and related equipment. For them the objective of broadcasting was to develop an audience to which they

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<sup>104</sup> Ellis.

<sup>105</sup> Hewlett, P. (2001). 'The public relations and journalism interface: The rise of the fifth estate compounds commercial ownership pressures.' Unpublished research paper, p.4.

could sell radio equipment. These early stations were chiefly concerned with playing music and there was little or no time given to news and current affairs. It also did not take long for advertising and sponsorship to become involved, with music distributors lending records to the stations in return for having their names mentioned on air.<sup>106</sup>

Media sources operate within what Michael J. Wolf has termed ‘The Entertainment Economy’. In his book of that name, he says that because the entertainment industry has mastered the art of capturing attention, its model will become central to all economic activity as competition for consumer attention heightens. He believes that without the element of entertainment, few consumer products stand a chance in the marketplace.<sup>107</sup> For media companies this means an ever-increasing emphasis on entertaining consumers of their products and doing whatever is necessary to gain attention in an extremely busy market. The result is that when media companies produce news and current affairs items they are constantly trying to find a compromise between their commercial and public service aims. The increasing pressures to raise profits often means the balance is shifting towards the commercial.

Another important consequence of the consolidation of ownership and profit orientation of the mass media is the practice of self-censorship. Pressure from advertisers, government or other companies owned by media conglomerates can lead to news stories being prevented from reaching the public. The potential for conflicts of interest within media conglomerates has been highlighted by two high-profile cases. The first concerned ABC Television and the Disney World theme park, both owned by The Walt Disney Co. In 1998 ABC carried out an investigation that found evidence of sexual offenders being hired by the theme park. Following pressure from within The Walt Disney Co. the investigation was dropped and the story did not go to air.<sup>108</sup> A similar situation arose between the Harper Collins publishing house and the Star TV satellite service, both owned by News Corporation. Harper Collins was set to publish a book by former Hong Kong governor Chris Patten, but this happened to be at a time when negotiations for Star TV to expand its operation in China were at a

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<sup>106</sup> Day, P. (1994). *The Radio Years*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, pp.43-47.

<sup>107</sup> Wolf, M. (1999). *The Entertainment Economy: How mega-media forces are transforming our lives*. New York: Times Books, pp.4-5.

<sup>108</sup> Klein, N. (2000). *No Logo: No space, no choice, no jobs*. London: Flamingo, p.170.

crucial point. The result was that the book was dumped and Rupert Murdoch was able to further his ambitions in the lucrative Chinese market.

Other startling examples can be found in the book *Into the Buzzsaw: Leading journalists expose the myth of a free press*, edited by Kristina Borjesson. Jane Akre details the experience of self-censorship by media organisations that she and her husband had while working at Fox-owned WTGT-TV in Tampa, Florida. They had been carrying out an investigation into the use of rGBH, a drug made by Monsanto and administered to cows to increase the amount of milk they produce. The investigation found that while achieving this aim, rGBH also poses health risks to both the cows and human consumers of their milk.<sup>109</sup> But just before the story was to be aired Monsanto got wind of it and threatened dire legal consequences for Fox News if changes were not made. Akre and her husband were ordered to rewrite the story, removing the hard allegations against Monsanto. When they refused to do so they were fired. According to Akre, the station's general manager told them: "We (Fox) paid \$3 billion for these television stations. We'll tell you what the news is."<sup>110</sup>

Borjesson also recounts her own experience while working at CBS investigating the crash of TWA Flight 800 in 1996. Her investigation found holes in the US government's claims that the plane had crashed because of an explosion caused by a malfunction in one of its engines. She believed the crash may have had something to do with a navy training exercise in the area at the time and eyewitness testimony of a 'flare-like' object rising from the ocean to meet the plane.<sup>111</sup> Following a visit to CBS by the FBI, which was involved in investigating the crash, Borjesson was fired. In her article about these events she stresses the problems for journalists in relying on 'official' sources for their information. She believes the information coming from government sources did not represent what was really happening with the crash investigation. This can lead to manipulation of the public when media sources report the information from official sources as indisputable fact.

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<sup>109</sup> Akre, J. 'The fox, the hounds and the sacred cows' in Borjesson, pp.39-40.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p.45.

<sup>111</sup> Borjesson, K. 'Into the buzzsaw' in Borjesson, p.137.

The reliance of journalists on official sources to gather information is a situation which the public needs to be more aware of because it has a big influence on the information carried by the media. Herman and Chomsky address it in the third filter of their propaganda model, ‘Sourcing mass-media news’. They hold the view that the mass media is drawn into a give and take relationship with powerful sources of information. This serves the purposes of both parties because the media need a reliable flow of information and official sources wish to communicate their versions of events.<sup>112</sup> This situation also serves the economic concerns of the media because using information from sources presumed to be reputable saves money and time on research.<sup>113</sup> The information presented to journalists in this relationship exemplifies the concept of information subsidies which I mentioned earlier. As a result of this relationship, official sources gain special access to the media and Chomsky and others believe the media may even feel obliged to run dubious stories for fear of offending their prized sources.<sup>114</sup> But Gavin Ellis believes these critics exaggerate the media’s fear of getting offside with official sources. He thinks they have overstated what he calls “their view of the media as a capitalist running dog.” Though he does say that while he thinks they have overstated this case they have drawn attention to some important things that we should be mindful of.<sup>115</sup> Sources considered to be official include government departments, business corporations, trade groups and law enforcement bodies. Mark Fishman has called the flow of information from official sources to the media ‘the principle of bureaucratic affinity: only other bureaucracies can satisfy the input needs of a news bureaucracy.’<sup>116</sup> These official sources of course have goals they wish to advance and should not always be trusted as impartial purveyors of information.

Ellis believes New Zealand is no different from any other country where there are always privileged elites and official sources are probably the most privileged of those elites. He does think we will see an increasing effort to move beyond those sources. “One of the reasons we will see that is the increasing diversity in our population.” In his opinion the nation’s changing ethnicity will lead to the altering of traditional

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<sup>112</sup> Herman & Chomsky, p.18.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p.19.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p.22.

<sup>115</sup> Ellis.

<sup>116</sup> Fishman, M. (1980). *Manufacturing the News*. Austin: University of Texas, p.143.

elites. He also says that the dangers posed by over-reliance on official sources could be averted if journalists and the public were to become more sceptical of what they are told. “That might help to break down some of that reliance on official sources if the official sources, through what they say and how they act, no longer enjoy the confidence of the people they’re talking to.”<sup>117</sup>

The dangers posed to the information environment by reliance on official sources have been highlighted in the media coverage of events following the September 11 attacks. Utilising the technique (described in article one) of describing the world strictly in terms of good and evil, the US government has crafted the idea of a clash between wild terrorists and peace-loving democracies. The mainstream media have dutifully conveyed this view to the public. There has been little scepticism in the mainstream media about the way in which US military, political and economic interests may benefit from the war on terror, and few demands for evidence of how the war will reduce terrorism and bring those responsible for the attacks to justice.<sup>118</sup>

The reliance of the mass media upon official sources has the effect of reducing the variety of resources that go into the production of news stories. When combined with the decrease in differentiation between media outlets caused by the concentration of ownership, the plurality of information within society is reduced. To put it another way fewer resources and fewer owners equals less diversity of opinion and more opportunity for manipulation.

From the discussion above we can see that the public’s ability to form opinions based on reality is increasingly coming under threat. The interaction of public relations and journalism, coupled with the economic considerations of the media has resulted in less diversity of information and increased opportunities for opinions to be manipulated. Having considered these issues, it is necessary to review the public’s trust in the media and whether or not it is justified.

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<sup>117</sup> Ellis.

<sup>118</sup> McChesney (2002), p.379.

## **Who can we trust?**

The role of journalism within society is to inform people about what is happening in the world and why these things are happening. This also entails working as a watchdog over the people holding positions of power and authority in society. According to John Pilger ‘the prime role of journalists is to tell people when they are being conned.’<sup>119</sup> David Randall expands on this sentiment, saying the job is about discovering information that replaces rumour and speculation, empowering voters, subverting the power of those whose authority relies on lack of public information and promoting the free exchange of ideas.<sup>120</sup> Therefore journalism is very important to democratic life. In the words of Harold Innis:

Whatever other power may be possessed by the media, they represent the chief mechanism through which ideas, myths, stereotypes, opinions and attitudes are dispersed to the people.<sup>121</sup>

Therefore the media hold an enormous amount of power over what people think. But is this power being used to improve society, or has it been hijacked by the pursuit of commercial gains? Ideally, the media must find a balance between what people want to know and what they think people should know. The struggle to strike this balance is at the heart of the difficulties facing mainstream journalism. The necessity to get ratings or sell papers can often get in the way of providing substantial, thought-provoking content. This, in turn, interferes with journalism’s role of informing people about serious and important issues. The journalism practiced by Paul Holmes is a good example of journalism where the balanced has shifted well in favour of what the people want, as opposed to what may be more useful to the democratic process. While this sort of journalism often defends itself as being for the people rather than elitist in nature, it does not fully realise the purpose of journalism. In his article, ‘Journalism and ethics, can they co-exist?’ Andrew Belsey says in a democracy a responsible press is supposed to serve the public interest. But he raises the question of where the boundaries of the public interest lie. He believes ‘they do not coincide, as has often

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<sup>119</sup> De Burgh, p.22.

<sup>120</sup> Randall, D. (1996). *The Universal Journalist*. London: Pluto Press, p.3.

<sup>121</sup> Altschull, p.348.

been pointed out, with what the public is interested in.<sup>122</sup> It is this sort of argument that has led some journalists and media observers to feel that journalism must fill a deeper need than simply what the people want. In this way, the public could have greater trust that journalism is providing them with the necessary information to make decisions that will benefit society.

The public place a good deal of trust in the media to carry out the role described above and to essentially give counsel on how best to interpret the complexities of the world around us. But as I have described in this article there are many instances in which the media are complicit in a process of ‘conning’ the people. Such examples are times when the public’s trust of the media has been ignored and even abused. Given all this, a careful reconsideration of the trust we place in the media is needed.

The central issue when assessing trust is that of freedom of the press. In democratic societies the right to freedom of speech ensures that the media are largely able to publish or broadcast whatever information they like. While this protects the media from regulation and control by government, on the other hand it puts the public in the awkward position of not being sure of the factual quality of information in the media. Thus there is the potential for the media to be used by public relations and other interests to manipulate public opinion. To completely prevent this from happening would require regulation of the media, but this could jeopardise the ability of the media to fulfil their ideal role of disinterested observers of society. As a result must bad journalism be tolerated? We are left with the dilemma of how to have a press that is free, but at the same time can be held accountable for the information it presents.

Light was shed on this perplexing conundrum in the 2002 Reith Lectures by Dr Onora O’Neill, the philosopher and principal of Newnham College, Cambridge. Her theme in the fifth lecture was that it is very difficult today for people to test and therefore trust what we are told by the media. The main forms of communication – television, radio and print – are one-way and offer very little room for interaction and discussion. In regards to press freedom she argued that it is by no means an unconditional good. It is only positive if it helps the public to explore and test opinions and judge for

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<sup>122</sup> Belsey, A. ‘Journalism and ethics, can they co-exist?’ in Kieran, M. (ed.) (1998). *Media ethics*. London: Routledge, p. ?.

themselves what to believe. O'Neill says freedom of the press is an outdated concept and is being used to disguise domination of public opinion by large media conglomerates. This view is echoed by John C. Merrill who points out that if press owners are using media for their own purposes it is said to be free, but if the government or other non-press groups are doing so then it is said to be unfree.<sup>123</sup> This can be a dangerous situation because anyone using the media for their own purposes can exercise a lot of power over public thought. O'Neill believes freedom of expression is for individuals, not for institutions and this differentiation must be fiercely protected:

If powerful (media) institutions are allowed to publish, circulate and promote material without indicating what is known and what is rumour; what is derived from a reputable source and what is invented, what is standard analysis and what is speculation; which sources may be knowledgeable and which are probably not, they damage our public culture and all our lives.<sup>124</sup>

O'Neill points out that journalism has largely escaped the revolution in accountability that has imposed tight systems of regulation and audit on so many professions and institutions.<sup>125</sup> She says the vital change that needs to occur is for information carried in the media to be assessable by audiences. As described in the extract above, the public is presently unable to determine the source and reliability of a lot of information in the media. Procedural changes have been suggested to introduce this sort of accountability. These include requirements for owners, editors and journalists to declare financial and other interests, to distinguish comment from reporting, to acknowledge when information has come from press releases and to introduce penalties for recirculating unproven information. Another suggestion that has been made is for the appointment of a press ombudsman to analyse media content and point out irresponsible behaviour. While these changes would be hard to implement, they would definitely help create a media culture that would be much more transparent than the one operating at the moment. This type of accountability would not interfere with press freedom because it would not directly dictate what could or could not be published or broadcast. Instead it would require that whatever was presented could be

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<sup>123</sup> Merrill, J. 'Global press philosophies' in de Beer, A. & Merrill J. (eds.) (2004). *Global Journalism: Topical issues and media systems*. Boston: Pearson, p.16.

<sup>124</sup> O'Neill, O. (2002). *Reith Lecture 5: Licence to Deceive*. Retrieved July 3, 2004, from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2002/lecture5.shtml>.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

assessed and checked for accuracy by audiences. Gavin Ellis agrees with these sentiments, though he says “in terms of acknowledging the source of information I think that depends on what the information itself is.” He thinks some pieces of information are not as meaningful as others and therefore acknowledging the source is not as important.<sup>126</sup> Currently it is the public, who in their choices of patronage, in the end decide what is and is not acceptable in terms of media content. If the media were to take more responsibility internally and there was more in the way of independent monitoring, then there would be a higher ratio of trustworthy content.

Trust is also vital when it comes to the products of the interaction of public relations and journalism. But working out who and what to trust can be extremely difficult. As discussed earlier, public relations practitioners represent organisations with specific objectives in mind. Meanwhile journalists are under a variety of pressures that may affect their ability to question and challenge public relations-generated information. Ian Hargreaves, author of *Journalism: Truth or dare?*, writes that modern politics, business, public relations and journalism have all suffered from the erosion of trust. He believes that all these sectors require trust in one another to do their jobs effectively and thus improve society as a whole.<sup>127</sup> But this is idealistic stuff and would require a stunning shift in priority away from individual considerations to the common good. The erosion of trust throughout these important sectors of society means the public is in a position where it can be very hard to judge what is really going on.

The answer would seem to be that the public must take it upon themselves to think more deeply about what is in the media and look for why certain information is being presented and who it might benefit. There is no guarantee that information in the media is completely true or presented in a manner that is not biased in some way. One of the Greek philosopher Aristotle’s arguments is useful to this situation. It concerned the subject of rhetoric, the use of speech to persuade. He saw rhetoric as an art, not governed by logic like the sciences. He argued rhetoric should be widely taught and understood, so people can recognise manipulative uses of it. This thinking can be transferred to information in the media. In many instances there is no hard and fast

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<sup>126</sup> Ellis.

<sup>127</sup> Hargreaves, I. (2003). *Journalism: Truth or dare?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.203-204.

interpretation of an event, rather there are a range of accounts and opinions. If people can, as Aristotle would have hoped, recognise when media information is being used to manipulate, then public opinion will stand a much better chance in the face of those who seek to control it.

### **Three. PR Under the Spotlight in New Zealand**

*We don't say, hey, will you come out and say nice things about us? No, we don't do that! As I say, we're a commercial entity and we don't need nor want to get involved in that sort of stuff – Dave Hilliard, Timberlands West Coast CEO, 1999.<sup>128</sup>*

In August 1999 the New Zealand public was presented with grave allegations concerning the activity of certain public relations practitioners. A book was published that claimed a large-scale, deceitful public relations campaign had been carried out by the New Zealand office of a global PR firm on behalf of a state-owned company. The book was *Secrets and Lies: The anatomy of an anti-environmental PR campaign*, authored by Nicky Hager and Bob Burton, the PR firm was Shandwick New Zealand Ltd and the state-owned company was Timberlands West Coast Ltd. Making use of scores of strategy documents and memos leaked from the campaign, Hager and Burton argued the New Zealand public had been the victim of a coordinated effort to hide factual information and encourage false perceptions in order to allow Timberlands to carry out its objectives. The authors believed the leaked documents revealed use of many of the classic PR techniques for manipulation seen overseas and several others as well. These documents make this a brilliant case for understanding allegedly deceitful public relations campaigns because the strategies and goals of the campaign are revealed in black and white. It is for this reason PR critic John Stauber says *Secrets and Lies* ‘is one of the most important political exposés you will ever read.’<sup>129</sup> This is no exaggeration, for the book details how the government, media and public can be mobilised to support an organisation that may not necessarily be acting in the best interests of society.

The Timberlands affair is definitely not the only case of information in the media manipulating public opinion in New Zealand in recent times. Also in 1999 media attention was drawn to a product called Lyprinol that contained an extract from green-lipped mussels that was claimed by the manufacturers to have cancer-curing properties. The information originated from a media release from a hospital in

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<sup>128</sup> Hager, N. & Burton, B. (1999). *Secrets and Lies: The anatomy of an anti-environmental PR campaign*. Nelson: Craig Potton, p.125.

<sup>129</sup> Stauber, J. in foreword to Hager & Burton, p.9.

Adelaide that said the extract had killed cancer cells in laboratory tests. The fact that it had not been tested on anything other than cells in a laboratory did not stop *One Network News* and the *Weekend Herald*, among others, from proclaiming it to be a miracle cure for cancer that would also provide a windfall for the New Zealand economy because of the fact that green-lipped mussels are only grown in New Zealand. The story broke on a Friday and it was no coincidence that the New Zealand launch of Lyprinol was set for the following Monday. Nor was it a coincidence that the hospital in question was receiving funding from Pharmalink, the distributors of Lyprinol. It is understood Pharmalink advised the hospital on the timing of the media release, in order to coincide with the Lyprinol launch.<sup>130</sup> \$2 million of Lyprinol pills were sold on the Monday, but that evening they were withdrawn by the distributors who accepted the Health Ministry's view that the claims about the product outweighed evidence drawn from research. This led to a change of tack from the media outlets who had made the earlier claims and questions were asked about who was responsible for the false hype that had surrounded the product. Whether it was the publicists for Lyprinol, or media organisations desperate for a sensational story, the episode highlights the need for caution when evaluating information in the media.

In 2004 public relations techniques appeared to be at work in Auckland as the city debated whether to allow a motor racing event to go ahead in the central city. Opinion was divided between those who wanted to watch the race and enjoy the economic benefits and those who believed the central city was an inappropriate venue which would result in massive traffic disruptions throughout the city. One of the parties involved in the debate was the V8 Street Race Supporters Club which was obviously pushing for the plan to be given the green light. The man behind this group was Klaus Sorenson, who was a key player for Shandwick in the Timberlands PR campaign. There is good reason to suspect that the Supporters Club was a front group for certain interests who wished to create the impression of widespread support for the event. The club's website said its members 'are a group of ordinary Kiwis who decided to get together and positively promote the International Street Race festival idea.'<sup>131</sup> There was more than a hint of irony as the statement went on to say: 'But typically

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<sup>130</sup> Comrie, M. (2000). 'Mussel-bound: The New Zealand media and the launch of Lyprinol.' *International Communication Bulletin*, Volume 35, No. 3-4, p.14.

<sup>131</sup> V8 Street Race Supporters Site. Retrieved June 25, 2004, from <http://www.streetracesupporters.co.nz>.

there are a few who want to wreak (sic) the idea. A noisy minority loudly claim they speak for everyone.<sup>132</sup> They do indeed.

### **The Timberlands controversy**

#### **Background**

The logging of West Coast native forests has been a controversial issue for many years. New Zealand's modern environmental movement was born out of campaigning during the 1970s that succeeded in stopping wholesale clearing of the West Coast's natural beech forests.<sup>133</sup> In 1986 the West Coast Accord was signed between the Government, the West Coast timber industry, environmental groups and local authorities. This agreement looked to move the timber industry away from reliance on native timber to a mix of exotic plantation timber and reduced volumes of sustainably produced indigenous timber. In 1987 the Government changed the way its exotic forests were managed, replacing the New Zealand Forest Service with a state-owned enterprise, the New Zealand Forestry Corporation. The Government went on to sell many of the exotic forests it owned, but was unable to sell the forests on the West Coast because of their unique situation. Therefore in 1990 a new state-owned enterprise, Timberlands West Coast Ltd, was formed to manage the West Coast exotic forests.

The situation began to heat up again in the mid-1990s when Timberlands proposed to expand the scale of its West Coast logging operation. Timberlands argued that its logging was much less destructive than in the past because of the technique of selective logging as opposed to clearfelling and also the use of helicopters to reduce the amount of roading and forest damage. The company said the logging produced a valuable commodity and some local employment. Environmentalists argued that the ancient rimu and beech forests were extremely valuable remnants of natural New Zealand and were also habitats for endangered wildlife and should not be logged at all. They said the timber industry had already logged too much native forest and the

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Hager & Burton, p.11.

country's timber needs could be satisfied by plantation forests.<sup>134</sup> Both sides presented valid points and the public and government would have to decide on what would happen. The weight of public opinion seemed to favour the discontinuation of native logging and environmental groups felt that if they could bring the issues to public attention then public pressure would lead to the stopping of the logging. Timberlands of course wanted its perspectives to be prominent in the information environment and the contest for public opinion was on.

Through his involvement in the environmental group Native Forest Action Wellington author Nicky Hager became interested in the issue and began to suspect that there was more going on than was immediately obvious to the public. He looked for people on the inside who would be willing to talk about the campaigning being undertaken by Timberlands. In 1999 several people became uncomfortable about the tactics they were involved with and decided the public should be told what was going on. They photocopied hundreds of pages of confidential documents, now known as the Timberlands Papers, and gave them to Hager. The documents included PR strategy papers, correspondence between Timberlands and its PR people, legal advice about attacking critics and minutes from weekly meetings.<sup>135</sup>

### **How the allegations fit with criticism of public relations**

To illustrate the impact that the public relations industry can have on democratic discourse I will use a selection of classic PR techniques in study of *Secrets and Lies*. I will look to show how public opinion can be manipulated, the media deceived and the public by extension. In regards to this case greater knowledge of these techniques may have meant more rigorous journalism and a more savvy public. As Aristotle believed, the better versed people are in the art of using words to persuade, the more likely they are to recognise manipulative uses of it.

At this point I would like to make a few things clear before getting into the analysis of the campaign. While the criticism of certain public relations techniques may seem to paint them as being purely deceitful, it is never as straightforward as this. The aim of

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<sup>134</sup> Hager & Burton, pp.17-18.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p.14.

PR is to present a client in the best possible light and perspectives differ on how appropriate this is. Public Relations Institute of New Zealand president Tim Marshall says it is a case of judging “sharp practice versus unethical behaviour.”<sup>136</sup> What I am presenting here is a critique of PR behaviour with the intention of alerting people to the possibilities that come with the rise of professional information management. It is by no means saying this sort of activity is confined to corporate organisations in their arguments with environmentalists. There is plenty of evidence to suggest many of the communications tactics employed by activists are similar to those of corporate public relations. In this case the leaked strategy documents enable a look at how one organisation organised its communications on a particular issue. In doing so an awareness of the influence of public relations strategies and a discussion of their appropriateness is made possible.

As we recall from article one, manipulation of public opinion through public relations activity is heavily influenced by the third party technique. This is where organisations put their message into the mouths of supposedly neutral parties in order to create the impression of support for their actions. Timberlands enlisted the help of practitioners of public relations to utilise this technique. Shandwick New Zealand Ltd was the principal PR firm involved, with support from Christchurch-based Head Consultants and Morris Communications Group in Wellington.<sup>137</sup>

Timberlands’ original 1991 PR strategy document shows the careful planning behind its campaign:

1. Identify and target messages to each target audience: MPs, especially Cabinet, shadow spokespeople, heads of departments, local community leaders, key national movers.
2. Attract and mobilise key third party support.
3. Neutralise likely opposition. Identify key figures. Monitor their programme. Counter misconceptions.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Marshall, T. (personal communication, March 28, 2005)

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p.22.

While there was nothing wrong with Timberlands wanting to make its point of view available in the information environment, criticism relates to the methods in which this was done. The information contained in the leaked documents shows a disregard for ethical guidelines and a cynical attitude toward the formulation of public opinion. The allegedly deceitful nature of the campaign can be appreciated by discussing how it used many techniques widely recognised as manipulative.

### **Front groups**

A front group is an organisation set up to promote the goals of a particular organisation whilst claiming to represent the public interest. The front group for the Timberlands campaign went by the name of the Coast Action Network (CAN). The group was launched in 1997 and was made up of Timberlands contractors and other West Coast locals and was actively supported by the company. For Timberlands, the purpose of CAN was to create the impression of active and passionate support by West Coast locals for the continuation of logging. It would also allow Timberlands to be involved in public debate under the cover of community concern.

Several episodes in particular illustrate the extent to which Timberlands and its PR advisers were pulling CAN's strings. The first concerned a proposal that appeared in West Coast newspapers in 1997 to preserve some of Timberlands' rimu forests as a memorial to Princess Diana. Timberlands wasn't so keen on the idea and decided to use CAN to oppose it. Using a tactic common throughout the campaign, Shandwick drafted several letters to be sent to West Coast newspapers and the conservation minister. The letters were then sent off to Timberlands, who in turn passed them on to CAN to sign and send. The Timberlands Papers reveal that in a memo to Timberlands CEO Dave Hilliard accompanying the letters, Shandwick's Rob McGregor wrote: 'Thank you for your help with this and for arranging for the Action Group (CAN) to dispatch the letters on their letterhead and in the name of their organisation. *Better this salvo comes from them than Timberlands* (my emphasis).'<sup>139</sup> This memo shows exactly how the front group technique is used by an organisation to put its words into the mouths of others.

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p.163.

Another episode occurred in 1998 when anti-logging environmental groups planned a gathering in Reefton over Queen's Birthday weekend. Timberlands did not like the idea of Native Forest Action (NFA) and Forest and Bird supporters getting together in a situation where they could influence local opinions. Timberlands worked with CAN to create anger among Reefton locals toward the environmentalists. Concerns held by locals for their futures and traditional locals versus greenies prejudices were exploited, resulting in threats of violence against the environmentalists if the weekend went ahead. Posters attributed to CAN were circulated which asked: 'How do you feel about NFA attempting to destroy your future livelihood, your future community viability, and the future timber industry on which the Coast's economy relies upon (sic)?'<sup>140</sup> This technique is reminiscent of the activities of the Wise Use Movement in the United States. The WUM is a coalition sponsored by many large corporations that opposes environmental regulations on the grounds that they interfere with human liberties. Environmental activist and scholar Sharon Beder says the WUM seeks the support of the disaffected, people who are worried about their future and are ready to blame environmentalism for their problems.<sup>141</sup> NFA eventually moved the gathering to another town on the West Coast, Murchison.

Near the beginning of 1999 CAN's operation was stepped up and the group announced plans to launch a public awareness campaign throughout the country that would promote so-called sustainable logging as the way to solve the West Coast forestry issue. In February 1999 Barry Nicolle became the chairperson and spokesperson of CAN. Nicolle was also contracted to Timberlands as a pest control worker, yet still claimed there were no connections between CAN and Timberlands.<sup>142</sup> This view was stressed by everyone involved with Timberlands, particularly CEO Dave Hilliard. But the Timberlands Papers tell a different story, showing how as early as 1994 Shandwick decided that creating a community front group would be a good way for Timberlands to get its message across.

While members of CAN cannot be criticised for wanting to safeguard the future of their communities, there is one issue in particular that shows the extent to which they

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p.165.

<sup>141</sup> Beder, p.52.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p.185.

were manipulated by Timberlands. This issue is the potential privatisation of the company. According to Hager and Burton, their research showed that ever since the creation of Timberlands the government had been working towards selling it to private interests. Privatisation had the potential to be just as devastating to local communities as the cessation of logging, as a new owner would be under no obligation to process the trees on the West Coast. Despite this serious threat to their livelihoods CAN members never publicly raised the issue of privatisation, instead focusing solely on supporting the continuation of Timberlands' logging of native forest.<sup>143</sup> This provides a solid indication of the extent to which CAN's agenda was determined by Timberlands, rather than by concerned locals.

### **Astroturf**

The practice of artificially creating grassroots support for Timberlands was another vital part of the company's public relations strategy. Timberlands realised that if it was to gain the government's support for the increasing of logging, the government would need to believe the plan was supported by West Coast locals and also the New Zealand public in general. The creation of the Coast Action Network was a large part of the astroturf creation, as it gave the impression that locals had banded together of their own initiative to support the activities of Timberlands. Two other key techniques were also used to project the idea of widespread grassroots support for Timberlands. These were an assault on the letters to the editor pages of the nation's newspapers and the purchasing of local support through sponsorship and advertising.

The letters to the editor section of a newspaper is important to democratic discourse because it allows members of the public to express their views on issues they deem to be important. It is one of the few areas where two-way communication operates, as opposed to one-way communication from media sources to the public. By 1997 Timberlands recognised that the bulk of letters to the editor concerning West Coast logging were against the continuation of logging. Because this suggested that more people opposed the logging than supported it, Timberlands and Shandwick decided something had to be done.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., pp.190-191.

The result was a strategy whereby letters to the editor sections of all newspapers were monitored and all letters critical of Timberlands were replied to. Included in the Timberlands Papers is a statement from Shandwick saying: ‘As part of this strategy Timberlands should ensure that it takes issue, by letter, with every criticism of the company and its activities...Key Recommendation: Establish “automatic reply” for any letters to editor.’<sup>144</sup> Shandwick even took on an extra employee to handle the implementation of the strategy. Shandwick drafted several letter templates on the key issues so replies could be sent quickly while the issue was still fresh in the public mind. The templates covered issues such as Charleston Forest, the West Coast Accord and the management of beech forests. Many of these letters were supposedly signed by Dave Hilliard after copies of Timberlands’ letterhead and his signature were sent to Shandwick so they could send the letters out directly.<sup>145</sup> An example is a letter signed by Hilliard that was printed in *The Evening Post* on October 25 1997. The letter took exception with an earlier letter by a member of the public who supported the protest activities of Native Forest Action. Hilliard’s letter accused the NFA of being vandals who misled the public and tried to ‘jeopardise the livelihood of many working New Zealanders and their communities.’<sup>146</sup>

There were also many letters written by people who did not acknowledge their links to Timberlands. Hager and Burton claim that an analysis of 100 pro-Timberlands letters sent to West Coast newspapers between 1997 and 1999 found the majority had been written by Timberlands staff, contractors and consultants or by members of CAN. In just over two months during the summer of 1998-99 most of the professional staff at Timberlands’ Greymouth headquarters had letters published in Wellington, Christchurch and West Coast newspapers.<sup>147</sup>

The use of sponsorship and advertising to procure grassroots support was pursued extensively by Timberlands. Between 1996 and 1998 Timberlands spent \$350,845 on sponsorship of organisations on the West Coast.<sup>148</sup> The money went to sports clubs, schools, scholarships and other interests. The sponsorship served a dual purpose for

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p.78.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., pp.78-79.

<sup>146</sup> Hilliard, D. (1997, October 25). *Timberlands selective*, letter to the editor, *The Evening Post*, p.4.

<sup>147</sup> Hager & Burton, p.163.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p.169.

Timberlands in its activities on the West Coast. It allowed the company to portray itself as caring about the community and as a result helped gain influence for when it needed third party support from locals. For instance in October 1998 Timberlands needed support by way of submissions supporting expanded rainforest logging. Its contributions to schools seemed to have payed off when the president of the West Coast Principals Association wrote a letter to all local schools reminding them of Timberlands' contributions and enclosing a submission form supportive of rainforest logging.<sup>149</sup> Locals were also reminded of the sponsorship when Timberlands was engaged in lobbying the Labour Party about the logging issue. A radio advertisement urging Coasters to write to Helen Clark said: 'And Timberlands have helped so many people through sport and it would be nice to turn around and help them, wouldn't it? Every sporting club that has had sponsorship, at least, should be putting pen to paper.'<sup>150</sup> In small communities like those on the West Coast, sponsorship money is gratefully accepted and can make a big difference to local activities. Timberlands and its PR advisers were aware of this and knew the gratitude of Coasters could be used to build the impression of grassroots support for logging.

Timberlands also spent money on public information advertising to influence the opinions of West Coasters. While there is nothing wrong ethically with using advertising to express one's point of view, it is still important to this case because it shows the desire of Timberlands to dominate the information environment and minimise the opinions of its opponents in the public consciousness. A communications strategy paper from Shandwick sums this up: 'Public information advertising provides the opportunity for the company to control its message and to deliver a strong message to a wider audience, *without a counter perspective* (my emphasis).'<sup>151</sup>

Advertisements were played on West Coast radio stations frequently during the period in which Timberlands was trying to encourage public submissions in support of its plans for beech logging. One advertisement on Radio Scenicland in 1998 featured the voices of children saying what they like about Timberlands. The comments included:

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p.168.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., p.196.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p.175.

'The thing that I liked about Timberlands was that all the people were kind and caring' and 'The thing I like about Timberlands is because (sic) they take care of our forests'. The spot finished with the presenter saying: 'What a great impression Timberlands have left in these kids' minds. Next time you're out and about in the forest, have a think about what Timberlands are doing for the West Coast.'<sup>152</sup> Persuading locals of its concern and commitment to the West Coast, something which can be challenged, was something Timberlands knew would help develop the third party support it needed.

Advertising also gave Timberlands another opportunity to influence opinion on the Coast. Small media outlets, such as those on the West Coast, are hugely dependent on advertising revenue to stay in business. This means advertisers who are providing the lifeblood of the media source can exert certain influences on editorial content. In their propaganda model, Herman and Chomsky refer to this phenomenon as 'The advertising licence to do business.' They point to many examples in the US where advertisers are allowed to dictate the media content that goes around their advertisements because media sources are afraid to offend the people providing their chief source of funding.

## **SLAPPs**

The technique of using threatening lawsuits to silence those with different views was attempted in several instances by Timberlands. The company enlisted law firm Pitt & Moore to write letters that threatened to sue environmental groups and other people opposed to the logging of native forests. The Timberlands Papers contain many examples of communication between Timberlands and Pitt & Moore concerning how the company might have been able to take criminal action against protesters. The co-operation between these two organisations is well illustrated by a letter from Pitt & Moore partner Jane Pearson concerning the handling of protesters in Timberlands forests: 'If Timberlands wishes to distance itself somewhat (from the trespass warning letters), I am more than happy to send the letter on your behalf on Pitt & Moore letterhead, although we may need to use your staff to identify the protesters and

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., pp.175-176.

deliver the letters to them.<sup>153</sup> If Timberlands was fully justified in threatening legal action against the protesters why would it wish to distance itself from the warning letters?

Timberlands looked to use legal threats in 1997 to prevent the Native Forest Action environmental group from presenting a critical view of the company. The issue concerned a poster and press release produced by NFA following the sale of a closed sawmill in Westport. The sawmill in question had taken logs from Charleston Forest until 1994 when Timberlands gave priority to a mill 140 kilometres away. The mill in Westport had been unable to survive and most of the jobs reliant on native logging in the Buller region had been lost.<sup>154</sup> Timberlands claimed the poster and press release had been issued with the intent of damaging the company's public reputation and a letter was sent from Pitt & Moore demanding removal of all the posters and retraction of the press release. The letter said if this did not happen NFA would be liable for defamation and there was the possibility of punitive damages being sought.<sup>155</sup> NFA ignored the letter and a subsequent follow-up and heard no more about the matter. This showed that despite the serious wording of the letters, the threats carried no legal weight and were attempts to intimidate rather than address actual illegal behaviour.

Legal threats were even made against members of parliament who spoke out against Timberlands. Alliance Party deputy leader Jeanette Fitzsimons was 'SLAPPed' after she wrote a letter to Heli Harvest Ltd., the helicopter logging company contracted to Timberlands. Her letter informed Heli Harvest it was the company's responsibility to avoid unnecessary danger when operating in areas where people were present, in this case protesters camping legally on public ground. She pointed out that under the Civil Aviation Act pilots could be prosecuted if they failed to do so. Heli Harvest responded quickly, threatening to sue Fitzsimons if her actions led to the company being unable to fulfil its contractual obligations to Timberlands. The company alleged Fitzsimons would be partly responsible if 'illegal' occupation of land by protesters interfered with its work. As with the other legal threats Fitzsimons ignored them and there was no further legal activity.

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p.42.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p.44.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

## **Greenwashing**

The main opposition to Timberlands' plans came from environmentalists, therefore the company knew it was extremely important to project an image of environmental responsibility in order to counter the views of its critics. The company's public relations campaign also looked to interfere with the environmental movement. The media was used to attempt to marginalise the opponents of logging and there were also efforts made to split the green movement.

The language used by Timberlands to describe its logging activities is a good example of greenwashing in operation. The Timberlands Papers contain a fax from Shandwick to Timberlands at the time the company was planning a survey questionnaire on its operations. Shandwick urged the company to avoid the use of terms such as 'logging' and 'native trees' in the survey questions. As a result the logging of old growth forests was referred to as 'sustainable harvesting of indigenous production forests.'<sup>156</sup>

Timberlands' description of its activities shares another strategy with the Wise Use Movement, that of billing itself as the 'true' environmentalists. This strategy can be seen in an October 1998 letter to the editor of *The Press* by Timberlands' corporate communication manager Paula de Roeper. She wrote of how Timberlands' vision was to maintain the forests forever but that 'change is constant, preservation is unattainable.' She finished by saying that 'Timberlands works for conservation so that future generations will enjoy the magnificent forests.'<sup>157</sup> But surely future generations would have the best chance of enjoying the forests if they were left alone. An article printed in *The Independent* on August 22 1997, written by Rob McGregor of Shandwick and signed by Dave Hilliard, also pushed the idea of Timberlands the environmentalists. It said that if the NFA and other groups were successful 'they would be responsible for a set of perverse outcomes impacting not only the physical landscape but contributing to the havoc being inflicted on rainforest around the globe, causing social and economic dislocation.'<sup>158</sup> The suggestion here was that if Timberlands did not cut down rainforests in New Zealand, rainforests in other

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., pp.97-98.

<sup>157</sup> De Roeper, P. (1998, October 2). *Timberlands' logging*, letter to the editor, *The Press*, p.4.

<sup>158</sup> Hilliard, D. (1997, August 22). *Forester fights back: activists overlook the facts*, *The Independent*, p.11.

countries would be logged more extensively to meet demand. Even if this was the case, if Timberlands was truly concerned for the environment it would have opposed all logging of rainforests.

The sponsorship of environmental groups and conferences is another greenwashing technique that has been well documented overseas. While environmental groups often welcome the financial assistance, this practice can also harm their operations. Sponsorship arrangements can allow organisations to get access to valuable information about how environmental groups work, enabling them to more effectively oppose the goals of environmentalists.<sup>159</sup> In December 1997 a conservation conference organised by Auckland University's School of Environmental and Marine Sciences was held in Taupo. In return for a \$4,000 donation to conference organisers Timberlands' logo was displayed prominently and there was a large display promoting the company's beech forest logging plans.<sup>160</sup> A company such as Timberlands succeeding in having its name associated with a conservation gathering is what greenwashing is all about. A casual observer not familiar with the background of the issue could well be forgiven for buying into Timberlands' rhetoric about its concern for preservation of the natural environment.

Timberlands' greenwashing campaign also used published material to push the company's environmental credentials. *Green Monitor* was a publication put out by the company to provide information about its operations. The Timberlands Papers contain a communications strategy paper from 1994 which said the purpose of *Green Monitor* was to 'provide information and confidence in Timberlands' decisions and operations, undermine extreme view credibility and promote the moderate view.' The intended audience of the publication included members of parliament, their advisers, caucus leaders, local government politicians and media outlets.<sup>161</sup> These sorts of people are what is known in PR as opinion leaders because the general public often looks to them to interpret important issues. Therefore it is important for opinion leaders to have a good grasp of the facts relevant to the issues. Critics of public relations allege that publications such as *Green Monitor* attempt to manipulate opinion leaders'

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<sup>159</sup> Beder, p.131.

<sup>160</sup> Hager & Burton, p.76.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p.102.

understanding of an issue. This theory was exemplified in early 1999 with an issue of *Green Monitor* attacking a scientific report by the Crown research institute Landcare.<sup>162</sup> The report, peer reviewed by other scientists before publication, concluded that Timberlands had overestimated the number of millable trees by 95 percent over 50 years and by a factor of four over 200 years. Timberlands hit back by circulating a draft issue of *Green Monitor* alleging the Landcare report contained grave errors and its content should not be accepted as fact. While a final revised copy of the issue toned down the attack on Landcare, it was still able to put doubt into the minds of opinion leaders.

Published material was even used to influence the thinking of school children. Timberlands had been annoyed by the negative publicity resulting from a conservation protest by school students outside parliament in May 1997. Timberlands and Shandwick decided that something needed to be done to deal with these sorts of ‘environmental attacks.’<sup>163</sup> The result was a resource kit to be sent to schools which could be used as part of the science curriculum for year seven and eight students. The information in the kit included all of Timberlands’ arguments for the sustainability of logging and gave references to the *Green Monitor* and Timberlands promotional material as sources of further information.<sup>164</sup> The targeting of children with public relations material is a worrying practice that is expanding worldwide and shows how keen many organisations are to persuade people to see things their way.

### **Interfering with environmental groups**

In interfering with the environmental movement Timberlands and its PR advisers saw the potential to weaken the position of the company’s opponents and further dominate the flow of information concerning its logging activities. Beder writes of how public relations firms often employ a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy when dealing with environmentalists. This strategy aims to exploit the differences within the environmental movement between radicals and moderates.<sup>165</sup> If the technique is successful environmentalists with moderate views (less critical of a company such as

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p.105.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p.107.

<sup>165</sup> Beder, p.133.

Timberlands), will become perceived by the public as the mainstream, while those highly critical will be marginalised as extreme and of no aid to society as a whole. Timberlands and Shandwick realised that the majority of New Zealanders felt native forests should be protected and therefore set about trying to tap into feelings of national pride. Documents in the Timberlands Papers show that the plan was to associate the company with subjects, people and ideas that New Zealanders identify closely with and value. The idea was that ‘mainstream light greens’ (those not associated with a particular environmental group) would feel comfortable supporting Timberlands.<sup>166</sup>

Another technique used in the Timberlands campaign to interfere with the environmental movement was the infiltration of green groups. Native Forest Action began a tree sitting campaign in Charleston Forest in 1997 and Timberlands was aware that many of the original members of NFA came from the Victoria University Environment Group. In order to gather information about protest action Shandwick arranged to pay a Victoria University student to join the group and report back about what was happening. The son of a senior Shandwick staff member agreed to the plan and was paid \$50 an hour to attend the meetings. Organisers of the group told Hager and Burton that the young man regularly attended meetings and often asked questions about planned protests and other activities.<sup>167</sup>

Applying labels to one’s opponents is a classic example of the propaganda technique known as name-calling. According to academic Penny Cass it signals an attempt to activate preconceptions and stereotypes already held by the public.<sup>168</sup> Thus language can be used to activate fear, anger and other emotions useful for mobilising people behind a certain cause. The labelling of environmentalists as ‘extremists’, ‘eco-terrorists’ and other negative terms has been a common tactic used by business organisations around the world.

The labelling of opposition was one of the cornerstones of the Timberlands/Shandwick campaign, the term ‘extremist’ was hammered home at every

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<sup>166</sup> Hager & Burton, p.93.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p.32.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p.134.

possible opportunity. They also looked to portray their environmental opponents as small and lacking in power. A Shandwick communications strategy from 1997 described how these tactics fitted with the Timberlands case: ‘Current environmental opposition is based on a small but determined group of relatively extreme environmentalists who do not support the sustainable management philosophy, enshrined in legislation and supported by the more responsible environmental groups.’<sup>169</sup> Timberlands knew the public would be much less likely to support the view of people perceived to be outside the boundaries of reasonable and ‘normal’ thought. Many of the letters and articles signed by CEO Dave Hilliard press home the extremist angle. Examples include: ‘...Native Forest Action – the most extreme of local environmental groups’,<sup>170</sup> and ‘Timberlands West Coast is accused of environmental vandalism by a self-appointed, misinformed and politically motivated group of extreme activists.’<sup>171</sup> The use of negative terms for environmentalists could also be seen in other media coverage. Headlines concerning the issue in business weekly *The Independent* included: ‘Body Shop backs tree huggers’,<sup>172</sup> and ‘Timberlands campaign went against the grain, say greenies.’<sup>173</sup> Stereotypical perceptions of environmentalists as bothersome troublemakers trying to ruin everybody’s fun can be very useful to a public relations campaign.

## Treetops PR

The technique of treetops public relations enables an organisation to influence society’s decision makers and to convince important or respected people to support its activities. For Timberlands this meant cultivating the support of scientists and academics, as well as aggressively targeting politicians and public servants with its messages.

By looking at the activities of one scientist in particular we can see how Timberlands gained his support and then used this support to sway public opinion. This

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<sup>169</sup> Hager & Burton, p.38.

<sup>170</sup> Hilliard, D. (1998, October 26). *Timberlands defends itself*, letter to the editor, The Evening Post, p.18.

<sup>171</sup> Hilliard, D. *Forester fights back: activists overlook the facts*.

<sup>172</sup> Slade, M. (1997, October 17). *Body Shop backs tree huggers*, The Independent, p.1.

<sup>173</sup> Llewellyn, I. (1999, August 18). *Timberlands campaign went against the grain, say greenies*, The Independent, p.8.

scientist is a good example of how the privatisation of science in New Zealand has created a pool of people who have the status of independent academics, but also run private consultancies.<sup>174</sup> This situation is concerning because when such people are quoted in the media the public is not readily aware of who they may be receiving funding from to carry out private research. Therefore there is the potential for conflicts of interest to interfere with their roles as so-called independent experts.

At the time of the Timberlands/Shandwick campaign David Norton was a forest ecologist working in the Canterbury University School of Forestry. He was also running a private consultancy through which he began to get contracts to work for Timberlands.<sup>175</sup> It must be said that his work for Timberlands was with the aim of helping make the process as ecologically friendly as possible, but the point is that there was a conflict of interest when he came to publicly defend Timberlands. This occurred when the company's plans for its controversial beech logging scheme were leaked in 1998. Following the leak Norton was quoted defending Timberlands practices and wrote to many National and Labour MPs criticising opponents of the logging scheme.<sup>176</sup> While naturally he was entitled to voice his views on the issue, the problem was that in neither his statements nor letters did he acknowledge his personal involvement with Timberlands. Several government press releases issued in support of Timberlands quoted Norton, referring to him simply as an eminent scientist. This shows the importance of questioning the motivations and allegiances of people presented as independent experts before placing trust.

Lobbying people involved in political decision making was of vital concern to Timberlands, being a state-owned company. Timberlands also realised the value to public opinion of having the support of important members of society. The Timberlands Papers show the key targets for lobbying: '1 Shareholder – Ministries of Finance and SOEs, 2 Advisers and government officials and 3 Caucus leaders / Relevant spokespeople.'<sup>177</sup> The plan was to identify the people with the most influence and develop personal contacts between them and Timberlands. Strategy documents showed that Timberlands planned to use a tiered approach by which the

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<sup>174</sup> Hager & Burton, p.146.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p.135.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., pp.144-145.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p.217.

most lobbying would be directed towards the MPs who had the potential to cause the company the most problems.<sup>178</sup>

The MP with the most influence over Timberlands was Jenny Shipley, who was both the Prime Minister and Minister for State-Owned Enterprises. She was one of a handful of ministers who comprised an informal group that met secretly from March 1997 to discuss how best to resolve the logging issue. Timberlands desperately wanted to know what was going on in these meetings and succeeded in cultivating a contact in Shipley's office. This person was Shipley's private secretary Cath Ingram who regularly provided Timberlands with updates on the meetings.<sup>179</sup> She also reassured Shandwick that Shipley was 'in control' and was still supporting the logging. The fact that Timberlands was able to keep tabs on ministers and make sure of their support highlights the extent to which its public relations campaign was able to influence the decision making process.

Another minister obviously important to Timberlands was environment minister Simon Upton. Timberlands exploited the relationship between Upton and environmentalist Guy Salmon to influence the minister. Salmon was a prominent figure in Timberlands' PR campaign and is worth discussing. He was head of environmental group the Maruia Society, formerly known as the Native Forest Action Council and from June 1999 as the Ecologic Foundation. He fell out with many members of the Maruia Society and during the 1990s the group's work chiefly consisted of lobbying and writing by Salmon only. He came to believe that environmentalists needed to work with companies in order to achieve their goals and hired his organisation out to companies to train them about environmental awareness and values.<sup>180</sup> He came to work closely with Timberlands and became a valuable asset in the company's PR campaign. He supported sustainable logging and frequently wrote articles and lobbied on the company's behalf. To have the head of a seemingly genuine environmental group supporting Timberlands was a vital part of its greenwashing strategy.

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p.200.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p.201.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., pp.136-137.

Salmon's relationship with Upton was also used by Timberlands in its treetops PR efforts. When Upton took over the environment portfolio he had wanted to appoint Salmon as his adviser but had been advised against this by the Prime Minister's office. According to documents in the Timberlands Papers Rob McGregor of Shandwick believed that Salmon still had influence over Upton and was effectively carrying out the role of adviser anyway. McGregor believed that the advice Salmon was giving Upton was working to counter that coming from the Ministry for the Environment.<sup>181</sup> Due to Salmon's close ties with Timberlands his involvement with Upton was beneficial to the company in two ways. He was able to influence the minister's decisions and he was also able to report back to Timberlands on how the logging issue was being treated by the government. This illustrates how the campaign sought to influence the thinking and decisions of those in power.

Also targeted were Labour Party MPs who might (and in fact did) form the government after the 1999 election. In November 1998 Labour voted at its annual conference to end all logging of West Coast public forests and offer Coasters a compensation package if it came to power. This would of course be a disaster for Timberlands and mean all its work had been in vain. The Timberlands Papers show that the company was desperate to persuade Labour leader Helen Clark to visit the West Coast where she could be taken on a PR tour and be given Timberlands' side of the logging issue. But as a state-owned enterprise Timberlands could not directly approach the opposition leader and therefore used the Coast Action Network to do so. CAN produced a letter to Clark, which it asked locals to sign, advocating that she visit to 'look for yourself instead of listening to wild extreme groups who play no part in our community.'<sup>182</sup> Through the use of CAN Timberlands again looked to activate local fears about the future, this time to put pressure on the Labour Party. In April 1999 a CAN meeting was held in Greymouth to help convince locals to support Timberlands. The political motives of the exercise were clear, with posters advertising the meeting saying: 'This is a MAJOR issue for the West Coast leading up to the November election, we cannot afford to lose our sustainable forest industry!'<sup>183</sup> At the meeting locals were urged to personally write to Helen Clark to express their support

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p.205.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p.181.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, p.188.

for Timberlands. The company hoped that such letters would indicate grassroots support for its operations and therefore influence Labour policy.

### **Handling the media**

In looking to dominate discussion about the logging issue Timberlands' PR advisers stressed the importance of always having the last word when the subject was brought up in the media. This meant careful monitoring of all media content that mentioned the company and quick responses to emphasise the company's perspective. It also meant contacting journalists with the intention of influencing their interpretation of the issue. Ideally journalists should not succumb to these pressures. They should be able to see through manipulative PR strategies like those discussed in this case study and inform the public of the truth. But as discussed in article two there are a collection of forces that are resulting in journalists not carrying out this role. So the problem for the public is that public relations practitioners, who have agendas, are increasingly winning the battle with the journalists whose job it is to present balanced, objective analysis.

The Timberlands Papers show that the PR strategy was to have as much control over the media as possible. This was to be achieved through the use of a 'Journalist Contact Programme.'<sup>184</sup> Journalists writing regularly on the issue were identified and invited on a three-day tour of the West Coast. The tours were carefully planned to avoid areas of forest damaged by logging and instead show the journalists areas that supported the company's claims about its environmentally-friendly logging practices. Reporters on these tours were also often taken out for meals by senior Timberlands staff looking to build cooperative relationships. This is a good example of the 'freebie' culture mentioned in article two that can interfere with the critical faculties of journalists.

Following these visits Timberlands expected favourable articles to be published. Together with their PR advisers Timberlands staff planned how they intended to shape the content of articles written by visiting journalists. A document contained in

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p.112.

the Timberlands Papers shows how this was applied to a forthcoming visit by *Sunday Star-Times* reporter Patrick Smellie. Paula de Roeper, Timberlands' corporate communications manager, advised the people taking Smellie around to encourage him to focus on discrediting environmentalists and highlighting how overseas experts were impressed by the Timberlands operation.<sup>185</sup> The resulting article provides a very interesting look at the arguments presented in *Secrets and Lies*. The book dismisses the article, saying the Timberlands plan worked, with over three quarters of Smellie's article devoted to Timberlands' case for the continuation of logging and the balance of the article not discussing why environmentalists opposed it.<sup>186</sup> But Smellie is most upset with the way his article was treated in the book. He says he spent a lot of time researching the issue and that even if internal documents said to try to manipulate his story it is a big leap to say that it in fact worked when he went there. He thinks that saying he had been taken in by the Timberlands PR "is as much of a misrepresentation as they (Hager and Burton) were accusing me of undertaking." He says he was offended because he believed Timberlands was making a genuine effort to come up with a method of sustainable logging on the West Coast, something nobody had done before. In Smellie's view what annoyed Hager and others was the fact that senior journalists kept going down to the West Coast to have a look and saying "this is pretty interesting."<sup>187</sup> The conjecture over this article highlights the importance of considering both sides in a debate like this and the complex nature of communications management.

This case also shows some of the effects of the movement of personnel between journalism and public relations. Klaus Sorenson and Rob McGregor, the key players for Shandwick, are both former journalists who moved into public relations. Therefore they had good knowledge of how journalists work and also had contacts within the industry. One of these contacts was allegedly used to get at a *National Business Review* journalist who was perceived to be interfering with the Timberlands PR campaign. The journalist had been invited on a PR trip to the West Coast and took the normal step of getting in touch with someone from the other side, in this instance Forest and Bird, for some comments. Forest and Bird sent him and other journalists a

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p.113.

<sup>186</sup> Smellie, P. (1998, December 27). *Chopping through the politics of trees*, Sunday Star-Times, p.5.

<sup>187</sup> Smellie, P. (personal communication)

briefing about their views.<sup>188</sup> Timberlands management were extremely unhappy about this, presumably because they wanted journalists to only hear their side of events. Sorenson, who had previously been deputy editor at the *NBR*, contacted the editor and accused the journalist of conspiring with Forest and Bird to spread untrue and defamatory information. A memo on the matter in the Timberlands Papers shows that the editor told Sorenson that he was ‘appalled’ at the conduct of his reporter.<sup>189</sup> All this had come from a journalist merely doing his job in looking for alternative views on an issue.

### The aftermath

After its victory in the November 1999 election the Labour Party announced it would phase Timberlands logging out over a two year period. All 130,000 hectares of rainforests that had previously been controlled by Timberlands would be transferred to the Department of Conservation for protection. In making the decision Labour acknowledged public pressure and also the party’s own anger at the attempts by Timberlands to influence its policy. The decision meant a victory for environmentalists who had fought for 30 years to protect these forests. According to Smellie it showed “the capacity of hearts and minds activism to win over corporate dollars is pretty spectacular.”<sup>190</sup>

Following the release of *Secrets and Lies* in August 1999, Hager and Burton laid a list of complaints with the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand in October of that year. The complaints revolved around the authors’ belief Sorenson and McGregor of Shandwick had breached professional ethics laid out in the PRINZ constitution during their work for Timberlands. Hager and Burton were concerned with the way much of the PR work done by Shandwick for Timberlands appeared to focus on attacking opponents rather than stating Timberlands’ case. To make the process impartial PRINZ enlisted the services of independent QC Hugh Rennie to investigate the case. Because of the fact that everybody knows each other in the New Zealand PR industry,

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<sup>188</sup> Hager & Burton, p.117.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p.118.

<sup>190</sup> Smellie P. (personal communication)

PRINZ felt an outside inquiry was the best way to go. After 18 months Rennie had reduced the 20 complaints down to four areas:

- 1) Someone at Shandwick had paid a third party to attend meetings of anti-logging Victoria University Environment Group. This activity was found to be unethical, but not the fault of Sorenson or McGregor.
- 2) The use of the word ‘extremists’ to describe environmentalists in documents created by Shandwick. This was found to have breached the PRINZ code of ethics.
- 3) The practice of Shandwick drafting letters to be sent to sympathetic parties for them to sign and then sent as lobbying missives. This was not found to be an ethical breach.
- 4) Shandwick had carried out a group of behaviours that could be described as actively manipulating media coverage. This was also not found to be a breach of ethics.<sup>191</sup>

Of the 20 complaints lodged by Hager and Burton, only one referring to the use of the word ‘extremists’ was upheld. Rennie concluded that manipulating the media is not unethical, instead it is standard PR practice.<sup>192</sup> PRINZ decided that it was not appropriate to punish Sorenson and McGregor, instead it hoped to use the episode to help clarify what is and is not acceptable behaviour for public relations practitioners. Nonetheless Sorenson and McGregor were outraged by the decision and immediately ended their membership of PRINZ. They maintained they were simply delivering the service their client had requested, with Sorenson saying “we are not prepared to accept this slight on our integrity.”<sup>193</sup> They argued that the word ‘extremist’ had not been used to denigrate Timberlands’ opponents, rather that it expressed the honestly held view of Timberlands and Shandwick. “We disagree that as public relations professionals we are responsible for the honestly held opinions of our clients,” said Sorenson.<sup>194</sup> The Shandwick men also hit out at Hager and Burton saying they were politically motivated and were pushing their own agendas.

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<sup>191</sup> De Boni, D. (2001, May 16). *Fateful breach in the beech*, New Zealand Herald, p.C1.

<sup>192</sup> Tidey, J. ‘Well-informed sources’ in Comrie & McGregor (eds.) (2002) *What’s News?: Reclaiming journalism in New Zealand*. Palmerston North, NZ: Dunmore Press, p.77.

<sup>193</sup> McManus, J. (2001, May 16). *PR-men quit in disgust over ethics ruling*, The Independent, p.7.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

The complainants were happy that the paying of someone to infiltrate an environmental group and the use of the word ‘extremist’ were found to be unethical, but were disappointed with the way the rest of their complaints were handled. They believed the process was one-sided and had been compromised by too much legal battling that resulted in most of their complaints never being considered. According to Hager, about three quarters of the complaint was rejected because he had been out of town one week when an unannounced request arrived instructing him to provide all his evidence by that Friday. He says his requests to review that decision were successfully opposed by Sorenson and McGregor’s lawyers.<sup>195</sup> Therefore when the PRINZ decision said that most of the accusations were unsubstantiated, Hager believes this was more to do with legal tactics than the actual ethics of the activities being reviewed.

Hager and Burton were particularly disappointed with two areas of complaint that were not upheld. The first was the practice of drafting letters to be sent to sympathetic parties for signing and then sent on as lobbying documents. PRINZ ruled that there was nothing wrong with this technique as the person who signed the letter had the freedom to do so or not. But this would seem to ignore the deceptive intentions of the plan, which were to give the impression to politicians that the letters had come directly from concerned West Coast locals. The PRINZ code of ethics states that members should avoid deceptive practices. The second area was that PRINZ dismissed the section of the complaint referring to a public relations firm conducting government lobbying on behalf of a state-owned enterprise. The complainants strongly believed that a state-owned enterprise should have no right to systematically attempt to influence the policies of the government that owns and directs it.<sup>196</sup>

The result of the PRINZ inquiry highlights the idea advocated by Hager and other critics of PR that there are two kinds of undemocratic public relations, the blatant kind where lies are told and the subtle kind where resources are used to subvert the democratic process. Thus while most of the PR activities used by Timberlands and Shandwick were found to be ethical, critics believe the end result was undemocratic

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<sup>195</sup> Hager, N. (2001). *Reaction to the Public Relations Institute decision on the professional conduct of Klaus Sorenson and Rob McGregor of Shandwick New Zealand Ltd in the Timberlands PR campaign*. Media release.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

because the resources available to an organisation such as Timberlands enables it to have a much louder voice in the public arena than its actual support may suggest. But for better or worse, this is the reality of the society we live in. The key for the public when forming opinions is to understand this fact and appreciate the potential for public relations campaigns to present a slanted version of events. And it also must be noted that an expensive PR campaign will not always achieve its aims. As Patrick Smellie asks “who won the Timberlands thing?”<sup>197</sup>

While my discussion of the Timberlands issue has been weighted towards the views of Hager, Burton and others who are critical of the PR industry, there are definitely other perspectives that should be considered. Tim Marshall, current president of PRINZ and vice-president at the time of the Rennie inquiry, believes the inquiry did a thorough job and that its impartiality enabled a fair result. He says that while it was unfortunate that Hager was unable to get the bulk of his evidence in, that was just an unfortunate reality, rather than a calculated ploy. He is also of the view that Hager goes out of his way to make largely innocent things seem scurrilous. For instance, he sees the letter writing that Shandwick carried out for Timberlands as just an example of the work PRPs do to help clients communicate, rather than a deceitful, deceptive tactic.<sup>198</sup> Others in the public relations industry argue that *Secrets and Lies* was in fact a work of PR for environmentalists, written with the intent of painting the public relations industry in a bad light. These views highlight the huge diversity of perspectives on any issue and that it is up to the individual to weigh up a variety of information when forming opinions.

QC Hugh Rennie’s ruling that manipulating the media is not unethical but rather standard public relations practice cuts to the heart of the relationship between public relations and journalism. If public relations practitioners are within their ethical rights in intentionally manipulating media content, then the role of the media in assessing the veracity and integrity of the information it puts into the public arena is surely that much more difficult and correspondingly that much more important. In the Timberlands case there is the argument that if journalists had been doing their job

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<sup>197</sup> Smellie, P. (personal communication)

<sup>198</sup> Marshall.

properly then the questionable PR tactics of Timberlands and Shandwick would have failed.

By relating the Timberlands case to the concepts of the information environment discussed in article two further light can be shed on this debate. This case supports the idea that the public sphere has been overtaken by the persuasive sphere, in that the persuasive intent of PR must be taken into consideration. The persuasive sphere concept says that the public relations most useful to society is based on reasoned argument. But in the Timberlands case we definitely saw the other form of PR, that which is based on appeals to the emotions and preconceptions of its audience. When this occurs the outcomes may not always be the most beneficial to society as a whole.

The weakness of the marketplace of ideas concept can be seen in the Timberlands case. Everybody being allowed to present whatever information they liked did not result in the truth coming to the surface. The inequality in resources between the supporters and opponents of logging, coupled with active attempts by Timberlands to suppress opposition views, meant the truth of the matter did not always become apparent to the public. The idea of the court of public opinion in relation to public relations practitioners was supported by the PRINZ decision. By not finding Sorenson and McGregor guilty of deceptive practices, PRINZ supported the idea that PRPs act like lawyers for their clients and are not required to disclose any information that may incriminate a client.

To summarise, the events covered in this case study began in the mid-1990s when state-owned enterprise Timberlands West Coast Ltd proposed to expand the scale of its logging operations on the West Coast. Timberlands realised it was fighting an uphill battle to win the support of public opinion for its activities and therefore decided to enlist the help of PR firm Shandwick New Zealand Ltd, with support from Head Consultants and Morris Communications Group. Utilising hundreds of pages of leaked strategy documents Nicky Hager and Bob Burton wrote a book, *Secrets and Lies*, alleging that the PR campaign run by Shandwick and Timberlands had been extremely deceitful in nature and had broken many of the ethical guidelines set out by the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand. The authors argued the leaked documents show how the campaign used many of the manipulative techniques widely

denounced by critics of public relations. For whatever reasons, New Zealand's news media did not see through the carefully constructed façade and were unable to help the public see the truth about what was happening. Following the release of *Secrets and Lies* Hager and Burton lodged a group of complaints with PRINZ about the conduct of Shandwick's Rob McGregor and Klaus Sorenson. The case was investigated by independent QC Hugh Rennie who upheld one of the 20 complaints. While Hager and Burton were disappointed with this outcome so too were McGregor and Sorenson who immediately quit PRINZ in disgust.

As a result of the spotlight shining on PR activity in New Zealand Nicky Hager believes the case improved things in the sense that "the good people within the industry took it seriously and talked about it." He also thinks there has been some consciousness raising among people outside the industry and encouragement of a more critical approach to the work of public relations practitioners. But he does warn that it hasn't restrained the kind of PR people who are manipulating at all and ongoing examples of Timberlands-style campaigns being run effectively.<sup>199</sup>

The Timberlands case shows that activities that can be considered undemocratic are not necessarily considered to be unethical. Whether this is right or wrong, it proves that unless there is increased regulation of the public relations industry, it is up to journalists and the public to be vigilant and look out for manipulative techniques of communication. While this case highlighted the negative potential of public relations activity it also raised some positives. It showed that the best defence against questionable PR tactics is an understanding of what they are and how they work. For instance, protesters threatened with legal action by Timberlands were aware of the concept of SLAPPs and knew that they were in no danger. If the public can become more aware of techniques such as the use of front groups and greenwashing then deceptive PR campaigns will have a diminished impact on public opinion. The case also showed the power of exposing these techniques. Following the publication of *Secrets and Lies* the heat was on Timberlands and healthy debate was ignited over the activities of PR firms and the ethical codes of their governing bodies. The case

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<sup>199</sup> Hager, N. (personal communication)

highlighted how the democratic process can be helped when light is cast into the shadowy world of public relations.

## **Four. Navigating the Information Environment**

*Nobody is going to pour truth into your brain. It's something you have to find out for yourself – Noam Chomsky.*

As I began this thesis my view of the public relations industry was of a frequently deceitful agent of elite interests in government and business. This attitude was the product of reading a handful of books and holding a distinctly cynical view of the world. But as my research went on and my knowledge grew I began to realise that such a simplistic outlook would not do at all if I was to fully comprehend the nuances of the relationship between PR and journalism. As I opened up to new possibilities I saw that there are all sorts of different types of communication occurring and it is very difficult to make definitive judgments about what is right and wrong. From my reading and discussions with people involved in communications I increasingly started to appreciate that there is a huge diversity of opinion on the roles of PR and journalism, all with their own merits and limitations. The fact is that people approach the issue from differing experiences and attitudes and aim to express their views in the best possible way. My research journey relates to this article in two ways. Firstly it has provided the material for a look at what's going on in the worlds of public relations and journalism. Secondly it impressed upon me the importance of considering and evaluating a variety of voices when forming opinions. I like to view the subject of communications as a microcosm of life in general. We are being told all sorts of different things and it is up to the individual to decide what makes the most sense.

Before plunging into the issues there is something crucial to establish: why should anyone care about PR, journalism and manipulation of public opinion? Some might say that it's a convoluted world of spin and lies and not worth bothering with. Others may feel that as members of the public we are too far removed from the processes of information dissemination to get involved in any meaningful way. I recently attended a course at the Outward Bound school in Anakiwa and the time away from all media contact gave me the opportunity to reflect on the issues I have been researching. Out in the bush, isolated from the outside world I found myself beginning to question the importance of the study I had been doing. But then I started to think about the

conversations we were having as members of a group of people from all sorts of different backgrounds. I realised that so much of what we know about the world around us comes from the media. Our opinions on all sorts of topics have been shaped by contact with television, radio, print, the Internet and other media. If there is a possibility that at times the information coming from these sources has deviated from the truth then this needs to be taken very seriously. For if our opinions are not based on accurate information then our beliefs and actions may prove harmful to society. So these issues are extremely important because if we do not take an interest in them we have the potential to lead lives that are hazardous to ourselves and those around us.

The intention of this article is to examine the debate surrounding the interface of journalism and public relations and as a result assist people in seeing how they can protect their opinions from manipulation. To set the scene I will begin with a brief background to public relations and journalism and how they interact.

Public relations is about people and organisations communicating their views and objectives. While this has been occurring throughout human history, the modern PR industry began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States. Large businesses were making record profits but were receiving increasingly negative publicity in regards to treatment of workers and other issues. As a result they turned to theories from social sciences such as psychology, economics and sociology to help them communicate with the public. These new methods of communicating proved successful and were also taken up by governments during wartime to inform the people about what was going on. In the years that have followed World War II there has been a constant rise in the plurality of ideas in society as well as a large increase in media sources. The result has been an expanding role for public relations as people and organisations compete to get their messages across. The influence of public relations can be seen in just about all areas of society where people have ideas and views to communicate.

While public relations is an undeniable force in society there are a wide range of opinions about its influence. Those who support and practice PR believe it is highly beneficial to society because it helps organisations and their publics understand each other better. By acting honestly and ethically they see public relations practitioners

(PRPs) as people who assist their clients to participate in the democratic process and compete fairly for public opinion. In addition to political issues PR's supporters believe it helps society in a commercial sense by allowing businesses to improve communications with their customers. At the other end of the spectrum are the critics of the public relations industry who believe it has a largely negative impact on society. Noam Chomsky and others argue that the modern PR industry was created at a stage when corporate leaders realised that the only barriers to their enterprises were the public mind coupled with the newly realised political power of the masses. Critics use terminology such as corporate propaganda to describe the activities of the PR industry. Their view is that public relations is a tool by which government and business leaders engineer consent for their activities. These two perspectives are at opposite ends of the scale and the reality of PR's role in society lies somewhere in between. Because it is such a wide-ranging industry there are many examples of it working in both the best and worst interests of society. Rather than holding a definitive view on its role, it would seem more beneficial to recognise its presence and appreciate that it is the use of communication to attempt to gain advantage in an open and competitive environment.

In addition to the growth of the public relations industry changes have been occurring in the world's media. One of the major trends has been the commercialisation of media sources, with turning profits becoming their chief concern. In a highly competitive market many media managers now see the public as consumers to be satisfied and increased, rather than audiences to be stimulated and informed. The result has been a greater emphasis on infotainment and soft news at the expense of investigative journalism and other reporting that deals with more complicated political and social issues. It has been argued that the priority of mass media outlets has shifted to delivering audiences to advertisers, ahead of working to protect the public interest. The way in which the journalism carried out by today's media outlets interacts with the public relations industry is a vital part of the newsmaking process. It is a very interesting relationship and one that has significant implications for democracy.

Public relations practitioners and journalists have a complex relationship in that they constantly battle each other, but also rely on each other to do their jobs. The conflict arises because journalists are tasked with presenting objective analysis to the public

while PRPs aim to use press releases and other communications to influence news stories to favour the organisations they represent. But they also need to co-operate because PR is a useful source of information for journalists and public relations practitioners must get their views into the media in order to succeed. A useful analogy puts the journalist in the role of gatekeeper, deciding which information to accept and which to reject. This role is becoming more difficult for several reasons, one of these being sheer weight of numbers. Mirroring trends overseas there are estimated to be more PRPs, around 3,000, than journalists, around 2,300, currently working in New Zealand. The more that members of the public can become aware of this relationship of mutual dependence the better the newsmaking process can be understood.

### **PR and journalism in New Zealand**

To gauge the current state of the debate over the interface of PR and journalism in New Zealand I conducted interviews with six people who bring conflicting perspectives to the issue: Bill Ralston, TVNZ's news chief; Gavin Ellis, former editor of the *New Zealand Herald*; Patrick Smellie, former senior journalist and now corporate communications manager for Contact Energy; Paul Dryden, executive director of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand; Dr Joe Atkinson, Political Studies lecturer at Auckland University and Nicky Hager, investigative researcher and author. All these people have extensive experience of the interface of PR and journalism and each has strong views about the current situation. As you would expect there is a healthy amount of rivalry and criticism between the practitioners of the different disciplines, something that helps us gain a diverse and balanced understanding of the area.

The public relations industry has always struggled with a negative image, which is rather ironic considering that it is the business of managing reputations and perceptions. You might say that it is considered by many to be the dark side of the force (the force being communications) battling against the honourable Jedi knights of journalism. But as I mentioned earlier this view does not capture the true dynamics of the relationship and needs to be reviewed if we are to put ourselves in a strong position to evaluate the news. By visiting some of the arguments over the role of PR in society we can do this.

According to Dryden the role of public relations is to help people and organisations with their communications. He says that many people and organisations do not know how to communicate well and PR is there to assist them. He doesn't like to think of it as public relations providing a biased view of an issue, but rather helping an organisation present itself in the best possible light. This is one of the central issues to the debate about PR. Critics often use terms like 'spin' to describe PR activity and argue that it aims to manipulate and twist information on certain issues. But public relations practitioners believe it is nothing more than the practice of presenting truths that enhance the reputation of their clients. Therefore it comes down to whether the information presented by PRPs is honest and truthful. Atkinson says you cannot blame public relations practitioners for wanting to get the best story for their clients across. He believes that the majority are not in the business of telling outright lies, but instead try to point people in the direction of good news.

Journalist turned PRP Smellie agrees, saying "my job is to put the arguments which favour my employer honestly. So there's no point in lying because you'll get found out. But a lot of the time if nobody asks you the questions that are the burning issues you're not going to volunteer it unless it's a good time to do it." This statement underlines how PRPs look to present their clients in the most positive way. So while everything they say may well be true, we must keep in mind that there may be things left unsaid that could alter a positive perception. Smellie reinforces this point: "I'm not going to hide the fact that there are issues that we don't want to talk about from time to time, or at particular times. In that sense it's political management."

But it must be noted that there have been examples of public relations practitioners using false information to further the causes of their clients. American writers John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton describe one such case in their book *Toxic sludge is good for you: Lies, damn lies and the public relations industry*. To briefly summarise, the case involved PR firm Hill & Knowlton representing the Kuwaiti government at the time of the Iraq invasion. In order to gain support for US involvement Hill & Knowlton arranged for a girl, later revealed to be the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the US, to come out and say that she had witnessed Iraqi soldiers removing babies from incubators in Kuwaiti hospitals and leaving them to die on the floor. The fact that this was not true was not discovered until the US government had

already made the decision to send troops. While this is an extreme example that may only represent a small minority of PR activity, it is still worth noting because it shows the potential for PR to influence major events. Here in New Zealand there have been allegations of PR acting to deceive, notably in the ‘Corngate’ case and in the operations of state-owned logging company Timberlands West Coast Ltd. Much debate surrounds both these cases and they provide good examples of the differing perspectives people have on public relations.

Nicky Hager was involved in investigating both these local cases and has serious concerns about the effects of public relations on democratic society. He believes that there are two kinds of undemocratic PR, one much more stealthy and effective than the other. The first is the blatant type where a public relations person may tell a lie or misrepresent who they are working for. The second type is much more subtle and involves the use of resources to subvert or swamp the democratic process. Hager says this can occur when, for example, an organisation may have one percent of the population on its side but can make it look like it has fifty percent by expending resources and hiring a PR firm. He argues that while the activities involved such as letter-writing and advertising are ethical in themselves the end effect is undemocratic because of the inequality of resources on the different sides.

He cites as a classic case the anti-MMP campaign of 1993 where a small group of business people spent millions and nearly stopped what seemed to be a certain referendum in favour of MMP. He says they didn’t do anything wrong, just advertised a lot, but the effect was extremely undemocratic. “It was mobilisation of resources to achieve their narrow ends whether or not they had the public on their side.” This argument raises all sorts of important questions about the organisation of society. The inequality of resources is an undeniable problem, but does it make for undemocratic behaviour? Capitalism operates with a system of free markets where people are free to buy and sell as they please. This makes the kind of subversion of democracy that Hager alleges a legitimate technique. So the answer must be for people to be aware of it and realise when a particular organisation is dominating the discourse on a subject. Then the question must be asked as to whether this is the result of genuine support or of superior access to resources.

The consensus among the people I interviewed is that intentionally deceitful PR is a minority of the whole business. Most practitioners realise that if they lie they will be found out sooner or later. Smellie says it is pointless to do the type of communications that keeps the lid on problems because it will eventually all come crashing down. “You have to take the long term view on decent communications.” He says that much of the time in communications you are trying to convince your employers and fellow workers that the way they want to talk about an issue may help the organisation in the short term but cause problems in the long run. While in a way this is comforting to us as members of the public it by no means ensures that we will receive balanced and comprehensive views on contentious subjects. Because PR aims to create the most favourable impression of a client we must look to other channels for alternative perspectives. This is where journalists come into the picture. Their job is to evaluate PR information and look around to find the facts that may have been left out of the public relations line. As members of the public, to protect our opinions we must ask how successful New Zealand’s journalists are in carrying out this role.

Joe Atkinson is of the belief that while the public may come to be misled, the finger should not automatically be pointed at the public relations industry. He thinks the problem is with journalism’s coverage of issues, rather than PR’s calculated efforts to deceive. “PR’s not a worry. PR is a source that they (journalists) can then go on and check.” It is his belief that problems arise when journalists fail to carry out research outside of the information presented by public relations practitioners. He says it is necessary to be sceptical about accusations of spin because “much of what the press has said about spin is partly self-serving.” By this he means that saying governments and corporations always lie can be used by journalists as an excuse for not doing any research. He also thinks that there are actually forms of journalistic spin that people must be aware of. These can involve setting up current affairs programmes in certain ways and arranging interviews with the intention of catching people out. Just as PRPs look to present a person or issue in a certain light, so can journalists. This view is echoed by Paul Dryden who says journalists take particular lines of questioning and may be looking for a particular outcome when researching a story. In such instances he sees public relations as a countering force to try and help balance a story. Both public relations and journalism are working with certain agendas in mind and this must be taken into consideration when looking at their activities.

Bill Ralston believes that journalists in New Zealand generally do a good job of finding additional information to PR releases and helping the public get a balanced view of issues. He says that as a senior journalist he looks to encourage reporters to have an enquiring mind and not take the first story they encounter. He thinks this sort of training, combined with tight editorial controls ensures that reporters are not misled by the public relations line on an argument.

When asking whether our journalists are doing a good job of handling public relations people Gavin Ellis believes you have to make a distinction between corporate and state PR. “In terms of corporate public relations they do a reasonable job in sorting the wheat from the chaff.” Though he does think problems can arise in two instances. One is where corporate PRPs try to lead people away from a story, something that can be hard to overcome. The second is the opposite approach where they are terribly helpful and in doing so tend to skew a story in a certain direction. “There will obviously be instances where PR people will prevail in both of those cases, but I think that generally speaking at least senior journalists are awake to the dangers and therefore avoid them.”

But Ellis says that “as far as state PR is concerned I have some greater concerns there.” These concerns are based on the development of what he sees as a situation where “the PR person has become a substitute for authority in terms of dealings with the media where access to the actual seated authority becomes more and more difficult to obtain.” He believes it is wrong for the PR person to become the substitute authority figure as it is a step away from real accountability. Ellis says it is not just with politicians that this is happening. “When was the last time we saw the chief executive of Land Transport New Zealand fronting on a road issue? That’s a very good example of the substituting of authority by public relations.” It is his view that these state PR people are there to control the flow of information not facilitate it and do their best to remain unidentified. He says that when he was editor of the *New Zealand Herald* they started to name some of these people and they really hate it. If these people can be identified more frequently then news audiences can get a better idea of from whom information is coming and how it may have been filtered.

Since the current Labour government was elected in 1999 there has been a huge increase in state public relations. Figures obtained under the Official Information Act show that the number of PR staff in government departments has risen by 48 percent to 293 and PR spending has risen by 51 percent to \$44.3 million per year. Hager believes this situation is a big concern for our democratic process because “nearly every day on nearly every issue the government is managing it and that’s why issues suddenly appear, suddenly disappear, get closed down, get deferred.” He feels that journalists are struggling to deal with the government’s management of issues: “It’s kind of like ten to the government one to the media on those things.”

Hager is very critical of many in our media organisations and thinks they lack a strong sense of mission about finding the truth. “It feels to me that in the news organisations there’s less interest in getting it right, it’s more about filling the bulletins or filling the paper.” He is dispirited by the way he believes all media will chase the same issue for three days, then the next issue for the next three days and so on. He thinks this suggests that other people are controlling the agendas by putting issues in and taking them out again. This is a grave accusation against the news media and one that drew a prickly response from Ellis. He responded to Hager’s idea that the media’s agenda is controlled from outside by saying “I think that’s part of Nicky’s conspiracy theorist gene makeup. I don’t think that it’s a matter of puppet masters and puppets.” Instead he acknowledges there is a legitimate criticism there of episodic reporting but doesn’t believe it is the result of orchestration by PR people. Rather he feels that in the fast paced news environment there is a tendency not to follow through with coverage of stories of significance. Ellis believes that timing the release of information can be used to avert attention from a scandal but says “I don’t think you need PR people to do that, politicians and companies are just as good at doing that themselves.”

There are also several structural factors that can make it difficult for journalists to find the truth. As I have mentioned there are understood to be more public relations practitioners operating in New Zealand than journalists. Also the scale of resources available to PR firms is much larger than to most news organisations, one of the results of which Ralston describes: “They (PR firms) have got some very experienced journalists working for them because they can afford to pay higher rates than most newspapers or broadcasters can.” The movement of experienced reporters into public

relations not only weakens journalism but it strengthens PR because former journalists have an intimate knowledge of the news gathering process and the best ways to influence stories. The result is that journalists are often younger and less experienced than the PR people trying to influence them. Hager thinks there should be a stronger sense of peer pressure against people who switch sides. “Cops wouldn’t like people who went off and ran P labs.”

The nature of public relations work as opposed to journalism can also leave reporters at a disadvantage when it comes to knowledge of subject matter. A journalist may have just a day or two to get to grips with complex issues to do with the pharmaceutical industry, for example, whereas it is the job of a PRP working for a pharmaceutical company to manage those issue on a daily basis. This issue of time is where Ralston feels there is the biggest constraint on daily news organisations like his. Reporters may only have six or seven hours to get a story ready and therefore must find people quickly and talk to them. This is not a lot of time to get to the bottom of a significant story where there may well be a large commercial public relations firm involved. Patrick Smellie agrees that the lack of specialised knowledge is a problem in New Zealand journalism. He says that in the electricity sector where he manages communications there are only about five reporters who understand the issues. “It’s not having people to deal with for whom there’s any kind of common understanding of the basics that is the biggest issue.” He says he feels sorry for journalists here because they are often reporting on several different areas, which makes it much harder to build considerable knowledge in any one subject. “It’s a pity that there’s a lack of maturity in New Zealand journalism and frankly I think that makes the job of PR people in New Zealand a bit easier.” This is definitely worth keeping in mind the next time you see a news story about a complicated issue.

The impact of commercial pressures also needs to be discussed when looking at the effectiveness of the media. Joe Atkinson expresses serious concern about the current state of the media: “PR has been a fact of life since the beginning of time and I’m not sure that it’s necessarily worse now than it used to be. But I am sure that journalism is worse now than it has been.” He believes the quest to increase audience sizes is harming the ability of news organisations to present news of depth and substance. “As long as news corporations are part of larger entertainment conglomerates...serious

journalism is in trouble.” This view doesn’t sit well with journalists Ralston and Ellis. Ralston thinks it is “fashionable to sneer at the quality or relative weight of (news) stories” and says you need to remember that to an extent media outlets are selling a product which needs to be made as interesting as possible. According to Ellis “Joe has a very jaundiced view of commercial media of all types. I would say that simply because you are there to make money it doesn’t make you a pariah.” He acknowledges commercial pressures are a factor but doesn’t think that they are an overwhelming force. He says that difficulties do arise when a media outlet’s revenue declines because inevitably managers will start cutting costs to maintain the level of profit. That’s where problems occur for journalism “because if you have less money to do your newsgathering, your newsgathering can’t be as comprehensive.”

Striking a balance between public service and commercial aims is probably the most crucial issue in contemporary journalism. As the news market becomes more competitive there is a tendency toward more stories about celebrities, sex, fashion and so forth. There can be problems for democratic discourse if these stories are run at the expense of coverage of important political and social issues. A good local example was the massive coverage in the media of last year’s New Zealand Fashion Week. Meanwhile the outcome of a parliamentary inquiry into allegations of a governmental cover-up of the illegal release of GE organisms (the ‘Corngate’ affair) that same week received a very small mention in comparison. It may well have been one of those cases of information being intentionally released at a time when public attention was elsewhere. But while there are these issues with commercial media Ellis believes that “anybody that sees public service broadcasting as the only legitimate form of media doesn’t live in the real world.” The fact is that commercial media have the widest reach and are used by the most people. As news audiences we must accept their limitations and look elsewhere if we feel that coverage of important issues is lacking.

The role of the public relations industry in New Zealand was thrown into the spotlight in 1999 by the publication of the book *Secrets and Lies: The anatomy of an anti-environmental PR campaign*, written by Nicky Hager and Bob Burton. Utilising leaked strategy documents, the book claimed that state-owned logging company Timberlands West Coast Ltd had hired PR firm Shandwick to run a deceitful and unethical public relations campaign. Hager and Burton believed the purpose of the

campaign was to produce a false impression of support for Timberlands' logging of native forests, as well as undermine and discredit the work of environmentalists. In their opinion Shandwick's practitioners had contravened PRINZ's Code of Ethics and they lodged an official 20-point complaint with the organisation. Without going into great detail, the complaint argued that the Shandwick campaign had been intentionally deceptive and had set out to actively manipulate media coverage. PRINZ appointed independent QC Hugh Rennie to investigate the complaint and he upheld just one of the complaints against the Shandwick practitioners. Rennie concluded that manipulating the media is not unethical, it is just standard PR practice. While PRINZ was pleased with the decision, the complainants were disappointed and felt that the inquiry had been dominated by legal proceedings which hindered their ability to present their case.

Hager believes the Timberlands case exemplified his theory about resource inequality subverting the democratic process. On the other hand those supportive of the PR industry's role in the affair believe that Timberlands and Shandwick did nothing wrong and that Hager and Burton's book was in fact itself a work of public relations on behalf of environmental interests. Tim Marshall, president of PRINZ and vice president at the time of the inquiry, says he thinks that either deliberately or for lack of understanding Hager is out to get the PR industry. According to Marshall, Hager has a habit of making straightforward things out to seem scurrilous. Hager responds by saying that someone like Marshall may find it easy to recognise the blatant kind of undemocratic PR where lies are told, but may not see the more subtle kind where resources are used to unfairly dominate the discourse on an issue.

The final result of the West Coast logging issue provides another interesting dimension to the debate over public relations. Following its election to government in 1999 the Labour Party decided to end the logging operations on the West Coast, handing victory to the environmentalists. So despite having the advantage in resources and using a commercial PR firm Timberlands was unable to win enough support for its point of view in the end. Patrick Smellie was involved with covering the issue as a reporter and believes the outcome shows that "the capacity of hearts and minds activism to win over corporate dollars is pretty spectacular and maybe that's the way it should be." This is encouraging because it shows that if people are passionate

enough about an issue they can make their presence felt in the democratic process despite not having a lot of money or using a PR firm.

Opinions on the outcome of the PRINZ inquiry aside, the Code of Ethics is a very important issue when looking at the public relations industry. All national PR bodies throughout the world have codes of ethics which basically state that members must always be accurate and honest in their communications and avoid deceptive practices. According to Paul Dryden the Code of Ethics is very important to PRINZ as it helps to ensure that “honesty is always first and foremost.” Though this sounds good, bodies such as PRINZ are voluntary and anybody can practice public relations without being a member and following the ethical code. PRINZ currently has 800 members, less than a third of the number of practitioners it estimates there are in the country. Sceptics also wonder about how well a non-independent body can scrutinise its own members. Joe Atkinson believes the PRINZ Code of Ethics is “fairly vague and you could drive a truck through it and PRINZ is unlikely to police its own people.” Because PR is not a trained, scientific profession, but a wide range of activities, he feels that it is actually a bit unusual to have a code of ethics.

Looking to the future there is a general consensus that the interface of journalism and public relations will carry on in much the same fashion as has occurred so far. Public relations practitioners will go on aiming to create favourable impressions of clients and journalists will go on trying to present balanced perspectives to their audiences. From my reading and interviewing I have come across some ideas for changes and initiatives in the practice of both PR and journalism that could help the whole process serve the public better.

An area where there has been discussion is the potential for independent regulation of the PR industry. There have been suggestions of a PR ombudsman or something similar to monitor public relations activity and determine when ethical boundaries have been broken. But there are two major problems with this idea. The first is that PR is a broad, wide-ranging industry and there is no single definition of what the practice of public relations actually is. It touches on all types of communications and is not like the advertising industry which is clearly defined with boundaries. The second is that by nature the most effective PR is invisible, achieving its aims without

people even realising it's going on. It is this aspect of PR that concerns people the most and conjures fears of spin doctors behind the scenes manipulating public opinion. As independent regulation seems out of the question the responsibility to cast light on any manipulative activity falls in two areas. Firstly, the media, who need to dig deep into issues to find the truth. Secondly people who are uncomfortable with the tactics being employed by their organisation. Hager says we need gutsy people to leak information as happened in the Timberlands case. "What does discipline and scare and deter any kind of unethical behaviour is the threat of exposure. There need to be more case studies where people get thoroughly done over and it looks like it's backfired on them for (acting unethically)."

In terms of journalistic practice there have been calls for more rigorous disclosure of sources of information. Atkinson says that PRPs want to make it seem like news comes from journalists even when it may actually have come from them. He thinks they are looking to give the air of journalistic neutrality to stories that can actually be fairly one-sided. The danger, as expressed by Dr Onora O'Neill in the 2002 Reith Lectures, is that if media outlets circulate information without saying where it came from the public is left powerless to assess the value of that information. According to Gavin Ellis "disclosure is important and all media need to be more mindful of the forms and functions of disclosure in relation to public relations." He believes disclosure means making it easier for the public to establish the relationship between the journalist and the organisation they are reporting on. "Quoting of sources is the easiest way of doing it and frankly I'd like to see more quoting by name of spokespeople." He says to best serve the public journalists must put their own egos aside. "I think that one of the dangers is that in a sort of misplaced superiority journalists don't like to be seen to be recipients of information from PR people. Well if they are, they are. It's as simple as that."

To improve journalism's ability to counter public relations Hager says there needs to be much more co-operation between reporters. PR firms are highly organised and have the resources to acquire comprehensive knowledge of subjects, whereas journalists are often researching a story by themselves. He thinks there is a very artificial idea of competition between journalists which results in a whole lot of isolated organisations often not doing a very good job. He would like to see more

journalists, quite separate of their media organisations, collaborating as much as possible to share knowledge. This would require reporters to put helping someone from a different outlet do a good story ahead of trying to take it for themselves. While this would definitely benefit the public it is hard to imagine it happening much considering the reality of competition between media outlets to get stories first and create interest in their product.

Hager also thinks our news media need to be more critical and exhibit a stronger ethic of scepticism toward information provided by public relations people. He would like to see journalism that pulls apart the whole process and journalists who specialise in reporting on PR rather than being subject to it. “Here we have journalists who know it’s going on but it’s almost like it’s not done to report it.” He also thinks we need more active programmes and columns that comment on the quality of journalism and point it out if journalists are being spun. National Radio’s *Mediawatch* looks at these issues but is unfortunately tucked away in a Sunday morning slot.

### **What can be done?**

Now that we’ve looked at the debate over PR, journalism and their impacts on society it’s time to think about what we can do as members of the public to protect ourselves from being had. All the people I spoke with agreed the most important thing is to use a wide range of media sources. The coverage of an issue can differ markedly between media outlets for all sorts of reasons. Each outlet can have different sources of information and different ways of interpreting what is happening. By comparing and contrasting reports we can learn more about an issue and expose ourselves to a range of opinions. This also means looking outside the mainstream media and reaching out to alternative media wherever possible. Thanks to the Internet and the burgeoning world of weblogs we now have access to a multitude of commentary and opinion both locally and internationally. There are countless alternative media sources available, a few good ones for starters are:

#### **Local**

- *Scoop Independent News* [scoop.co.nz](http://scoop.co.nz)

- *Aotearoa Independent Media Centre* indymedia.org.nz
- *The Mediawatch Blog* mediawatch.co.nz
- *Public Address* publicaddress.net
- *Big News* big-news.blogspot.com

## **International**

- *Z Magazine/ZNet* zmag.org
- *Independent Media Center* indymedia.org
- *Guerilla News Network* guerillanews.com
- *Center for Media and Democracy* prwatch.org
- *Common Dreams News Center* commondreams.org

When using media sources it is vital to apply the phrase caveat emptor – buyer beware. There is no guarantee that the information we receive from media is 100 percent accurate and not biased in some way. A healthy level of scepticism is important if we are to protect ourselves from manipulation. Nicky Hager describes this nicely, saying that members of the public and journalists too must possess “what’s called a bullshit detector.” This means challenging what we are being told and questioning who may stand to benefit from a particular shift in public opinion. What it doesn’t mean is becoming cynical and assuming that we are being misinformed on most issues. Instead it is a matter of bringing an open mind to media use and looking for alternatives if we are unhappy with coverage of an issue. Hager would like to see people express more dissatisfaction with the standard of news we have in New Zealand: “One thing people could do more of is just to say ‘what is this crap?’”

Understanding how public relations practitioners and journalists operate is also very important. According to Atkinson “the better educated one is in general about how the media work, the less likely on is to be taken in by spin.” As far as understanding public relations goes, the most important thing to remember is that it is the job of its practitioners to present their clients in the best possible light. And while PR’s supporters claim that a high percentage of PR is honest and ethical, there are examples of manipulative campaigns out there. Many of these utilise the ‘third party

technique.' Critics of public relations believe that this strategy is used by PRPs to put the words of their client into the mouths of supposedly neutral people. One of the instruments of the third party technique is the creation of front groups to communicate view on an issue. An example from the United States is the American Council on Science and Health, which sounds like an organisation looking out for the public interest. But thanks to funding from corporations such as Burger King, Coca-Cola, NutraSweet Monsanto and others it has worked to defend petrochemical companies, the nutritional value of fast foods and the safety of pesticides and growth hormones for dairy cows. With the high use of people presented as independent experts in the media today an awareness of the third party technique is very useful. It is always worth questioning the motivations and allegiances of such people. Understanding the tools public relations practitioners use to present their clients is vital to finding the full story on an issue. Websites such as the *Center for Media and Democracy* provide detailed analysis of many public relations techniques and directories of PR firms, front groups, think tanks and other such organisations.

In regards to the media it is important to be mindful of the impact of commercial demands on the content produced by mainstream news organisations. In some instances this can lead to important political and social issues receiving low levels of attention. In these cases it can be beneficial to look around alternative news sources to find out more about the issue. The lack of numbers and resources compared to the PR industry is another factor that can leave journalists at a disadvantage. We need to be aware that the reporters telling us about an issue may not be as knowledgeable about the subject matter as the public relations practitioners involved. So to protect ourselves from manipulation we need to be aware of the interface between public relations and journalism and how it affects the production of news. The two groups have a complex relationship which works best for them both when the public is unaware of what is happening behind the scenes. But as members of the public we are in a much stronger position when we can appreciate the subtleties of the news process.

When assessing a news story there are a couple of other things to consider as well. We need to be wary of stories that are one-sided or where the source of the information is unclear. In these instances we need to ask why this has happened and

look elsewhere to fill in the gaps. Also the tone of a story is important. If it is full of emotive appeals rather than reasoned argument we need to be wary. Recent world events have illustrated how fear can be used to gain approval for government actions. It can be argued that an exaggeration of the threat of terrorism has been used by the governments of the US, Britain and other countries to justify military action and new legislation that threatens civil liberties.

To help the public become better versed in the art of information evaluation we need to find ways to encourage more interest in news and current affairs. Gavin Ellis believes that “we’re not a particularly news-aware country, the number of people who don’t read newspapers or watch television is alarming.” Joe Atkinson agrees, saying most people have a limited interest in politics and would rather find out about celebrities and consumer goods. This is a tough situation to remedy in the short term and Ellis believes the long term answer lies in schools. “I’m a firm believer that if we had more emphasis on civics in schools then we would have a much more aware population.” Civics is the study of such things as the form and role of government, the purposes of representation, in short how society operates. If this could be combined with more education on how the media work and the impact of all of it on our lives then maybe we could develop a population that is more interested and involved in the democratic process. In the short term I think people who are interested in current affairs need to avoid the temptation to become cynical and look to create interest among those around them by sharing knowledge and encouraging discussion of important issues and how they affect our lives.

To summarise here is a list of points to remember to help protect our opinions from manipulation:

- Employ a ‘bullshit detector’
- Caveat emptor when using media sources
- Use a wide range of sources and reach out to alternative sources as much as possible
- Look for programmes and columns that critique media coverage
- Watch for stories that are one-sided or where the source of information is unclear

- Be aware that people are constantly trying to influence our opinions
- Understand what public relations practitioners do and the techniques they use to help their clients
- Understand how journalists operate and the factors that can limit their effectiveness
- Appreciate the interaction of public relations and journalism and how this relationship impacts upon the production of news
- Trust is crucial, be careful with whom you place it
- Appreciate that there are at least two sides to every story and many issues require careful consideration
- Encourage a better understanding of civics and the media among our children

I would like to finish with a passage from US writers John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton to sum up how we can counter opinion manipulation: ‘First, learn to recognise the influence of PR in your life; second, seek alternative sources of information; third, become personally involved in local efforts to directly address important issues at the community level.’

## **Exegesis**

These pieces of journalism on the role of public relations in the democratic process were sparked by an interest in the case of the death of British weapons inspector David Kelly and the implications for public opinion formulation. It was a fascinating case because of the dynamics between government, public relations, the media and the public. It illustrated the way the communication of information can play such a central role in an event like the invasion of a country. The potential for a government, or other organisations for that matter, to manipulate information to justify its behaviour is a very real concern in a democracy and can happen all too easily without public awareness. As members of the public we are in a difficult position when it comes to comprehending reality and making good decisions. There was a desire to look at how the public relations industry and the media are helping or hindering this process. This thesis was planned as an extended work of journalism that would assist readers in understanding how information is managed. The central question at the core of this project was: ‘How can the public protect its opinions from manipulation?’

The research began with two books by Nicky Hager about public relations in New Zealand – *Seeds of Distrust* and *Secrets and Lies: The anatomy of an anti-environmental PR campaign*. Both these books alleged deceitful behaviour by public relations practitioners with the intention of controlling the public understanding of issues. These books argue PR can be used against the public interest and needs to be challenged or strictly regulated if people are to be able to engage meaningfully in the democratic process.

This view is expanded in Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber’s books *Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, damn lies and the public relations industry* and *Trust Us We’re Experts: How industry manipulates science and gambles with your future* which detail the tactics they believe the PR industry uses to manipulate the public mind. Their view is that the key to defeating these tactics is simply knowledge. *Global Spin: The corporate assault on environmentalism* by Sharon Beder also discusses PR tactics and the failings of the news media in presenting balanced coverage. Beder’s work concentrates on the communication of environmental issues, alleging that wealthy corporations deceitfully manage opinion through the use of PR firms.

Alex Carey's *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy: Propaganda in the US and Australia* is considered to be a seminal text on the topic of opinion management. The book argues that elite interests in government and business do not wish to leave their fate in the hands of the democratic process so they use public relations and other tools to engineer consent for their activities. Also important is his discussion of the Manichean view of the world, whereby things are considered to be either pure or evil with no middle ground. Carey believes when people can be convinced of this view of the world they are much more susceptible to propaganda. The way the current Bush administration communicates with the American people, for instance over the issue of the War on Terror, appears to exemplify this theory. *Propaganda and the Public Mind: Conversations with Noam Chomsky* by David Barsamian gives a good insight to the thinking of Chomsky on these matters. He is of the view that there has been a conscious effort on the part of elite interests to close the public mind off from critical thought and leave people as spectators rather than participants in democracies. The answer according to Chomsky is to challenge people to think things through and find truth for themselves, rather than relying on others. The perspective of these writers is nicely summarised by Carey:

The twentieth century has been characterised by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy.<sup>200</sup>

These writers see PR as an often hidden force that helps elite interests engineer consent for things the public would not support if it realised the truth. They discuss particular techniques such as the use of front groups and greenwashing which they believe subvert democracy through misrepresentation. At this stage of the research I was heavily influenced by this perspective and was primarily interested in exposing and describing the deceitful tactics used by the PR industry.

The next part of the research involved reviewing the literature supportive of public relations. Here text books used in the teaching of public relations were analysed as well as a variety of other literature dealing with the role of PR in society. Key text

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<sup>200</sup> Carey, A. (1995). *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy: Propaganda in the US and Australia*; edited by Andrew Lohrey. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, p.18.

books in this regard were *This is PR: The realities of public relations* by Newsom et al. and *PR: Strategies and tactics* by Wilcox et al. These books obviously cast PR in a much different light to those of its critics and discuss it in terms of providing a valuable service to society. Their value is explaining more about how PR is carried out. *The New Australian and New Zealand Public Relations Manual* by Tymson and Lazar was also useful in explaining the work of public relations practitioners. It described how research is one of the key activities in identifying an organisation's publics, how they relate to the organisation and how best to manage communications with them. The authors also described five major areas of PR activity, being relations with: media, government, investors, employees and the community. This range of contact throughout society impressed upon me the influence of PR and the importance of understanding its impact.

The research also examined the idea of symmetric versus asymmetric communications. This is very important as it describes the difference between communications where organisations and publics have an equal say and those where one side dominates the discourse. In their book *Managing Public Relations*, influential writers Grunig and Hunt lay down a four-part typology to describe the evolution of PR. It is seen as a growth from a one-way propagandistic activity to a two-way symmetric operation where public relations practitioners act as mediators between organisations and their publics. The idea is that while PR may have been manipulative in the past it has gone past this and is now working in the best interests of society. Debate revolves around whether this is actually the case or if it is more of an attempt to justify public relations.

One of the most important things that came out of texts supportive of PR was the emphasis placed on ethical behaviour. According to Newsom et al. 'a public relations practitioner should be measured by only one standard: ethical performance.'<sup>201</sup> This stands in stark contrast to so much in the criticism about how PR is a dirty and deceitful activity. Examining the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand Code of Ethics to see what sort of guidelines it sets down illustrates that there is plenty of

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<sup>201</sup> Newsom, D., Turk, J. & Kruckeberg, D. (2004). *This is PR: The realities of public relations*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, p.4.

contention over how effective codes of ethics are and shows how hard it is to pin down exactly what public relations is and how it operates.

Most of the criticism of PR deals with the behaviour of governments and corporations, but it must be noted that PR is used by just about every organisation with something to say. There are also examples, such as public education campaigns on issues like drink driving, that show how PR can definitely have a positive effect on society. The point made by those sources which argue PR's positive role is the fact that public relations is all about presenting a client in the best possible light by drawing attention to information that reflects well on an organisation.

The next section of research was concerned with the interaction of public relations with journalism. This area is critical because the information received from the media by the public is the result of this interaction. *Rethinking PR: The spin and the substance* by Kevin Moloney provides a balanced look at the activities of both PR and journalism, placing them in the wider context of the political economy. The book draws attention to the factors that are interfering with the ability of journalists to carry out the 'gatekeeper' role, such as inequality of resources compared with public relations practitioners and the increasing amount of editorial space there is to fill. His idea that the notion of the public sphere has been superseded by the persuasive sphere where the undeniable persuasive influence of public relations is recognised is a convincing one. In his view the intertwined relationship between public relations and journalism is about both sides trying to match mutual dependencies in the supply and demand of information.

Another useful resource was a research paper by AUT student Paul Hewlett, someone who has practical experience in both journalism and PR. *The Public Relations and Journalism Interface: The rise of the fifth estate compounds commercial ownership pressures* argues that journalism is coming under threat on two fronts – from public relations and also from commercial demands on media outlets. He also cites the inequality in resources as being a serious problem and sees this manifesting itself in the increased use of information subsidies by journalists. This idea was also discussed by David Miller in the article *PR and Journalism: Promotional strategies and media power*. He believes the ability of rich sources to provide information subsidies gives

them a much louder voice in the public arena than they deserve to have. He also discusses the dissolving boundaries between PR and journalism seen through personnel movement and cross-training endeavours. The blurring of the line between journalism and PR is of vital importance because it is resulting in an environment where persuasive and emotional appeals are more common than reasoned, logical analysis.

The books *Whose News?* and *What's News?* edited by Comrie and McGregor provided a good look at the impacts of public relations and journalism on public opinion in New Zealand. Chapters in these books deal with the issue of 'spin' and argue that journalists often exaggerate the power of public relations. The Lyprinol, King Salmon and Timberlands cases were discussed as examples of media carrying information of dubious quality sourced from public relations practitioners. In relation to politics there is the claim made by Eileen O'Leary that the Clark government has refined the art of news management and journalists are struggling to keep up.<sup>202</sup> This view was also expressed in the *Sunday Star-Times* article 'PR spending spins out of control' by Kevin Taylor. The article references information gained under the Official Information Act showing that PR spending and staff numbers have both increased by fifty percent under the Clark government. This definitely shows the New Zealand public need an improved understanding of the influence of public relations in order to comprehend the reality of domestic political issues.

This part of the research led into the area of the economic considerations of mass media outlets. This is central to any examination of this issue because if people are to find truth they need to be aware of how and why the news media may let them down. The pressure to make profits is a vital concern and has many effects which are not necessarily in the public's best interests.

Moloney outlines the situation cogently in saying that news managers now see audiences as consumers to be satisfied and increased, not audiences to be informed and stimulated. Dr Joe Atkinson also takes this view in his writing, saying the most direct relationship is between producers and advertisers, rather than between

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<sup>202</sup> O'Leary, E. 'Political Spin' in Comrie & McGregor (eds.) (2002) *What's News?: Reclaiming journalism in New Zealand*. Palmerston North, NZ: Dunmore Press, p.192.

producers and audiences. The work of Atkinson in articles such as ‘The “Americanisation” of One Network News’ and ‘Tabloid democracy’ looks at how the demand for profit is shaping journalism. The pressure to make things faster, flashier and more exciting is lowering the quality of news coverage and making it harder to get a grasp on important political and social issues. Thomas Paterson’s study *Doing Well and Doing Good* helped expand on these ideas. His research found soft news content to be on the rise, but news audience sizes to be generally on the decline. The study concluded the increasing amount of soft news is failing to attract new committed audience members and is driving away people who were committed.

Another influential source was Herman and Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent: The political economy of the mass media*. They point to the concentration of media ownership and the aggressive climate of takeovers as forces harmful to public discourse. Several of the filters described in their propaganda model are relevant to my research. The third filter ‘Sourcing mass media news’ says there is an over-reliance on official sources by news outlets, giving these sources the power to shape the news agenda.<sup>203</sup> This is examined in the second article which also draws on a piece by Robert McChesney called ‘The rise and fall of professional journalism’. The fourth filter ‘Flak and the enforcers’ relates to the interface of PR and journalism. This describes how public relations practitioners can pressure journalists into stopping a particular line of investigation or altering a story.

The pressure on journalists is elaborated on by the contributors to *Into the Buzzsaw: Leading journalists expose the myth of a free press* edited by Kristina Borjesson. There are accounts of how government and business interests are able to lean on media outlets to force them to kill or drastically alter stories. The ownership of most news organisations by large entertainment conglomerates is a major concern because they are clearly reluctant to report critically on their corporate allies.

There are important discussions on the place of the mass media in today’s wider economic context in books such as *No Logo* by Naomi Klein and *When Corporations Rule the World* by David C. Korten. These writers believe the mass media are being

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<sup>203</sup> Herman, E. & Chomsky, N. (1994). *Manufacturing Consent: The political economy of the mass media*. London: Vintage, p.18.

driven by the rampant marketing of consumer goods, leaving very little room for journalism seeking to challenge the view that we can buy our way to happiness. These kinds of arguments are vital if people are to challenge the current world order. The articles seek to encourage people to step back and consider the values and beliefs they have adopted about the world and think about whether they are based in reality.

Having analysed the interaction of PR and journalism and the commercial pressures on the mass media there was the need to examine journalism's role in society and whether we can trust news outlets to fulfil this role. Books such as *The Universal Journalist* by David Randall, *From Milton to McLuhan: The ideas behind American journalism* by Altschull and *Investigative Journalism: Context and practice* by Hugo de Burgh argue the role of journalism is to inform people about what is happening in the world and why, and also act as a watchdog over those in positions of power and authority. These are extremely important tasks in a democracy, yet for many reasons journalists are struggling to carry them out. The resultant necessity to be wary of media information is one of the crucial points made in the articles. Onora O'Neill's ideas on trust from the 2002 Reith Lectures were influential in the research in this area. She calls for greater accountability in the media in regards to acknowledging the sources of information. Her arguments also attack press freedom as an outdated concept which is now being used to disguise the management of public opinion. This can be related to the activities of the public relations industry and its ability to exercise its power without transparency. This situation reinforced the understanding that it is in the hands of the public to learn about the media and PR and think carefully about which information to trust.

Also drawn on as 'research' experience for the writing of these articles was part-time work writing news bulletins at 95bFM and producing content for the TVNZ news website. This work provided the opportunity to read and evaluate a lot of news articles and follow the development of media coverage of all sorts of issues. This was particularly the case at TVNZ where there was access to the Reuters, AAP and Radio New Zealand wire services. While these services do address the serious issues it was noticeable that soft news concerning celebrities and products draws plenty of attention as well. Also of interest was the encouragement by news managers to give prominence to soft news, particularly in the area of international news.

The next phase of research was the case study. The Timberlands PR campaign was chosen for a variety of reasons. One of the most important was because of the leaked documents Nicky Hager and Bob Burton had obtained which became the basis of their book *Secrets and Lies*. The black and white description of PR strategies contained in these documents is an excellent resource for informing the public about the potential of PR to manipulate opinion. The intention in writing these articles was to cast light into the world of public relations and enable people to realise when it is at work. The leaked information provides the opportunity to not just speculate on the influence of PR, but to clearly see how it operates. This case also shows, according to the accusations of Hager and Burton, how the campaign exhibited many of the tactics denounced by critics of public relations. It was an example of front groups, astroturf, greenwashing, SLAPPs and other techniques described by authors like Rampton and Stauber, being used right here in New Zealand. These techniques show how an organisation can put its words into the mouths of third parties, creating the impression of support where it does not really exist and work to silence critics. This case substantiated the research into these tactics and outlined to the public how they work. Another reason to use this case was because the Timberlands logging issue received a very high profile in the media, therefore there was plenty of news coverage to analyse.

The Timberlands case also led to an inquiry into PR behaviour. Hager and Burton laid official complaints with the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand about the conduct of two public relations practitioners from the Shandwick firm employed by Timberlands. The result was an investigation by an independent QC who found the PR men guilty of just one of the twenty complaints. This inquiry allowed for a closer examination of PRINZ and its code of ethics and an evaluation how useful it is as a regulating mechanism. The outcome of the inquiry also opened up debate over what is considered to be unethical and undemocratic. These are crucial issues when it comes to assessing the role of PR in society and are things we should all give serious consideration to.

To see how the issue had been treated in the media newspaper articles from sources including the *Sunday Star-Times*, *New Zealand Herald*, *The Independent*, *The Press*, *The Evening Post* and *The Nelson Mail* were examined. The research also looked at letters to the editor of these publications concerning the issue. During the debate over

West Coast logging the letters to the editor section became an important forum, with Timberlands making a concerted effort to immediately reply to anybody who was critical of their actions. The journalistic coverage of the issue appeared to be generally lacking in any serious drive to challenge what were being presented as the facts about the subject. It is well worth noting the argument, as put forward by John Tidey in his article ‘Well-informed sources’, that journalists doing their job properly would have stopped the Timberlands campaign in its tracks.<sup>204</sup>

To gain a different perspective on the case to that of Nicky Hager and Bob Burton Tim Marshall, current president of PRINZ and vice president at the time of the Timberlands inquiry was interviewed. He naturally disagrees with the criticism levelled at PR over the Timberlands case and says he feels Hager has a habit of making straightforward things out to seem scurrilous. Where critics see unethical, manipulative behaviour he sees PR simply presenting the information that reflects best on a client. He says there is a distinction between unethical behaviour and sharp practice and this appears to be at the heart of the debate over PR. Considering this, the point of the case study is to show people how public relations can influence public debate and give people the opportunity to think about what they consider to be appropriate or not.

The research then moved onto the interviews. These were conducted after the completion of the readings so as to have solid understanding of the subject matter and be able to make the most of the interviews. The interviews opened up new perspectives not apparent in the readings. As a result the knowledge of the topic became much more rounded and the learning gained from the interviews improved the understanding and articulation of the earlier study.

The first person interviewed was Dr Joe Atkinson, political studies lecturer at the University of Auckland. He was included because he has written extensively about media issues in New Zealand, in particular the rise of what he calls the new mediators (information management industries) and the impact of commercial pressure on journalism. His main point was that he doesn’t see PR as a threat, but rather as a

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<sup>204</sup> Tidey, J. ‘Well-informed sources’ in Comrie & McGregor (eds.) (2002) *What’s News?: Reclaiming journalism in New Zealand*. Palmerston North, NZ: Dunmore Press, p.78.

source for journalists to go on and check. He thinks the problem is with journalism's poor coverage of issues rather than PR's calculated efforts to deceive.

Bill Ralston, TVNZ's news boss, was interviewed because of his extensive experience in journalism and the fact he is running one of our most prominent news outlets. He defended the ability of journalists in New Zealand to not be taken in by PR spin and said in his organisation they work hard to dig behind press handouts. He also pointed to the resource inequality with public relations firms as an obstacle to newsgathering.

Paul Dryden, PRINZ's executive director, provided a PR industry view on the interface of public relations and journalism. He obviously thinks PR plays a valuable role in society and extolled the desire for honesty and ethical behaviour. He says public relations is not there to provide bias, but to assist people and organisations who don't know how to communicate effectively. According to Dryden journalists can be looking for a particular outcome before they begin researching a story and PR is there to counter the imbalances this can cause.

Investigative researcher and author Nicky Hager was also interviewed. He has been vocal in his criticism of the PR industry and also argues for what he sees as the failure of the media to help the public find truth. The key point he made was that there are two kinds of undemocratic PR. The first sort is the blatant kind such as telling a lie or misrepresenting who you work for. The second is much harder to recognise and involves the use of resources to swamp or subvert the democratic process. Hager believes the public need to understand the tools and tricks used by public relations practitioners in order to protect themselves from manipulation.

Patrick Smellie provided some interesting comments as someone who has made the move from journalism into public relations. The primary reason for talking to him was because he was mentioned in *Secrets and Lies* as a journalist who had been taken in by the Timberlands PR campaign. He was very unhappy with his treatment in the book, defending the value of the article in question. He says he could not come to the conclusion that what Timberlands was doing was environmentally destructive and believes Hager and Burton criticised him because they didn't like his conclusions.

Smellie says the role of PR is to present truths which reflect well on an organisation and that lying is pointless because you will be found out eventually.

The final interview was with Gavin Ellis, former editor of the *New Zealand Herald*. He thinks journalists do a good job of dealing with corporate PR, but has greater concerns in regard to state PR. He believes it is getting harder for the media to access seated authority with a lot of comment coming from government PR people. He acknowledges the commercial pressures on media but says people who believe public service broadcasting is the only legitimate form of journalism do not live in the real world.

When it came to writing the thesis the decision was made to divide the material into four sections that can work as stand alone articles and in a series. Because the main focus of the work was the public relations industry the first article is the discussion of what PR is and how it functions in society. With the second article the media was brought into the picture to show how PR interacts with journalism and also the constraints placed on journalism by the mass media system. These first two sections laid the groundwork for the two major topic areas and hopefully give the reader a good background to consider the third article, the case study. The case study has been structured with sections devoted to various PR strategies and tactics. This was done to split quite a complex array of analysis into manageable sections. Finally the fourth article sums up what has been presented and answers the question of what the public can do. This was determined as the best place to use the bulk of the primary research to create a lively debate on the issues raised throughout the thesis. In writing the articles a personal approach was adopted with use of the personal pronoun. This was done to help differentiate between the views of the author and information sources and to enable the author to express certain parts of the research deemed to be of the most importance.

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