

Overcoming the Dark Side: Seeing through the spin of public relations in the news

Samantha Stanley
University of Hong Kong

Abstract

In its current state, news literacy curriculum covers all the information types that consumers will see when they read, watch, listen to, and interact with news content. While current lessons do explain how press releases distribute information in the “promotion / publicity” neighborhood, there is much more nuance to the practice of PR that impacts information people read as ‘news’. In today’s climate of political spin cycles, it is more important than ever for news consumers to understand what public relations is and how its strategies influence news content.

Because the practice of public relations is so often misunderstood and because brand management and media relations strategies, by nature, can mislead news consumers, we as news literacy educators have an opportunity – and responsibility – to shed a brighter light on the practice of public relations, its relationship with journalism, and how it influences news content so that news consumers can better recognize the influence of public relations before taking action. Further, if more news consumers demanded transparency and forthright information from PR practitioners, the ability of journalists to obtain helpful information would increase.

An advanced news literacy course that focuses more specifically on public relations in the news can also help inform other much-needed advanced topics in news literacy. To build on this course, in-depth curriculums on *political economies of news media*, *digital news media*, and *social media and the news* can also give news consumers more context on what influences news content, including their government’s policies, the expansion of web-based content and how it impacts traditional news media, and how they (unintentionally) impact what other users are exposed to on social media.

Course Objectives

In this first advanced news literacy course, we will take a deeper look at a practice that heavily influences news content and that increasingly produces content that consumers often mistake for news: Public relations.

For decades, as mass media has become more advanced so, too, have public relations strategies. It is important for news consumers to understand public relations and its role in the news environment so that we can more accurately consider it as a source of information and

recognize when content lacks independence and belongs in the promotion / publicity neighborhood.

Learning objectives of this course are to:

1. Become familiar with the goals of public relations and media relations and who uses it
2. Understand the role public relations plays in the creation of news content
3. Recognize the influence of public relations tactics in news content
4. Investigate the source and possible motives of news content influenced by public relations
5. Identify the use of public relations in places where news content is also found (blogs, websites, discussion forums, social media, etc.)
6. Empower consumers to demand ethical public relations practices from governments, companies, and organizations for the benefit of the public and of quality journalism

Lesson Plans

Lesson 1

Concepts:

Definition, goals, and uses of public relations; differences between PR, marketing, and advertising; who uses PR; how PR is related to news content

Lesson Objectives:

Upon completion of the lesson, learners will understand the goals of public relations and media relations, who uses it, and why it seeks to influence news content.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is your current understanding of what public relations is and how it is related to news content?
2. Do you think public relations is a good practice or a bad one for the public good?
3. Can you think of examples of PR influence on news content?

Summary of the Lesson / Lesson Outline:

- In *Making Sense of the News* we learned that it is important to consider the sources of information found in news content and in content that may appear to be news but isn't. In this course, we will take a deeper look at one frequently used – and growing – source of information found in news content: public relations.
- First, let's establish a baseline of understanding. What *is* public relations, really? “Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends.”ⁱ
 - Identifies relationships that are important for the success of the gov/org/company
 - It should be noted that contrary to public perception, PR is not inherently evil, or even necessarily meant to mislead. There are aspects of PR that result in publics gaining valuable information about an organization. However, public relations practices *are* inherently self-serving because the ultimate goal is to increase the success of the business, organization, or government entity it serves. This means that any information coming from a public relations campaign lacks independence. We will see in future lessons that this can become a big problem for news consumers when journalists or news organizations rely too heavily on public relations information without fact checking or balancing the information with opposing opinions.
 - Public relations has been used since the early 1900s to manage relationshipsⁱⁱ and its integrity has seen ups and downs. More on that in a coming lesson.
 - The practice of PR builds and strengthens those relationships using numerous strategies, including media relations.

- Public relations covers a broad range of activities that accomplish its objectives including media relations, internal or employee communications, relationships with vendors and regulatory agencies, and others. However, in this course we will focus exclusively on those activities that impact news content and content that is sometimes mistaken for news.
- Difference between PR, marketing, advertising
 - According to the American Marketing Association, “Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.”ⁱⁱⁱ
 - The lines between PR and marketing have blurred in recent years and, according to the Public Relations Society of America, 60% of practitioners believe that the merging of PR and marketing will increase in coming years.^{iv}
 - Advertising is “Attracting attention by paying to have announcements placed on billboards, in newspapers and broadcasts or on websites.”^v
- Who uses it
 - Governments (“public affairs”)
 - Companies (“public relations”)
 - Non-government Organizations (“public outreach”)
- Common practices of PR that impact news content and / or consumption
 - Media relations
 - A study done in 2010 by Pew Research Center found that 63% of local news coverage on major stories in Baltimore, Maryland was initiated by the government’s public affairs offices; 14% was initiated by members of the press; the remaining 23% came from special interest groups or public relations.^{vi}
 - Digital outreach and engagement sends PR driven content directly to consumers without the “slant filter” that journalism provides^{vii}
 - Crisis communications
 - The Chartered Institute for Public Relations in the UK reports that in 2016 media relations represented 41% of PR department budgets. Social and digital media management represented 34%. These are great investments in getting their message to you through new communication channels.
 - In future lessons, we’ll look more at these two strategies and how news consumers can recognize them in journalism and in publications where journalism is often found.

The Takeaway:

1. The goal of public relations is to identify and cultivate relationships that are important to the success of its organization.
2. Governments, companies, and non-government organizations use public relations strategies and tactics.
3. Common areas of PR that impact or mimic news content are media relations, digital outreach, and crisis communications.

References/Media Used/Additional Resources:

PR Industry Fills Vacuum Left by Shrinking News Rooms, John Sullivan (*ProPublica & Columbia Journalism Review*)

Integrity and Trust in Public Relations, Robert Minton-Taylor (*LinkedIn Pulse*)

Lesson 2

Concepts:

Trust, ethics, media relations, crisis communication, getting journalists accurate information

Lesson Objectives:

To understand how opportunities for good PR in the news goes wrong and why it has a bad reputation through the use of examples from ethical and unethical examples.

Discussion Questions:

1. When you think of “public relations” what are three adjectives that come to mind?
2. Can you think of an example in which public relations has improved a situation? How about one in which it has caused harm or led to mistrust?
3. Imagine the PR department of a government, company, or organization has asked you what they can do to build trust in their media relations efforts. What three pieces of advice would you give them?

Summary of the Lesson / Lesson Outline:

- PR’s reputation – cite specific polls
- PRSA’s ethics rules applying to media relations:^{viii}
 - Act in the public interest: Find the greatest good for the majority of the people (a utilitarianism or teleological perspective in which what benefits the most people in the end is moral).
 - Use honesty and integrity as your guide.
 - Avoid and / or disclose actual or apparent conflicts of interest. (This applies mostly to client relations, where the practitioner may represent multiple clients or have a connection to, for example, an advertising firm they recommend for a PR strategy.)
 - Ensure accuracy and truth.
 - Promote the free exchange of ideas.
 - Do not disseminate false and misleading information.
 - If you accidentally do make an error, correct it immediately with all publics.
- Examples of good and bad uses of PR
 - PR professionals typically don’t provide inaccurate information to journalists on purpose, but it does sometimes happen.^{ix} What can go wrong?
 - PR professionals may not have the best or most accurate information from others within the organization
 - Poor planning or crisis communication plans

- Straight up deception
- Volkswagen's handling of its emissions scandal in the US is a good example of a company intentionally misinforming the news media on several occasions.
- Poor use of media relations for the public good: Flint Michigan water crisis – Details of public safety were misrepresented or unreported by the government and by news organizations; citizens of Flint were first told a new water supply was safe and then after complaints to boil it or use bottled water, meanwhile government officials knew about toxins in the water for at least five months. Twelve citizens died and many fell ill because of the failure to accurately inform the public.

The Takeaway:

1. Trust is the cornerstone of healthy relationships, which is a goal of good PR professionals.
2. PR professionals should adhere to ethical conduct that puts the safety of the public first, promotes transparency, and produces timely and accurate information to journalists and the public.
3. Sometimes journalists are given the wrong information for a variety of reasons.

References/Media Used/Additional Resources:

A timeline of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, Associated Press (Washington Post)
Toxic Communication: How the Water Crisis in Flint Eroded the Governor's Credibility, Jeanette L. Drake (The Strategist)
VW's Crisis Strategy: Forward, Reverse, U-Turn, Danny Hakim (New York Times)

Lesson 3

Concepts:

Media relations; ethical relationships between PR practitioners and journalists; transparency; press releases; VNRs; online and social media tactics

Lesson Objectives:

Learners should understand the role of media relations work in the production of news content, be able to identify news releases, video news releases, blog posts, and social media produced by PR practitioners, and know the difference between ethical and unethical relationships between PR practitioners and journalists.

Discussion Questions:

1. If PR professionals rely on journalists to tell their story in news outlets, and journalists rely on PR teams for story leads and as a source of information, what would be an appropriate relationship? What kinds of behaviors would cross an ethical line?

Summary of the Lesson / Lesson Outline:

- How PR practitioners cultivate and work with journalists
 - PR teams need journalists to cover their stories in major news outlets. In turn, journalists rely on PR teams to provide information for stories and (increasingly) for leads and story ideas.
 - What is ethical and not?
 - Many news organizations have ethics guidelines that guide journalists' relationships with PR teams.
 - Use *Times curbs Pogue's P.R. appearances* letter from then public editor Arthur S. Brisbane as an example: "Times readers deserve to be assured that journalists don't get too cozy with the P.R. professionals who strive to influence coverage."^x
 - As mentioned in the last lesson, the PR industry also has ethics guidelines that require professionals to provide true and accurate information. Many industries and individual PR companies and departments also have guidelines around ethical treatment of journalists.
 - Transparency and journalists' use of PR generated content
 - As reliance on PR generated content continues to rise in the current climate of newsrooms, it is more important than ever for journalists to be transparent about where information is obtained. Because that doesn't always happen, we will cover in a later lesson some signs and tools you can use to spot the influence of PR on news content.
 - Even when it is labeled as such, PR produced or driven content can still be deceiving and trick news consumers into thinking content is

meant inform, when in fact it is also meant to influence. (Example: The New York Times' Netflix paid advertisement of Orange is the New Black is a company produced article that reads very much like a newsworthy piece – complete with the byline of marketing communication strategist Melanie Deziel, although it is an advertisement for season two of the show.)

- Strategies and tactics related to media coverage
 - Press releases distributed through:
 - Wire services
 - Direct send to reporters (usually via email)
 - Social media
 - On their own website
 - Breaking down a press release – Press releases are written for journalists, with the idea that a good release can be a template for a story. It is written in the journalistic inverted pyramid style, contains quotes, and has a headline and byline. Press releases typically contain the following basic elements, which are sometimes easy to spot in news coverage:
 - Contact information, which could include the author of the story, and / or media contacts within the organization. It is not necessarily the person who wrote the release.
 - The words “For Immediate Release” meaning that reporters can begin publishing information from the story as soon as they receive the release, or “Embargo” with a date, which means that the reporter can begin working on a story using information found in the release but that information contained in the release cannot be published until the embargo date (unless, of course, the reporter has obtained the information from a different source)
 - Catchy title
 - Dateline with city (this is typically the date the release is made public, which could be days after the release is complete, along with the city where the organization is headquartered, not necessarily where the release is written)
 - Lead paragraph containing the main idea, or angle, of the story
 - Body paragraphs about the story, written in inverted pyramid style
 - A quote about the main idea from the CEO or other high-ranking representative. Unlike the quotes collected by journalists, these quotes are typically crafted by the PR team and approved by the person to whom the quote is attributed and / or a high ranking strategic communications officer. This does not mean the quote contains inaccurate information, but it does mean that journalists should be careful in using such a well-

crafted message in news publications. Sometimes there are additional quotes from another person within the organization or partnering organization who is directly related to the story. This quote is also typically approved by the person to whom it is attributed.

- Additional information or backgrounder information about the organization. This typically appears after a set of centered characters (such as “####”) that signal the end of the press release content, which is similar to the characters journalists use to signify the end of an article pre-print.
- Video news releases (VNRs) – VNRs are pre-packaged videos produced by PR teams that are designed to look like a news story. Because they are filmed using journalistic interviews, footage, and graphics, the idea is that news organizations will use part – or all – of the video directly in their own reporting.
 - Here is an example of a VNR created and distributed by Port Canaveral in Florida and how local news stations used the footage. (Show video from 01:30) Question: What is problematic about this coverage as it aired on local news?
 - Now take a look at these examples of VNRs and pay attention to the message, hints of logos and advertising, what the interviewees are saying, and who the sources are:
 - Kulcar Solar Powered Car Cooler Video News Release
 - Video News Release: Are we DRIVING our kids to UNHEALTHY HABITS?
 - Food Service Video News Release (VNR)
 - Video News Release - Walmart Announces "Great For You" food labeling initiative
- Online news resources: Pre-packaged materials are often offered to journalists or the public on a company’s website. (example: Cambridge Mask Company’s press page offers VNR, b-roll, etc.)
- Press conferences, interviews, and spokespersons
 - Often conducted by professionals who are trained to stick to talking points, pivot to control a conversation, and give only information that is authorized.
- Blogging: PR practitioners now have an online outlet to write their own articles that are targeted to their publics. They no longer need to rely solely on external publishers to get their stories to audiences.
- Social media management (Example: Coca Cola on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat)
- Digital advances are changing the relationship and how information reaches consumers:
 - Public relations departments no longer need news outlets to relay their messages; with the help of social media they can get their message to their

publics directly. (Example: Southwest Airlines nose landing was announced on Facebook and Twitter feeds before news outlets picked up the story. The company posted updates about the incident on both channels as the story developed and linked to official news releases.)

- Pretty much any online presence an organization has is managed by public relations and strategic communications departments, even if it appears to be an individual working in another part of the organization, a “street team”, etc.
- The emergence of “big data” that comes from search engines and social media means that PR practitioners have more information to tailor messages to targeted audiences. This is just one more reason why it is important to recognize the influence of PR online and seek multiple sources of information about any given topic.
- Evolving strategies in Search Engine Optimization (SEO) means that PR professionals are continuously working to ensure that (positive) information about their organization appears at the top of search results. It is important to remember that the order in which information appears in a search result does not equal its reliability, and it is important to explore results beyond the first few pages of results. Think of a recent news story that involved a corporate or government scandal and search for it in your preferred search engine. How many results on the first two pages come from news sources? PR driven sources (including official websites and social media accounts)?

The Takeaway:

1. Journalists and PR professionals have a mutually beneficial relationship.
2. Relationships between journalists and PR professionals should be ethical and transparent.
3. If a news organization uses materials or information that comes from PR sources should be identified as such.
4. Products like press releases and VNRs are being used more by newsrooms and are also being published to audiences directly on the internet.
5. Information and content produced by PR practitioners belongs in the “promotion / publicity” neighborhood.

References/Media Used/Additional Resources:

Journalism and PR: News Media and Public Relations in the Digital Age, John Lloyd and Laura Toogood (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism)

Women Inmates: Why the Male Model Doesn't Work, Melanie Deziel (Netflix)

VIDEO NEWS RELEASE SAMPLES

Kulcar Solar Powered Car Cooler Video News Release

Video News Release: Are we DRIVING our kids to UNHEALTHY HABITS?

Food Service Video News Release (VNR)

Video News Release - Walmart Announces "Great For You" food labeling initiative

Cambridge Mask Company's press page

Lesson 4

Concepts:

Verification, source evaluation, information neighborhoods

Lesson Objectives:

Learners will be able to recognize the influence of media relations tactics in news content.

Discussion Questions:

1. In which information neighborhood does public relations belong?
2. What are some examples of PR influence that would be inappropriate in news content?
3. How might a news story end up unbalanced with content from PR efforts?
4. What are some ways to spot PR in news content or PR that looks like news content?

Summary of the Lesson / Lesson Outline:

- Why might PR be inappropriately represented in news content
 - Newsrooms short on time and budget rely more on press releases and VNRs
 - PR efforts are sometimes mistaken for journalistic content, even when a news org is not involved in its publication – more on that in a future lesson
- In addition to the news deconstruction techniques we learned in Making Sense of the News, we can also look out for signs of public relations influence in news content.

Indications of PR influence can include:

- Direct quotes from a CEO
 - The appearance of a direct quote from a CEO is not always the result of a press release. However, press releases typically contain quotes from a member of a company's upper management team – most often its CEO. Because press releases are NOT journalism, those quotes are vetted, massaged, and most often approved by the person being quoted and, likely, other PR managers before the release is published. (Example: CEO Tim Cook's quote in Apple's press release *Apple launches online store in China* appears word-for-word in news publications like *this story in China Daily* with the same title.)
- Use of the word "spokesperson"
 - Spokespersons are typically members of a public relations department, which means that their quote or response to a reporter is probably part of a set of talking points or pre-approved information about the topic. (Example: *Transgender Activists to Facebook: A Pride Month Button Isn't Enough*)
- Language about an entity that sounds biased could have come directly from that entity. Words like innovative, exciting, ground-breaking, etc. are

adjectives not typically used in news reporting but that are often found in press releases.

- Single source – if just a single source is used in a news story, it could be for a variety of reasons. We know from our *Making Sense of the News* course that reporters should verify information from a variety of sources in order to ensure the information is true and accurate. For example, journalists not able to reach a second source to verify information before a deadline could find their story published anyway because of editorial decisions based on factors like time pressure or budget. It could also be that the reporter based the story on a news release or information from a PR practitioner. The basic construction of a press release contains one or two quotes, typically from the CEO and sometimes from a more specialized and relevant position within the company or from a partnering company. If an article quotes a CEO without attributing the quote to a source like “... said during a press conference,” or “... said in an interview,” this could be a sign it came from a press release. Searching the quote on a search engine or on the company’s website can help find related press releases for comparison to the news article.
- If it *sounds* like a press release, it just might be one.
 - Sometimes language from or even an entire press release is printed in a news publication. (Example: press release “Southwest Virginia students become published authors through The Origin Project” was released in PR Newswire and reprinted in Crossroads Today. In this case the source is attributed as a press release, but that does not always happen. Here is an example of a press release printed in the Antigua Observer, but with no information about its author or source.)
- Applying VIA to public relations sources
 - Let’s evaluate using VIA the content of this 2017 press release from Apple: *Apple launches app development curriculum for high school and community college students*
 - The information is verified since the story is about Apple’s program and it is released by Apple, there is no better source for accuracy than “the horse’s mouth.”
 - Since Apple is releasing the information about its own program and there are no other sources in the press release, the information is *not* independent.
 - The press release clearly states that it is published by Apple and there are a list of contacts with phone numbers and email addresses at the bottom. Apple is accountable for the information.
 - Now let’s look at how the content of this press release has shown up in online publications:
 - Take a look at *Apple launches new app development curriculum for students* published online by Business News USA. At first glance this article looks like a news story. There is a headline, a byline, and the article appears to be structured like a news article. But, how much of

the information in this article is *not* found in Apple’s press release? This article has a single source and a quick search for the CEO’s quote and the phrase “press release” shows us the source of the article’s information.

- How about *How Silicon Valley Pushed Coding Into American Classrooms* from The New York Times? The article covers more than one effort to offer coding curriculum to learners in the US. It references information from and the press release itself, but the story is more well-rounded than that of Business News USA.
- In which information neighborhood does PR content belong?
 - Let’s take a look at this press release from Disney and figure out in which neighborhood the information belongs: *The Walt Disney Company Commits One Million Dollars in Humanitarian Aid to Support Communities Impacted by Hurricane Matthew*

The Takeaway:

1. PR content can show up in news content for a number of reasons, including newsroom budget and time restraints.
2. News consumers should be on the lookout for signs of PR influence and begin to question flattering adjectives and single sources in news stories as PR driven content.
3. PR information is verified and accountable, but not independent.
4. PR belongs in the “promotion / publicity” neighborhood.

References/Media Used/Additional Resources:

- Information neighborhoods PDF, Center for News Literacy, Stony Brook University
- *Apple launches app development curriculum for high school and community college students (2017)*
- *Apple launches new app development curriculum for students (2017)*
- *How Silicon Valley Pushed Coding Into American Classrooms (2017)*
- *The Walt Disney Company Commits One Million Dollars in Humanitarian Aid to Support Communities Impacted by Hurricane Matthew (2016)*

Lesson 5

Concepts:

Consumer power, accountability

Lesson Objectives:

To empower learners, as consumers, to demand ethical public relations practices from governments, companies, and organizations for the benefit of the public and of quality journalism

Discussion Questions:

1. What can we do as consumers, constituents, and supporters to demand truth and accountability from PR professionals?
2. How does our role as news consumers give us power to demand ethical and transparent partnerships between PR practitioners and journalists?

Summary of the Lesson / Lesson Outline:

- As news organizations figure out how to navigate the digital landscape and make profit that could reverse the impacts of budget cuts, they will continue to rely on other resources, such as PR, to fill the gap. It is important that we as news consumers hold news creators accountable for using these resources responsibly and encouraging them to be used sparingly.
 - Write to the public editor or ombudsman when you see public relations being used as news content.
 - Respond online to articles and social media posts and be vigilant in sharing news content that passes the V.I.A. test. (Reminder: Verified, Independent, Accountable)
- It is important to recognize the influence of PR online and hold companies accountable for being truthful and good media partners.
 - Put your buying power and vote to work by supporting business and officials who use PR responsibly. After all, the goal of PR is to improve the “bottom line”.
 - Contact companies, government entities, and organizations when they use PR responsibly and when they misuse it to mislead reporters and the public.
 - Respond publicly on social media, blogs, and anywhere else a PR department is listing to publics.
 - Do not forget that in many countries, mass communications practices are sometimes regulated. When companies violate communication laws and the public trust, contact those who hold them accountable: regulatory and watch dog groups as well as news organizations.

- Now that we can better recognize the influence of public relations on journalism and how it sometimes looks like journalism, it is important that we consider its motives before acting on the information in question.

The Takeaway:

1. Public relations is not inherently misleading or meant to manipulate audiences. However, its practitioners don't always follow ethical best practices. Consumers, constituents, and supporters of organizations are an important public and it is the job of PR professionals to listen.
2. News consumers are powerful. Through our news consumption habits and our communications with news outlets we can remind news leaders to be independent, transparent, and accountable when using PR produced content.
3. Becoming familiar with regulations of mass communications in your country can help you hold journalists and PR practitioners accountable for the information they deliver to the public.

References/Media Used/Additional Resources:

The "public" in public relations means accountability to audiences, Shel Holtz (LinkedIn Pulse)

Course Evaluation

Because this course builds on the Coursera course *Making Sense of the News: News Literacy for Digital Citizens*, qualitative and quantitative data can be used to evaluate the success of the course as well as the need for future lessons. Discussion forum responses, to both teacher and student generated topics, can give insight to topics of further needed education.

Voluntary Survey

Consumer interest in advanced news literacy topics will be assessed through a voluntary survey distributed at the end of the Making Sense of the News MOOC.

Educator Feedback

Experts in news literacy education who have taught for several years should review this course along with public relations educators to ensure accuracy and completeness of the information presented and its helpfulness in increasing the ability of learners to think critically about news content. They may also inform what additional advanced topics could be useful.

Additional Advanced News Literacy Topics

This course could be the first of several advanced news literacy courses presented to MOOC learners. Alternatively, additional topics could be covered in lesson plans that are added to the above to give learners a more well-rounded education in one course. Potential topics for future courses or lessons include:

- Political economies
- Broadcast journalism
- Photojournalism
- Documentaries
- Advanced Verification

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ⁱ (Broom and Bey-Ling)

ⁱⁱ (Broom and Bey-Ling)

ⁱⁱⁱ (American Marketing Association)

^{iv} (Public Relations Society of America)

^v (Stony Brook University, Center for News Literacy)

^{vi} (Pew Research Center: Journalism & Media Staff)

^{vii} (Sullivan)

^{viii} (Public Relations Society of America)

^{ix} (Silverman)

^x (Brisbane)