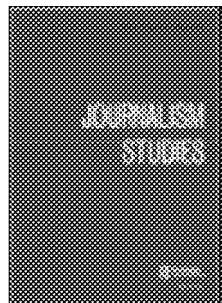


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A COMPROMISED FOURTH ESTATE? UK news journalism, public relations and news sources

Justin Lewis, Andrew Williams, and Bob Franklin

The suggestion that the activities of public relations professionals and news agencies help to shape news content in national and local news media is increasingly commonplace among journalists, academics and public relations professionals. The findings from this study provide substantive empirical evidence to support such claims. The study analyses the domestic news content of UK national "quality" newspapers (2207 items in the Guardian, The Times, Independent, Daily Telegraph and the mid-market Daily Mail) and radio and television news reports (402 items broadcast by BBC Radio 4, BBC News, ITV News and SkyNews), across two week-long sample periods in 2006, to identify the influence of specific public relations materials and news agency copy (especially reports provided by the UK Press Association) in published and broadcast news contents. The findings illustrate that journalists' reliance on these news sources is extensive and raises significant questions concerning claims to journalistic independence in UK news media and journalists' role as a fourth estate. A political economy analysis suggests that the factors which have created this editorial reliance on these 'information subsidies' seems set to continue, if not increase, in the near future.

KEYWORDS agency copy; editorial reliance; journalism; journalistic independence; public relations

Introduction

The suggestion that public relations professionals and news agencies (especially the UK Press Association) play an increasingly influential role in the news gathering and reporting processes of UK media has become commonplace across the last decade (Davis, 2002; Fletcher, 2006; Franklin, 1997, 2006; Maloney, 2006; Manning, 2008; White and Hobsbawm, 2007). At the same time, pressures on journalists to increase productivity, via substantive growths in the pagination of national newspapers across the last two decades, achieved with relatively static numbers of journalists, have raised questions about the impact of these changing journalistic practices on the quality and independence of journalists' output (Lewis et al., 2006b). These pressures, it is suggested, have prompted desk-bound journalists to develop an increasing reliance on pre-packaged sources of news deriving from the PR industry and news agencies. Taken together, these factors lie at the heart of debates about the quality and independence of UK journalism.

A significant theoretical starting point for the inquiry has been Herbert Gans' influential and suggestive dance metaphor which characterises journalist/source relations as essentially co-operative and consensual. "It takes two to tango", Gans suggests, but "more often than not, sources do the leading" (Gans, 1979, p. 116). Journalists object to this formulation on two grounds. Firstly, it signals source supremacy in news making, but

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secondly it offends journalists' professional culture, which emphasises independence and editorial autonomy. A relationship with sources that is "too cosy" is potentially compromising of journalists' integrity and risks becoming collusive. Journalists have typically favoured a more robust, conflict model, based on a crucial assumption that if the media are to function as watchdogs of powerful economic and political interests, journalists must establish their independence of sources or risk the *fourth estate* being driven by the *fifth estate* of public relations (Baistow, 1985, pp. 67–77). Reflecting this concern, journalists have typically been wary—if not contemptuous—of the motives of PR professionals (Greenslade, 2005; White and Hobsbawm, 2007, pp. 284–5).

This conflict model, however, has recently been recast as a "trading" relationship in which journalists, working in under-resourced and under-staffed newsrooms, increasingly rely on PR sources for editorial copy in return for access to editorial columns for PR stories (Davis, 2002; Jones, 2006; Larsson, 2002; White and Hobsbawm, 2007). Everyday relationships between sources and journalists are much less adversarial than the latter suggest. Typically the journalists and sources are "inextricably linked", working in complementary (if not collusive) ways since each has professional ambitions, interests and needs which can be achieved most readily if they can win the co-operation of the other group (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1981, p. 473).

An important theoretical intervention in the debates around sources is Oscar Gandy's (1982) notion of an "information subsidy". Gandy argues that PR practitioners and other suppliers of pre-packaged news offer a subsidy to news organisations (through press releases, press conferences, video news releases, press briefings, lobbying and special reports). These subsidies reflect "efforts by policy actors to increase the consumption of persuasive messages by reducing their costs" and in government and beyond, "there are information specialists whose responsibility is to ensure that the nation's public media carry the desired message forward to the general public" (Gandy, 1982, p. 74). These subsidies assist news organisations to maintain profitability by squaring the circle between cost cutting (cuts in journalism wages and numbers of journalists employed), while sustaining if not increasing news output through greater pagination, more supplements and the development of online editions and other news services. Research suggests that newspapers' receptivity to such subsidies reflects directly the financial and journalistic resources which different newspapers possess: well-resourced daily newspapers with specialist journalists are more resilient to PR initiatives than poorly resourced weekly (especially free) newspapers with few journalists and little budget (Franklin, 1986, 1988, 1997, 2005).

The drive for profit maximisation thereby compromises the independence of the press. The line between journalism and PR—between factual reporting and partisan narrative—becomes blurred.

Financial Times journalist and Director of Journalism at Reuters Oxford International Institute for Journalism John Lloyd concurs, claiming that:

The normal journalistic approach to PRs—i.e. dogs and lampposts—is grossly self serving from the point of view of journalists. It glosses over, ignores or even denies the fact that much of current journalism both broadcast and press is public relations in the sense that stories, ideas, features and interviews are either suggested, or in the extreme actually written by public relations people. Until that becomes open and debated between PR people and journalists, we will continue to have this artificially wide gulf where

journalists pose as fearless seekers of truth and PRs are slimy creatures trying to put one over on us. It is not remotely like that. (Lloyd, cited in Plunkett, 2006, p. 3)

In this article, we apply empirical tests to some of the claims made about the current state of British journalism. Our content analysis is the first to document systematically the independence of news output.

Pre-packaged News Sources in the “Quality” British Media

That this is the first empirical research of its kind reflects, perhaps, the difficulties involved in devising solid measures to establish journalists’ reliance on PR and agency copy. The ambition was to examine the “top end” of British journalism (the places where it might be least expected to find a reliance on pre-packaged news). Two weeks of domestic news coverage (in late March 2006 and in late April 2006) were examined in four quality British daily newspapers (*Guardian*, *Independent*, *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph*), as well as the mid-market *Daily Mail*, the BBC and ITV evening television news bulletins, BBC Radio 4’s *World at One* and the *Today* programme.

All domestic news items and articles were analysed to establish, in every case, the extent, if any, to which they were based on pre-packaged material: typically copy drawn from PR and/or agency sources, or content from other media. This was an extremely time-consuming research protocol since PR or agency content was rarely used explicitly, and researchers were sometimes required to follow a number of possible leads.

While the research team became adept at tracing PR material, a strong word of caution is necessary at the outset. Public relations activity—particularly the more sophisticated kind—may leave few traces. So, for example, when we spoke to Mark Borkowski, television entertainer Noel Edmonds’ publicist, about a flurry of stories reporting Edmond’s recent ‘comeback’ to popularity, it was clear that his promotion of his client was far more subtle than simply distributing press releases. On the contrary, Borkowski claimed “the strategy we put in place [was] that we didn’t seek any publicity”. Instead, he “seeded” interviews in a few carefully chosen media outlets, focusing on tightly controlling the flow of information and rumours about the growing popularity of Edmond’s new game show by “filtering out” selected sound-bites to journalists using personal contacts. “Press release dissemination”, Borkowski argued, “doesn’t really work now. We prefer a system of short sharp sound-bites, e-mail releases to specific people, not blanket mailing” (interview cited in Lewis et al., 2006b, p. 13).

In short, he emphasised the importance of “understanding how journalists think” and the conditions under which they work, over the scattergun approaches of more conventional PR. This, of course, makes tracking the role of PR in news much more difficult. Moreover, because this study’s data quantifying the presence of PR in newspapers’ editorial copy relied wholly on verifiable evidence, they are inevitably conservative, and almost certainly underestimate the true extent of PR activity, which many PR specialists suggest is very high. Senior PR practitioner Julia Hobsbawm, for example, suggested that “at least 60 per cent and more commonly 80 per cent of any broadcast or broadsheet outlet has got a PR element in it”. Despite this, the analysis of a substantial sample of print and broadcast journalism revealed a wealth of PR materials behind the news.

TABLE 1
Published newspaper items by type

Type of story	Number	Percentage
Article	1564	71
News in brief	561	25.5
Opinion	67	3
Picture only	9	0.5
Other	6	—
Total	2207	100

Looking Behind the News: The Samples

The sample of print journalism included a total of 2207 “home news” stories from the five selected newspapers (this is the data set for press figures in all tables unless otherwise indicated). Table 1 illustrates that most of these (71 per cent) were standard news articles, the bulk of the others being small news in brief items (nibs).

The sample of broadcast journalism constituted 402 “home news” items from television and radio news programmes. Table 2 reveals the range of story formats included in the sample, from packages on location to two-ways between anchors/presenters and reporters.

These articles and news items covered a wide range of topics which were grouped under 32 different headings, from the arts to transport. In Table 3, these foci for editorial are grouped under nine more general headings.

The most common editorial focus is crime (20 per cent of press stories and 26 per cent of broadcast new stories—with most reflecting coverage of particular crimes rather than issues or trends), which receives more coverage than all other domestic issues (such as the NHS, education, the environment, immigration etc.).

The other main areas reported are politics (15 per cent in the press and 17 per cent in broadcast news), business/consumer news (12 and 13 per cent—a high figure given we did not include business sections in our sample), health (10 and 7 per cent) and entertainment (this category being much more prevalent in the press than broadcast news). It is worth noting here that *none of the top three categories is traditionally associated with PR activity*—a point we shall examine shortly.

TABLE 2
Number and formats of broadcast news items

Type of story	Number	Percentage
Anchor/presenter only	115	29
Reporter on location	96	24
Interview/discussion	41	10
Anchor package	25	6
Reporter studio package	71	18
Reporter/anchor two-way	23	6
Donut*	29	7
Total	402	100

*A ‘donut’ is a broadcasting term which denotes a live two-way between an anchor and a reporter with a pre-recorded video or audio package in the middle.

TABLE 3
News items by subject focus (%)

Topic	Press	Broadcast
Crime	20	26
Domestic issues (e.g. NHS, education, immigration)	15	20
Politics	15	17
Business/consumer news	12	13
Health/natural world	10	7
Entertainment/sport	10	3
Accidents/disasters	5	4
Defence/foreign policy	2	5
Other	12	5

The Role of News Agencies and Other Media

Most newspaper articles (72 per cent) were written by named journalists (the unnamed journalist category refers to labels such as a “*Daily Mail Reporter*”) but in around a quarter of cases there was no clear identification of who had written the story (as is often the case with nibs). Only 1 per cent of stories were *directly attributed* to Press Association (PA) or other agency services (see Table 4). At first glance, these data suggest that *newspapers give the impression* that they depend on their own journalists rather than agencies or other outside sources.

However, when newspaper stories were compared with the copy produced by agency services (with the PA being the most dominant on domestic news in the UK), the data signalled that *the press were far more dependent on copy from these services and other media than conveyed by this initial impression* (see Table 5). Indeed, 30 per cent of the stories in the press sample replicated agency service copy almost verbatim, with a further 19 per cent being largely dependent on such copy. In other words, nearly *half of all press stories appeared to come wholly or mainly from agency services*.

Moreover, direct replication is rarely attributed. Many stories apparently written by a newspaper’s reporter originated in other sources and seem to have been largely cut and pasted. A front-page story from the *Daily Telegraph* about the problems at the Wembley stadium site (Alleyne, 2006), for example, was attributed to reporter Richard Alleyne. Most of the key facts and quotations, however, are also present in the PA copy from the day before, and the remaining information replicates information reported in two articles in the *Sun* and the *Evening Standard* from the previous day (Parker, 2006; *Evening Standard*, 2006).

TABLE 4
Source of story in newspapers

	Percentage
Named journalist	72
Unnamed journalist	2
No ID	24.5
Press Association	1
Other	0.5
Total	100

TABLE 5

Stories which replicate copy from agencies/other media (%)

	Press	Broadcast
All from agencies/other media	30	16
Mainly from agencies/other media	19	11
Mix of agency/other media with other information	13	20
Mainly other information	8	18
Agency covered story but not used	5	5
No evidence	25	30

There was also a small but significant group of stories attributed to a newspaper that replicated agency copy verbatim. The *Daily Mail*, in particular, often attributes agency stories (or less often, stories from press releases) to a “*Daily Mail Reporter*”. So, for example, a story about the health risks of eating oily fish (*Daily Mail Reporter*, 2006) directly replicates facts and quotations taken from two PA stories, and another from a regional news agency distributed by Mercury.

It was anticipated that a number of stories offering a mix of information from the agencies/other media with new material added by the journalist would be identified although this story composition made up only 13 per cent of the press sample. An example of this kind of story was a front-page article about the Food Standards Agency’s policy climb-down over recommended salt levels after pressure from food industry lobbyists (Poulter, 2006). The PA article offers a fairly straightforward report of new guidelines governing salt levels in food. The *Mail* article uses much of the basic information provided by PA, but writes an adversarial piece which uses additional contrary research and opinion provided by health campaigners.

By contrast, only 8 per cent of articles used available agency copy sparingly, depending mainly on information from other sources, while few examples were found of articles in newspapers which did not make use of *any* agency copy if some existed (only 5 per cent). In these instances, the story is often solely or principally based around personal perspectives or case studies that have been researched by individual journalists. This was the case with a long piece on the Victims Advocates Scheme for the relatives of murder victims published in the *Guardian* (Campbell, 2006).

It might be anticipated that the influence of agencies and other media would be less apparent in broadcast news, and the study data confirm this expectation. Nonetheless, more than a quarter of broadcast items (27 per cent) contained information that appeared to be mainly or wholly derived from agency copy or other media. Typically, when a broadcast news item is very short, it is far more likely to rely on other news or PR copy, and less likely to leave space for any original journalistic input.

On 27 April 2006, for example, an item aired on the BBC evening news about the American gangster rapper Snoop Dogg’s arrest for brawling with the police at Heathrow airport, lasted only 15 seconds and was extensively reliant on information previously published in the *Sun* and on the PA news agency (Reilly and Bonici, 2006). However, broadcast news often develops a story more than print outlets, reflecting the incorporation of reporting formats beyond the “piece to camera”. These formats can take many forms, for example: an in-depth interview or discussion with a news story’s protagonist; basing a news item around a case study and asking someone to talk about how an issue affects them; or the inclusion of vox-pops.

The most commonly used journalistic source for domestic stories in the sample, by far, was the PA agency service (47 per cent of press stories replicated at least some copy from the PA), followed by regional news agency copy distributed by Mercury (17 per cent), with 11 per cent of stories reproducing information from other media. It is possible, of course, that journalists used the same sources as the news agencies and consequently produced the same information, language and quotations as the agency copy *without* referring to that copy. However, since most journalists look at agency copy on subjects they are writing about, often ahead of other sources, this seems unlikely. What is more plausible is that agency stories will themselves be based on PR material, a process confirmed by journalists working at the PA. PA reporters complain of a heavy workload based on writing up to 10 stories a day, making them, in turn, heavily dependent on pre-packaged news (Lewis et al., 2006b, p. 49).

Journalism and Public Relations

Despite the covert nature of much PR activity, the study expected to find examples of PR playing an agenda-setting role. However, in many cases the influence of PR goes much further. Nearly one in five newspaper stories and 17 per cent of broadcast stories were verifiably derived *mainly* or *wholly* from PR material or activity (Table 6).

A surprising number of longer print pieces were coded in the "All from PR" category (although long broadcast items consisting solely of PR copy were very seldom found). A *Times* story headlined "George Cross for Iraq War Hero" (Evans, 2006), for example, repeats almost verbatim a press release issued by the Ministry of Defence. Similarly, an article about a new hay fever vaccine in the *Daily Mail* reproduces a private press release from the drug company Cytos without adding any original material (Montague, 2006).

An example of a print story that consists *mainly* of information from a single source of PR material is an article in *The Times* about a new league table of UK heart surgeons (Hawkes, 2006). The article is almost wholly derived from a press release issued by the Healthcare Commission, and only differs in the provision of some minor facts about gaps in the data included in the league tables. A broadcast news item from this category involved Rod Aldridge (the ex-chairman of PFI firm Capita) who had just resigned in the wake of the "loans for peerages" scandal. The businessman's official statement to the press accounts for half of the report.

In both press and broadcast news, shorter items are particularly likely to be based on PR material. As Figure 1 shows, many short items of broadcast news—generally those presented by the news anchor or presenter—are based 'mainly or wholly on PR material'. Indeed, the majority of broadcast stories based 'wholly or mainly on PR' were presented by

TABLE 6
Stories in which PR materials are replicated (%)

	Press	Broadcast
All from PR	10	10
Mainly from PR	9	7
Mix of PR with other information	11	14
Mainly other information	11	21
Looks like PR but not found	13	6
No evidence	46	42

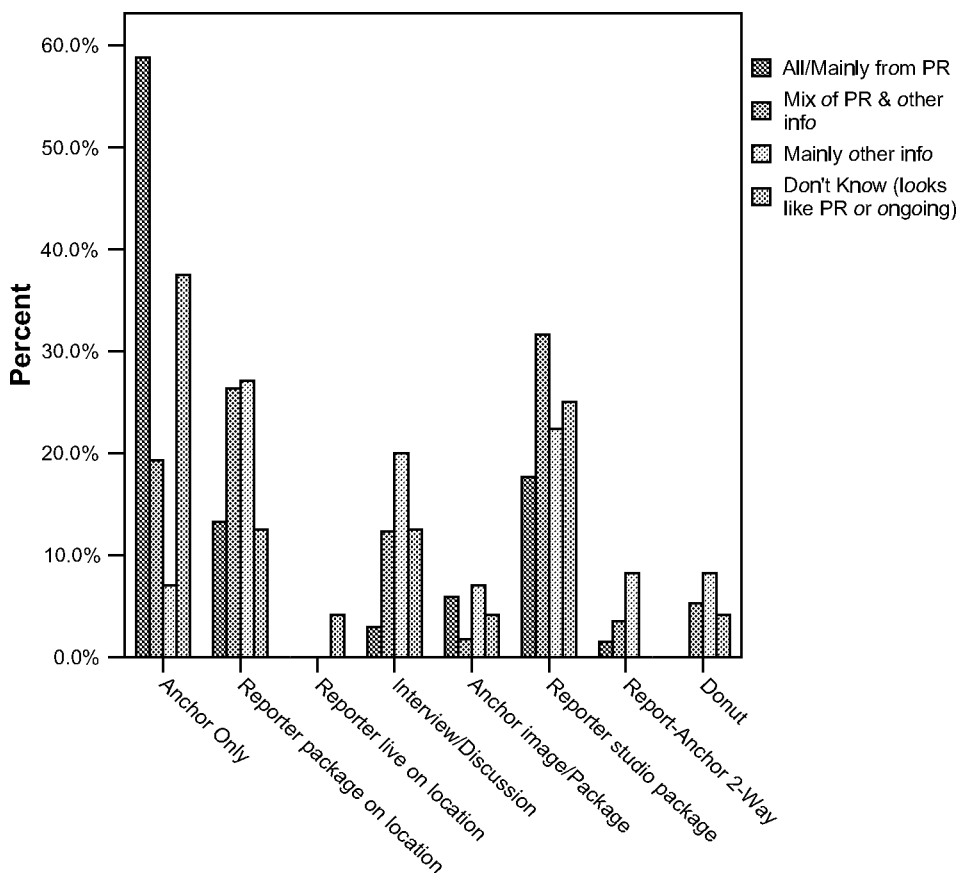


FIGURE 1
Broadcast news reliance on PR by news format

anchors in the studio. Stories by reporters—whether in the studio or on location—were much more likely to include other information.

Similarly, Figure 2 shows that a majority of nibs derive “wholly or mainly from PR”, but what also emerges from Figure 2 is the perhaps surprising extent to which longer newspaper articles are also influenced by PR: over 60 per cent of the PR-based press stories in the study sample were longer articles.

Public Relations Sets the Agenda

Many stories (11 per cent of press and 14 per cent of broadcast), whilst still verifiably reliant on PR for much of their content, nonetheless consult a range of sources. PR is playing an agenda-setting role on these occasions. An item from the *Independent*, for example, used a range of press releases to tackle the complex subject of international trade negotiations (Thornton, 2006). The article offered a detailed analysis of the politics of international development, and yet was almost wholly composed of press release information provided by Oxfam, the International Development Committee, and the

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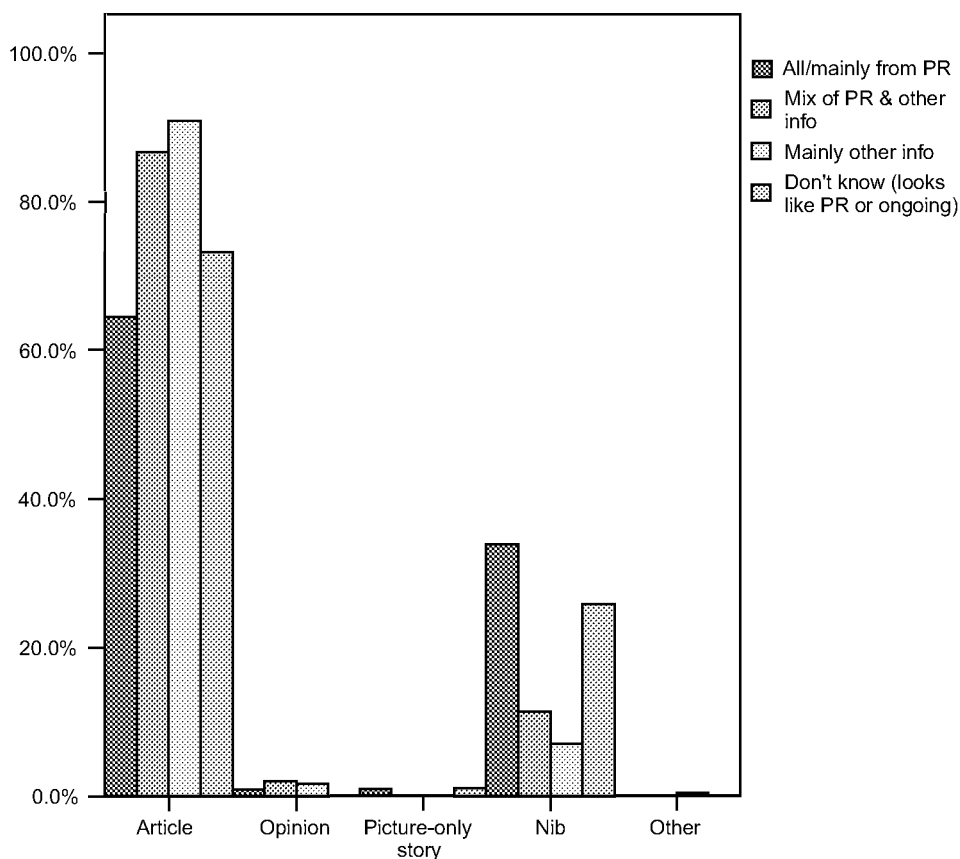


FIGURE 2

Newspaper items' reliance on PR by editorial format (Nib, news in brief)

World Development Movement, with quotations from a public relations statement made by the Department of Trade and Industry.

In a number of cases, especially in broadcast news (21 per cent of broadcast stories, 11 per cent of print), PR may play an agenda-setting role, but the story itself appears to rely mainly on other sources. In other words, where PR material was used, more contextual information was found in the broadcast media than in print. One news item from the *World at One*, for example (23 March 2006), reporting the government dropping its proposed new mental health bill, illustrates how broadcast news can take advantage of its format to provide more context. Whilst it does rely minimally on press releases (one from the Department of Health, and one from the pressure group Mental Health Alliance), most of this five-minute segment consists of extra contextual information provided by a studio interview with a spokesman for Mental Health Alliance, and an exclusive interview with the government Minister Rosie Winterton.

Overall, then, the data suggest that while broadcast news often uses PR to prompt a story, they are more likely than the press to develop that story independently. So, for example, BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme broadcast an item based on recently published research claiming that young people are becoming more impatient (24 March 2006). The research had been commissioned and publicised by the online finance company

Easymoney in order to obtain media coverage for its new online mortgages. In the press, the press release was reproduced fairly uncritically. The radio programme, however, after introducing the topic by using the publicity material, devoted a number of minutes to an on-air debate between the owner of the “Easy” brand Stelios Haji-loannou and psychologist Oliver James. In this case, the addition of another voice is significant, as the psychologist not only criticises the worth of the report’s findings, but also finds fault with the use of hastily constructed research for PR purposes.

A further 13 per cent of press articles and 6 per cent of broadcast news items were categorised under the heading “looks like PR but not found”; and for two related reasons. First, when it seemed highly probable that there was some PR content in a story, but this could not be verified (by finding a press release or other evidence of PR influence). So, for example, the story “Up Above All Other Series, ‘Rainbow’ Is Flying High” in the *Independent* (Byrne, 2006), was an article about *Rainbow* having topped a survey to find the nation’s favourite children’s television programme. The research had been commissioned by the BBC magazine *CBeebies Weekly*, but the study team was unable to locate PR activity that might have generated the newspaper article. It is, however, difficult to imagine the BBC’s PR department making no attempt to promote this story.

Other stories were categorised under this heading simply because the age of the story made pinpointing the PR content difficult. So, for example, a short piece in the *Daily Mail* before the budget—which sought to tax cars with high fuel consumption—gave information about Rolls Royce’s long-standing plans to develop steam-powered cars (*Daily Mail*, 2006a). Again, it seems likely that PR material would have informed this story.

Overall then, the study verified that at least 41 per cent of press articles and 52 per cent of broadcast news items contain PR materials which play an agenda-setting role or where PR material makes up the bulk of the story (although broadcast news items are much more likely to involve the former). As already indicated, this is a conservative, baseline figure. *If those stories in which the involvement of PR seems likely but could not be verified are included, then a majority of stories (54 per cent of print stories and 58 per cent of broadcast news stories) are informed by PR.* This does not mean that the 46 per cent of print stories and 42 per cent of broadcast stories in the sample are “PR-free”, simply that no verifiable evidence of PR activity could be identified.

The Origins of Journalists’ Sources: Where Does PR Come From?

When the *kinds* of stories generated by PR (Figure 3, which combines press and broadcast samples) are analysed it is evident that despite the publicity given to “spin”, political stories in the press contain less identifiable PR material than any other kind (even less than crime, which might not be expected to be driven by PR).

This should, perhaps, be taken with a pinch of salt. As Julia Hobsbawm explained in interview:

take a sample of stories in business, politics and a couple of other sectors and see how often the phrase “sources close to” appears ... on the one hand it’s an absolutely admirable and necessary pillar of journalism that sources remain anonymous ... on the other hand it’s become a by-word for not having to justify insufficient research because you can just rely on one source. (Lewis et al., 2006b, p. 21)

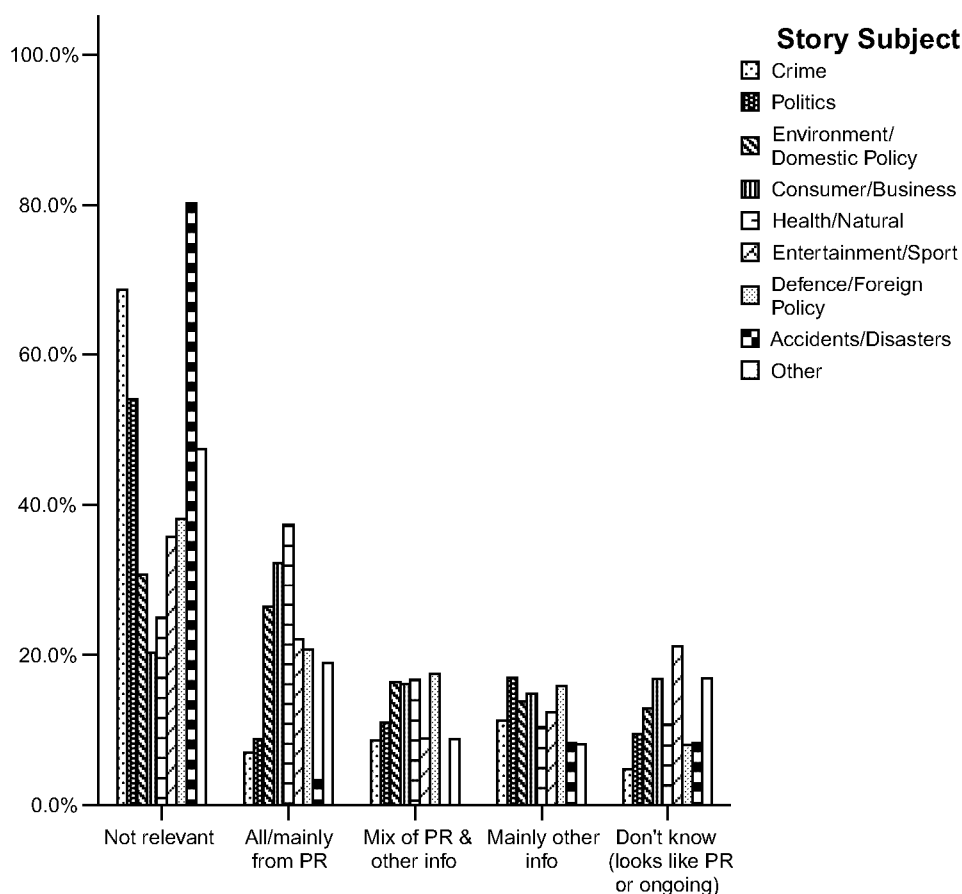


FIGURE 3

Extent of reliance on PR materials by story subject focus (%)

In political coverage as elsewhere, this “source” may have been, indeed is likely to have been, part of a deliberate PR exercise (Price, 2005), but since this could not be established with certainty, such stories were not identified as containing PR.

As might be expected, consumer/business and entertainment stories score highly for PR content. However, the area with the most PR-generated material is health, where 37 per cent of stories are based mainly or wholly on PR material (see Figure 3). This reflects the volume of PR material that comes from the health and pharmaceutical industries, as well as pressures on health reporters to produce a high volume of stories. As Nigel Hawkes the Health Editor of *The Times*, reported, “We are ‘churning’ [out] stories today, not writing them. Almost everything is recycled from another source” (Lewis et al., 2006b, p. 48).

Since the most PR-informed topics are health, business and entertainment, it is not surprising that the main source of PR activity overall (Table 7) is the business/corporate world, which originated 38 per cent of the PR material that found its way into press articles and 32 per cent of broadcast news items. This compares favourably with PR from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and charities—which might be expected to promote a rather different world view—which was reported in only 11 per cent of press articles and 8 per cent of broadcast news items. In short, when it comes to getting information in the

TABLE 7
Origins of PR materials (%)

	Press (N = 1343)	Broadcast (N = 236)
Professional private	38	32
Professional government	21	39
Public body	23	14
NGO/charity	11	8
Professional association	5	4
Citizen(s)	2	3

news, the most successful “spin doctors” come from business rather than from NGOs, charities or pressure groups.

This point is worth stressing, in the context of the BBC Trust’s report on impartiality (2007), which chose to highlight moments when the BBC appeared to follow an NGO agenda on poverty issues. In fact, this study found that in broadcast media (and much of the sample was constituted by BBC programmes), the business world was nearly four times as likely as NGOs or pressure groups to ‘place’ their PR material into news stories.

When it comes to governmental PR, there is a striking difference between print and broadcast news: on TV and radio, use of government PR dominates, with 39 per cent of PR material coming from this source. The proportion for the press is just over half this figure (21 per cent). This may reflect the style of BBC journalism (where most of the broadcast sample comes from), which research suggests tends to favour “official”, often governmental sources (Lewis et al., 2005).

Stories that used PR material from businesses often replicated straightforwardly the message of the promotional press release. So, for example, “Coleen Lands a £1/2 Million Office Job” (*Daily Mail*, 2006b), reproduced publicity material explaining how Coleen McLoughlin (the partner of footballer Wayne Rooney) has signed a lucrative deal to advertise LG mobile phones alongside a page-length picture of the celebrity.

Press releases from government are either released directly by an individual department, by the central Government News Network at the Central Office of Information, or both. Study researchers also enjoyed access to other forms of government PR, such as the Prime Minister’s press conferences and briefings, which are published on the 10 Downing Street website, but some forms of government PR inevitably passed under our radar. Researchers were unable, for example, to code for the kind of high-level, contact-based, PR, spin, and counter-spin that surrounds and informs so many major political stories (Franklin, 2004). It should also be noted that the category of governmental PR is wide-ranging, and goes beyond Westminster. So, for example, “Action to Shield Public After Anthrax Kills Cows” (Meikle, 2006) details the death of two cows on a Welsh farm, but derives most of its information from a release issued by the Welsh Assembly Government.

The greater use of governmental PR by broadcasters may also be a function of more sceptical treatment by unsympathetic newspapers, whose more adversarial stances against government policy and sources may lead them to ignore such information. Alternatively, government PR is sometimes used selectively by the press to highlight problems. A rather dry press release from the then Department for Education and Skills about new guidelines for school nurses was turned into a very critical and sensationalist

front-page article by the *Daily Mail* under the headline: "A Birth-control Nurse for All Schools" (Harris, 2006).

The range of public bodies that issue PR material is broad, and this constitutes the second biggest source of PR used by the press (23 per cent of cases). They include the police, the emergency services, hospitals, NHS trusts and universities. Crime stories about which the police had issued statements or press releases make up a large proportion of articles in this category. So, for example, the story "Brothers Killed in Gang Attack" (Fresco, 2006) was based largely on a statement describing the crime released by the Metropolitan Police.

Stories that use press releases from universities are often about science and health. Most major quality newspapers rely on a steady stream of "new research" stories, and use university PR accordingly. One example among many is "Flu Pandemic Would Peak in UK Within Four Months" (Jha and Sample, 2006), which explains new research from academics at Imperial College predicting the likely consequences of an outbreak of bird flu in the UK. It uses a press release pack issued by the college which included descriptions of the research, a collection of quotations and a large full-colour graphic that was printed alongside the story. The story was also influenced by a press release issued by the journal *Nature*, in which the findings were published, and a statement by the government's Chief Medical Officer, who welcomed the research.

Releases from NGOs and charities are occasionally used as the basis for a story, but more often a quotation from one of these groups will be used to provide a contextual or opposing viewpoint to the main focus of an item. One rare example of a press release from a charity being used to inform a story was in "The Big Branch Names Taking Over Woodlands" (Fenton, 2006), which reported a survey of woodland birds undertaken for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). Almost all quotations and facts, as well as two large colour photographs, came from a press release issued by the RSPB. A more conventional use of NGO material is exemplified in a story about the new trend towards mainstream consumers choosing green energy sources in their homes (Vidal, 2006). The story is largely an independent piece of journalism based around a case study of a suburban family who have converted their house to sustainable energy. To contextualise the story PR material is used from a university research group, and a number of politicians. Also cited are research from the environmental NGO Greenpeace, and a statement from the independent charity Green Alliance.

More occasionally, smaller charities manage to use PR to gain news coverage. "Stores Urged to Drop Super-skinny Mannequins" (Pedersen, 2006) in the *Daily Mail*, is an article inspired by stories in *The Times* and the *Express* in preceding weeks (Keeley, 2006; Porter, 2006). It details the fact that even though women's bodies are larger than ever before, shop window mannequins seem to be getting smaller, and makes much of a statement from the Eating Disorders Association, a small charity based in Norwich. Still rare are stories in which PR from a trade union shapes the news angle of the story. Where trade union material was present in reports it typically provided an oppositional voice. One example is "Class Sizes Increase in Infant Schools Despite 1997 Pledge" (Garner, 2006), which was mainly based on a press release and press statement from the then Department for Education and Skills, but which was supplemented by quotations from a statement made by the National Union of Teachers.

Not surprisingly, citizen-generated PR is by far the smallest category of public relations material encountered. *In only 2 per cent of cases when PR was used in the*

composition of a story, did it derive from members of the public. In most of these cases the story was not published initially in the national media, but instead picked up from the regional press or regional news agencies. One such story was about a campaign to encourage appreciation of the local dialect in schools in Norfolk. A type-written press release was sent by the small Friends of Norfolk Dialect group to a number of regional news outlets and agencies. It was picked up by local radio and news agencies, and subsequently by *The Times*, the *Guardian* and other national news outlets (Barkham, 2006; Richards, 2006). Peter Brooks, the group's chairman, told researchers "I sent the press release to a total of 13 regional outlets, and the result has been very encouraging, with national dailies and TV stations along with the BBC coming to us for more information and help with producing programmes". As study data confirm, however, Mr Brooks' "amateur" PR success is clearly not the norm.

Finally, the study analysed the primary sources informing news stories (i.e. those people quoted). Table 8 suggests it is politicians and government who are most successful in getting their voices heard in news stories (although it should be acknowledged that many of these stories are negative).

The extensive use of police or judicial sources in news reports reflects the prominence of crime stories in news agendas. Again, business people fare more favourably than NGOs/pressure groups, while trade unionists rarely feature at all (in only 1.5 per cent of stories, which is around the number that deals specifically with industrial relations disputes). As other research has shown, "information-rich" sources, such as the academy (9 per cent), medical/science/technology (8 per cent) and think tanks (1 per cent) tend to be used less often (Lewis et al., 2005).

The Role of Independent Journalism

The picture painted by the analysis thus far suggests that even in a sample based on the UK's most prestigious news outlets, journalists are heavily reliant on pre-packaged information, either from the PR industry or other media (notably agency services). In order to measure the overall degree of independent journalism, we looked at the number of stories that *did not* replicate either PR, agencies or other media. The figures here (Table 9) are especially striking: 60 per cent of press stories rely wholly or mainly on pre-packaged information, a further 20 per cent are reliant to varying degrees on PR and agency materials. Of the remaining 20 per cent only 12 per cent are without any discernible pre-packaged content and in 8 per cent of cases the presence of PR content was unclear.

TABLE 8

Sources most frequently cited in stories ($N=4418$ sources)

	Percentage of stories
Party/politician	28
National government	23
Law and order	22
Business	17
Pressure groups/NGOs	13

TABLE 9

Stories with content deriving from PR, news agencies/other media (%)

	Press	Broadcast
All from PR, agencies/other media	38	21
Mainly from PR, agencies/other media	22	13
Mix of PR, agencies/other media with other information	13	25
Mainly other information	7	20
All other information	12	18
Unclear	8	3

While broadcast news also makes extensive use of pre-packaged material, the more typical use of such material is as a prompt for a story or as part of a mix (45 per cent of broadcast news stories do this), rather than relying wholly or mainly on it.

If the small percentage of cases that are unclear are isolated and broken down by newspaper, more similarities than differences become apparent. Nonetheless, *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* appear to replicate a significantly higher percentage of agency/PR material than the *Guardian*, which, according to these data, is the most independent of the newspapers. While just over half the stories in the *Guardian* come wholly or mainly from pre-packaged sources, this compares with around two-thirds of the stories on other newspapers. By the same measure, the *Guardian* is also more likely to use a mix of information or to get information from other sources (Figure 4).

In the broadcast sample, television news, perhaps because of resources and the need for visual information, is less dependent on pre-packaged news than radio. The biggest user of PR material was the *Today* programme, and the heaviest user of agency copy was the *World at One*.

The data also suggest that while PR material may be used directly by journalists, *PR often finds its way into stories through the agencies*. Indeed, if those 259 stories in the sample that appeared to be based wholly on public relations material are isolated, a high proportion—47 per cent—closely replicated agency copy. This suggests a clear linear process in which PR material is reproduced by agency journalists whose copy is, in turn, reproduced in the news media.

The data in Tables 10 and 11 tell a similar general story. Most of the stories examined—87 per cent—are based on a single primary source. However, *in only half these cases did the press make any discernible attempt to contextualise or verify this information, and in less than one in five cases was this done meaningfully*. Broadcast news, once again, does better, with 42 per cent of cases involving thorough contextualisation or verification, although it is clear that this is not the norm in either form of news.

Examples from one issue of the *Guardian* illustrate these different levels of context and verification. One comprehensively researched story that quite clearly contextualises copy from agencies or other media with new information is "Fortnight of Job Cuts Across Financially Ailing NHS" (Carvell and Butt, 2006). There was no evidence of any PR input in the story, but a small amount of the information contained in the story was attributable to previous articles on the PA and Mercury news agencies and a story on the BBC website from the day before. The rest of the item consists of quotations and facts obtained by methodically interviewing representatives from a large number of NHS trusts.

A story that was categorised as *briefly* contextualising the main source of information with other views was "Drug Cuts Chances of Breast Cancer Returning, Say

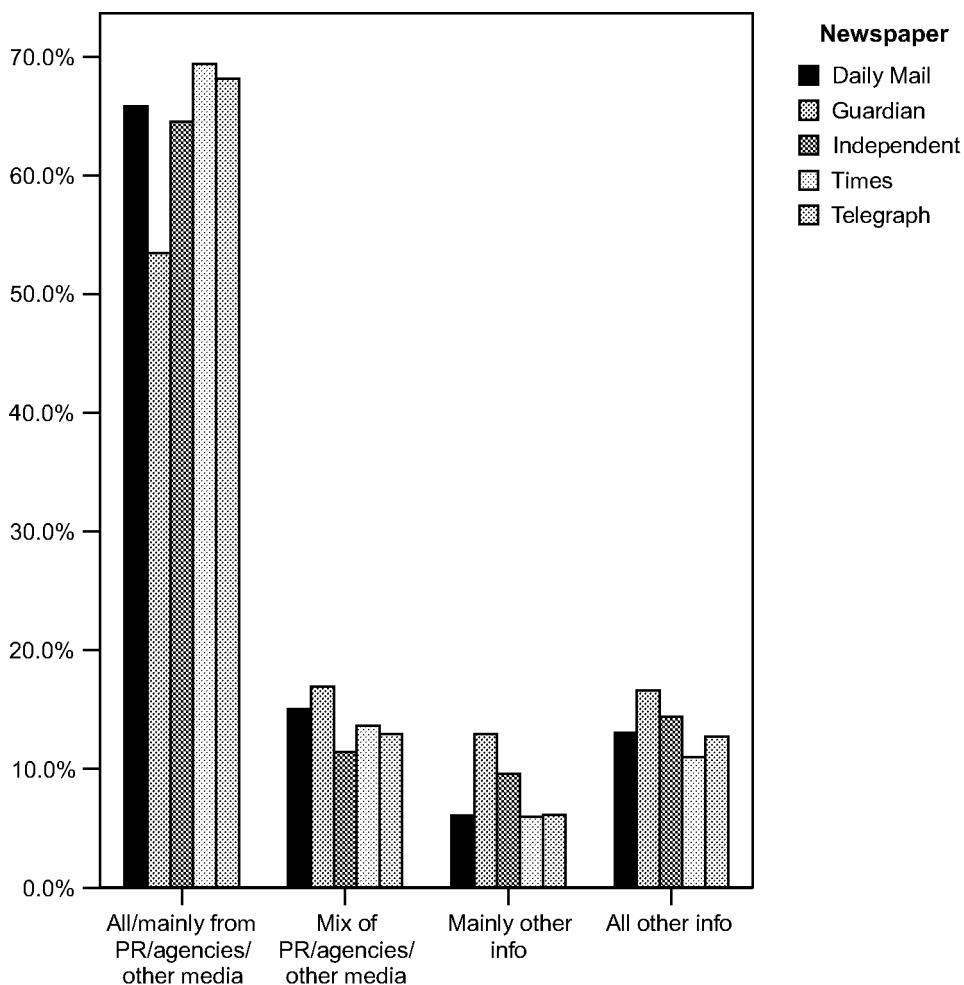


FIGURE 4
Stories replicating PR and agency materials by newspaper title (%)

Scientists” (Curtis, 2006). The story was based largely round a well-written press release from the pharmaceuticals company Novartis, which already provided the journalist with a number of different sources of information about the drug Femara (both researchers and cancer pressure groups are quoted in the release, and a great deal of background information is offered). The newspaper article contextualises this information with a brief

TABLE 10
Is the main source/information contextualised with other substantive information/views? (%)*

	Press	Broadcast
Yes, thoroughly	19	42
Yes, briefly	31	30
No	50	28

*Based on 87 per cent of the sample.

TABLE 11When factual claims are made are they corroborated? ($N=112$)

	Percentage
Yes, thoroughly	12
Yes, briefly	18
No	70

quote from an alternative academic source (a cancer expert from University College London).

An example of an article with no contextual information was a story about the trial of an Estonian former prostitute for the murder of her elderly husband (Dodd, 2006). This high-profile crime story was covered on both the PA and Mercury news agencies the day before, and although some of the wording of the story differs from the agency copy, all of the facts and quotations used are the same.

Newspaper articles in which the news story is based on specific factual claims were also analysed (Table 11).

What is immediately striking is how few articles this applies to (112 from 2207 or just over 5 per cent). Within this sample, *in 70 per cent of cases, these article claims are completely uncorroborated, and in only 12 per cent of cases are they corroborated thoroughly*. These findings are consistent with other research. A study of the UK media coverage of the 2003 Iraq war, for example, found that even misleading claims by the military were routinely unattributed and rarely questioned or verified (Lewis et al., 2006a).

One of the few stories to corroborate thoroughly its factual claims came from the *Daily Telegraph*, and deals with the viability of burying the UK's nuclear waste (Clover, 2006). The news angle concerns the Committee on Radioactive Waste Management's release of a long-awaited report. A detailed press release was issued by the Committee itself, along with a more critical release from Friends of the Earth. In other newspapers on the same day these two documents provided the bulk of the information presented to the reader. The *Daily Telegraph*, however, added substantial extra corroborating information and expert opinion from two more academic sources.

"Middle-aged Women 'Facing Same Angina Threat as Men'" (Hope, 2006), on the other hand, is less rigorous in its corroboration of claims. Based mainly around a press release from University College London, the story adds a very short qualifying statement from an academic spokesman for the British Heart Foundation at the end. This, in turn, is more rigorous than an article that appears a few pages later in the same edition of the *Mail*. "Boozy Britain Is Just Like Gin Lane, Says Liver Expert" (Cook, 2006) is based around an eye-catching release from the Royal Society of Gastroenterology, but does not include any corroborating voices. While the story makes the source of the claim clear, there is no attempt to provide context of verification.

Conclusion: Plagiarism by Any Other Name?

Taken together, *these data portray a picture of the journalistic processes of news gathering and news reporting in which any meaningful independent journalistic activity by the media is the exception rather than the rule*. We are not talking about investigative journalism here, but the everyday practices of news judgement, fact checking, balance,

criticising and interrogating sources etc., that are, in theory, central to routine day-to-day journalism practice. News, especially in print, is routinely recycled from elsewhere, and yet *the widespread use of other material is rarely attributed to its source* (e.g. “according to PA...” or “a press release from X suggests that...”). Such practices would, elsewhere, be regarded as straightforward plagiarism.

This is not to say that PR material is, by definition, problematic. On the contrary, many agencies—especially those involved in forms of public service—use PR to put useful and significant information into the public domain. Our findings do, however, raise questions about the nature and sources of PR. As we have seen, *it will favour those, notably business and government, best able to produce strong and effective PR material.*

It would however be unfair to blame journalists for relying on pre-packaged information. It is clear that most journalists operate under economic, institutional and organisational constraints which require them to draft and process too many stories for publication to be able to operate with the freedom and independence necessary to work effectively. What is clear from this study is that the quality and independence of the British news media has been significantly affected by its increasing reliance on public relations and news agency material; and for the worse!

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Justin Lewis (author to whom correspondence should be addressed), Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University, Cardiff CF10 3NB, UK.
E-mail: LewisJ2@cf.ac.uk

Andrew Williams, Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University, Cardiff CF10 3NB, UK. E-mail: WilliamsA28@cf.ac.uk

Bob Franklin, Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University, Cardiff CF10 3NB, UK. E-mail: FranklinB1@cf.ac.uk