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Public relations, news production and changing patterns of source access in the British national media

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Introduction

The intentions of this article are to highlight the rapidly growing influence of professional public relations practitioners on the process of news production in Britain and to present a discussion on how this influence is affecting patterns of source access. To date, journalists and academics have generally adopted a rather narrow view of the development of public relations. Interest has been largely confined to the workings of PR in the formal political process, emphasizing the means by which professional communicators have aided politicians and state institutions in their attempts to manage the media. For many, the concerns have been with the power of a handful of 'spin doctors', the abuses of the lobby system, and the evolution of the new 'public relations state' (Deacon and Golding, 1994). However, these interests have distracted from more general trends. These are that: (1) the employment of professional public relations practitioners (PRPs) by institutional sources has recently expanded at a significantly higher rate than most studies have acknowledged; (2) a much larger range of non-institutional organizations have begun employing PR strategies and personnel to achieve particular political and economic goals; and (3) the ability of PRPs to influence news production has been given added impetus by a rapid decline in editorial resources and a growing media dependency on sources. These trends indicate that the business of news production is thus becoming ever more absorbed into the British political process and that at the centre of this transition is an increasingly powerful class of

professional communicators. For both sources and journalists, these indi-viduals are responsible for gaining and managing access, thereby enabling or preventing various source organizations from pursuing their aims. All of which suggest that professional public relations is influencing patterns of source access and that this influence requires further attention.

The question of access, simply put, is one of constriction or expansion of the public sphere. Is public relations simply a means by which corporate and state sources can further dominate access and manage media agendas? Or, does it enable non-institutional and 'resource-poor' (Goldenberg, 1975) groups to gain an influence in the media that was previously denied them? Debates on this question have, to date, remained fairly speculative. This is because empirical research into the development of public relations, and its influence on media producers, remains sparse and dissipated among various disciplines. Those studies concentrating on public relations in institutional politics have shown no interest in similar developments outside the formal political process. Studies which have focused on non-official sources have paid little attention to the very recent involvement of communications professionals. Thus the question of how the new professional class of PRPs is affecting the abilities of various sources to gain access to journalists and set media agendas remains to be fully explored.

The observations of several recently documented studies suggest that both trends are, in fact, in evidence: that institutional and corporate sources are increasingly using public relations to consolidate their superior media access, and that alternative sources are also managing to make frequent interventions by adopting PR strategies. This indicates that a fuller descrip-tion of the use of PR is required – one that accounts for its successful application by differently resourced organizations. In pursuit of this, this article identifies and compares three evolving accounts of the use of public relations. The first, a *traditional radical* approach, looks at the rise of PR in corporate and state institutions and identifies large resource advantages which underpin their dominant access. The second, *radical pluralism*, com-pares various types of source organization. It emphasizes the importance of institutional legitimacy, suggesting that non-official sources can use public relations to acquire such legitimacy and that official sources, when locked in conflict, can lose it. When the two processes combine, non-official sources can gain substantial levels of access. The third looks more closely at the activities of PRPs in non-official source organizations and offers *further grounds for pluralist optimism*. It argues that resource-poor organ-izations can use voluntary human resources and professional PR strategies in place of institutional legitimacy and/or large capital expenditure. As such, professional public relations offers some potential for widening, rather than restricting, source access. The conclusion draws together the findings of these separate perspectives and makes a contribution towards the production of a more developed theoretical synthesis.

The rise and dissemination of public relations in Britain

The involvement of professional public relations in the political sphere is far from new but the rapid expansion of the profession is. Franklin (1994), Scammell (1995) and Kavanagh (1995) have all charted the recent rate of political PR expansion. In 1979, the Central Office of Information (COI) budget was £27 million and advertising expenditure was £44 million. In 1988 these figures had risen to £150 million and £85 million respectively. In 1979, Labour spent £1.57 million on its election campaign, the Conservatives £2.33 million. In 1992, these figures had increased to £7.1 million and £10.1 million respectively (Scammell, 1995: 204, 206 and 290). More recently published figures (*Observer*, 27 July 1997) state that in the 12 months leading up to the 1997 election, Labour spent £13 million and the Conservatives £19 million. In response to this growth, a recent flurry of accounts have emerged from the disciplines of political communications (Crewe and Harrop, 1986, 1989; Crewe and Gosschalk, 1995; Negrine, 1994, 1996; Watts, 1997), media studies (Blumler, 1990; Philo, 1993; Tulloch, 1993; Billig et al., 1994; McNair, 1995; Gaber, 1995, 1998), and from journalists themselves (Cockerell et al., 1984; Cockerell, 1988; Nelson, 1989; Jones, 1995; Rosenbaum, 1997). Each has recorded the developing interdependency of the media and politicians, the influx of professional communicators, and the altering of political and media practices accordingly. The mass media, feeling the effects of change, have themselves become obsessed with the activities of the more powerful political spin doctors – choosing to present them as primary power brokers rather than mere messengers.

However, this intense interest in political PR has partially obscured the fact that public relations is expanding far beyond the confines of institutional politics. The public relations consultancy sector, which derives its fee income almost exclusively from work in the corporate sphere, grew at annual rates of 25–30 percent for most of the 1980s. After a slowdown during the recession, the British public relations industry is once again undergoing an impressive phase of expansion. *PR Week*'s (2 May 1997) 'Top 150' league table recorded that fee income increased during 1995–6 by 21 percent and staff numbers increased by 11.5 percent. Figure 1 below shows the growth in fee income of Public Relations Consultancy Association (PRCA) members during the period 1983 to 1997. Members of the PRCA (claiming to account for roughly 70 percent of total consultancy income) have thus seen an increase of over 1300 percent (inflation not accounted for) in income in 14 years.

Indications are that this expansion of PR skills and personnel has quickly spilled over into the public arena. Public relations has its own trade journal, its own division in the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), and has initiated a substantial secondary industry of service suppliers, do-it-yourself
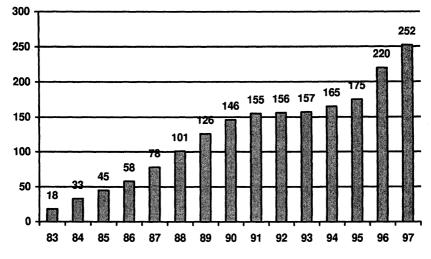
FIGURE 1
Growth in PRCA members' fee income 1983–97 (totals in £millions)

Source: PRCA Survey (PRCA, 1998).

guides, specialist reference books and a range of educational courses. As one of the widely available guides points out (Hammond, 1995: 94), 'Since public relations is a professional activity that can be practised by or for any organisation, all principles of PR hold good wherever it is practised, and non-commercial organisations are no exception.' A range of organizations and individuals have accordingly shown interest in the adoption of corporate promotional strategies and expertise as a means to achieve their objectives. Thus local councils, schools, hospitals, universities, trade unions, professional associations and pressure groups have all felt it necessary to invest in public relations departments to achieve clear political and economic objectives, including: the influencing of government policy, raising public/consumer awareness, and defending against threatened funding cuts. A lack of quantitative data in these sectors makes it more difficult to distinguish patterns in these sectors. However, trends have been noted in more general studies of non-official sources. Lowe and Goyder's (1983) study of environmental pressure groups discovered that over half their sample had developed strategies that involved using the media to publicize their concerns. Later work by Anderson (1991, 1993), and Hansen (1993) indicated that many of these groups had subsequently developed quite sophisticated media strategies as well as employing a number of ex-media/ PR personnel. Similar developments were observed among pressure groups and trade associations in the 'criminal justice arena' (Ericson et al., 1989; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994), in gay and lesbian pressure groups (Miller

and Williams, 1993), and in paramilitary organizations in Northern Ireland (Miller, 1994). In the charity sector, professional PR has become fundamental for raising profiles and gaining funding. The National Children's Home (IPR, 1992a), St John's Ambulance (IPR, 1994a), the Women's Royal Voluntary Service (IPR, 1995a) and the Royal British Legion (IPR, 1997a) have all won top IPR 'Sword of Excellence' awards for campaigns in the 1990s. Deacon's (1996) survey of the voluntary sector found that 31 percent of organizations had press/publicity officers, 43 percent used external PR agencies and 56 percent monitored the media. These figures were increased to 57 percent, 81 percent and 78 percent for organizations with annual budgets above £250,000. Early indications that trade unions were adopting public relations methods (McShane, 1983; Jones, 1986) were confirmed in recent work by Davis (1998, forthcoming). Davis found that two-thirds of unions had at least one part-time press officer, 25 percent used PR consultancies and 57.4 percent used other agencies to monitor the media and provide other services. Clearly, state and corporate institutions are not the only organizations attempting to influence the public sphere.

The decline of news gathering resources, the market for information subsidies and public relations Britain

The rise of public relations might have little significance except for the fact that its expanding output is fulfilling a very real demand. A look at British media in the last two decades indicates that the rise in professional public relations is also linked to an equally dramatic decline in the editorial resources of news producers. Recent accounts of the British media (Barnett and Curry, 1994; Tunstall, 1996; Williams, 1996; Franklin, 1997) suggest that news itself has never been less popular, with far more readers, viewers and advertising finance being attracted towards entertainment. At the same time, competition among media organizations has been intensified by new technologies, government deregulation of the industry, and the introduction of free market conditions into public service broadcasting. Consequently, as financial concerns have replaced public service ideals, the will to resource costly news programmes and a serious broadsheet press has dwindled. Journalists have been consistently forced to increase output without a corresponding increase in resources. The final result, according to many observers, appears to be the decline of investigative reporting, a drop in editorial standards, and increased dependency on sources.

The downward spiral of the national newspaper industry has been observable for some time. Between 1984 and 1997 the national daily market lost over 2 million sales (13 percent) with only *The Times*, *Financial Times* and *Daily Mail* increasing their readership. To staunch the flow, a number of costly experiments have been attempted: from sales gimmicks and new

editors to new layout designs and reduced subscription charges. Through-
out the period, newspaper owners have also attempted to expand their
consumer bases by adding new sections, a trend that has resulted in quite
pronounced page inflation. Between 1984 and 1994: the *Sun* increased from
32 pages to 52; the *Mirror*, 32 to 48; the *Star*, 28 to 36; the *Express*, 36 to
64; the *Telegraph*, 36 to 38; the *Guardian*, 28 to 72; *The Times*, 32 to 72;
the *FT*, 48 to 78 (*Media Guardian*, 20 June 1994). Most damaging of all
has been a series of price-cutting wars that have further damaged profits
and left established papers fighting for survival. *Today*, the *Sunday Express*
and the *Independent on Sunday*, have all recently closed or been merged
with sister papers.

The result of increased output demands and reduced profits has been
pressure to cut labour costs. De-unionization, the use of freelancers and
short-term contracts, the 'pooling' of journalists, 'multi-skilling' and merging
of sister papers have all resulted in cheaper and 'more flexible' labour.
Finally, a steady flow of redundancies has followed in many papers. The
Independent, *Daily Express* and *Daily Star* have cut the numbers of
editorial staff by between a third and a half in the last four years. The
Guardian and the *Mirror* have implemented small but regular rounds of
redundancies during the same period, and even the high-selling *Times* is
reportedly (*Media Guardian*, 19 Jan. 1998) considering making editorial
budget cuts. Consequently, journalists are having to produce far more copy
(two or three times more per journalist than in the 1960s, according to
Tunstall, 1996: 136) with no equivalent increase in resources.[1] Journalists
and editors in Britain are well aware of the intensifying pressures, the
declining levels of investigative journalism, and the enticements of outside
information supply. As Jones declares (1995: 8), 'During the 1980s they
[the Conservative Party] had unleashed and encouraged unparalleled com-
petition between newspapers, television and radio. These commercial pres-
sures had inevitably had an impact on editorial standards.'[2] One of the
long-term effects of declining editorial resources, according to the work of
Sigal (1973), Gandy (1980) and Fishman (1980), is an increased depend-
ency on 'information subsidies' (Gandy, 1980) supplied by sources.[3] The
market for information subsidies has therefore expanded and sources are
increasingly employing PRPs to supply this market with their own indi-
vidualized brands of subsidy.

Changes in the relationships between sources, PRPs and journalists have
always been difficult to chart because it has always been in the best
interests of all concerned to keep such routine relations as invisible as
possible. However, it is evident that both sources and journalists have been
transformed in their relations by what, in effect, amounts to a massive
transfer of news-gathering resources, away from 'independent' journalists
and towards partisan sources. The trend has in turn created a rapidly
growing employment sector for professional communicators; individuals

whose main occupation is to access and manage the news to the benefit of their source organizations. Apart from the attention received by Peter Mandelson, Tim Bell and others, this development has taken place almost unnoticed. However, 'spin doctors' are just one aspect of a general transition that has seen the erosion of the lines that traditionally separated participants in the media production process. Consequently, the British media are being further incorporated into the new 'public relations democracy', contributing, in Blumler and Gurevitch's (1995) estimation, to a 'crisis of public communication'. In this transition, fundamental questions emerge about changing patterns of media production, source adaptation, and source access. Principal among these, is whether professional public relations enables wider source participation or excludes it. This debate is the focus of the remainder of this article.

Public relations – a radical description

Any attempts to describe the effects of public relations on source access must start with traditional radical perspectives. Conventional liberal pluralists have barely acknowledged a profession which has, by its very activities, undermined the notion of an independent 'fourth estate' media. Additionally, those that have discussed patterns of source access (Tunstall, 1971; Gans, 1979; Blumler and Gurevitch, 1986, 1995; Tiffen, 1989) have simply confirmed the findings of their radical counterparts (Sigal, 1973; Hall et al., 1978; Fishman, 1980; Gitlin, 1980; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Hallin, 1994; Philo, 1995): that institutional and government sources consistently outnumber all other types of news source in news texts. Last of all, professional public relations has, until recently, been almost exclusively used by governments and corporations. Thus one must conclude that there exists little basis for a standard liberal account of news production that might incorporate professional public relations.

Radical explanations begin with this last point. The history of the development of professional public relations in the 20th century is linked almost exclusively to governments and corporations (see, for example, Bernays, 1923; Kelley, 1956; Tulloch, 1993; Rosenbaum, 1997). Most radical observers, who have passed comment on the rise of political public relations, have regarded it as only one of many means by which states and large corporations have attempted to manage the media. Those who have devoted greater attention to the phenomenon (Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Habermas, 1989; Deacon and Golding, 1994; McNair, 1995) have been more specific about linking the evolution of public relations directly to the needs of capitalist democracies. The introduction of universal suffrage, the rise of mass media, the emphasis on the consumer society, the continuing need to legitimize both the state and the process of capitalist accumulation,

are all factors requiring increased management of public opinion. Thus the needs of the state and corporate sectors – to control information flows within the public sphere in the name of the consumer citizen – necessitate the creation of a professional public relations sector.

The recent history of public relations in Britain fits neatly with this explanation. Conservative governments, since 1979, decisively broke with the post-war tripartite consensus and intervened in the economy to support the needs of international capital accumulation (the interests of the City and multinational corporations) at the expense of national wage labour (trade unions, manufacturing industry and the welfare state). Thus, conditions required rapid expansion of both corporate and state public relations. The expansion that took place during the 1980s (see above) not only con-solidated the electoral support of the Conservative government, it also helped finance expansion of the corporate PR consultancy industry. As some commentators (Franklin, 1994; Kavanagh, 1995; Scammell, 1995) have noted, the fortunes of the Conservative government and the corporate PR sector were closely linked. While the Conservatives benefited from ongoing PR advice and high levels of aid during election campaigns, the consultancies benefited from lucrative government contracts and positive relations with the corporate world. A look at the budgets for some of the Conservative privatization campaigns of the 1980s – all awarded to PR consultancies – gives some indication of the extent of finances being filtered towards the top companies. The promotional budget for the privatization of BT in 1984 was £25 million; for British Gas in 1986, £40 million; for BP in 1987, £23 million; for the water utilities in 1989, £40 million; and for the electricity companies in 1989, £76 million (Franklin, 1994: 103). The close connections between the PR industry, the corporate sector and the UK political establishment persist. An IPR (Institute of Public Relations) survey, conducted in 1994 (see Table 1), underlines the fact that professional public relations continues to be almost

TABLE 1
Breakdown of PRP employment sectors

In-house govt		External		In-house companies		In-house non-profit	
Local	(7%)	Consultancy	(47%)	Manufacturing	(6%)	Charities	(4%)
Central	(1%)	Advertising	(1%)	Services	(10%)	Trade Bodies	(4%)
Govt Agency	(2%)			Finance	(3%)	Arts/Culture	(1%)
Armed Forces	(1%)			HQ/Holding Co.	(3%)	Trade Unions	(0%)
Education	(3%)			Tourism/Leisure	(2%)	Political Orgns	(0%)
Health	(3%)			Nationalized Ind.	(2%)		
				Press/Bdcasting	(2%)		
Total	17%	Total	48%	Total	27%	Total	9%

Source: IPR Membership Survey 1994b. (Figures are rounded up and do not add up to 100%.)

entirely dominated by government and corporate sources. Only 9 percent of PRPs work for non-profit organizations such as charities and trade bodies (some of which are business associations). Within the consultancy sector (47 percent of the total), the vast majority (over 90 percent) of clients are businesses requiring a mixture of consumer, financial, corporate, trade and government relations.

Although the corporate and state duopoly in the use of public relations has recently been broken, traditional radical perspectives indicate that little will change. The principal reason is that corporate and state sources have massive institutional and economic resource advantages that cannot be matched. Institutional resource advantages bestow a number of benefits on PRPs working for the state and its institutions. First of these is the physical power to restrict/enable access to information. The state, and many of its institutions, will always have the political, legal and financial means with which to apply pressure to journalists, influence their movements, and/or court them. These factors, which aid PRPs working under difficult conditions, have already been widely documented and require little further discussion (see, for example, Curran et al., 1986; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Nelson, 1989; Miller, 1994; Philo, 1995; Eldridge, 1995). The second, and more decisive, aspect is the de facto legitimacy conferred on institutional and some corporate sources which automatically presents them as 'primary definers' (Hall et al., 1978). News values dictate that the public must be informed of the policies and activities of individuals and institutions which, in theory, draw their legitimacy from the support of the public. They also dictate that institutional representatives command an authority and respect that alone justifies their source status. So the 'primary definer' status of official sources is 'structurally determined' by the routine practices and values of journalists (see Hall et al., 1978; Golding and Middleton, 1982; Philo, 1995). The third factor benefiting institutional PRPs is the 'bureaucratic affinity' (Fishman, 1980) that exists between institutions and media organizations. According to many liberal empirical studies (Sigal, 1973; Fishman, 1980; Tiffen, 1989; Ericson et al., 1989), institutions tend to attract journalists because they are usually physically accessible, well resourced and provide a regular supply of information subsidies. Thus institutions have tended to become the most common sources for journalists, and consequently, many reporters and media producers have become almost entirely dependent on them. The self-perpetuating result of all these inherent biases is that institutional public relations operates almost invisibly and on a grand scale. Under such conditions PRP skills are no longer necessary for gaining media access, only for the management of messages.

Once again, many government departments and state institutions have taken advantage of their positions and invested heavily in professional communications. During the 1980s, the government became the largest

TABLE 2
Increase in information officer numbers 1979–95 in selected institutions

	Buckingham Palace	CBI	Inland Revenue	Met Police	BBC
1979	3	8	5	6	5
1995	12	18	18	61	35
% change	+300%	+125%	+260%	+917%	+600%

Source: IPO Directories (1979–95) Information and Press Officers in Government Departments and Public Corporations.

purchaser of advertising in the UK. The number of information officers employed by the Central Office of Information rose from 36 in 1979 to 160 in 1996 (COI directories) and several departmental information and promotional budgets underwent substantial expansion (see Franklin, 1994 and Scammell, 1995, for more detailed accounts). The recent development of public relations machines in local government and public institutions is equally impressive. By 1994, 90 percent of metropolitan local authorities had established in-house PR departments (Franklin, 1994: 7), employing 2000 full-time staff and spending £250 million annually between them. Table 2 gives an indication of the increase in information officer numbers that has taken place in many other institutions since 1979.

Linked to institutional resource advantages are economic resource advantages. For Gandy (1980), Fishman (1980) and Herman and Chomsky (1988), PR is the sum of its financial and human resources and these are clearly unequally distributed. More PR resources mean more media contacts, greater output of information subsidies, multiple modes of communication, and continuous media operations. Even though smaller organizations are increasingly drawn to using PR consultancies and employing PRPs, most continue to be effectively excluded by the high costs. In 1996, the average fee per client for a small PR consultancy firm was £16,217. The larger firms averaged £66,665 per client (PRCA Year Book, 1997). Developing well-resourced and professionally staffed in-house PR divisions can be equally expensive. The PRCA estimated (DTI, 1994: 23) that, on average, public relations departments cost £42,000 per head to maintain. In effect, the 'costs of market entry' into the professional PR world once again restrict full participation by smaller opposition organizations.

These extreme differences in economic resources mean well-resourced organizations can inundate the media and set the agenda while the attempts of resource-poor organizations become quickly marginalized. Miller (1994: 132–3) recorded that in Northern Ireland in 1989, Sinn Fein, with five voluntary press staff and a budget of £7000, attempted to compete with official government sources with 145 communications staff and a 20-million pound budget. Davis (1998 and forthcoming) noted that public

service trade unions working to halt government cuts and privatizations were consistently out-resourced by corporations and state departments during the period of Conservative government. The differences take on further significance in times of conflict when companies and government departments rapidly employ more PRPs and/or hire consultancies to manage crises. Miller (1994: 78) found that, as tensions heightened in Northern Ireland at the end of the 1960s, the British Army increased its press staff from 2 to 40 between 1968 and 1971. Jones (1986) similarly observed that the National Coal Board (NCB) was able to call on extensive communications resources in its conflict with the National Union of Miners in 1984/85. The NCB spent 4.5 million pounds on advertising and increased its press staff from 6 to 25 during the dispute (Jones, 1986; COI directories).

Public relations – towards a radical pluralist alternative

This radical description of public relations, in the light of recent empirical findings and theoretical advances, now appears to exclude too many concerns. Left alone, it risks repeating the mistakes of 'cultural structuralists' and 'radical functionalists' (see Schlesinger, 1990; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994; Curran, 1996) by offering an overly rigid and/or economically determinist explanation of media–source relations. It tends continually to subordinate the activities of journalists, assumes primary definers act in unison, and does not account for historical shifts in status and access. Most importantly for this debate, it does not account for the possibility that non-official and resource-poor organizations might also make significant interventions in media discourses. However, as several recent studies have shown, an increasing number of such organizations are achieving such interventions (see above), some to the point of actually managing to dictate agendas and alter quite defined government and corporate policies. CLEAR's campaign for lead-free petrol (Wilson, 1984), Hart District Council's defence of its land against government building plans (PRCA, 1994), the ambulance drivers' dispute with the Department of Health (Kerr and Sachdev, 1992), and the Union of Communication Workers' battle against Post Office privatization (*PR Week*, 1995; Cockerell, 1997), are all documented examples of Conservative government policies being reversed by skilled PR campaigns on the part of lesser resourced organizations. A number of other successful campaigns, such as Greenpeace's prevention of the sinking of the Brent Spar, and the General, Municiple and Boilermakers Union's (GMB) 'Fat Cats' inspired campaign, remain to be documented. Both, however, indicate rather more profound challenges to governments and corporations from 'non-official' sources employing PR. The effectiveness of non-official group PR was highlighted in a recent survey of 250

businesses (*PR Week*, 2 May 1997: 5). This revealed that 'More than half those questioned in the UK said that pressure group activity significantly affected the way they did business ... [and that] a majority felt that such groups were more likely to gain media coverage and sympathy.'

An alternative radical pluralist thesis, centred on patterns of reporting and institutional legitimacy, has instead emerged from: (1) discussions of elite sources in the United States (Nacos, 1990; Hallin, 1994); (2) studies of environmental pressure groups (Anderson, 1993; Hansen, 1993); and above all in (3) comparative studies of official and non-official sources in Britain (Miller and Williams, 1993; Miller, 1994; Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994). All three approaches have suggested means, which may include PRPs contributing to a 'more dynamic process of contestation' in given 'fields of discourse'. As such, each offers an explanation of how non-official sources can gain access to media discourses normally dominated by official sources.

Schlesinger and Tumber (1994), Miller (1993, 1994) and Anderson (1991, 1993) have devoted more attention to the legitimizing function of institutional resources. Drawing on inspiration from the work of Bourdieu (1979, 1993), institutional legitimacy and authority are likened to a form of 'cultural capital' that is linked to, but not simply determined by, economic capital. In theory, non-official sources can use professional public relations to accumulate such capital and, in effect, simulate the authority and legitimacy of institutional sources. By providing a consistent supply of information subsidies (news stories and research) to journalists, non-official sources can establish themselves in media discourses as legitimate sources. This process, in itself, encourages a larger media profile and usually results in a further accumulation of institutional legitimacy. Their studies did indeed record several examples of pressure groups developing quite sophisticated media strategies, which effectively identified them to the media as reliable and authoritative sources in their particular subject areas. Miller and Williams (1993) observed such strategies being applied by the Terrence Higgins Trust. Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) found the same with trade associations/unions such as the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO), the Prison Officers Association (POA) and the Police Federation, and by pressure groups such as the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO) and the Prison Reform Trust. Cracknell (1993) and Anderson (1993) offered similar accounts of the development of media strategies by Friends of the Earth and other environmental groups. All of these organizations have tended to avoid dramatic publicity stunts, preferring instead slowly to establish positive media profiles. Along with organizations such as Amnesty, Liberty, the British Medical Association (BMA) and the Association of First Division Civil Servants (FDA), each has shown that a steady

accumulation of media capital may go some way to overcoming traditional institutional advantages.[4]

An alternative, but complementary approach, is to look at official sources and their capacity to lose cultural capital and/or waste economic and institutional resource advantages by engaging in conflict among themselves. Hallin (1994), for example, accounted for news producers becoming more critical of institutional sources during the Vietnam War, because of dramatic 'shifts in elite consensus' among official sources. In the UK, a number of studies have similarly highlighted tendencies for institutional conflict, either internally or with external allies, resulting in PR strategies becoming inconsistent. Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) noted differences between civilians and police officers engaged in public relations roles for the police. Kavanagh (1995) and Jones (1995) observed frequent conflicts, within political parties and governments, that took place among professional PRPs, administrative civil servants, and politicians. More obviously, disparate departments or state institutions may have conflicting objectives. Miller (1993, 1994), Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) and Deacon and Golding (1994) have shown, in the continuing conflict in Northern Ireland, ongoing debates on the criminal justice system, and during the introduction of the community charge in the late 1980s, respectively, that clear disagreements have surfaced among government departments. In these cases, individuals and institutions have come to be regarded as 'unreliable' by journalists and, on occasion, been seen to lose their standing as legitimate sources altogether. Ultimately, as Conservative party policy over Europe has recently demonstrated, such public 'shifts in elite consensus' can threaten established political parties and governments. At such times, trade unions and pressure groups, if they have pursued clear PR strategies and built up legitimate media profiles, are able to strike and challenge official media discourses.

Public relations – further grounds for pluralist optimism

Although traditional liberal theories of media production are incompatible with the rise of professional public relations, there do exist further grounds for pluralist optimism. Several authors (Shoemaker, 1989; Blumler, 1990; Scammell, 1995) have suggested that PR actually offers far greater potential for non-official sources to gain access than previous studies have acknowledged. Public relations is less capital-dependent than other forms of public communication and can employ strategies that require little institutional legitimacy. Both factors increase the scope for resource-poor groups to use PR to gain media access. In Shoemaker's words (1989: 215): 'Journalistic routines (such as news-beats) result in media content that

reinforces the status quo and limits media access to new ideas and organisations off the "beaten" path. As a result, public relations efforts may be the only realistic strategy for a group to get media coverage.' Indeed, a closer look at recently documented cases of non-official PR in action tends to offer some support for this pluralist optimism. As such, it can be argued that the dissemination of professional public relations offers much potential to widen, rather than restrict, media access for non-official source groups.

The principal point to make is that effective public relations is aided by economic resources but need not be especially dependent on them. First, it must be remembered that, unlike advertising, news coverage is free. Although the ruses used by PRPs to get media coverage may, at times, be expensive, the actual coverage is not. Second, the principal costs in PR are largely human ones. In addition to work space, public relations practice only requires some basic communications equipment. In a breakdown of the PR consultancy industry (William Shackleman Ltd, 1995), human resources accounted for 54 percent of total expenditure on PR. Most other significant costs are taken up by company services, space rental and financial incentives; all of which remain rather less relevant to non-profit organizations. Third, good PRPs may be expensive, but public relations may be practised without gaining specific qualifications or undergoing any long-term training. In fact, the most recent IPR membership survey (IPR, 1994b) found that only 13 percent had a CAM certificate or other relevant qualification. Since human resources are the most important factor and expense in PR, and because exclusive qualifications and skills are not needed, subordinate groups can, in theory, make up for their lack of finance with the use of greater labour resources. All of this implies that trade unions, charities and pressure groups can therefore coordinate the expertise of one or two professionals with large networks of partially trained volunteers. Two recent award-winning campaigns by the Union of Communication Workers (UCW) (Cockerell, 1997; *PR Week*, 1995) and Women's Royal Voluntary Service (WRVS) (IPR, 1995a) followed such a strategy. The UCW involved many of its postmen and women in running local PR campaigns against post office privatization across the country, thus applying grass-roots pressure to local MPs that eventually filtered through to the national press and the main parties. The WRVS, in danger of financial collapse, successfully recruited new members and raised funds by pursuing a nationwide PR campaign that relied heavily on its 'invaluable army of 160,000 ambassadors' (IPR, 1995a).

The accumulation and retention of cultural capital is also less important than previous studies have suggested. Many resource-poor organizations have instead realized that promoting their aims and changing government policy are more important than promoting their organizations. Trade unions and other campaigning groups (such as those working on refugee rights,

the legalization of cannabis and euthanasia), often operating in hostile
media and political environments, have found it more advantageous to
promote policy changes and to damage opposition rather than publicize
themselves. As long as individual media contacts have been established,
non-official sources may employ strategies that promote their agendas
without relying on an accumulation of institutional legitimacy.

One documented strategy has involved the promotion of non-official
source objectives as public interest objectives. For while media organiza-
tions are drawn to institutions because of their 'bureaucratic affinity', indi-
vidual journalists are often drawn to sources because of their public interest
appeal. Health-care workers' unions (Seaton, 1991; Kerr and Sachdev,
1992) and environmental pressure groups (Wilson, 1984) have both
succeeded in gaining positive media coverage with strategies that focused
on the needs of the public rather than on wages, conditions or other
personal interests. In each case stories questioned the legitimacy of
'intransigent ministers' and 'corporate greed', rather than focus on the
disruptive actions of less legitimized pressure groups. Alternatively, non-
official sources may go through third parties, or work collectively to supply
journalists with the same 'line of the day' from multiple sources. PR is,
after all, according to Tim Bell (DTI, 1994: 7) 'the use of third-party
endorsement to inform and persuade'. This means non-official sources
bypassing the need for individual legitimacy by persuading high-profile
individuals, with a degree of authority or legitimacy, to speak on an
organization's behalf. MPs, clergy, academics and the great British public
(in the form of opinion polls) are all used to put forward the opinions of
non-official organizations. Collective action, if well coordinated, can ulti-
mately combine seemingly to isolate a government or corporation in particu-
lar media discourses. Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) noted the existence of
collective media action by trade unions and pressure groups in the criminal
justice arena. Wilson (1984) and Hansen (1993) both emphasized the
'alliance with science' and with other public figures that environmental
campaigners have readily adopted. The strategy adopted by CLEAR,
against leaded petrol in the 1980s (Wilson, 1984), and the UCW against
Post Office privatization in the 1990s (Cockerell, 1997; Davis, forth-
coming) both involved wide unofficial alliances with MPs, local councils,
pressure groups and consumer organizations. Both were able to feed
through their arguments, via these alternative sources, in addition to publiciz-
ing the great spread of opposition feeling across the country. Clearly, each of
these strategies worked, not by utilizing previously accumulated cultural
capital, but by taking advantage of journalistic routines, public concerns,
and by making use of the cultural capital accumulated by others. On
occasion, such strategies have even enabled resource-poor groups to dictate
news agendas without appearing as 'primary definers' at all.

Concluding remarks

Evidently, where once PRPs were employed exclusively by government and corporate sources to manage the public sphere, now pressure groups, trade unions and other organizations are using those same people and skills to upset elite media dominance. Because public relations does not necessarily rely on large capital expenditure, or the possession of a high degree of institutional legitimacy, more organizations, not fewer, are likely to achieve access that was hitherto denied them. In fact, as several cases have demonstrated, non-official sources can do better than simply gain access. They can set agendas and, on occasion, quite significantly disrupt their official and corporate counterparts.

However, any notion of public relations providing a new-found liberal pluralism in the public sphere would be premature. Economic resources and institutional advantages remain highly relevant to the debate.[5] The vast majority of PR resources and personnel are used by those with greater economic and political resources. In addition to resource advantages, official sources can and do use every strategy available to their non-official oppositions. Most of the time, dominant media discourses result from the inundation of messages relayed from governments and businesses – even when those messages are themselves in conflict. Usually, it is not simply a matter of hegemonic shifts in consensus to accommodate opposition groups, since the opposition groups are not represented at all. For many resource-poor organizations even the small amounts of resources required for initiating PR initiatives are absent. Their only means of obtaining media attention is by rioting, terrorism or some other confrontational media strategy that only serves further to marginalize them in media discourse.

An explanation of the successes of professional PR use by quite differently shaped and resourced organizations clearly requires further thought. By way of an initial thesis it might be concluded that the efficacy of public relations is determined by a combination of at least four factors: (1) economic capital; (2) cultural capital; (3) human resources; and (4) strategic application. These factors are all related but are not inextricably linked. Institutional legitimacy (or cultural capital) and human resources are more likely to be boosted by economic resources but they are not completely dependent on them. Public relations strategies are advantaged by cultural and economic capital but can operate with minimal amounts of either. Public relations strategies themselves can help to accumulate or lose all three types of resource. This suggests that variously resourced groups can deploy PR strategies that use alternative factors – each of which can result in a successful supply of information subsidies. Businesses rely on their economic resources to pursue expensive strategies because cultural capital and high levels of public interest are harder for them to accumulate. Governments may effectively use all four factors to strengthen their

position in the new public relations democracy. They are thus becoming increasingly effective at managing routine access to the media. At times of national crisis (for example, wars or large-scale industrial action), the concerted application of all types of resource results in a virtual monopoly of official source access. Pressure groups and trade unions can, however, continue their efforts in spite of resource inequalities. Instead they can make use of their human resources and apply strategies that integrate well with journalistic routines, occasionally using both to accumulate cultural capital. They are therefore able to make a significant impact, especially when governments and businesses are unprepared or in conflict – as they must be on many issues. Thus the rise of professional public relations means that institutions and corporations can further extend their media influence in the long term, but also that non-official sources have gained a new means of access and can sometimes upset their official oppositions quite dramatically.

Notes

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1. For journalists working in national broadcasting, the decline has been more recent but also more extreme. Broadcasters have borne the brunt of Conservative government attempts to dismantle public service broadcasting as well as having to adapt to competition induced by new technologies. With Channel 5, breakfast television, cable, satellite and digital, broadcasting time has risen exponentially. The BBC, easily the most resourced broadcast news operation, has introduced numerous cuts in staff, independent tendering, multi-skilling and other labour cost-cutting practices. Franklin (1994: 70) estimated that 7000 jobs (25 percent) were shed at the BBC between 1986 and 1994. Over 90 journalist job cuts were reported during 1996 and a further 25 percent cut (to be phased in over 5 years) was announced in 1997. ITN, Sky and Channel 5, all already operating on marginal budgets, have simply gone down-market. Only Channel 4 has remained relatively unscathed during the 1990s, but its future remains far from secure. Once again the lure of information subsidies remains irresistible. A 1996 survey (*PR Week*, 11 Oct. 1996, p. 1) of 60 broadcasters found '. . . 62% said that, with budget restrictions and increased demand for stories, they expect to use more outside generated material in the coming year'.
2. For further examples see comments by Colin Bourne (*Journalist*, Dec. 1995/Jan. 1996), Alan Rusbridger (*Press Gazette*, 22 March 1996), Roy Greenslade (*Media Guardian*, 15 July 1996), Jo Fawkes (*Journalist*, Aug./Sept. 1996), and Godfrey Hodgson (*British Journalism Review*, No. 3, 1997).
3. Sigal (1973), Gandy (1980) and Fishman (1980), in studies of the US media, all separately argued that the relationship between sources and journalists was, in many ways, conditioned by the resources available to news gatherers. As resources were reduced, costly investigative or 'enterprise' reporting declined and the reliance on particular sources and their information increased. Reporters no longer

actively sought out sources, they came to rely on steady supplies of what Gandy (1980) referred to as 'information subsidies'.

4. These studies might be contrasted with the confrontational media strategies of many unions and pressure groups up until the early 1980s. Such strategies involved demonstrations, disruptions, industrial action and terrorist acts. These, while often achieving media coverage, also worked to further de-legitimize those groups in the eyes of the media (Gitlin, 1980; Miller, 1994; Philo, 1995) and consequently risked the long-term stability of the organizations.

5. Studies by Schlesinger and Tumber (1994), Deacon (1996) and Davis (1998) all agree that, among non-official sources, those with greater resources are more likely to employ PR methods and personnel. There are, however, many exceptions to the rule.

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