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Public Relations

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Chapter overview

This chapter examines the rise of public relations as a philosophy and an industry and debates how to understand its increased importance in the era of neoliberalism. It notes the key importance of the state and business in disseminating and suppressing information as well as the countervailing tactics which are used by pressure groups and other activists. The chapter examines the relative success of various tactics and groups in managing the news and how this relates to the exercise of political and economic power. It points to contemporary developments in ownership and control of the media and promotional industries and argues that these tend to narrow the space for free debate. As corporate power both increases and is increasingly subject to challenge, the question of curbing 'promotional culture' is raised.

Introduction

Contemporary society has become more promotional. Public relations (PR) and promotional strategies are now central concerns of government, business, trades unions, popular movements and even the smallest single-issue protest group. The rise of 'promotional culture' (Wernick 1991) parallels, and is intimately intertwined with, the expansion of the role of the media in societal decision making and development. As Robert Jackall has remarked: 'Few areas of our social lives are untouched by the visual images, narratives, jingles, rhetorics, slogans, and interpretations continuously produced by these experts with symbols' (Jackall 1994: 7). In Britain, the US and many other countries, the sheer amount of media space demanding to be filled has markedly expanded since the end of the 1970s. But the rise of public relations (and related activities such as lobbying) is also related to the rise in prominence of corporate power, often described as 'neoliberalism', meaning 'the doctrine that market exchange is an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action' (Harvey 2005). So how should we understand the relationship between public relations, the media and power in society?

News and media strategies

In liberal pluralist theory the media provide a public space in which information is shared and the public informed. By this it is meant that the free media function as a watchdog on the actions of government. Free competition for media space and political power ensures that a variety of voices are heard in the media (Gans 1980; Blumler and Gurevitch 1995; Sigal 1986). In contrast, much Marxist theory sees the media as agencies of class control in which official messages are reproduced by journalists, the masses are indoctrinated and the stability of capitalism assured (see Curran 1991; Curran and Seaton 1995, Chapter 16).

It has been widely noted, however, that the identification of these two positions as self-contained opposites can rather overstate the difference between them (Curran *et al.* 1982). While some differences between the approaches remain, until recently both have been highly 'media-centric' (Schlesinger 1990: 64) in their analyses and explanations of public relations strategies. They have tended to assess the public relations activities of sources by either examining media content or interviewing journalists and have therefore failed to examine 'source-media relations from the perspectives of the sources themselves' (Schlesinger 1990: 61; Ericson *et al.* 1989: 24).

The use of media-centric methods of research has affected the kinds of analysis of source power available. In one variant of Marxist theorising about the media, often referred to as 'structuralist', it is argued that the opinions of the powerful receive a 'structured preference' in the media and become 'primary definers' of media coverage (Hall *et al.* 1978). This approach has tended to overemphasise the power of official sources and to underestimate the extent to which pressure groups and others can manage the news (Miller 1993). Crucially it also assumes that managing the news is tantamount to exercising power in society.

By contrast, pluralist approaches tend to underemphasise the crucial importance of official sources of information and overplay the fluidity of competition. An approach which moves beyond 'media-centrism' and directly examines the promotional strategies of government, business and interest or pressure groups has been advocated and a wide range of number of studies now exist (e.g. Anderson 1991, 1997; Cook 1989; Davies 2000a, b, 2002, 2003, 2007; Deacon 1996, 2003; Deacon and Golding 1994; Dinan and Miller 2007; Ericson *et al.* 1989; Manning 1998; Miller 1994; Miller *et al.* 1998; Miller and Dinan 2008a; Schlesinger *et al.* 2001; Tilson 1993). But media-centrism is not only a methodological question. Taken seriously the study of communicative strategies by powerful and lowly organisations also suggests that power is exercised not just through the mass media but outside and sometimes despite the media. For example most lobbying activities are secretive and involve the planning of communicative strategies for influence. They attempt to pursue direct influence rather than using the media to convince their targets.

The following sections of this chapter review some of the important issues in understanding promotional strategies and their relationships with the media and power in society. First we briefly examine the rise of public relations and promotional culture.

The rise of 'promotional culture'

The rise of public relations as a specific profession occurred around the turn of the 20th century in the USA, in Britain and in Germany. The development of propaganda and public relations suggests that public opinion became more important in this period. 'Within the life of the generation now in control of affairs', wrote the most important US theorist of the trend, Walter Lippmann, 'persuasion has become a self-conscious art and a regular organ of popular government' (Lippmann 1921: 158). Lippmann approved of what he termed the 'manufacture of consent' by public relations. But why did public opinion suddenly become so important that it needed to be managed?

The extension of the franchise between 1880 and 1920, giving most adults the vote for the first time, as well as other democratic reforms, were key factors in increasing the influence which could be exerted by the populace on decision making. In other words, the rise of public relations as a specialism was a *response* to the modest democratic reforms of this period (Miller and Dinan 2008a). Edward Bernays was amongst the first to make a profession out of what he called the 'conscious and intelligent manipulation' of the beliefs and behaviour of the public. Those who 'manipulate this unseen mechanism' of society were, he wrote, an 'invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country' (Bernays 1928: 9). This kind of manipulation also emerged in the UK at the same time. Political scientist Graham Wallas pioneered the idea that society was now too complex for the masses to properly comprehend. Meanwhile business activists such as Dudley Docker formed organisations called Business Leagues and later 'National Propaganda' dedicated to resisting democracy with propaganda. 'If our league succeeds' wrote Docker in 1911, 'politics would be done for. That is my object' (cited in Miller and Dinan, 2008a: 40).

Public relations offices have tended to be established at moments of crisis for the powerful, whether at war, under attack from colonial possessions or organised labour. For example, the Foreign Office and the armed forces first appointed press officers during World War One and in 1919 Prime Minister Lloyd George's aide set up a covert propaganda agency to incite hostility against trades unionism, part-funded by employers (see Middlemass 1979; Miller and Dinan 2008a). Business PR became more important after the end of World War Two. An organisation called Aims of Industry was founded by business leaders in 1942–43 and it soon saw action assisting the medical profession in resisting the introduction of the National Health Service and campaigning against the nationalisation of the sugar and iron and steel industries (Kisch 1964). In the US it has been argued that the conservatism of the 1950s was 'politically constructed' in part by the 'intellectual reconquest' of the US by big business (Fones-Wolf 1994: 285). Since 1945 we have witnessed the growth of information posts in British government (Tulloch 1993), both in civil ministries (Crofts 1989) and in colonial counter-insurgency (Caruthers 1995), leading latterly to the rise of the 'public relations state' (Deacon and Golding 1994: 4) and in the political parties the emergence of the 'spin doctor' (Jones 1995, 1997, 1999). Corporate PR has also expanded and adapted to new challenges, such as the threat to business interests of the environmental

movement. According to some accounts the PR activities of, for example, McDonald's (Vidal 1997), British Airways (Gregory 1996), and consultancies like Burson Marsteller (Hager and Burton 1999) have often strayed over the line of good faith and even legality (Beder 1997, 2006a, 2006b; Rampton and Stauber 2001; Stauber and Rampton 1995).

The Conservatives' release of the free market from 1979 had an explosive impact on PR. Between 1979 and 1998 the PR consultancy industry in the UK increased elevenfold in real terms (Miller and Dinan 2000). PR consultancies expanded on the back of the mass privatisations of publicly owned assets and the increased international mobility of capital fostered by neoliberal regimes in the UK, the USA, Japan and elsewhere.

In the political world, too, PR and marketing techniques have become much more important. The obsession with controlling image and perception evident in the Labour Party under Blair and Brown led to the jettisoning of Labour's distinctive policy platform (Heffernan and Marqusee 1992), to be replaced by spin and presentation. The accounts of this period which have thus far appeared make it clear that a small group of modernisers around Blair (especially pollster Philip Gould and spin doctors Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell) conspired to reshape the party in a new market-friendly guise (Gould 1998; Macintyre 2000; Routledge 1999). It has been widely agreed that centralised and politicised information control by Blair's press secretary Alastair Campbell, surpassed that experienced under the Thatcher administration (Jones 1999; Osborne 1999) and the prognosis for the Brown administration appeared to be no better (*Financial Times* 2008; Price 2008).

With the growth of PR have come myriad specialisms such as media relations, public affairs, issues management and lobbying (Moloney 1996). Lobbying is a secretive and largely covert industry in which lobby firms or corporations communicate directly with MPs, civil servants, ministers and other power brokers to pursue their interests. Much of this occurs without much recourse to the use of the mass media. It is these kind of communicative activities that have the possibility of exerting direct power, that are often missing from 'media centric' accounts of power relations. Lobbying has become more important as government has become more market friendly and as marketisation of government has opened up more space for direct corporate power. The activities of lobbyists themselves became a major public issue following the exposure by the media of the cash-for-questions controversy when some MPs were revealed to be secretly working for undeclared lobbying interests (Greer 1997; Leigh and Vulliamy 1997). Soon after the election of the New Labour government in 1997 the tight networks of power around New Labour were exposed when Labour-friendly lobbyists offered direct ministerial access to an undercover journalist posing as a businessman. In a similar sting in 1999 lobbyists targeting the new Scottish Parliament were also exposed as offering access to ministers for cash (Schlesinger *et al.* 2001). The covert and media-shy activities of lobbyists have unquestionably become more important in policy making (Hollingsworth 1991; Silverstein 1998), but calls to regulate British lobbyists have so far gone unheeded. The European Parliament voted in favour of lobbying registration in early 2008, but the European Commission has made only half hearted moves to introduce a voluntary register

in June 2008 (Kanter 2008). UK developments in 2007–08 focused on the inquiry into lobbying conducted by the Public Administration Select Committee (Miller and Dinan 2008b; PASC 2007; Hall 2008).

It was only in the 1970s that organisations such as trades unions started to appoint PR officials and prioritise media relations (Jones 1986). As the media have become increasingly important or as other avenues for influence or change are closed off, so pressure groups and other campaigners have been forced to try to attract the attention of the media in order to pursue their aims. Since the 1970s there has been a change in the character of protest. Mass marches and demonstrations have become less popular and are increasingly seen as ineffective (Engel 1996; Porter 1995). Instead radical or countercultural movements increasingly understand the value of smaller and more focused actions which are more likely to have televisual appeal (Grant 1995; Vidal and Bellos 1996). This can be seen particularly in the campaigns against Genetically Modified (GM) food, where campaigners have damaged crops wearing protective clothing and with TV cameras in tow.

The focus of much lobbying and public relations activity has also shifted from the centres of power in the nation-state to transnational bodies. In Europe, Brussels has become a much more important target for both pressure groups (Greenwood 1997; Mazey and Richardson 1993) and the PR industry (Dinan and Miller 2006). The global level has also become markedly more important. Corporations are increasingly able to move capital globally to seek higher and quicker profits. Consequently institutions of global governance such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization have become more important in regulating the 'free trade'. But in the wake of the globalisation of capital has come the globalisation of protest. The protests in Seattle against the WTO and in Prague against the IMF in 2000 signalled the public emergence of a heterogeneous assemblage of different interests from the developed and developing world united by their opposition to the free market and the dominance of predominantly US multinationals. Anti-capitalist protests have occurred across the world as the global reach of corporations has made clear the interconnectedness of local protests. One key aspect of the protests is a specific opposition to the marketing, PR and advertising strategies of multinationals. This is expressed by pressure groups such as the Canadian adbusters group (<http://adbusters.org>) and chronicled in Naomi Klein's anti-branding polemic *No Logo* (Klein 2000). This has been expressed in campaign websites such as PRwatch.org and Spinwatch.org and latterly in European and UK campaigns for lobbying transparency such as The Alliance for Lobbying Transparency and Ethics Regulation EU (ALTER-EU – www.alter-eu.org) and the Alliance for Lobbying Transparency in the UK (www.lobbyingtransparency.org).

Promotional resources

The contemporary experience is that government, business and pressure groups actively compete for media space and definitional advantage. However, in the competition for access there are very marked resource inequalities between

organisations. One obvious way in which this is the case is in financial and personnel budgets. Government promotion is carried out by the Government Information and Communication Service, which employs more than 1200 information officers, plus support staff and has a budget running into hundreds of millions of pounds. The top 150 PR consultancies earned £765 million in fee income in 2007 up from £440 million in 1995 (*PR Week* 2008; Miller and Dinan 2000: 11). It is only government, corporations and the bigger interest groups who can afford long-term support from PR consultancies. In other words, the central institutions of the state and big business enjoy structured advantages in the competition. By resources, however, we also mean the extent to which an organisation is institutionally secure. For example, the central institutions of the state are plainly among the most institutionalised, whereas government-created statutory bodies are less institutionally secure. Outside the ambit of the state are major pressure groups such as Greenpeace or professional associations such as the British Medical Association. These are long-term bodies, which may not always be fully secure. The least institutionalised organisations are those with little formal organisation, arising out of specific campaigns or circumstances, whether as a result of attempts to block new motorways or bypasses or to stop the closure of a local school. A third type of resource is cultural. Respectability, authoritative-ness and legitimacy are all key elements here. These are largely decided by and dependent on the perceptions of others and can decisively influence the credibility of an organisation. Cultural capital resides even in the smallest feature of personal presentation such as the accent of the speaker and how they dress. On the basis of the unequal distribution of resources we can identify some groups as 'resource-poor' (Goldenberg 1975) or 'resource-rich'. However, the resources available to the institutions of the state also exist in the context of broader structures of power and authority. Both the state and business have markedly more power to police disclosure and enclosure than others.

Policing enclosure and disclosure

The state is a key site for the policing of information. It controls a huge bureaucratic machinery for the production of research, official statistics and public information. The backbone of the machinery of media management in Britain is the system of mass unattributable briefings, known as the lobby system by which journalists receive the latest 'off-the-record' comment and political spin on the stories of the day. These appear in news reporting with the source of the information disguised in phrases such as 'the government believes' or 'sources close to the Prime Minister suggest'. The advantage for the government is that since the information is not attributed it is, as one minister put it, 'no skin off anyone's nose if it turns out to be wrong' (Cockerell *et al.* 1984: 33; see also Cockerell 1988; Franklin 1994; Harris 1990; Ingham 1991). The production of government information can itself be influenced by party political or class interests and there have been a number of controversies in Britain about the accuracy of official statistics (Levitas and Guy 1996). Furthermore, the accuracy of government information in general has been

increasingly questioned. From the massaging of the figures for unemployment in the 1980s and 1990s, to disinformation in relation to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, state personnel regularly involve themselves in misinformation.

Successive cabinet secretaries have provoked opprobrium for their slippery definitions of the concept of truth. Sir Robert Armstrong famously acknowledged in an Australian court in 1988 that he had been 'economical with the truth' in the British government's attempt to suppress the book *Spycatcher*. In the Scott inquiry into the Arms to Iraq affair, his successor Sir Robin Butler maintained that Parliament had not been misled even though it had only been given partial information. 'Half the picture can be true' he stated (see Norton-Taylor 1995: 91).

Iraq: the use of propaganda and PR activities

The case of Iraq is instructive in examining the use of propaganda and PR activities. Seen from the point of view of 'media centric' approaches, the issue of propaganda is one of media reporting of claims and the extent to which journalists are misled or go along with the lies. But there is much more to see than this partial interest would suggest. Propaganda strategies are planned for particular reasons and they should be judged in relation to their intentions and not just in relation to how well they do or do not manage the media. There are three main points to make here.

The propaganda campaign to suggest that the incumbent Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein posed a threat to the West was a compound deception, fusing carefully selected elements to present an entirely untrue account in which it was suggested that the Iraqi regime was a threat. This involved stories about mobile chemical labs, weapons of mass destruction available for use in 45 minutes and fictitious links with al-Qaeda (Miller 2004a). This was not based on faulty intelligence but on a determined and deliberate propaganda campaign, the aim of which was not to convince the British or US public as a whole, but to create enough of a coalition for those in favour of war to put their policy into action (Miller 2004a).

Seen from the media centric view, the campaign was effective in managing a good deal of the mainstream media, but was not a success in the blogosphere or amongst the public. While such conclusions are justified they neglect to look at the intentions behind and the ultimate outcomes of the propaganda – to invade Iraq and take control of its resources. That element of the propaganda campaign was stunningly successful in the face of unparalleled opposition from much of the population of the world.

A second point to make is that this campaign could only be put in place by very substantial investments of time and resources. Both the Bush and Blair governments invested heavily in new propaganda organisations, with Bush creating the Office of Global Communications to coordinate activities worldwide and across time zones (Miller 2004b).

A third point is that we need to understand the philosophy of the propaganda. Powerful agents like states – though the point applies to corporations too – see

propaganda and public relations simply as weapons in a battle. This is normally discussed as the 'battle of ideas', but if this suggests that the ideas element is not fully integrated with strategies involving coercion and violence, then it is not quite right. The philosophy of propaganda in the age of the 'war on terror' is part of a philosophy of 'total spectrum dominance'. The US and UK military and civilian planners see what they call 'information dominance' simply as a constituent part of dominance over land, air, sea and space. This means that all information – whether it is the command and control systems of a military opponents or the pages of the mainstream press – have the potential to be 'weaponised'. If such information does not have the capability of adding to 'dominance', the philosophy dictates that the aim is to 'deny, degrade or destroy' information perceived as 'unfriendly' (Miller 2004c). Some have argued that propaganda is not a suitable term to describe all of these strategies (Corner 2007). There is some merit to that argument in that the traditional term is perhaps not capacious enough to encompass all the uses to which governments put it. But the consequence of not using it – of abandoning it without anything to put in its place – at precisely the period in history where there has been unparalleled investment in and success for propaganda, seems less than persuasive.

Promotional strategies: lobbying versus media relations

Resources determine the strategies which organisations are able to employ. But resource-rich organisations do not always devote the main part of their efforts to managing the media. It may be that low-profile and discreet lobbying in Whitehall, Brussels or at the WTO is seen as a more effective way of pursuing interests. Indeed it has been suggested that the groups most able to implement this type of 'insider' strategy (Grant 1995) are by definition resource-rich since they have superior contacts and are perceived as more respectable, credible and authoritative or representative. Furthermore, given that British society is characterised by marked inequalities of wealth, power and status, the defenders of the current order are only likely to need to engage in media management in so far as change is threatened or desired. This is one explanation of the observation that business tends not to be as visible as its critics in the media (Tumber 1993).

Both of these factors influence the strategies of resource-poor groups. An absence of contacts with government and the aim of political or cultural change can condemn resource-poor groups to strategies and tactics which resource-rich organisations would rarely even consider. Moreover, resource-poor groups may not wish to become entangled in consultative procedures with government for ideological or strategic reasons (Grant 1995).

More prosperous groups tend to concentrate on more orthodox media relations. Nevertheless, resource-poor groups are sometimes able to gain coverage in the media and can on occasion influence public debate. This is particularly the case with issue-based campaigning groups which appear to gain a higher profile than those which simply attempt to raise resources or their own profile (Deacon 1996).

For example, Peter Tatchell of the lesbian and gay activist group Outrage has commented:

We produce very good quality press releases that back up what we say with hard facts and statistics. It makes it much easier for people to take us seriously.

(Cited in Miller and Williams 1993: 132)

The imaginative and highly controversial tactics of Outrage allowed them to capture the media spotlight for lesbian and gay issues at an unprecedented level in the 1990s. It is this kind of skill and innovation in campaigning strategy which can help the resource-poor group even in marginalised parts of the developing world. A similar tale can be told about some of the tactics of climate change campaigners in 2007–08 such as in Plane Stupid or at the Kingsnorth Climate Camp in their attempts to draw attention to the pressing issue of environmental crisis (PR Week Reporters 2008; Plane Stupid, nd).

But however sophisticated their public relations skills, small alternative groups are unlikely to be able to gain sustained positive media coverage in the face of strong competition from resource-rich organisations.

Problems of coherence and division

Conversely, resource-rich organisations are not always able to plan and execute coherent and unified promotional strategies. All organisations, whatever their resources, are likely to contain a variety of competing agendas, political perspectives and professional rivalries. In government departments, for example, there is a history of rivalry between promotional professionals and administrative civil servants (Miller 1993). Furthermore, the involvement of a variety of official bodies in a particular issue can lead to, or be symptomatic of, serious disputes over strategy and tactics. The rivalry between different government agencies in Northern Ireland such as the police, the army, the various intelligence bodies and the Northern Ireland Office are well known and in 1974 the divisions were so serious that a strike by Protestant workers succeeded in bringing down a power-sharing assembly in the face of the government's inability to speak with one voice (Miller 1993).

Too much publicity can be dangerous for radical organisations. Success in gaining media coverage may lead to internal dissent as spokespersons become media-friendly. The suspicion within the organisation that the newly visible spokesperson might become infatuated with their own celebrity and have 'sold out' is never far from the surface (see Anderson 1993; Gitlin 1980; Miller *et al.* 1998). Furthermore, divisions over strategy and tactics are common, especially in radical or countercultural movements or groups. Divisions within environmental and animal rights groups have increasingly appeared as some become more mainstream. The divisions between organisations campaigning for rights for people with disabilities are absolutely typical. Here the old style of incremental campaigning now competes with the more radical direct action approach of organisations such as the Disabled People's Direct Action Network (DAN), which eschews the gradualist approach and agitates for civil rights rather than 'charity' and sympathy.

One campaign slogan, fusing radical politics with newsworthy punchiness, reads 'piss on pity'. For the old-style campaigners such tactics are more likely to alienate policy makers. According to one: 'if you go up to an MP with that on I don't think he or she's likely to warm to you – if they're not already interested' (Parker 1995: 6). For the radicals such an approach smacks of tried and failed reformism. Such differences of emphasis on strategy, tactics and goals are of course partly genuine political differences, but can also indicate strategies of 'product differentiation' and a means of generating extra pressure on decision makers.

Of course, there are occasions on which it is seen as better to cooperate on particular issues. Resource-poor groups can enter tactical or long-term alliances with their resource-rich competitors or even with their apparent enemies. But more commonly pressure groups will join other statutory and non-statutory bodies to create a common strategy, perhaps at the European or global levels (Dinan and Miller 2006).

Media factors

The media operate within a complex set of pressures of ownership, editorial control and economic interest. Journalists do have some measure of autonomy in their daily work routines. But this varies greatly between radio, television and the press, between different channels or newspapers and even between different formats, be they news, current affairs or discussion programmes in the broadcast media or news, features, columns and editorials in the press. These variations are in part a result of variations in news values, but they also reflect the promotional networks which form around varying journalistic beats. At the pinnacle of the news values of broadcasting, the broadsheet press and some elements of the tabloid press is hard news. This typically revolves around the news beats of central government which are covered by political correspondents or lobby journalists. Down a notch in terms of news value are more peripheral government departments such as Defence, Education, Agriculture or Health, which typically have their own corps of specialist journalists. As a result of this form of organisation the bulk of political news originates with the central bureaucracies of Whitehall and the political party's news management apparatus. However, the specialist correspondents are also engaged in attempting to cover the major policy debates or new developments in their field. Furthermore, they may have a special page devoted to their output in broadsheet newspapers such as the health, science or education pages. Such factors do mean that specialists can be more interested in the intricacies of policy debates or in the activities of resource-poor groups than their non-specialist colleagues on the news desk. As a result resource-poor groups who target specialist journalists can often build up a valuable relationship with them and will tend to gain more access to the inside specialist pages than to other sections of the paper. The relationship also has advantages for the specialist journalist in that pressure groups can be used as a research resource. On the other hand, specialists do tend to gravitate towards official sources in their area and may be less likely to view pressure group stunts as newsworthy than their news desk.

Deacon and Golding (1994) suggest that journalists tend to see news sources as either *advocates* of a point of view or constituency who can be used to give a 'balancing' comment, or as *arbiters*, as 'expert witnesses' who can judge the significance or import of events. Both rich and poor groups can move between these designations though achieving arbiter status is harder than advocate status. Groups at the poorer end of the resource spectrum may only be designated arbiters by specialists. When an issue leaves the specialist pages to move higher up the news agenda to the front pages, most likely when official pronouncements or action are involved, an organisation may have to contend with reverting to advocate status. Such differences are also inflected by varying news values across the media. For example, 'cuddly charities', the ones which deal with animals, children or health, are more heavily featured in tabloid and television coverage (Deacon 1996). But the media are increasingly subordinate to commercial imperatives. In the press investigative journalism has declined, to be replaced by lifestyle and consumer writing. On television 'reality TV' has squeezed out programmes which periodically make powerful interests uncomfortable or provide the public with useful information (Barnett and Seymour 1999; Cohen 2000; Stone 1999). Furthermore, in TV news the obsession with 'liveness' is substituted for explaining the world (Snow 2000).

The impact and success of promotional strategies

The success and impact of promotional strategies are hard to measure, first, because they have myriad aims which are not always clearly conceptualised. Second, they work at different levels. That is, some groups target local opinion, while others simply want to raise funds.

The self-denying status of propaganda, the behind-the-scenes nature of lobbying and the endemic secrecy surrounding the policy process in Britain are further reasons why evaluations of success or impact are difficult. Finally, we should beware of judging success in terms simply of the amount or quality of media coverage, since media coverage does not necessarily or straightforwardly translate into influence (cf. Cracknell 1993).

Governments, business and interest groups try to manage the media because of a widespread recognition that media reporting can impose limits on organisational action and provide opportunities for influencing public opinion, and the distribution of power and resources in society (Walsh-Childers 1994: 827; Linsky 1986). However, one of the key limitations of much media and cultural studies is the reluctance to examine the outcomes of successful (or unsuccessful) media management (Philo and Miller 2001: 70–1). The influence of media reporting on public opinion and, most importantly, government and corporate decision making demand to be directly investigated.

Media strategies have helped to sell government policies such as the privatisation of British public utilities in the 1980s (Miller and Dinan 2000; Philo 1995). Conversely, even flagship policies of strong governments such as the Poll Tax can

fail despite concerted marketing campaigns (Deacon and Golding 1994). In the longer term the strategies of social movements and associated struggles can lead to marked changes in the status and power of social constituencies such as women, Black people and lesbians and gay men. The emergence of issues like racism, violence against women, child sexual abuse, homophobia and even the environment were preceded by long and, on many occasions, apparently unsuccessful campaigns to raise awareness and change society (cf. Tiffen 1989: 197–8).

Changing trends?

Those parts of the media industry which are run by private corporations – that is most of the industry – are increasingly integrated into the global corporate power structure. The increase in the size and power of corporations means that directors of media firms are also directors of other firms too. The biggest media companies are now owned by corporations with many other interests. So, 'Rather than scrutinize the merchants of militarism, large news organizations have been inclined to embrace them. In some cases, as with General Electric and NBC, the arms contractor and the network owner are one and the same. The Pentagon's key vendors can rest assured that big TV and radio outlets will function much more as allies than adversaries' (Solomon 2000).

The convergence between the media and PR business is visible especially in companies like United Business Media, which owns CMP a provider of events, print and online publications. UBM is also a major shareholder of ITN (20 per cent) and the Press Association (17.01 per cent) (UBM 2007). But UBM also owns PR Newswire, a publicity service for corporations and the PR industry which distributes content to news outlets such as ITN and the Press Association. PR Newswire is also the parent of another subsidiary, eWatch, a controversial internet monitoring agency which advertised a service to spy on activist groups and corporate critics. After it was exposed by *Business Week* in 2000 the page promoting this was removed from the eWatch website and eWatch even claimed that it had never existed (Lubbers 2002: 117).

The interests of the media corporations as corporations also means that they are politically active. The media industry is very active in lobbying around issues like healthy eating and obesity as the regulation of advertising would directly impact on their bottom line. Pearson, the media firm which owns the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* funds neoliberal think tanks like Demos and the Social Market Foundation. *The Times* newspaper has funded the Science Media Group the organisation set up to manage coverage of science in – amongst other places – *The Times*. Journalists from Reuters and other news outlets have attended the Bilderberg group, the secretive elite policy planning group and most notably were active participants in the LOTIS (Liberalisation of Trade in Services) committee set up to lobby for the opening up of markets in services. Leaked minutes show that three separate Reuters staff attended the meetings and debated how best to counter protestors against GATS (the programme of opening up world markets in

services). The minutes record that Henry Manisty of Reuters 'wondered how business views could best be communicated to the media. In that respect, his company would be most willing to give them publicity' (Wesselius 2001).

The integration of the PR and media industries is in its early stages. But it is a tendency which undermines the possibility of independent media. This tendency is reinforced by the rise of 'infomediaries' and 'fake news'. Amongst the developments are the trend towards the direct corporate control of information media. This has been something that PR operatives in the UK have been conscious of and trying to influence for some time. An early example of this was the joint venture between ITN and Burson Marsteller, one of the biggest and least ethical PR firms in the world. Corporate Television News was based inside ITN headquarters with full access to ITN archives and made films for Shell and other corporate clients (Brooks 1995; Monbiot 1998; Whitehead 1998).

PR firms have also been busy developing their own channels. One venture, pioneered by Brunswick, one of the most secretive PR companies in the UK – which is also close to both Gordon Brown and David Cameron, provides what it calls 'London's premier business presentation centre' within their own expensive offices in Lincoln's Inn Fields in London. The Lincoln Centre is a subsidiary of Brunswick and provides webcasting service to companies such as Atkins, Spirent, Diageo and Compass Group (Lincoln Centre, nd).

The PR industry is quite open about the reasons for this trend in their trade press. *PR Week* reports that they are 'enthusiastic' about it: 'it avoids the embarrassing howlers that a press conference can create', says Keren Haynes, a founding director of Shout! Communications. Citing the 1990s example of corporate 'fat cat' Cedric Brown of British Gas being 'torn into by journalists' when trapped in a lift, Haynes notes that had Brown 'been at the other end of a webcast, such a situation would never have happened' (Gray 2006: 26). This kind of total message control is handled by PR agencies as well as a new breed of fake news providers. BAA, for example commissions the controversial firm World Television to produce its webcasting programme. World Television is the company behind a British government fake news service called British Satellite News (Miller 2006).

An initiative by one of New Labour's favourite PR people, Julia Hobsbawm, attempts to blur the lines between spin and journalism even further. It is titled Editorial Intelligence (ei) and involves a range of journalists, PR people and lobbyists such as the disgraced former lobbyist Derek Draper. Reports suggest that Editorial Intelligence was offering journalists £1000 a year to sit on its advisory board, and £250 a time to appear on discussion panels, while, according to the *Sunday Times*, 40 organisations 'such as the Royal Mail and Vodafone have paid £4000 each to join the club in the hope of getting their agendas across to Britain's "most influential commentators"' (Fixter 2006).

Editorial Intelligence is simply one example among an impressive variety of initiatives. Before Editorial Intelligence, Hobsbawm floated the idea of a 'truth commission' an Orwellian-sounding project in which a number of key journalistic and market ideologues were involved including John Lloyd, who has written a book about how it is the media (rather than government or the market) which is destroying politics (Lloyd 2004). Lloyd and Hobsbawm were also involved in the

discussion leading to the formation of the new journalism think tank at the LSE/LCC. Called 'Polis', a key inspiration was the academic Roger Silverstone whose work on the media and morality chimed well with Hobsbawm and Lloyd's distaste for independent journalism. In his last – posthumously published – book Silverstone refers to the 'trashing of trust' in which the media are held to have a central role (Silverstone 2006: 163). Silverstone also proposed the importance of media literacy as a means to ensure 'media justice'. He puts this clearly at one point: 'The slogan? Let's say "Education, not regulation!"' (2006: 185) – a slogan which is music to the ears of corporate lobbyists everywhere. He also notes that 'it would be good' to reduce 'conflict, repression, discord' (2006: 187). The opposing view is that journalism and PR have differing interests and attempting to bring them closer can only damage the potential independence of journalism.

Lloyd founded the Reuters Institute at Oxford with a £1.75 million grant from the media monolith, the Reuters Foundation. The trend to fund think tanks and the setting up of focused journalism centres operates in parallel with the rise of fake news. But a similar development is the rise of 'journo-lobbyists'. The aim is the same – to dominate the information environment. This development is furthest advanced in the US, and is unsurprisingly the province of the extensive network of think tanks, lobbying firms and front groups associated with neoliberal and neoconservative tendencies. One pioneering example is Tech Central Station which appears at first glance to be a kind of think tank cum internet magazine. Look a little deeper and it is apparent that TCS has 'taken aggressive positions on one side or another of intra-industry debates, rather like a corporate lobbyist' (Confessore 2003: 2). 'But', writes Nicholas Confessore,

TCS doesn't just act like a lobbying shop. It's actually published by one – the DCI Group, a prominent Washington 'public affairs' firm specializing in P.R., lobbying, and so-called 'Astroturf' organizing, generally on behalf of corporations, GOP politicians, and the occasional Third-World despot. The two organizations share most of the same owners, some staff, and even the same suite of offices in downtown Washington, a block off K Street. As it happens, many of DCI's clients are also 'sponsors' of the site it houses. TCS not only runs the sponsors' banner ads; its contributors aggressively defend those firms' policy positions, on TCS and elsewhere.

(Confessore 2003: 2)

James Glassman, who runs Tech Central Station has 'given birth to something quite new in Washington: journo-lobbying'. Confessore notes:

It's an innovation driven primarily by the influence industry. Lobbying firms that once specialized in gaining person-to-person access to key decision-makers have branched out. The new game is to dominate the entire intellectual environment in which officials make policy decisions, which means funding everything from think tanks to issue ads to phony grassroots pressure groups. But the institution that most affects the intellectual atmosphere in Washington, the media, has also proven the hardest for K Street to influence – until now.

(Confessore 2003: 2)

The wider project of the PR industry of which the direct takeover of the channels of communication is part, is to abolish the possibility of independent journalism, whilst maintaining the appearance of independent media.

Conclusion

This brings us back to debates about the effects of 'promotional culture' on the democratic process. On the one hand, it can be argued that there has been an increasing sophistication in news management on the part of the powerful, especially in government and business. On the other, that some countervailing pressure has been exerted and that particular social constituencies have to some extent advanced their position in our culture. This seems to speak of an increasing sophistication of promotional strategies on the part of the powerless, too. Yet, before we embrace the comforting pluralist notion of relatively open competition for power and resources we should examine the relative prominence of official sources in the media and the results of promotional strategies on the distribution of rewards and resources in society – meaning specifically levels of poverty and inequality and the distribution of power. While winners and losers vary and the type and extent of inequality in contemporary society does change, it is clear that Western countries remain radically inegalitarian societies. Indeed in some cases (such as Britain), whatever the victories of the resource-poor in the media, inequalities of wealth and power have actually become dramatically wider since the beginning of the 1980s (Philo and Miller 2001). In other words wealth can be systematically moved from poor to rich even as the media are awash with stories about corruption in big business or government.

Contemporary corporate and governmental public relations activities are terminally lacking in good faith, they debase the political language and stride forward hand in hand with an increasingly commercialised media – ever ready to take handouts from PR operatives. The campaign against corporate promotion is gathering pace. From Seattle and protests against war to critiques of New Labour 'spin', there is resistance to the misinformation and distortion which are central to the PR business. There are possibilities for pressure groups and the powerless to intervene in this process. It is also possible to plan and execute promotional strategies on behalf of the powerless which do not compromise either radical politics or a respect for truth. The key question for the future is whether the systematic distortions of promotional culture can be curbed in the interests of democratic deliberation and decision making.

Questions

- 1 How do multinational corporations manipulate the media to safeguard their interests?
- 2 Are pressure groups condemned to rely on publicity stunts to promote their aims and, if so, why?
- 3 Does spin work? Is it successful in (a) managing the media; (b) influencing public opinion; (c) legitimising government policies?
- 4 Using an example selected from contemporary news coverage, analyse the promotional strategy of one or more of the following: a government department, a corporate

organisation, a pressure group and attempt to assess the relative success or failure of the strategy.

Further reading

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- Dinan, W. and Miller, D. (eds) (2007) *Thinker, Faker, Spinner, Spy: Corporate PR and the Assault on Democracy*, London: Pluto. Case studies of the role of public relations and think tanks in power politics.
- Miller, D. and Dinan, W. (2008) *A Century of Spin: How PR Became the Cutting Edge of Corporate Power*, London: Pluto. An historical overview of how business power arose and how democracy declined.
- Stauber, J. and Rampton, S. (1995) *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*, Monroe, ME: Common Courage. A popular account of what is wrong with the PR industry.

Websites

- www.prwatch.org - Center for Media and Democracy. Publishers of *PR Watch* which provides public interest reporting on the PR industry.
- www.sourcewatch.org - CMD also hosts Sourcewatch a 'wiki' database on PR and spin.
- www.spinwatch.org - Spinwatch, a public interest reporting site on spin and propaganda, based in the UK.
- www.spinprofiles.org - Spinwatch also hosts a wiki on lobbying, spin and propaganda.

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