Media releases and news: An analysis of how mainstream online media used Queensland Government communications

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Abstract

"Media release journalism" is the practice of passing off a media release as news without conducting further journalistic work (Shin, Lee & Park, 2012). The practice is viewed broadly in the journalism industry as being undesirable and unethical, but previous studies have shown it to be surprisingly common. This paper shares the results of a study that tracked Queensland Government-issued media releases and compared them with the resulting online news stories. It sought not to ascertain if a media release was picked up by the media, but how the information was integrated when the media used it as the basis for a news story. Where the angle provided in the release was not followed, the study applied a recognised set of news values, offering suggestions for the reason for the deviation.

The study found that some journalists do not conduct journalistic inquiry into the information provided in a government-provided media release, and this may be framed as failing in their public duty to critique such information before dissemination. In almost a third of the stories analysed, journalists for mainstream online news outlets presented the words prepared by government media officers as news without notable change. The paper suggests further research is needed into the reasons why journalists who use media releases for story inspiration do not fulfil other public responsibilities of the profession in presenting the resulting news stories. It also suggests the thin stream of research into the relationships between government media officers and journalists would prove a fertile field for further academic inquiry.

Introduction

For the purposes of this article, news journalism is defined as a living, changing organism that presents fresh, interesting and important information to the public in ways they can easily access and digest (Lamble, 2010). The intricacies of the collation and presentation of news are a constant source of general as well as scholarly interest. Some analysts have focused on the absence or presence of production pressures (Tuchman, 1973); others have considered staffing numbers, ethnographical backgrounds, managerial influence or personal political leanings. Some inquiry has been motivated by a desire to understand the role of journalists, journalism and news consumption, but others are motivated by a reason that has arguably further reaching resonance: to assess its watchdog role. It is interest in this latter area of study of the industry that drove the primary research objectives that inform this paper. The suggestion that public relations professionals play an increasing role in newsgathering has been regularly stated (Davis, 2002; Manning, 2008). One way to assess whether the stream of information is travelling from the mouth of the government to the ears of the public is being filtered through a series of checks and balances is to analyse the ways in which journalists present government-provided information to their readers. To do this, consideration of the news story intros in the stories resulting from government-supplied information was conducted. Those news stories that did not follow the line provided in the media release were analysed for their news value against an accepted set to suggest a reason for the variation.

Public relations and the news media

Mencher (1997) described one of journalists' essential duties as keeping governments honest. The relationships between government public relations officers and the news media have been widely observed because, as Cohen (1963, p. 179) notes, "public relations activity results in press coverage, which is then interpreted as significant public opinion". The sway public relations officers have over the presentation of news may be larger than "scholars recorded, journalists admitted, or news consumers were aware of" (Davis, 2003, p. 31). Information presented by public relations officers "… must be always be seen as 'instrumental' or contributing to persuading and mobilising the target audience to … vote for a particular candidate" (Linning, 2004, p. 67). Davis found that that the ability of public relations practitioners to influence news production gained added impetus by the rapid decline in editorial resources and a growing dependency on sources for stories (Davis, 2000).

The relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists has been described as a mixed one with elements of both mutual dependency and mutual mistrust (Shin & Cameron, 2005; DeLorme & Fedler, 2003). Shin et al. (2012) contended that public relations practitioners are among the most influential news sources for journalists because they offer subsidised information for journalists. However, "public relations practitioners as news sources try to influence the news-making process, and journalists try to remain objective, attempting to avoid undue influence by sources" (Shin et al., 2012, p. 21). DeLorme and Fedler (2003) contended that journalists' century-old resentment of public relations sources was aggravated by reporters wanting information easily, but resenting those who provide it.

This overview of the very textured relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners provides some context for the current study.

Agenda setting, government public relations and news

Berkowitz (1997) noted that policymakers see mass media as a convenient channel for transmitting messages they wanted conveyed to influence public opinion. This is aided by bureaucratic sources of information being seen as authoritative (Gandy, 1982) and journalists' view of society as bureaucratically structured (Fishman, 1980). If, as Lippmann (1960) contended, the news media construct society's view of the world and public opinion on political matters is the result of deliberate persuasion and the cultivation of symbols and stereotypes, the impact that public relations-prepared media releases has on news stories must be considered. McCombs and Shaw (1972) formalised the "agenda setting" phenomenon in a study of media influence on undecided voters during a presidential election campaign in the United States. This anchoring of the theory in the observation and analysis of political activity makes agenda setting theory particularly relevant to this study.

Of particular interest is the government public relations branches' relationship with the news media. Government and the media are each bound by different roles and obligations to the public that they each seek to serve, but each seeks to influence. Public relations services within government have been labelled 'spin doctoring' and have been criticised for blurring the boundaries between the promotion of an incumbent government's political agenda and the public service role of effective factual communication to benefit the citizenry (Louw, 2010; Stockwell, 2007).

Pearson and McLean (2010) warned that legitimate government public service communication and party-centric propaganda are intrinsically different and it is important to develop a measure of ways to separate these. Cutlip, Center and Broom (2006) contended that, almost by definition, government-media relations are adversarial. Governments ideally would like privacy in which to make their decisions and control how those decisions are publicised, and Western media contend that the business and activities of the government, elected representatives and public servants

should be conducted in the open to ensure they are ethical and in the public interest. Furlan (2011) asserted that the relational dynamics between public relations practitioners and journalists were important, as they may influence an area of reporting which affects not only public behaviour but also government policy. Despite this, Furlan said it had received scant attention in Australia.

The preparation of media releases by government officers is an example of effort by policy makers to garner support (Kennamer, 1994) and to inform citizenry of their activities and decisions (Simmons & Small, 2012). Media outlets use media releases as a basis for news stories to save time and money in research and writing (Gandy, 1982). Thus, the creators of those media releases that are used as the basis of, or for a whole presentation of, 'news', play a part in setting news agendas and, potentially, establish issues of community concern. How big a part they play depends on how many releases and what proportion of each is used within each story, or more broadly, by a publication as a whole.

Kennamer (1994) contended that news media are as much the target of agenda setting as they are the source of it. Policy makers and organisations make an effort to shape the amount and kind of news coverage their media releases and other initiatives receive. Research in Australia has indicated that between 30% and 80% of media content is sourced from or significantly influenced by public relations material or practitioners (Jackson, 2009).

Researchers refer to the need for the public to trust that journalists work in the public interest (Jempson, 2005). Other studies have shown that journalists are reluctant to cite public relations material as a source (Macnamara, 2006; Simmons, 2007). One scholar argued that there is need for specific mention of plagiarism of media release material in codes of ethics (Richards, 2005). Simmons and Spence (2006) contended that the media's practice of using press releases as news constituted deception and manipulation.

Information selection for news

Journalists have been found to take their role in disseminating information to the public very seriously, with critique of government information very high on their list. A survey of 1068 journalists from across all mainstream media in Australia found that 81% of them believed the role of investigating statements by government to be "extremely important" (Henningham, 1996, p. 213). Thirty percent also believed it was equally important to be an adversary of public officials (Henningham, 1996, p. 213).

Lord Francis Williams, former BBC governor and newspaper editor, stated that the press had three linked responsibilities: to collect and publish news, to interpret and comment on it, and to act as a guard dog of the public interest where executive power may be used (Conley & Lamble, 2006).

By its nature, journalism involves decisions about what to include and what to leave out of every news article prepared. These choices may need to be justified to each other, the public, the government or in court (Pearson, 2007). Online, this decision-making process – inherent in bringing the news to the public – is conducted in an environment of an endless deadline. Pressures are many, and accessing information quickly is an intrinsic part of a journalist's work (Cohen, 2002).

Media releases are viewed by some as the most important public relations tool (Bollinger, 2001) and the public relations industry's most common tool for disseminating information to the media (Cameron, Sallot & Curtin, 1997). Public relations officers use them because they are effective and media outlets use them as story inspiration because they have advantages over informal communications (Bivins, 2005). However, some studies have found media releases were forming the basis of an increasing and disproportionate part of news content. Research in the UK found that journalists in 'quality' news organisations were relying on public relations sources for news (Lewis, Williams & Franklin, 2008) to the point where independent journalistic activity was the exception rather than the rule. Research in Australia indicates that 55% of stories analysed

across 10 publications were driven by some form of public relations element (Crikey-ACIJ, 2010). These studies spurred the research in this paper.

News values

In this study, consideration was given to possible reasons for published news stories being different from the supplied media releases. Elements that make a story worthy of publication or broadcast are not fixed. Mencher (1997) said news was information that was a break from the normal flow of events and information that helped people make sound decisions about their lives (Mencher, 1997). Professional western journalism ethics are built on the objective pursuit of truth (Ward, 2009).

Being able to recognise news and something that resembles it is the difference between a good journalist and a bad one (Conley & Lamble, 2006). Distinctions must be drawn between news and a version of reality that is based on self-interested sources (Epstein, 1975). The public relies on journalists to do this.

Galtung and Ruge researched what was news in 1965 and their study and report became one of the most influential about news values (Watson, 1998). The authors acknowledged their study had limitations because it dealt only with an analysis of foreign news in a single nation's foreign news pages (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Across all media, there seems a consensus that it is important to have a measure of news values – a framework to assess information for its newsworthiness. This framework would help determine whether a journalist should pursue a story and whether, if that story was published, the public would read it (Conley & Lamble, 2006). Published news items have an effect on public discussion and society's perception of itself (McCombs, 2004), so the way in which the information is presented is important.

New Zealand academic Murray Masterton questioned 3000 journalists from 67 nations for his doctoral thesis on the values that made information news (Masterton 1990). He outlined internationally accepted criteria by which newsworthiness could be measured. The breadth and scope of the research were unprecedented and gave the study obvious rigour. The six criteria, in descending order of importance, that Masterton's research established dictated an information item's newsworthiness were: significance, proximity, conflict, human interest, novelty, and prominence. Using these criteria in the current study may indicate reasons for divergence from the first paragraph provided in the supplied media release.

Methodology and research framework

In order to identify how journalists used media releases, 10 Queensland Government-issued releases disseminated between March and August 2010 were selected. The 10 were chosen as being written about topics that had potentially broad public interest, and were therefore more likely to be picked up by mainstream online media. These 10 releases (Table 1) then became the beginning of 'cases', with the subsequent online news stories that emanated from the release completing each 'case'. Gandy (1982) suggested one way to study the concept of government media release and press coverage relations was through case studies. Turk (1986, p. 16) said a more quantifiable and generally applicable methodology used content analysis to examine agenda shaping. However, as the research did not seek to establish *whether* a media release was used, but rather *how* the information was presented, a modified case study approach was deemed to be a more appropriate research method in this instance. Hedrick, Bickman and Rog (1993) contended that research projects seeking answers to questions of how and why were most likely to be exploratory and a methodology based on case study was the most appropriate research method. Yin said case study research was preferred for examining contemporary events and was "used … to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organisational, social, political and related phenomena" (Yin, 2009, p. 4).

4

Table 1: Media releases by title, originator and date

Title	Originator	Date
1. Half a billion dollars' worth of road upgrades on their way	Treasurer	March 18, 2010
2. Major milestone for justice in Qld	Attorney-General	April 13, 2010
3. New framework modernises water management in SEQ	Natural Resources Minister	May 20. 2010
4. Hooning impounds pass 20,000 mark	Police Minister	June 13, 2010
5. Public nuisance ticketing to be extended statewide	*Premier*	June 15, 2010
6. Three strikes and you're out for speeding learners	Transport Minister	July 13, 2010
7. Qld jobs growth says economy on the right track	Treasurer	July 26, 2010
8. Record year for elective surgery	Health Minister	August 13. 2010
9. Qld Government offers immediate police pay rise	Premier and Police Minister	August 13, 2010
10. Drink Safe Precincts to offer local solutions to local problems	Premier and Tourism Minister	August 29, 2010

Editorial content on mainstream news websites does not differ greatly from the way print and broadcast journalists approach storytelling, news values or relationships with audiences (Deuze 2005). Given this, 10 online stories from mainstream media outlets were selected as the source of the news stories that would be analysed. In all, 43 news stories were found that resulted from the 10 media releases.To assess those stories where introductions diverged from the media release, a basic analysis of the introduction's content was conducted. Content analysis is used to study the content of communication and to ascertain the meaning or value of those communications (Weerkkody, 2009), making it an appropriate secondary research method for this project. Lasswell's core questions of content analysis – "Who says what, to whom, why, to what extent and with what effect?" in his communication model (in Bryson 1948) –

was considered in this step. Its commonality with the basic tenets of journalistic reporting – answering the who, what, when, where, why and how of an event or issue (Kipling, 1986) – also made an analysis of the introduction's content an obvious choice. Content analysis is useful for examining news articles, or in this study, the front end of them, because the stated aim of news is to be objective. Content analysis also guided Turk (in McCombs & Shaw 1993) in her 1985 study of public relations and its relationship with news. Masterton's (1990) news values were applied to the content in an attempt to suggest the reason for the change.

Results and discussion

In this study, 10 media releases prepared by Queensland Government media officers were tracked and the online news articles that resulted from them were analysed. One finding that became evident early in the research was

5

that the news stories that emanated from the media releases varied enormously in content and the angle of the introduction.

The first task in analysing the responses was to assess whether each media outlet followed the government-provided angle in the introduction to the story (Table 2, below). Of the 43 stories analysed, 11 had lead paragraphs that mirrored the government-provided leads. This meant that of the stories within the cases that were analysed, 30.6% followed the government-provided lead. Notably, some featured lead sentences that mimicked the media release almost word-for-word.

Table 2: Cases analysed according to percentage of stories mirroring government-provided lead

Media release	Percentage of the resulting stories that mirrored provided lead
1	0
2	66
3	50
4	100
5	40
6	0
7	0
8	0
9	0
10	50
Average	**30.6%**

Of the 32 stories that deviated from the government-generated angle, the news values applied in the deviation varied broadly. In the cases where many media outlets published stories, there were as many as four different news values reflected in the lead paragraphs that were crafted. Some of the individual story leads had indications of several news values in their introductory sentences. An example of this is media release number 6. The media release read:

Minister for Transport Rachel Nolan has instructed the Department of Transport and Main Roads to change driver testing rules in favour of a tougher "three-strikes-and-you're-out" policy.

Three of the resulting introductions read:

1. Queensland Opposition Leader John-Paul Langbroek says new driving test criteria will send the wrong message to young motorists (ABC).

2. The Queensland Opposition says it's outrageous that learner drivers will be able to speed several times during their driving tests and still pass (*Sydney Morning Herald*).

3. Learner drivers will be allowed to speed up to five times during their driving test and still pass under a new testing regime in Queensland (*The Courier-Mail*).

Of the 10 cases examined, five were found to deviate from the provided angle in every resulting story. The reason for the divergence was not uniform, however, with each news article exhibiting a key value that would indicate the outlet deemed most newsworthy. In only one case did every news article follow the provided news angle.

Table 3: Cases analysed according to Masterton's news values

Case #	Significance	Proximity	Conflict	Human interest	Novelty	Prominence
1	√	√	√	√		
2	√					
3			√			
4						
5		√	√			
6		√	√	√		
7	√	√	√			
8		√	√			
9			√			
10	√	√	√			
Total	**4**	**6**	**8**	**2**		

Of the media releases selected as case studies, none of the resulting stories exhibited the novelty or prominence news values in their introductions (Table 3). This is perhaps unsurprising, as the media releases emanated from government departments, where novelty is not often reason for a piece of information being newsworthy.

The releases selected were government announcements, not out-of-the-ordinary events, therefore novelty was always going to be an unlikely motivator for the resulting news article. In analysing the news values collectively, conflict was overwhelmingly the most common news value evident in the stories.

Of the news stories whose introductions deviated from the government-provided line, the values most commonly reflected were conflict, proximity and significance. Conflict was the most common value, followed closely by proximity. Human interest was rarely the present news value, and novelty and prominence were not present as news values in the stories analysed. One case had equal measures of two values. In collating the cases according to the most commonly applied news value, conflict led the field, followed closely by proximity.

The preamble to the Media Alliance Code of Ethics, the national guidelines for the way in which journalists conduct themselves and present their work, includes references to the need for journalists to scrutinise power, and that they must search, disclose and question

7

information (MEAA, 2005). The first tenet in the code says journalists must "report and interpret honestly, striving for accuracy, fairness and disclosure of all essential facts. Do not suppress relevant available facts, or give distorting emphasis" (MEAA, 2005). Followed strictly, the code suggests that any information transmitted by a government should be questioned and scrutinised, with other views and voices being consulted and reported to give the public a balanced and fair account of the content of that information. Where the media release was published as a news story and left unchanged, or where the journalists gave distorted emphasis to another opinion, it could therefore be suggested that the journalists, and online publications themselves, were not demonstrating ethical conduct, according to the Media Alliance Code of Ethics.

Conclusion

Journalistic ethicists may express concern that 31% of the stories analysed in this study presented the government-crafted introduction as news, and the news outlet aired that angle. Given the Code of Ethics dictates that journalists must not give distorting emphasis, and must scrutinise power, it may be suggested that the reporters of those stories were not fulfilling their role in keeping the decision-makers and legislators accountable. However, given that this study only considered the lead paragraphs of each news story, further research would be needed to investigate whether the chosen angle was adhered to throughout the article and comment further on the unethical behaviour noted.

Notably, it could be argued that those outlets that failed to write another angle on the stories simply felt the government-provided lead was the most newsworthy, and therefore should not seek another simply because it was given to them by the government. Public relations practitioners could contend that giving the government-provided information to the public unfiltered is informing them more accurately. In addition, given that many public relations staff in the government departments' media units are former journalists, perhaps these media relations officers simply provided media releases with solid news angles.

A different perspective on this statistic is that while 31% of news outlets toed the government's line, 69% did not. That a large majority presented a different introduction, crafted as a result of their own research and interviews, indicates they used the practices of journalism to find another angle on the initially provided information that they deemed to be more newsworthy. In these cases, the news release was simply the inspiration for the story, not viewed as the story itself. Interestingly, of the six news values Masterton (1990) established in his international study, his 'top three' were found to be the most commonly reflected in the stories that deviated in this study. It could be contended that this research project therefore supports the ranking that Masterton established in his important study but in a different order.

Further research, including perhaps qualitative enquiries, is needed to establish the reasons for a media release's use as news or why a journalist would choose to divert from it. Such questions deserving of further inquiry include: Why did the outlets that ran with the releases as news stories do so? Was it deemed that the release was sufficiently newsworthy, or was presenting the release as news to readers influenced by organisational factors such as staffing levels or following a directed workplace agenda? Are the results of this study indicative of a broader pattern in the news journalism profession?

The pattern in mainstream online media of following a government-provided lead or choosing one that is driven by a different news value is also something that clearly warrants further study. Whether there is a general shift in the proportion of each news value in the general makeup of news is a matter that might be worthy of further investigation and research for both the journalism and public relations professions. In an evolving and growing area of communication relations, the need for ongoing and broadening studies into the behaviours and motivations of those who communicate important information to the public has never been greater.

8

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