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## Book review:

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**Cottle, S. (Ed.). (2003). *News, public relations and power.* London: Sage.**

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There is some debate about the title of Simon Cottle's book *News, Public Relations and Power*. At a Melbourne University conference in December, 2003, editor Professor Simon Cottle said the title's implied emphasis on 'public relations' had been insisted upon by the publisher. Cottle agreed it might be concluded that this was for marketing purposes. This helps to explain why only one chapter out of nine offers an explicit critique of the impact of public relations on how British news gets reported. The other chapters are on more diffuse aspects of the sociology of journalism in the United Kingdom. For a reader keen to see this book as a contribution to understanding contemporary public relations practices it is a 'do-it-yourself job' to insert public relations implications into the other critiques.

The explicit PR chapter--chapter 2 by Aeron Davis--tells us: "The public relations industry [in Britain] has, in recent decades, come to play an increasingly important part in the reporting process...In contrast the news gathering resources of journalists have declined" (p. 27). If this sounds a little like *deja vu* that fits with Cottle's preface remarks: "The chapters in this book...present and summarise current arguments and research findings within the field of journalism studies. These have sometimes been published at greater length elsewhere." The book does not however seem to be in touch with public relations writings on these matters. Davis gathers together a few graphs from secondary sources to show the increasing employment of political and government information officers and the increasing income of public relations consultants in Britain. Consultants are said to have increased

their fee income from £175 million (UK pounds) in 1995 to £377 million in 2000. Davis reviews the literature which warns that powerful corporate and government public relations activities are: "extend[ing] their dominance of news still further" (p. 35). However he concludes that there are "grounds for pluralist optimism" because "at the same time...‘resource poor’ and ‘outsider’ sources have also used public relations to gain more frequent and favourable coverage." By this Davis means that non-establishment groups now lobby and do media relations effectively with the help of voluntary labour. This is in an atmosphere where there is increasing cynicism about dominant and 'official' sources; exemplified by a decline in voter turnout. (Unlike in Australia the British only vote if they want to.)

Cottle writes an introductory chapter describing the book as about "key concerns and debates about the media's relation to wider structures and systems of power." Chapter 3 is about British political parties' communication strategies and attempts at news management (Bob Franklin). Chapter 4 is about attempts at manipulating the reporting of wars (Philip Taylor). Chapter 5 is about interest and campaign groups' attempts to seize and control news agendas (Gadi Wolfsfeld). Chapter 6 is about non-governmental organisations as news sources (David Deacon). Chapter 7 is about cyber-activism and other ways environmental protest and similar oppositional groups get their news across (Alison Anderson). Chapter 8 is about tabloid formats of TV news (John Langer). Chapter 9 is about the 'framing' and

contextualising of news by the conventions of television journalism (Simon Cottle).

Professor Cottle has recently taken up a position at Melbourne University after moving from the UK. It will be very welcome if similar work on Australian news media and institutions results from this move. But as his new project unfolds perhaps his research could consider the academic field boundaries which are revealed by this book. Much of what is written here is directly relevant to a critique of public relations and to an ethics of public relations. However the terminology confines the studies primarily to an academic field of media sociology which shies away from links to public relations scholarship. The next edition could perhaps benefit from an easing of this academic demarcation to include writers with direct understanding of public relations practices and a more overt approach to explaining how organisations set out to influence through public relations practice. Much of what this book tells us is described more clearly in specific public relations research. It is a shame that the writers do not seem to have read this research.