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Macnamara, Jim - *Journalism & PR: Unpacking 'Spin', Stereotypes, and Media Myths*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2014, pp. 284, ISBN 978-1-4331-2426-6

Reviewed by Caroline Fisher - University of Canberra, Australia

This book takes a fresh look at the well-documented and contentious relationship between journalism and public relations. While some of the content and arguments have appeared in earlier journal publications {Macnamara, 2012 #314; Macnamara, 2014 #777}, this text also contains new material, including the author's personal reflections on moving back and forth between journalism and public relations.

Based on an examination of existing literature, his own experience and additional qualitative research, Macnamara sets out to do as the title of the book suggests: 'unpack' the 'spin' and challenge the stereotypes and myths that surround conceptions of journalism and public relations. In doing so, he takes us on a hundred year journey from the emergence of the first press agents in the early 1900s to the 21st century where new forms of public relations practice are testing the boundaries between journalism and public relations.

The book begins with an overview of existing research and literature about the journalism-PR nexus and the thoroughly documented negative perception that journalists have traditionally had toward public relations and its practitioners. Macnamara argues that journalists have been engaged in three key negative discourses regarding public relations: the discourse of 'spin', the discourse of 'denial', and the discourse of 'victimhood'. Simply put, in the discourse of 'spin' the derogatory label of 'spin' which emerged in the 1970s in relation to political PR, has come to encompass all aspects of public relations work, and fails distinguish between different forms of PR. To 'unpack' that perception Macnamara reminds readers that PR is also "used by the less powerful, opening doors for progressive movements to get their messages onto the media agenda" (Dahlgren, 2009, p.49). Ironically, despite the concern about 'spin' and the pervasiveness of PR, Macnamara argues it "is largely unstudied and unexamined outside the specialist disciplinary field of public relations scholarship" (xiv).

The discourse of 'denial' refers to what he says is a lack of transparency by journalists about the extent to which they rely on public relations subsidies, such as press releases. Despite a range of research demonstrating the heavy use of press releases, reporters and editors do not reveal to the audience which stories were generated from press release or other public relations materials. Rather than be transparent about their reliance on PR, Macnamara argues that journalists engage in a discourse of 'victimhood'. This involves journalists complaining that they cannot compete against the rising number of PR practitioners at a time of decreasing resources in the news media, thus forcing reporters to become increasingly dependent on PR materials and undermining their independence. While the author concedes that "the decline in journalists' jobs is likely to exacerbate the situation", he argues that journalists are reluctant to take any responsibility for their reliance on PR by failing "to acknowledge that many, if not most, journalists willingly seek PR materials and assistance on a daily basis – even if they deny this to their editors and their audience" (41). Based on a review of content analyses states there is evidence of journalism's dependence on PR materials well before the digital revolution, and therefore argues "there is no correlation between the trend lines of increasing use of PR material and loss of journalists' jobs – these two trends have occurred independently of each other" (40).

Having 'unpacked spin', Macnamara then goes on to provide a comprehensive description of the models and

theories of the media and the dominant professional conception of journalism as democratic 'watchdog'. While declaring his support for a robust 'fourth estate', he also points to examples of ethical breaches in journalism that have served to weaken that idealistic conception. Similarly, he provides an overview of public relations theory and practice beginning with its 'murky' origins of press agency and links to propaganda, through to normative conceptions of PR and the dominance of Grunig's (1984) 'Excellence Theory', which he then balances with a long list of "PR disasters" (84).

The second half of the book centres on qualitative research findings based on in-depth interviews with 32 senior PR and journalism practitioners. The selected interview data includes concerns from the practitioners about journalists not having a good understanding of the nature and breadth of PR; the importance of trust between journalists and PR practitioners; and the need for better regulation, education and training in journalism and public relations. The data also includes concerns from practitioners about new forms of PR that are blurring the boundary with journalism. He then further builds on that data by looking at the rise of social media and user generated content and the implications on professional boundaries between the two fields. He restates the well established arguments that the ability of "people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006) to publish their own information via blog or other digital platforms means the public can now seek information from a range of sources other than traditional media; And the 'fourth estate' role that has traditionally been performed by the news media is increasingly being taken over by a new 'fifth estate' of "watchful independent citizens connected online through networks" (198).

Other developments, Macnamara argues, are also causing a conflation between journalism and PR. These include the growing use of advertorials, embedding journalists, paid posts/sponsored content, and brand/corporate journalism. To meet the demand for informational content, he argues, organisations are looking to journalists to create specialist content and write about their brands. As journalists continue to lose jobs in the traditional news media he predicts that increasing numbers of reporters will crossover to the 'dark-side' to work in these new areas of corporate journalism. While Macnamara acknowledges it is necessary for new media forms and models to develop, he also sees the convergence of journalism and public relations as "counter-productive and even catastrophic for democracies and civil societies" (214).

In order to avoid this undesirable outcome, Macnamara makes several recommendations in the final chapter targeting journalism and public relations education and regulation. They include developing clearer 'rules' of engagement' for journalists and public relations practitioners through a code of practice for journalist – PR interaction. That code would also include transparency guidelines for journalists to declare their use of PR materials. He also recommends improved education for journalism and PR students about nature and role of both fields, including stronger instruction for both in ethics. He also calls on academic disciplines outside of PR to study the role of public relations and its impact on society. Lastly, he recommends collaboration between the PR, advertising and marketing industries to develop responsible codes of practice around new forms of PR such as native advertising, embedding, advertorial and brand journalism, and for them to acknowledge the potential deleterious impact these practices might have on the public sphere. To hold those industries to account, he also urges media regulators to watch these developments closely.

This is a timely, and in parts, challenging book that takes a comprehensive look at the interrelationship between journalism and public relations. It is timely because changes in technology mean professional demarcations are dissolving and increasing numbers of journalists will be looking to a future in PR in response to job losses in the traditional news media. The book is challenging, because it demands both journalism and public relations scholars and practitioners reflect on their perceptions and conceptions of the other, question the stereotypes associated with both roles, and adopt new approaches to educating students about the nature and need for both journalism and public relations in society.

The recommendations for greater transparency by journalists about their use of PR materials, and regulation for PR industry are also likely to be challenging to some practitioners. While the foreword and opening chapter of the book appear to be defensive about public relations, overall, the book does leave an aftertaste of balance about the strengths and weaknesses of both journalism and PR with recommendations about how to maintain their independence and boost their integrity. At a time of upheaval in the news media with journalists looking for new avenues of employment to ply their skills, this book provides a useful overview of both fields and challenges unhelpful pre-conceptions that have traditionally hampered relations between the two fields.

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About the reviewer

Caroline Fisher is a lecturer in journalism and political communication in the Faculty of Arts & Design, University of Canberra, Australia. Her PhD thesis *From 'Watchdog' to 'Spin-doctor'* examined the career transition from journalism to political media advising.