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Journalism in a PR World

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JOURNALISM IN A PR WORLD

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I'm a member of the Communication faculty at what is primarily a teaching institution. We have approximately 800 majors in our department – A number that has grown significantly over the past five years.

Among our incoming students, journalism is our most popular program, with three times as many students declaring a journalism major over public relations – what we call public communication. Among graduates, however, journalism is our least popular degree – and public communication, our most popular.

This migration of talent from journalism to public relations is troubling, but it's also understandable. Our adjuncts, many of whom are active or retired media professionals, teach most of our introductory journalism courses. The real life experiences as professional journalists that we boast they bring to the classroom – the war stories we hire them to tell – are seldom glamorous.

They're stories of downsized newsrooms, increased workloads and declining salary scales. Stories of working without resources. Of researching and writing nine stories a week. Of working under circumstances that mandate an inadequate job. Of working for news organizations where news is not a priority.

Then there's the war against the press. Reporters Without Borders now ranks the U.S. # 47 in press freedom, following a massive uptick in unprovoked police beatings and baseless arrests of journalists covering police brutality. We now teach students how to get arrested. Freedom of the press does not seem to protect the freedom of reporters to physically gather data – just to report the data they must now increasingly risk arrest to obtain.

There's also the government persecution of whistle blowers and harassment of whistleblower data disseminators – with Wikileaks being the most obvious example. And there're a slew of new ALEC-authored state laws around the country criminalizing various forms of investigative reporting, such as going undercover in food processing facilities. And let's not forget the statutory Food Disparagement laws of the 1990s, now on the books in 12 states as civil statutes and in Colorado as a criminal statute.

This is what awaits the cream of the crop among our graduates – the elite few who land ever elusive jobs actually getting paid to practice something akin to journalism.

One by one students defect to a profession that, at least on the market level, better values their skillset. They migrate to a growing profession that seems to have enough jobs for every well qualified graduate. To a fun profession where you can maybe blog and tweet all day. Entry level PR jobs involve dressing funny and driving a giant Red Bull can around - - rather than covering school board meetings.

I don't blame our students for defecting. But I also need to mention that in our program, we try to incorporate ethics, broadly defined, into every class. Some of us argue it's not ethical to market Coca Cola to children – -- or adults. And most of our student internship placements are with public service organizations. So, it's not surprising that the vast majority of our PR graduates go on to work for community based service agencies and non-profit organizations rather than chemical companies or marshmallow makers – we're doing something right.

For most of them, whatever drew them to journalism is still alive. But as they buy homes, raise kids, advance in their fields and ultimately gain market value themselves as commodities, the gravitational pull from the dark side of the profession tugs ever more forcefully.

It's also important to mention that New York State, like other states, has been balancing their budget on the backs of students for over a generation. What was once my birthright as a New Yorker to have a tuition-free university education, can now saddle a student with a lifetime of debt. This debt forces the hands of poor, working class and lower middle-class students, and their parents, to prioritize careers over passions. And journalism is looking more and more like a passion – not a safe bet for a stable middle-class career.

Studying Journalism is becoming a class privilege. More and more, it's becoming a course of study for those who don't have to worry about student debt. About immediately finding work upon graduation to avoid going into default – of being dogged for life as a credit leper. Or at the very least, it's one of those majors that throws parents into a panic.

Those who make it into careers as journalists will often find themselves overworked, with little time to actually research and write their assigned stories. In order to cope, they'll cultivate PR contacts who can give them easy access to newsmakers and regularly feed them quotes, data, leads, eventually canned stories. They become what David Barsamian terms "Stenographers to Power."

They will also find themselves outgunned and outnumbered by better paid and usually better equipped PR wonks. This reality sinks in at about the same time a journalist acquires enough experience and contacts in the industry to become attractive as an asset to be recruited the PR industry.

Ultimately, many successful mid-career journalists defect to the PR industry, much like government regulators going to work for the industries they used to regulate. One of many stories there're few journalists left to write.

The result of all of this is that the PR industry has captured journalism. Our media is dominated by spin, with few journalists left to challenge or contextualize it. None of this is news to anyone here.

But I also see hope.

First I need to argue, as a journalist, that it's ultimately the journalism industry, not the PR industry, that killed journalism in the US. Not the journalists, per se, but those who owned the industry. To understand what happened, we need to look specifically at newspapers – legacy media where the vast majority of our journalism transpired.

Let's go back around 25 years to when newspapers were wildly profitable. Wall Street demanded, and regularly got, double digit annual returns on its newspaper investments, holding their own against the sexiest tech stocks.

SEC regulations mandated profit maximization, not quality journalism, from publicly traded news and media corporations. And investors demanded it. And if they didn't get it, they migrated to where they could find it. For the bottom line, journalism fell into direct competition with pork bellies. These factors are all still in place.

Whatever romantic notions we might have harbored about the press were all dead and buried by the 1990s, with almost every major newspaper focusing first and foremost on profit maximization and extraction. *In the 1990s, the forests of journalism were clear-cut.*

Let's be clear about this. *Downsizing of newsrooms began back when papers were making money* – in many cases, record profits.

It wasn't always this way. The profits of the 1990s were built on the skeletons of an earlier era of newspapers that were killed off by ruthless competition from emerging conglomerates, or worse, were killed off by their owners as they divvied up cities into news monopolies much like narco cartels carving up the illicit drug trade.

By the 1990s, over 98 percent of daily newspapers operated without any direct competition. As unchallenged monopolies, there was no need to maintain, much less improve, quality. There were no other papers to scoop. No competition to keep them honest. Newspapers cut sections, laid off reporters, pulled the plug on labor intensive and trouble making investigative reporting.

This was the era when news organizations really gnawed away at their own limbs – all in the interest of maximizing short-term profits, essentially by cannibalizing the profession.

This is also when PR finally conquered journalism. Downsized newsrooms came to depend upon PR releases to structure, or in the worst cases, become, their stories. Without competition, there was no one to call these corrupted newsrooms out and no one to show them up with a better product.

Around this time, I personally could not justify reaching my hand into my pocket to actually pay money for my local newspaper, the Buffalo News – which became a monopoly two decades earlier when Warren Buffet bought it and operated it at a loss, bleeding its completion, *The Courier Express,* dry in five years, and hence reaping the profits of a monopoly for the next thirty.

I certainly wasn't alone. Monopoly newspapers took their readers and advertisers for granted.

Their readers had other ideas, abandoning newspapers around the country just as newsprint prices started to soar. And many of their smaller advertises folded, unable to keep up with the price increases foisted upon them by the only game in town.

This was all *before* the rise of Internet news, back when Arianna Huffington was still best known for her columns in *The National Review.*

Roll forward 20 years and we're seeing the widely lamented demise of some venerable old daily newspapers. But my argument, which I wrote a few years back, when newspapers became obsessed with the collapse of newspapers, is that there's really nothing here worth mourning.

These papers actually died a generation ago. Today we're just finally acknowledging their deaths and cremating their Zombie corpses.

Some people take offense at a journalism professor essentially saying good riddance to these legacy news organizations. But I'm not saying good riddance to journalism. *I'm saying goodbye to PR dominated media organs that passed themselves off as journalism for way too long*.

Now the Hope part.

A few years ago, shortly after the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine, I met with a group of middle-aged journalists from that country. I mention their age, since it indicated that they studied journalism and began their careers when the Ukraine was a Soviet republic – when there was no free press.

Their journalism training was what it was – style over substance. Not that different, really, from many contemporary American journalism programs. More importantly, there was little, if any, of what we would recognize as journalism going on to inspire them at that time in the USSR.

Think near total information dominance by state Public Relations apparatchiks. Bad clunky comically ineffective Public Relations. Think North Korea today – mystified as to why Dear Leader videos go viral on YouTube every week.

Yet these Ukrainians, in their youth, endured journalism school, where they learned to dress, walk and talk like journalists, and then spent 10 or 20 years marching in lockstep. But subdued as they now admit to having been, there were real idealistic journalists cocooned deep within them. When the police state began to crumble, they all emerged like one big sleeper cell. Overnight the Ukraine had journalism.

In retrospect, it turned out they didn't dream since childhood of growing up to be groveling stenographers. *They dreamed of being journalists, and settled with a plan for survival*. But in the end it turned out they were journalists. *Journalism's sleeper cells*.

I'm not naïve. I don't expect the brilliantly creative and morally bankrupt professional liars at Hill & Knowlton to be among our sleeper cells waiting to sound the clarion call to tax the rich. But I didn't expect children reared, educated and employed in state with near total government information dominance to one day emerge as journalists either.

I don't want to sound romantic here. I understand journalists in the former Soviet republics are now following our model and defecting back into safer more lucrative careers in PR. Perhaps the real problem was just that the state didn't pay enough to have full control over their souls. Of course, there's also the region's exceptionally high assassination rate for journalists.

Back here in the U.S., I personally know mainstream journalists working for zombie news organizations – or news organizations with such sordid histories that they never had a heyday

to be proud of – newsrooms that never were anything other than faithful mouthpieces for corporate PR. These folks pay their mortgages. They're good people. None have ever spoken enthusiastically about their jobs, however. *PR captured their hopes*.

But take them out of mixed company – put them in an environment where they can be candid, and they become some of corporate journalism's most voracious detractors. Those of us who have the luxury of publically calling ourselves "journalism critics" often rely on their leads. Like their counterparts in the former Soviet Union, they too never aspired to be obsequious stenographers.

Then there are those legions of journalists who never had souls. Never aspired to anything we here would recognize as journalism. Their minds never burdened with thought. But they can write finely crafted, albeit vapid, sentences. And they can spew some exemplary enunciation. They populate what TV producers term, "news magazines." They write, talk, ruminate and pontificate about Kardashians and the like. I recently did a Google news story search and turned up north of 1.5 million Kardashian stories. That was 10 times as many stories as I found about Haiti.

The reality is, news of celebrity pregnancies is generally more pleasant then stories about, say, pandemics or dying oceans. And stories about new products, and how cool they are, are easier on the soul than stories about the workers who make these products and the conditions they live and toil under. *It's more pleasant to hear about the features of a new car than its global social and environmental effects*. Cognitive dissonance is a bummer.

But the thing about blissful ignorance is, it eventually comes to an end when the systems that allow us the privilege of ignorance, either collapse, or worse, turn on us.

Global warming, as an abstract, could be ignored. Large swaths of Brooklyn and Manhattan under water is more difficult to ignore. *Fukushima Daiichi* is a Japanese name. Cancer is real. Free trade is a political meme. Your job, gone, is real. Abortion rights are a concept. Legally mandated pregnancy is real. Civil rights are an ethos. Stop and frisk is real. Poverty is a social concept. Having to decide whether to pay rent, see the doctor or buy food is real. Reality is impinging on ignorance. *Bliss may be dead.*

This end of bliss is creating a renewed demand for news, at a time in our history when our news diet has grown fat with PR. A sea of PR, however, cannot continue to mask a reality that insists on forcing its way into more and more of our lives. In simple market capitalist terms, there is a market demand for news. But the mainstream press will not give us the news we demand. It's antithetical to their business model.

This PR-driven reality has created a market demand for alternative sources of news.

My students are finding jobs -- in media we characterize as "alternative." Corporate newsrooms are downsizing. Alternative media organizations are populating our emergent media. This is why old school communication departments are suddenly interested in alt media. That's where the new journalism jobs are. Perhaps we've hit bottom and the future will be brighter. Perhaps?

But the language of emergent media, its cultural currency, is different from that of legacy media. This is where our students' PR training comes into play. PR education stresses the importance of speaking the language of your publics. PR education offers a superior toolkit for actually communicating with people we need to communicate with.

Of course the PR industry comes to the table with a number of advantages. *Tactical lying is probably their most potent, as is superior funding*. Remove these from the table, however, and the PR toolkit is still better equipped than legacy journalism for the contemporary media and cultural environment. Today's challenge is to subvert that toolkit. To capture the zest of PR – the creativity of PR – without its lies and deception. To use the toolkit to address, rather than mask, reality.

The goal is to be fluent in the language of PR, but to practice journalism. I'd like to say, "*if* that is possible." But I don't think we have the luxury of asking *if*. We have to make it happen.

This is not going to come easy, however, as the system is gamed against such deep emancipation. Emergent media, rather than diversify channels of information dissemination, as its boosters claim, is funneling almost all media into one corporate and government controlled portal. We should not be lulled into taking the anarco-democracy of the Internet for granted.

Resisting the Public Relations industry's capture of journalism, politics and culture will depend on diversifying the technologies we use to communicate – and ultimately maintaining public access to emerging communication technologies and information portals.