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view from the top connie st louis

Don't let the PR industry annex science journalism

The *Guardian* reporter Nick Davies achieved journalistic sainthood for his exposure of phone hacking at News International. But more relevant to those working in research is his 2008 book *Flat Earth News*. In this, Davies charts the rise of churnalism—news stories that are little more than rewritten press releases, supplied by public relations agencies working on behalf of commercial or political interests.

Lord Leveson omitted churnalism from his inquiry into press ethics. But the extent of the PR industry's hold on science reporting was neatly illustrated when the Science Media Centre represented itself to the inquiry as the voice of science journalism, and even cooked up a set of guidelines for science reporters.

It would not be harsh to call the London-based centre a PR agency. Funded by a mixture of charities, government and industry, its aim is to help scientists get their message across to the media. It is, in other words, a gamekeeper. And while poachers must accept gamekeepers as a fact of life, it's a bit much when the gamekeepers start telling the poachers how to do their jobs.

The PR industry influences all branches of journalism, encouraging passivity and undermining editorial integrity, but science journalists are particularly vulnerable. One problem is information overload: a glance at the inbox of any science journalist will show the avalanche of press releases and contents alerts sent out by the ever-growing number of journals.

There is little time to separate the wheat from the chaff, staff journalists are under pressure to feed a growing number of media platforms, and media organisations are employing a dwindling number of science specialists. Recently, the Sydney newspaper *The Australian* sacked its science reporter, the editors having deemed it sufficient to rely on press releases from the Australian

Science Media Centre. Journalism researcher Andy Williams of Cardiff University has found that, in general, science PR is increasing and independent science journalism is decreasing.

The result is that science journalists are over-reliant on a few global peer-reviewed journals owned by multinational corporations. *The Lancet* is the property of Elsevier, for example, while Macmillan owns *Nature*. Journal editors have high ideals, but conflicts of interest between corporate interests and journalistic enquiry are inevitable. These

journals vie for international prestige not only by seeking to publish the latest discoveries but also to publicise those findings in the mainstream media, primarily through weekly embargoed press releases. It's these press releases where the specialised language of science becomes the everyday speech of the news, giving them a significant influence on the public's view of science.

In addition, the growth of online media has fuelled an insidious corporatisation of science journalism, by allowing those who do and fund research, such as drug companies and charities, to reach large audiences directly with their own content. It's difficult for readers to tell who, if anyone, safeguards the values, motives and independence of these powerful online presences, with their vested interests, or to know whether they can be trusted to fill the void left by the contraction of science journalism.

As a result of such changes, much science coverage is PR masquerading as reporting, or what I would term 'translational' journalism. This is understandable, as science journalism began in the nineteenth century as science popularisation and then science communication. And the public has a legitimate interest in understanding what researchers find. But because translational stories must strive to seem important and exciting, they tend towards simplistic language and sensationalism—the miracle cure, the theory of everything—without revealing the ambiguities, tensions and politics that underlie much of science. Translational journalism's near-total dominance of the science media is bad for the quality of both public and scientific debate.

Leveson's determination to impose a statutory regulator for the media is to be applauded and I, like many others, am hopeful that a consensus will emerge soon. In the main, science journalism will have little to fear from statutory regulation. However, churnalism and PR presents a much more pressing threat to its existence.

Research Fortnight readers might be grateful that journalists are in danger of becoming docile, spoon-fed creatures, lacking the time and resources to probe into what they are up to. But in the long run, they should be concerned. As Leveson showed, when the links between journalists and who they report on become too cozy, the results are not healthy for either side.

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