
# POW

Old Joe Scoop just can't get with the times. He calls Di "girlie" and thinks her purpose in the newsroom is to make him coffee and pretty up the place. He last had a front page lead just before 27 April 1994. Since then he's been subbing. He mutters into his empty ashtray about the new faces in the newsroom who just can't get the grammar right. They'd fire him but he keeps the equity quota balanced.

The media transformation debate currently underway in South Africa is, in the main, concerned with power – who has it, who should get it, and to what use it should be put. And it's not surprising that the debate is vigorous. One reason for this is, of course, the assumption that the mass media wield a great deal of power in society. A recent study I conducted suggests that the media's own grip on that power is slipping. Instead, the findings imply that control is shifting to those who are better equipped, better resourced, better trained, and more motivated – the professional information sources, usually managed by public relations practitioners or publicists.

Some of the identified reasons for this shift are that **many journalists are, essentially, bored with news** as it is currently defined, and that they are uninspired by managers who talk more about how activities impact the bottom line than about society at large.These are worth considering further, along with some of the possible consequences of newspapers produced – albeit it indirectly – by publicists.

First, though, some background. The impetus for the exploratory study was the observation that the transformation debate had touched on media ownership, media laws and regulations, newsroom staff make up, media output and audiences, advertising expenditure and, most recently, journalism education and training. But there had been a significant omission: media sources.

As anyone familiar with the operations in a newsroom knows, a substantial part of the editorial staff's activities – and ultimately every news product's content – revolves around the information supplied by official sources, principally through news releases, events (news conferences, briefings, visits, and the like) and officials' responses to enquiries (most often managed, if not dealt with, by spokespeople). And while the relationship between the media and **the country's single biggest newsmaker – the head of state** – had indeed come under scrutiny, there was little attention to the role played by commercial content providers like public relations practitioners not employed by government or non-government organisations.

The study, which was intended to inform more extensive research into shifts in media power, consisted of in-depth interviews with senior editorial staff (at the rank of deputy editor or above) at each of Cape Town's daily newspapers as well as with senior public relations practitioners. All those interviewed had been involved in the news-making process since before the 1994 elections and could, therefore, **provide some insight into how things had changed since then.** The interviews were transcribed and analysed with specific reference to the four themes of organisation-public relationships (OPRs) commonly identified in academic

by Francois Nel

# ER who has it, who should get it?

literature. They are:
- trust, defined by researchers as a party's level of confidence in, and willingness to, open themselves up to fair and above-board dealings;
- control mutuality, considered to be the extent to which partners agree about which of them should decide on relational goals and how to go about achieving them;
- relational commitment, or the extent to which a party feels and believes that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote; and,
- relational satisfaction, which is the extent to which both organisations and their public were satisfied with their relationship.

Media coverage generated by publicity efforts can generally be considered to fall in the area where the interests of the source and the interests of the media, and by extension their perceptions of the interests of their audience, intersect. Typically then the four key elements of OPRs are evident in the extent that publicists continued to operate (commitment, control mutuality), press releases published (trust), and both parties benefited from the exchange (relational satisfaction). By all accounts, the relationships between the daily newspapers and the publicists in Cape Town were very strong. The principal reason for this was because **under-prepared, time-starved and poorly-motivated journalists – newcomers and veterans alike – rely heavily on publicists to get their jobs done, which is exactly what the publicists want.** Instead of continuing to describe the findings of the current situation (answers to the What? question), I'll keep to the information directly relevant to the current discussions about journalism education and training, and particularly some of the responses to the Why? question.

The respondents pointed out that while the socio-political and socio-economic transformation processes in South Africa had significantly affected the relational elements, broader environmental factors had also played a role. Among them were changes in the media options, especially as a result of re-regulations of broadcast media and other technological advances, such as the web. All interviewees agreed on one thing: the most important factor that had affected media-publicists' relations since 1994 was the changes in the performance of practitioners – on both sides.

**Journalism standards and skills were said to have declined and, inversely, those of publicists had increased.** A range of reasons for this shift was offered. In addition to the factors already identified by others – general lack of resources, career paths that lead reporters out of the newsroom and into management, and poaching of staff by corporations and government – interviewees noted the migration of journalists into public service for ideological reasons. Key among these factors were the definition and content of news stories, and the role of journalism in society, as articulated by managers.

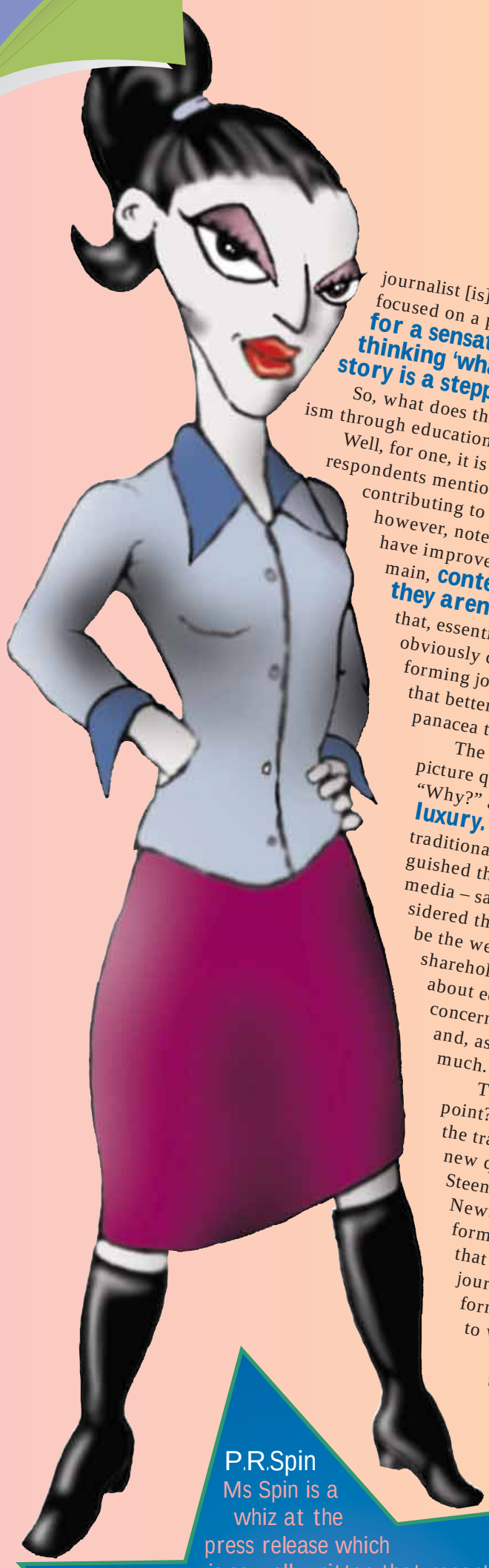
**Changes in the "big news story"** in South Africa. During the period leading up to the demise of apartheid, many journalists joined the profession as a way of participating in the fight for democratic change, commonly referred to in South Africa as the struggle. The advent of a constitutional democracy meant the demise of their reason for being journalists – both for those to the left and to the right of the political spectrum.

Others, it was noted, left journalism because, for them, the new, big news story was no longer exciting enough. This may be explained because news of the struggle, which had dominated all other stories for several decades, had all the elements generally considered to be newsworthy: scale, intensity, clarity, significant consequence, continuity and visual appeal. By contrast, what followed was a more complex (the good guys and bad guys were more difficult to tell apart) – and less obviously dramatic – story of the implementation of the new democracy, which was dominated by parliamentary debate and policy formulation, and relatively unexciting activities such as the building of houses and teaching people new skills.

**Changes in the articulated goals of media organisations and journalists.** Whether the shift in emphasis from communication goals toward economic goals was because of the normalisation of the society, changes in ownership, or wider economic pressures, all respondents agreed that the emphasis by media managers on the economic bottom line had resulted in **the rise of the "what's in it for me" attitude** among journalists. This attitude was said to be prevalent among experienced journalist who, after years of working for a cause had decided that it was payback time; it was also common amongst new journalists.

One respondent noted that this was especially commonplace among those who want to move from the relative anonymity of newspapers, to higher-profile careers in radio and television, which provided greater social and economic benefits: "[This] new breed of

Turn over for more...



journalist [is] less of a newshound, more of a free agent focused on a personal agenda… **they're looking for a sensationalist approach. They're always thinking 'what do I get out of the story?'…the story is a stepping stone."**

So, what does this mean for efforts to enhance the quality of journalism through education and training?

Well, for one, it is significant to note that in this study none of the respondents mentioned the quality of journalism training as a factor contributing to the shift in the skills of practitioners. (They did, however, note that that public relations training seemed to have improved.) Instead, the responses imply that, in the main, **contemporary newsrooms suffer because they aren't very inspiring places to work** – and that, essentially, is a matter of leadership. That observation obviously challenges the logic that suggests under-performing journalists are poorly trained and, therefore, that better (or more) education and training is the panacea to the problems in the newsroom.

The findings also imply that addressing the big picture questions about journalism practice – "Why?" and **"What's the point?" – is not a luxury.** It might also be a reminder that what has traditionally motivated journalists and distinguished them from their counterparts in other media – say film and music – is that they have considered their prime responsibility (the "Why?") to be the well-being of society, not themselves or shareholders. Indeed, when managers talk more about economic concerns, rather than social concerns, they tend to get what they pay for – and, as we well know, they don't pay that much.

The other big question – "What's the point?" – seems to be asked in reference to the transformation process itself. It's not a new question, of course. Lynette Steenveld, the former Independent Newspapers Chair of Media Transformation at Rhodes University asked that question in Issue 16 of this journal in a piece titled: "The transformation of the media: from what, to what?"

Of course, if answers to these questions aren't clearly articulated, and if they fail to inspire, and if the bottom line isn't the well being of society as a whole, then the current shortage of newsroom talent is unlikely to be alleviated. Not only will citizens – not consumers – **stop paying attention** (and paying for newspapers), but talented people will continue to look elsewhere for opportunities to use their skills. And, in that situation, more and better journalism education and training won't make much difference to newsrooms at all. But it might just help further strengthen the already-powerful public relations profession.

> THE OTHER BIG QUESTION – "WHAT'S THE POINT?" – SEEMS TO BE ASKED IN REFERENCE TO THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS ITSELF. IT'S NOT A NEW QUESTION, OF COURSE.

Finally, what are publicists – and the companies that employ them – doing with the power gained from not having to contend with strong media gatekeepers? **The short answer is: they're being forced to be responsible – not by journalists, but by other activist groups who, thanks to the communication revolution, have greater access to information, and louder voices.**

New information networks have strengthened activist groups – consumer, labour, government and other watchdogs – and their demand that business share responsibility for the general wellbeing of the societies from which they draw their wealth can no longer be ignored. This has forced a re-examination of economist Milton Friedman's (modification of former US president Calvin Coolidge's) adage that "the business of business is business". Short-term profit motives are being moderated by longer-term consequences. I suggest that increasingly there's the recognition that "the business of business is sustainable business". Not surprisingly then, corporate social responsibility programmes and the like are increasingly seen less as corporate largesse than as a business imperative, a cost of doing business, as it were. That responsibility, in the main, also extends to the information that corporate publicists put out. **And when they don't tell the truth, or spin the facts,** they're less likely to be confronted by enterprising investigative reporters than by hawkish activist groups, inside and outside the corporation. The Treatment Action Campaign's impact on the pharmaceutical industry (and government policy) is one local example of this.

Therefore, **formal sources that control the information** may, I contend, have less impact on the truth of the information than on the type of information conveyed. Given their desire to control volatility, the mainstay of information provided by corporate publicists is typically conflict-free, resulting in pretty bland newspapers. (Of course, an option for a newsroom faced with this predicament is to (over?) emphasise those stories that do contain conflict – an essential element of information traditionally considered to be newsworthy – and are within the easy grasp of lower-skilled or motivated staff: stories of the **crime and "he-said, she-said" political mud-slinging variety.)** Taken together – weakened gate-keeping by the news media, better-prepared corporate communicators, more and new information channels, increased emphasis on corporate responsibility, and greater transparency all around – may mean that, ultimately, the skills shortage in newsrooms will probably be of relatively little consequence to society. **Newspapers have long since lost their monopolistic grip on information distribution channels.** Their only power, therefore, is derived from their content. And that power, like any, is ultimately given by those on whom the power is exerted. Of course, for the vast majority of South African news audiences, daily newspapers aren't the preferred content show in town. So, by the time newspapers do regroup – if they do – they may just find there aren't many left who actually care.

**P.R.Spin**
Ms Spin is a whiz at the press release which is so well written that reporters simply pop on their own byline and run it whole. She's good at gifts – knowing exactly what goodies will get the attention of her favourite contacts. She also lays on a good lunch. She works the phones hourly, setting the agenda for coverage in her field of expertise.

*This article draws on the paper: Relationships between media organisations and their commercial content providers in a society in transition: a discussion of a South African experience, presented at the European Public Relations Research and Education Association's ninth annual conference in Bled, Slovenia. For details see www.bledcom.com.* *François Nel is a part-time lecturer at the Graduate Centre for Management at Cape Technikon and course leader of the Master's Programme in Strategic Communication at the Lancashire Business School at the University of Central Lancashire, UK, at fpn@iafrica.com.*