

## **1(b). Coping with Spin and Pressure**

*Meeting summary report by rapporteur Steffen Burkhardt, University of Hamburg/International Media Center Hamburg; syndicate expert Leendert Van der Valk, University of Amsterdam; background report by Van der Valk and Mirjam Prenger, University of Amsterdam; chair Yael de Haan, University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, The Netherlands; and team members.\**

Over the past decades journalism education in many countries has been confronted with a radical change in the field of professional communication. The number of communication experts, public relations officers and spin doctors has grown steadily, while simultaneously the number of independent journalists has dramatically decreased. For example, in the Netherlands PR/propaganda workers now outnumber journalists roughly 5-to-1 (Van der Valk & Prenger, 2013). In the growing online communication market, entrepreneurial journalism, social media and PR are combining in new ways. Journalism schools need to react to this development by preparing their students to deal with this new PR economy.

Journalism schools need to teach students how to cope with spin and pressure in this new reality. Educators must teach PR goals, methods and strategies, how to negotiate and how to analyze media and communication studies research.

Education institutions' first key step should be clearly communicating the differences between PR and journalism education and making sure everyone at their institution understands their approach. Journalism schools already teaching PR often take one of two approaches: they completely separate journalism and PR education (and teach how to work in journalism or PR) or combine the two (how to work in PR and journalism). Regardless of an institution's approach, antagonistic or symbiotic, it must be transparent. A related code of ethics explaining one's approach, sent to students, faculty and sponsors, can help achieve this goal.

Teach students that PR professionals are not their enemies. And prepare them for dealing with PR people by teaching them the following:

1. How PR works and how PR people target groups
2. How to understand statistics
3. How to use research, including social exchange theory studies
4. How to play the game and negotiate
5. How to find, use, check, evaluate and verify sources to reduce reliance on PR agents and social media
6. How to manage their time to help them avoid PR as a "solution" for running out of time
7. How to interview like a researcher

8. How to fact-check
9. How to make construction of the news part of the story, in order for audiences to understand how sources spin information and to break PR narratives.
10. How to protect themselves and other journalists if their credibility is attacked by spin doctors

Journalism schools need to teach the mechanisms and methods of PR and spin in order to make students aware of their influence on agenda setting and storytelling. Accordingly, make sure students are well-grounded in media effects research and the following theories: source, priming, framing, agenda setting and cultivation.

How should the above skills, competences be taught? Some quality methods follow:

1. Best-practice examples (how to work with PR agents in crisis communication situations, etc.)
2. Role-playing (students playing PR and journalism roles and learning to negotiate)
3. Stakeholder analysis (identify whose interests are involved)
4. Network analysis (in order to check sources)
5. Case studies and reflection (train students how to cope with PR and spin before and after publication, with a focus on how to use, and not be used by, PR officials)

In addition, the following books may help sensitize journalism students to spin and how to deal with it: Chris Genasi's (2002) "Winning Reputations: How to Be Your Own Spin Doctor," Paul Richard's (2005) "Be Your Own Spin Doctor: A Practical Guide to Using the Media" and Tim Burt's (2012) "Dark Art: The Changing Face of Public Relations."

### ***Recommendations***

*The group's top five recommendations follow:*

1. Make your institution's approach toward PR and journalism education transparent and release a code of ethics explaining to students, faculty and sponsors your position.
2. Make your journalism students aware that they cannot avoid contact and confrontation with PR and spin since all organizations have PR agents.
3. Teach your journalism students not to see PR professionals as enemies since they must work with them in the public sphere.
4. Teach the mechanisms and methods of PR and spin in order to make students aware of their hidden influence on agenda setting, framing, priming and storytelling.

5. Train students how to use different didactical approaches so they can use PR instead of being used by it.

#### Reference

Van der Valk, L., & Prenger, M. (2013). *Coping with PR and spin in the newsroom and in the classroom*. Unpublished WJEC-3 background report.

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