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## JOURNALISM VS. PUBLIC RELATIONS

# Losing the next generation of idealists

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**J**ournalists have enough worries: cutbacks, bloggers, a geriatric audience. But here's one more: They should worry that bright young people who might once have been heading into newsrooms are going into public relations instead.

Worse, these people aren't going just for the money. Journalism -- assailed by self-doubt and public mistrust -- is in danger of losing its next generation of idealists to PR.

At last month's annual gathering of media academics, the difference in tone between journalism and PR sessions was striking. While the journalism people wondered and whined about how to recover a lost sense of purpose and direction, the PR academics were asserting an audacious and expansive view of their industry's ethical role: Not only should PR people be telling the truth; they should be telling their clients not to do things they'd be unwilling to tell the truth about.

### **Threat to truthful discourse**

As recruiting pitches go, that's a pretty good one, and it seems to be working. While the percentage of undergraduates majoring in journalism and mass communications has remained steady for the past 15 years, the proportion who intend to be journalists -- a slippery category that includes local TV anchors -- is apparently falling. Numbers are elusive, but academics seem to agree the main beneficiary is PR.

The two fields have existed as codependent rivals since the advent of modern PR in the 1920s. That's when a new class of press agents, spawned by the U.S. war-propaganda machine, took root among big companies and the image-conscious rich. Newspaper people saw PR as a threat to truthful discourse and responded by forming professional organizations and drafting codes of ethics, in part to keep publicists at bay. PR thus helped push journalists into professionalism.

The relationship has since softened into a grudging mutual reliance. PR people have the information, journalists have the outlets, communication requires both. Journalists view PR people the way many spouses see their in-laws: grateful for the gift, wary of the givers. To the PR side the journalist is the son-in-law, both undeserving and indispensable.

Both fields have traditionally drawn from much the same labor pool of what Walter Lippmann called "the vaguely talented," and PR has long been the refuge of choice for mid-career journalists, once college fees loomed and newsroom hours got unbearable.

### **Chief integrity officer**

Why PR appeals now to young potential reporters no doubt has to do with the heavy cloud of economic gloom hovering over the news business. It also reflects a wish, as a Palestinian journalism student who was going into PR told me, to do something "active" -- to make things happen instead of reacting to events. Students come back from summer PR internships with exciting tales of scanning the next day's papers for stories they helped bring about.

But PR is also promising something else to the young and impressionable: A role in contemporary affairs that's way beyond message creation, brand maintenance or advocacy. The PR professional is proposed as a senior counselor not just on what is persuasive and effective, but on what is right -- as chief integrity

officer.

As James Lukaszewski, a PR practitioner who consults on such matters, has written: "The primary goal of public relations will be to create an environment of integrity within organizations." That's heady stuff.

### **Government's video news releases**

There were signs of this surge of probity in the industry's response to the recent scandal over Armstrong Williams, the commentator who was secretly paid by one of the country's top PR shops to shill for Bush administration policies, and over the administration's promiscuous use of so-called video news releases -- propaganda tricked out to look like TV news reports. PR industry leaders were miles ahead of TV news directors in condemning the practices.

Such is PR's new niche. It's got its problems. Just who's going to hire this new priesthood of in-house scolds, what do they know about ethics and what becomes of the honorable PR functions of partisan spinning and dissembling are among many unanswered questions.

But the goal draws PR out of client service and into public service, and it appeals powerfully to the longing of the young not for a job but for a mission. Once, that's what journalism promised, and should promise once again.

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