

Definitional Essay: Sourcing and Public Relations

John Birmingham. Oct. 6, 2014.

The journalist-source relationship plays a pivotal role in the dissemination of information in democratic societies, and it is a fitting subject of study for the ‘depth’ component of my comprehensive examination. This course of study forms a key component of future dissertation research into the proliferation of public relations (PR) messages in the mass media and the extensive influence of promotion and PR on journalism and on democratic communication, in particular, the Northern Gateway pipeline expansion proposal.

The continued erosion of news reporting resources, due to multiple disruptions to traditional mass media, has generated greater opportunities for those in government, companies and the non-profit sector to disseminate messages directly to the public, with negative consequences for journalism. This set of readings will examine the journalist-source relationship, look at the influence of promotion and PR on journalism, survey risk reporting and environmental coverage, and finally, evaluate opportunities for greater democratization of the sourcing and influencing process.

Media sources may be defined as “the people, places and organizations that supply journalists with ideas and general information for news stories and features...cuttings, archival material, broadcast recordings and a variety of documents and websites provide useful sources of information” (Franklin et al, 2005, p. 248).

I have chosen readings covering critical theoretical standpoints in the analysis of journalist-source relations, in order to ground myself in the subfield of sourcing, and to examine its ‘turns’ in research. I will examine the complex and evolving journalist-source relationship, anatomizing its tensions and particularly, in the broader democratic implications of who gets access to the media, and who does not (Franklin & Carlson, 2011). This comprehensive will evaluate the journalist-source relationship in the context of both normative and critical theoretical frameworks. It will look at the issues and debates of news sourcing as outlined, by drawing from the following theoretical frameworks to the issue of journalism’s relationship to source-power, and its effect on democratic discourse: The public sphere; critical political economy; cultural studies; and field theory.

I will engage readings regarding the arguably growing influence of PR on the press. I will survey its history, political economy, and as an ‘information subsidy’ for journalists and media organizations. I will look at not only how an elite consensus is reproduced through PR, but how non-governmental groups actively use its methods to disseminate counter-hegemonic messages, making PR a highly contested terrain.

I intend to examine five areas of theoretical research within sourcing and public relations.

1. Public Relations, in its historical, and political economic context:

I want to study the history and influence of PR, its political economy and pivotal role as news content-provider, and as a source of information and meaning (Ewen, 1996). I will study PR’s core functionality for government, corporate and media sponsors, in the context of the communication needs and strategies of capital and the state (Davis, 2002; Kozolanka, 2014). I want to look at the information subsidy of time and resources for journalists, and at the role of news agencies in disseminating messaged content (Gandy, 1982). I will examine the dynamics of the relationship between journalists and PR channels (Sigal, 1973; Miller, 2008). I will look at sourcing through a critical paradigm, as a mechanism of media control, propaganda and ‘spin.’ (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Carey, 1995; Davis, 2000; Franklin et al, 2008).

I am interested in the political economy of PR, as constitutive of transnational capitalism; as a voice for capital in the mainstream media, based on an interpretation of information both as a commodity and as a legitimating system of hegemonic social and economic relations (Hall et al, 1978; Miller & Dinan, 2000; Manning, 2001; Kozolanka, 2014).

2. Power and Influence: framing, news agendas, representation:

The manifestation of power in reporter-source relationships will be my focus here, situating sourcing within the journalism field, especially within the discourse of power. Using concepts such as legitimization and hegemony, how does the journalist-source relationship function as a component of elite control? (Hall et al, 1978; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Davis, 2007).

Media meaning-making includes the power to set news agendas and frames in a news context. I want to examine how sources dictate interpretations and privilege frameworks of meaning, along with oppositional frames (Hall et al, 1978; Gitlin, 1980). I would like to appraise the

‘manufacture of consent’ propaganda model (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), and look at the role of legitimization in the manufacture of compliance within a neoliberal ideological framework (Hall et al, 1978; Couldry, 2010). I intend to evaluate the journalist’s mediation between power and the public in the political arena; in the journalist’s choice of sources and power relationships, and in the contestation for media space (Sigal, 1973; Bennett, 2007). This will include the ‘indexing’ of political coverage of official agendas, and the reluctance among political journalists to challenge the terms of debate that predominate within official circles (Bennett, 2009).

I will look at framing of the news, and at the role of image-making and representation in influencing news agendas (Kennamer, 1992; Entman, 2010). How do journalists balance the need for timely and accurate information with the dynamics of hegemony and ideology within a commercialized media environment? (Gitlin, 1980; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Couldry, 2010) I critically situate sourcing within the political economy of mass media (Hall et al, 1978; Curran, 2002; 2003). I am interested here in how the journalist-source relationship is both textual and discursive; assigning and framing power. What is the nature of the influence of sources over agenda-setting, framing and priming?

I am also interested in the links between journalism’s shifting labour processes and the extent of labour ‘subsidy’ of sponsored PR information. Is the broader deprofessionalization of journalism increasing PR’s influence in the mass media, and if so, how?

3. The mediated journalist-source relationship:

I will research sourcing routines and news production within the dynamics of the journalist-source relationship, and its effect on agenda-setting and the formation of public opinion. How is the influence of sources manifested in news coverage? (Ericson et al, 1989; Kennamer, 1992; Reich, 2009) How has the relationship between journalists and sources changed in recent years, in light of its core dynamics, especially the reliance on centralized sources as part of news routines (Tuchman, 1978; Ericson et al, 1989). This will include the objectivity debate, within the context of sourcing norms (Bennett, 2009; Schudson, 2011). What is the effect on democracy of the increasing dependence on a limited group of news sources? (Davis, 2007) I will study how recent disruptions to the media business model have influenced sourcing, in particular the shifting power-balance between journalists and their sources within the political economy of

media corporations (Manning, 2001). I am interested how journalists' reliance on sources reinforces power, and limits oppositional voices. Has the journalist-source relationship limited the range of voices in the media, and to what extent is it undergoing a transformation?

4. Journalism and the Environmental Field:

This section will look at media reporting of environmental issues, with several specific topics of interest: how do professional journalism routines and news values impact reporting on controversial environmental issues (Anderson, 1997; Lester, 2010; Oreskes & Conway, 2010); the role of journalism in the risk society (Cottle, 1998; 2006); and how journalism's professional ideals, such as the exercise of objectivity, have resulted in the reporting of climate change as a contested, but also a hegemonic discourse (Hansen, 2010; Boykoff, 2011; Cox, 2013).

What is the relationship between mainstream media and corporate power, especially in the energy sector, through the journalist-source relationship (Paskey & Steward, 2012), and the legitimization of the interests of petro-capitalism in Canada's oil sands extraction (Gunster & Saurette, 2014).

How are NGOs and social movements performing as news sources; what are their PR and media strategies in environmental conflict, and how is the Internet being utilized as an alternative to mainstream corporate media? (Cox, 2013; Lester, 2013).

The focus here will be on identifying themes and confluences for my future dissertation work, particularly in the systemic organization of journalist-source relationships within the environmental communication field.

5. Digital sourcing and Contestation:

I will review two divergent positions in this section: Firstly, that the mainstream media still control coverage and marginalize oppositional voices, despite greater internet access and social media activity (Dean, 2005); and alternatively, citizen voices have found new opportunities online to publish their own information to a receptive audience, effectively undermining traditional journalism's 'gatekeeper' role (Franklin et al, 2011). My reading will assess the effect of online media on source relations (Pavlik, 2004; Messner, 2008), and whether the new information environment has indeed opened up possibilities for oppositional narratives and

mediated activism (Curran, 2003; Dean, 2005). Topics covered here will include the relationship between mainstream news coverage and new media, such as crowdsourcing and ‘wikivism’ (Stacey, 2008) How is sourcing constitutive of the broader project of the marketization of global information networks? (Schiller, 1999) I will also consider other salient sourcing issues, such as the use of alternative sources (Atton & Wickenden, 2005), and the increasingly important role of whistleblowers in the internet age (Reich, 2008).

I hope that this ‘depth’ sourcing and PR reading program will ground my future work in this most pressing research area. The source is still the greatest informational resource that the journalist relies upon, especially in an increasingly controlled, sponsored media environment. The necessity of studying as ‘truth-to-power’ has never been greater.

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