

## Still stuck in “A love-hate relationship”: Understanding journalists’ enduring and impassioned duality towards public relations.

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### **Abstract:**

*This article reports the results of a qualitative survey question asking New Zealand journalists for their thoughts on public relations. The findings provide the first empirical support for the widespread anecdotal suggestion that there is a deeply held antagonism between these two professions in this country, but also indicate that the antagonism is not straightforward. Overall, the results show that many New Zealand journalists are profoundly conflicted about the value of public relations, often holding two dissonant views and expressing each passionately. These findings indicate New Zealand attitudes mirror international historical attitudes in most respects, but depart from them in some notable ways. The research gives a clearer picture of the origin and nature of some of the stereotypes and resentments that characterise the relationship between these two professions. It also raises important questions about the implications for both journalists and public relations practitioners of working within a relationship in which there are forceful and dichotomous conceptualisations by one party of another. The strength of ambiguous feeling evident in many of the statements suggests that there is a need to consider the impact on individuals and on professional decision-making processes of such entrenched, ardent, and in many cases hostile, views, as well as to question the applicability of this kind of longstanding professional cultural ‘stance’ to today’s changing media landscape.*

### ***Introduction***

The journalism-public relations nexus has long been a topic of concern to researchers and practitioners in both fields. The journalistic perspective is often troubled about levels of ‘information subsidy’ (Gandy, 1982) – that is, ways in which public relations material can shape the news agenda by providing easier access to content from particular sources (Curtin, 1999; Turk, 1985, 1986; Turk & Franklin, 1987). The public relations perspective is frequently concerned that the role is misunderstood or stereotyped (Wright, 2005; Bollinger, 2003; Henderson, 1998). There is a quite longitudinal and internationally diverse body of study examining relationships between the two professions in the northern hemisphere, largely using interviews with editors and senior journalists, or textual analysis of published works by prominent journalists (articles, books, etc.) that discuss public relations, to identify major themes (e.g. Neijens & Smit, 2006; Kim & Bae, 2006; Sallot & Johnson, 2006a, 2006b; Brody, 1984; Belz, Talbott & Starck, 1984; Kopenhaver, Martinson, & Ryan, 1984; Pincus, Rimmer, Rayfield & Cropp, 1993; Shoemaker, 1989; Spicer, 1993; DeLorme & Fedler, 2003). This research focus has culminated most recently in the edited collection titled *A complicated, antagonistic and symbiotic affair; Journalism, public relations, and their struggle for public attention*, published by the European Journalism Observatory in the wake of a conference dedicated specifically to examining the European public relations/journalism nexus (Merkel, Russ-Mohl, & Zavaritt, 2007). These and other studies concur that, to varying degrees, journalists exhibit dissonance, being both hostile towards and cooperative with public relations practitioners.

There has been comparatively little research on the issue in the southern hemisphere, and there has been very little survey research in any region to explore how pervasive the identified themes are among a range of journalists. Existing studies of the intersections between the two professions in New Zealand have contributed to our understanding of the nexus here by such methods as tracking the passage of news items from public relations sources into the news media agenda – e.g. the 1997 study of New Zealand metropolitan newspapers by Bartley (cited in Comrie, 2002), which indicated 47 percent of business articles came from media releases – and similar studies have occurred in Australia (Zawawi, 2000) but there have been few studies anywhere, and only one in New Zealand, that go directly to a broad sample of

journalists to map their professed attitudinal dimensions and explore what effects their collective stances towards public relations might have on media practice. We wanted to find out whether published New Zealand media attitudes such as Trotter's view that public relations is a "tragic distortion of the once proud profession of journalism" and "the Devil's business" (2007, paras. 1 & 7) were more widely held by other New Zealand journalists, and if so, what the dimensions and implications of that might be.

In New Zealand, one small previous study of journalists' attitudes has been conducted by a public relations firm with a self-selected sample and pre-set quantitative categories (Talkies Group, 2004). Although unrepresentative, it identified some issues worthy of further investigation and clarification, such as that most journalists who responded thought most public relations people lied most of the time. Recognising that the nature of the relationship between public relations and journalism has important implications for media practices across both professions, we concluded that more data were needed in order to isolate and explore key themes, track changes, compare relationships in New Zealand with elsewhere, look for differences between different media sectors, and identify the impact of journalists' and public relations practitioners' mutual attitudes on overall news media processes and outputs. Therefore, an open-ended question about public relations was included in the 2007 New Zealand Big Journalism omnibus survey (Hollings, Lealand, Samson, & Tilley, 2007) in order to obtain some benchmark qualitative data about New Zealand journalists' attitudes towards that profession. The Big Journalism study offered an opportunity to obtain a wider sample of attitudes towards public relations than the Talkies study, and to enable a broader range of possible responses by using a qualitative, grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992).

### ***Methodology***

The overall questionnaire was drawn up using questions from previous journalism industry surveys, some from the US Pew Survey (2004), and some nominated by the researchers involved in this project. The survey was piloted on a small group of journalists (n=12) and the results used to identify the most useful questions for a broad questionnaire. A distribution list of print, broadcast and internet news organisations was compiled from published media guides, the researchers' industry knowledge, and media associations. Key people at each – mostly chief reporters or

editors – were identified, sent an email directing them to an online questionnaire at an established commercial provider (SurveyMonkey), and invited to forward the email to all staff within their organisation. Follow-up phone calls at one day and one week later were made to ask if the email had been received and passed on. Survey responses were monitored as they arrived and areas with low response rates were prompted with follow-up calls and attempts to target respondents from these groups.

Respondents were self-selecting and thus this survey cannot be considered random, nor subject to conventional tests of probability and reliability, and thus cannot be regarded as truly representative of all New Zealand journalists. Nevertheless, a comparison by Hollings (2007) of respondents' basic demographic characteristics with national census data suggests that this particular survey encompasses a similar profile group, though with a small response bias in some areas. For example, women respondents made up 70 percent of full-time reporters (n=185), half of subeditors (n=23), but only 40 percent of managers (n=55), despite making up 55 percent of all journalists in this survey. This differs from the 2006 Census, where although the overall male/female split was the same, the reporter split was 50-50, and the subeditor split 40/60 in favour of females (Statistics New Zealand, 2007). A reasonably good response rate (n=514) of the census' 4000 estimated New Zealand journalists was achieved, with a fairly even spread across media genres. More than 97 percent of the respondents were *not* in any kind of senior managerial (general manager, editor, or publisher) role, and half the respondents were under 40 years, had less than 10 years' experience, and earned under \$50,000 a year. More than half were female, and more than two-thirds had a qualification (see Hollings, Lealand, Samson, & Tilley, 2007 for the full demographic profile of respondents, and for an overview of all results).

This article focuses on answers to a specific question about attitudes towards public relations. The open question 'What do you think of public relations?' was chosen in order to constrain respondents as little as possible and give no indication of any expected direction or nature of response. We were looking for any and all possible quick reactions to the term 'public relations' given as a word stimulus, in a manner that could be likened to the word association games once used in some branches of psychology to identify the first response to a given word (e.g. Masters, 1969) – although without the attendant extrapolations of deeper 'subconscious' meaning that

have somewhat discredited the word association practice in psychology. There was no word limit placed on the response box. Of the 514 people who responded to the survey, 354 entered a response: that is, 69 percent. Responses ranged from one word to 225 words long. The average response length was 22.6 words. We interpreted this relatively short response length as indicative that we had collected what we were hoping for – short, pithy, instant ‘gut reactions’ to the concept of public relations.

Processing of the answers to the question ‘What do you think of public relations?’ used two text analysis software packages: first the concordance program MonoConc Pro version 2.2 (Concordancer: MonoConc Pro, n.d.), then the HyperResearch qualitative data analysis package (ResearchWare, n.d.). Both packages allow examination of qualitative data as text only, in isolation from respondents’ demographics, thus allowing a researcher to focus only on transcript content without being influenced by knowledge of an individual respondent’s demographic profile or other answers.

Grounded theory requires that awareness of key themes be permitted to emerge from total textual content during multiple close readings, during which the researcher maps the full extent of the content by taking notes of repeated or similar ideas, and identifying reoccurring key words or language patterns. Broad patterns are thus detected across the entire corpus of actual words given in response to a particular question by the entire study population, as opposed to establishing hypotheses in advance and then looking at individual answers one-by-one for certain specific things that match a pre-built coding ‘frame’. MonoConc assists with this process by generating an overall word frequency list to help the researcher identify high frequency terms that may signal repeated ideas or concepts, and HyperResearch manages the production of coding notes and assists with collapsing or expanding theme categories until a series of discrete codes and sub-codes is obtained that covers all the content.

Grounded codes are thus generated by, and directly based in, respondents’ statements. They reflect the researcher’s organising and filing system, as it were, for what is present in the entire text of qualitative responses, and are driven by what is found to be present, not what is expected to be present. Each grounded theory code must be

supportable in reverse; that is able to be illustrated by “extensive amounts of rich data” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 514), for example multiple comments from survey responses that fit the code description.

The final phase of analysis for this particular article was to compare the identified codes with the findings of other international research. (The specific literature review to identify and collate themes from other similar studies overseas was conducted *after* the coding of this data was complete, to minimise the likelihood of researcher pre-conditioning towards particular themes.) In the next phase of the research a reverse mapping was also conducted back onto the respondent group’s demographics, to check patterns of response against such variables as gender, media genre, experience, and seniority; however for reasons of scope we cannot include those detailed breakdowns here.

### ***Findings***

When this qualitative analysis method was applied to the Big Journalism public relations question, some distinct patterns were evident. First, the frequency count showed that the single most frequent ‘content’ word (once non-content words like ‘the’, ‘and’ or ‘a’ are removed) was “people”. Looking at the word in context within answers, it became apparent that most journalists’ gut reactions to the term ‘public relations’ were reactions to specific ‘PR people’ they had experienced, as opposed to a macro response to ‘public relations’ as an abstract profession, discipline, process, or practice. Many answers drew a distinction between the professional role as a whole, which was often seen as a legitimate or tolerable business function, and behaviour by individual practitioners, which had sometimes been experienced as unprofessional. Typical examples of this distinction are: “I think it is necessary for businesses to have someone who can advise them on how to handle certain events, but the amount of damned lying that goes on is quite unforgivable”; “Fine, although some individual PR people can be difficult to deal with”; and, “I don’t have any problem with the job itself - it’s just a shame that it attracts the people it does”. Overall, it was apparent that when the journalists in the study evoked a quick ‘thought image’ of ‘public relations’, such an image predominantly comprised or included an image or images of ‘public relations people’.

The next highest frequency words in the answer corpus were “good”, “necessary”, “evil” and “useful”, in that order. This suggested a strong polarisation of binary concepts (e.g. good and evil) within the corpus of results. Of course concordance software only counts frequency (manifest content) not connotation (latent content), however frequency counts are useful for preliminary identification of macro patterns and areas of interest which can then be unpacked in the next phase of more contextual interpretation (Stemler, 2001). Nuanced understanding of how key terms are used only occurs when they are examined in context (see below), but their initial frequency identification at least gives some indication of which conceptual units might be what Burke calls the “God” and “Devil” terms in a given text, that is its most dominant positive and negative orientators (Rueckert, 1982). Here, the key terms, however used, relate to morality (good, evil) and utility (necessary, useful). Further examination of these terms in context is then needed to identify whether utility and morality are largely positive, negative, or split orientators.

In the second phase of coding, using HyperResearch to identify longer key phrases in context, 22 sub-codes emerged. (See Table 1, sub-code ranking, which lists the sub-codes from most common at the top to least common at the bottom.)

**Table 1: Thematic sub-codes ranked by frequency.\***

<b>Rank</b>	<b>Sub-code name</b>	<b>Count</b>
1.	Can be useful or helpful	60
2.	Live and let live, has a place	53
3.	Investive (wholly, unequivocally wrong / evil / dark side / manipulative / sneaky / liars)	51
4.	More money and or better conditions	45
5.	Of concern because blocks access to truth or corrupts flow of communication with undue influence	43
6.	PRs lack media understanding or skill	42
7.	There are two types of PR – good and bad	39
8.	Journalists are responsible for what happens with PR	35
9.	A necessary evil, tolerated but not liked	25
10.	Advertising, puffery, spin, not to be taken seriously	22
11.	Nuisance, more irritant or annoyance than anything, pushy, clogs email	21
12.	An ever-growing area, increasingly unavoidable	20

13.	Think not much of it, try not to think about it	17
14.	I have or do work in PR already or will consider it in future	11
15.	Important, necessary function for organisations	10
16.	Useless, waste of time or money for clients	10
17.	Commercial pressures on journalism	10
18.	Taking skills from journalism	9
19.	Complex field/depends for whom	9
20.	Misunderstood or wrongly ignored by journalists	7
21.	Not for me but OK for some	4
22.	Blurred lines/occurring in-house within journalism	4
<b>Total**</b>	Number of comments	547

\*Note: Ranking numbers and counts in all tables are provided to give a general suggestion of indicative relative frequency only. They are not statistically reliable, as analysis of this question was qualitative, not quantitative, in order to collect and explore the fullest possible range of responses.

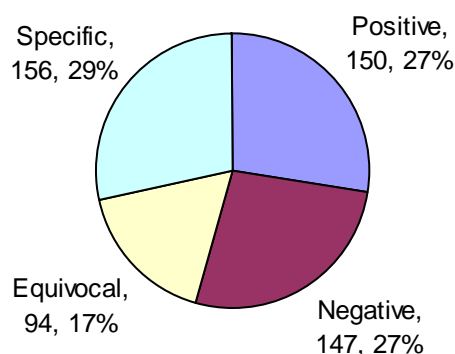
\*\*Note: Total count is for comments, not respondents, as many respondents made more than one comment and raised different issues.

Each of these sub-codes or themes represents a repeated idea or similar form of words. The two most common overall were both generally positive towards public relations: the first was the idea that it is actively useful or helpful, and the second the related but slightly less enthusiastic idea that it has a role to play and is “just another job” like journalism itself. The third most common response was emphatically against public relations (for example comments such as “They should all be shot” or “They are whores!”). These invectives were more prevalent than negative-but-less-impassioned comments such as expressions of moderate concern about rising influence, but were quite substantially outweighed by the two positive categories which led the overall responses. Some journalists commented reflexively on the existence or impact of strongly negative attitudes towards public relations within their own profession: for example one said “I yawn when colleagues make disparaging remarks about ‘the dark side’”, while another felt prejudice against public relations meant some public relations material was wrongly ignored as an important community-based source: “Many community events get overlooked because people don't care enough to respond to an email or check the fax... often people ring in with story ideas and are brushed off, no other options are considered. The readers feel neglected”.



When these 22 sub-codes were collated into broader code areas to give a more macro picture of the responses (Figure 1), the overall impression of the corpus of comments was of a fairly evenly-split, binarised response field. The majority of comments (just over half, at 297 comments) made value judgements as to public relations' merit. They took a particular stance fairly emphatically either for (150 comments) or against (147 comments) public relations, although with degrees of fervour within such a stance. The remainder of comments either raised specific issues of concern in a way that was more descriptive or diagnostic than judgemental (156 comments) or were equivocal (94 comments).

**Figure One: Comments grouped by broad code type**



In the positive comments (Table 2), the most complimentary views generally focused on utility, seeing public relations as a crucial, perhaps even misunderstood, function in society, assisting journalists with story ideas, access to interviewees, background facts, and statistics, for example: “PR can be useful for alerting newsrooms to potential stories - I've found so myself”. In slightly less positive comments, public relations was seen as, for example, “A necessary voicepiece that represents an organisation or person, but it is not the only voice out there, nor is it the strongest”.

**Table Two: Generally positive to tolerant comments ranked by frequency**

Can be useful or helpful	60
Live and let live has a place	53
A growing area unavoidable	20
Important	10
Misunderstood or wrongly ignored by journalists	7
	150

The negative comments were, in the main, more concerned with morality. In the most judgemental of the negative comments (Table 3), public relations was simply considered wholly wrong, with invective such as “evil”, “loathsome”, “pernicious”, and “peopled by sell-out scum” common forms of response in this category. The two-word answer “paid liars” was also a repeated answer in this category. Other negative comments were more moderate, although still opposed to public relations, seeing it for example as “another obstacle to be overcome by news organisations”, a “money-making racket”, or “a heartless and soulless [sic] industry”.

**Table Three: Generally negative to concerned comments ranked by frequency**

Invective (wholly, unequivocally wrong / evil / dark side / manipulative / sneaky / liars)	51
Blocks or corrupts flow of communication	43
Advertising puffery spin	22
Nuisance annoyance pushy	21
Useless waste of time or money	10
	147

By contrast with these fairly clear groups of comments positioned for and against public relations, a much smaller group of comments (around one-fifth) took a stance that was inherently equivocal, seeing the industry as too complex and diverse to be summed up easily, as having twinned, intertwined good and bad aspects, or as differing depending what client or organisation was represented (Table 4). The greatest number of these more ambivalent comments suggested that there exist two dichotomous types of public relations person – one who facilitates information and one who blocks information – and that the value and impact of public relations

depends entirely upon which of these mutually exclusive types of ‘PR person’ was doing the job. Typical such comments were: “They can either be very helpful for getting at sources or they can be a painful barrier between the real issue and the journalist” and “Some comms workers are BRILLIANT. They make my life easy, I look forward to speaking to them, and as a result I admit they get much better coverage. Others are surly and unhelpful – some even lie – and I look forward to dragging them, and their employer, through the mud”. Several respondents indicated that the kind of public relations person they encounter affects the coverage received: “I find in the majority of cases they impede communication rather than facilitating it. Ironically, the minority who are helpful tend to earn themselves better coverage”. This ‘equivocal’ code also contained the single most common verbatim repeated phrase in the corpus of comments: “necessary evil”. This phrase encapsulated the ambivalence many respondents felt towards public relations: as one said, “it’s a love/hate relationship. As much as it pains me to say it, they are needed”.

***Table Four: Generally equivocal to non-committal comments ranked by frequency***

Two types	39
Necessary evil	25
Not much, try not to	17
Complex field depends for whom	9
Not for me	4
	94

The remaining comments, just under one third, made specific observations or raised particular issues of concern (Table 5). The most frequent of these concerned the idea that public relations practitioners enjoy more money and/or better conditions than journalists (in fact this was the fourth most frequently raised comment overall). Public relations was “well paid” or “over paid” and was therefore “A very tempting option for a lowly paid, over-worked journalist”. Other typical comments in this category included: “The fact is if you want to earn an income that reflects the fact that journalism is a profession you need to enter PR” and “An inevitable transformation for most journalists to survive financially”. Public relations was also seen to offer more flexible working conditions, especially for people with family commitments.

**Table Five: Specific issues ranked by frequency**

More money and or better conditions	45
Lacking media understanding or skill	42
Journalists responsible	35
I have or do work in pr already or will consider it in future	11
Commercial pressures on journalism	10
Taking skills from journalism	9
Blurred lines/occurring in-house within journalism	4
	156

The second most frequent specific issue raised was that public relations practitioners lack media understanding or skill: they are “ill-informed”, “Amazingly incompetent ... generally have no understanding of news values”, and there “Seem to be a lot of young people coming in to PR without necessary journalistic background” and with “appalling standards of writing”. One respondent said skill levels varied: “A minority of PR people have considerable journalist experience. They, at least, can provide useable angles and relevant information. Many of the rest are halfwits who make no effort to understand the industry they're trying to corrupt.” Unskilled media relations was often a source of amusement: “I laugh like a drain at half-arsed, poorly thought-through media campaigns, knowing the people who run them aren't trained properly or experienced enough to handle them”. There was an interesting duality in evidence on the issue of skill. Within the corpus of responses there were both repeated calls for public relations practitioners to have better or greater media skill including specific journalism experience (e.g. “the best public relations people are those who have been journalists themselves” or “The ones who understand the press are fine but lots don't have a clue”), and concerns that public relations practitioners are becoming *too* skilled (“Getting very crafty!”). Skilled public relations practitioners, particularly former journalists, were seen as more able to manipulate journalists, especially new recruits: “The experienced people can use their skills to bluff younger journalists”; “It has its role, but am concerned about the power they have issuing media releases that just get copied by inexperienced journos and reported as 'news'... without real investigation and research”; and “I see lots of journalists simply passing on PR copy as their own,

missing points that would make a good story, not following up on alternate views. Makes it easy with deadlines and limited staff, but quite dangerous for the news industry”.

These concerns about manipulation were often seen as related to another frequently raised specific issue, journalists’ responsibilities and skill levels in dealing appropriately with public relations material. Public relations was repeatedly seen as a “fact of life”, but one which many journalists were dealing with inadequately, especially by lacking sufficient scepticism or investigative skill: “Problems with PR agencies are a reflection on journalists, not the PR people”; “The PR industry makes bad journalists worse. It indulges the lazy and panders to the poor”. There were calls for more specific training of journalists in how to deal with public relations: “it should be drummed into young journalists entering into the profession that a press release shouldn't be taken as gospel! It needs researching and for the journalist to go to the source to verify it. Otherwise, lazy journalism will abound” and “Young journalists should be taught (and regularly reminded) about where real journalism stops and marketing/advocacy takes over”.

Other issues included the increasing commercial pressures on journalism. Public relations was used because it “saves time in a frantic newsroom” and “News staffs have been trimmed to the point where journalists need all the help they can get”. Media kits were described as “Very useful for stressed, overworked journalists, who can just lift entire press releases into their story”. The pressures on journalists were compounded because ‘tempting’ public relations jobs were seen as taking skills from journalism: “Sadly many PR people are former journos, whose skills and experience are badly needed in journalism!” There was also some mention of blurring lines between public relations and journalism, with some examples given of promotional writing occurring in-house within journalism: “PR can serve as a great source of story ideas, but journos should not have to do it, i.e. staff reporters should not have to write adveats, or bumph that is decidedly one-sided”. There was concern that “some journalism ... uses infomercials disguised as news to sell product”.

### ***Discussion***

The answers to the public relations question highlighted some key issues of concern for journalists in dealing with public relations practitioners, and revealed some interesting dualities, with both individual comments and the overall corpus of results often containing twinned statements of position that appeared ambivalent or irreconcilable. More than anything else, journalists, both as a group and individually, appeared conflicted in their stance towards public relations, finding it difficult to know how to deal with it consistently in the midst of other pressures such as long hours, low pay, and shiftwork. Many respondents' answers included both some sort of mild-to-moderate positive comment in terms of public relations' utility and some mild-to-extreme negative comment in terms of public relations people's morality. Negative comments were certainly not dominant overall, making up only 27 percent of total comments, but almost half the respondents made either wholly negative comment or at least some kind of negative observation, even if in concert with positive statements.

Often, this situation of cognitive dissonance for journalists – researchers who have identified similar situations in overseas studies have called it a “neurotic double bind” (Haller, 2007) – appeared to lead to habitual reactions either emphatically for or against public relations material from particular sources, with little time available for those at the ‘coal-face’ to think through the practical implications of their particular stance. We suggest that the resort to such emotive heuristics is probably ultimately unhelpful to journalists in their goal to present news that is as unbiased and fully informative as possible. Dismissing ‘PR people’ as either friends or foes suggests a worldview “in which the good guys and the bad guys are readily identifiable” (Black, 2001, p.129), as opposed to a more nuanced or critical examination of each piece of public relations-sourced information on its merits. Black argues (not of journalists, but we believe the argument is applicable here) that us/them binary heuristics that create “broad, all-inclusive categories of in-groups (friends) and out-groups (enemies), beliefs and disbeliefs, and situations to be accepted or rejected in toto” (Black, 2001, p.134) encourage a closing-down of discussion, leading to quick decisions and polarised, emotive responses without investigation of further evidence. For journalists under pressure, reliance on a ‘friend or foe’ judgement could lead to unexamined bias both for and against particular public relations information.

The powerful ‘people’ orientation of responses goes some way towards explaining why some public relations practitioners who work in areas other than media relations feel their entire profession is conflated, in media coverage, with media relations. If journalists are forming opinions about public relations based on the specific public relations people they deal with – an understandable sequence of events – then their opinions *will* usually be about *media relations* rather than about the spectrum of public relations activity. That the words “media” and “journalists” were also among the most frequent overall content words in the response corpus underscores that the paradigm within which journalists are typically thinking, when thinking about public relations, is a media relations paradigm, not anything broader.

For public relations practitioners, the lesson from the ‘people orientation’ of responses is that their entire profession *will* be judged by their individual actions, and especially their actions in dealing with journalists. Even though, in a recent public relations industry survey, fewer than 10 percent of New Zealand public relations practitioners nominated media relations as their main activity (PRINZ, 2006), the present Big Journalism survey suggests that it will typically be from this less-than-10 percent that the mass-mediated public face of public relations is generated. For journalists, perhaps one possible lesson is that if they value maximal accuracy in their own reporting, they might choose to use the term ‘media relations’ when reporting on the specialist branch of public relations that deals with the media (see further Tilley, 2005) and reserve ‘public relations’ for broader discussion of the entire profession, in the same way that a discussion of nurses would presumably refer to them as ‘nurses’ as opposed to ‘medical staff’. In both cases the former term is more semantically precise and informative, even though both terms would be technically correct.

Another interesting issue arising from the data was that while the existence of pronounced duality towards public relations mirrors findings from many overseas studies that journalists feel one way about public relations in general and very differently about public relations practitioners as individuals (Belz et al., 1984; Berkowitz & Lee, 2004; Chen, 2007; DeLorme & Fedler, 2003; Evans, 1984; Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003; Henderson, 1998; Kim & Bae, 2006; Kopenhaver, 1982; Merkel, et al., 2007; Sallot & Johnson, 2006a, 2006b; Scrimger & Richards,

2003; Shaw & White, 2004; Shoemaker, 1989), the often-described ‘Jeffers effect’ (1977), in which journalists “generally denigrate public relations practitioners [but] hold more positive attitudes about individual practitioners with whom they work closely” (Sallot & Johnson, 2006a) appeared to be largely reversed. In New Zealand, it appears that journalists tend not to ‘hate at a distance but tolerate up close’, as the Jeffers effect has been loosely paraphrased (Sallot & Johnson, 2006a), but rather appear to tolerate in the abstract and dislike up close, as comments such as “Fine, although some individual PR people can be difficult to deal with”; and, “I don't have any problem with the job itself - it's just a shame that it attracts the people it does” illustrate. Future interview research may help to clarify the reasons for this difference.

In many other ways the results replicated overseas studies, which have also found that journalists raise issues about ‘two types of PR practitioner’. Delorme and Fedler, 2003, found mention of this ‘two types’ response as long ago as a study from 1884); that journalists talk about their own workplace problems when discussing public relations, including unfavourable pay comparisons (e.g. Olson, 1989; Sallot & Johnson, 2006a, 2006b; Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997); and that journalists feel in a double bind about maintaining their independence yet finding themselves dependent upon provided information (Haller, 2007).

One finding that has occurred in overseas studies but was notably absent from these responses was the complaint that public relations people try to bribe journalists with gifts or favours to get good coverage – clearly journalists are not overly concerned about this in New Zealand (only one comment related to freebies and this was to the effect that the journalist enjoyed receiving a goody bag but was not influenced by it). However, many New Zealand journalists are clearly angry about something. Given the internal conflict and other media industry issues evident in the data, however, it is questionable whether they are actually angry with ‘public relations’ as such, or are displacing anger at other structural and managerial factors into an habitual stance against ‘PR’. The workplace issues raised in answers to this question, even though the question did not ask about journalists’ own work conditions, suggest that perhaps journalists’ key stress and resentment is actually at the levels of dependency upon public relations they find themselves forced into because of a range of other factors such as fewer staff, lower pay, less time per story, etc. Data from UK research



suggests British journalists now have only one-third of the time per story that they had 20 years ago (Lewis, Williams, Franklin, Thomas, & Mosdell, 2007), and the United States' *State of the News Media 2008* report signalled American journalists' ongoing concerns that "Fewer people are being asked to do more" (Project for Excellence in Journalism, p. 2). The many mentions of resourcing issues in this New Zealand data suggest that similar research to the UK and USA studies is needed here. (Elsewhere in the Big Journalism survey, in answers to questions specifically about resourcing and commercial pressures, the majority of respondents indicated they thought all areas at their media outlets were resourced below average, and more than two-thirds thought commercial pressures were hurting the way news organisations do things – see Hollings et al., 2007.) An issue arising from the mention of these issues in answers to the question about public relations is, to what degree is anger about newsroom downsizing being redirected, perhaps because of journalists' difficulties in tackling their employers head-on? Would the energy behind anti-public relations sentiments be more productively directed at disseminating the mounting evidence that newsroom investment is a good business decision – see for example the numerous articles in *Good journalism, good business*, the special issue of *Newspaper Research Journal* (Lacy, Thorson & Russial, 2004); longitudinal work by Meyer (e.g. Meyer & Kim, 2003) and Thorson (2003); and most recently the study by Mantrala, Naik, Sridhar, and Thorson (2007) which shows that upsizing news staffs and better resourcing newsrooms has quantifiable positive impacts on both circulation and advertising revenue. Interview data is being gathered in New Zealand to test and triangulate these issues for our media and assess the extent to which the levels of resentment evident among journalists towards public relations might at least in part be a displacement of emotion and anger about their own changing working conditions and sense of powerlessness.

### ***Conclusions***

The perceived mutual loathing between the public relations and journalism professions is often seen as a kind of joke – but if serious issues such as staffing levels and the ways in which staffing cuts actually *prevent* journalistic sources from competing with other information sources are given any less attention because the blame directed towards public relations provides at least one outlet for journalists' feelings of dissatisfaction, the end result may be no laughing matter. Furthermore, the

levels of hostility revealed here, even though in the minority, suggest that for many journalists, feelings of anger run deeper than humorous sniping.

The findings of this study are in some ways ‘nothing new’. For the past four decades at least, researchers in the United States (US) alone have found in more than 150 studies (Grunig, 2007) that journalists profess to an antagonistic yet conflicted stance towards public relations. What is interesting is the extent to which this long-held stance endures while many other aspects of the media landscape are changing. Lucarelli (1983) has traced the antagonism’s historical origins to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century when press agents first emerged in the US. A proactive campaign by journalists against press agents’ material, including tagging it as fictitious in contrast with journalistic ‘truth’, had commercial motives – journalists “feared that publicists’ efforts to obtain free publicity would reduce newspapers’ advertising revenue” (DeLorme & Fedler, 2003, p.100). It is more widely recognised in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that journalism is also a form of storytelling (Tuchman, 1978; McCullagh, 2002), and new and varied sources of competition for newspapers’ advertising revenue have now emerged (such as online and citizen news). Commercial pressures and increased competition are generally recognised as factors that increase journalists’ (clearly often unwilling) reliance upon information subsidies (Davis, 2000). Yet, the basic elements of the binary ‘us versus them’ relationship appear to remain largely in place.

This study has clarified the nature of that relationship in several ways: antagonism still exists here in New Zealand and for some journalists it is intense. Some international studies have suggested that hostility is declining (Shaw & White, 2004) or gone altogether – for example the relationship is described as “mature professional relations” in The Netherlands, where government communicators are banned from using persuasion (Neijens & Smit, 2006, p.239). Clearly some animosity does still occur in New Zealand, and in ways that broadly mirror international norms of love/hate dissonance (Sallot & Johnson, 2006a), but there are some localised aspects such as that New Zealand journalists differentiate between the general and the particular in ways that differ from overseas studies, and do not feel they are being bribed. The use of qualitative corpus analysis helps identify that the love/hate dichotomy occurs here along two different conceptual fault-lines (utility and morality)

rather than being a dissonance on one issue. This may help to explain why journalists are able to hold such apparently conflicting views at the same time.

That this dichotomy of need versus resentment, which has been repeatedly identified in previous international studies spanning several decades, remains strong in 2007, suggests that although the media landscape itself has changed dramatically, journalists and public relations professionals remain locked in an historical antagonism characterised by blame and dependency. The data also confirm that journalists' antagonism is far from straightforward. One simple explanation for the duality was found when the data were analysed for key themes: most journalists appear to judge public relations wholly through their interactions with the particular 'public relations people' who deal with media inquiries, meaning their understanding of 'public relations' is arising from specific, personal, individual experiences of media relations. Given the importance of public relations' own media profile in building the reputation of the profession as a whole, the limited yet fervent perspective held by many journalists suggests that the conflation of public relations with media relations is a form of particularly influential discourse that the public relations industry might consider it a priority to challenge.

Another explanation for journalists' love/hate stance can be found in the interrelated issues raised in the survey, about pay levels, newsroom resourcing, and journalists' levels of skill and experience, which issues journalists perceived as connected with the influence of public relations. Overall, the data give a clearer picture of the nature of some of the stereotypes and resentments that characterise the relationship between these two professions, but also raise questions about the extent to which anger at other issues may be displaced into an habitual historical stance against public relations.

The data also raise important questions about the implications for both journalists and public relations practitioners of working within a relationship in which there are dissonant conceptualisations by one party of the other. What are the behavioural and psychological responses to such a phenomenon? A subsequent phase of the research is investigating the flip-side of this data, public relations practitioners' views of journalists, in order to continue to advance our understanding of the impact on media professionals and their audiences of this not-so-joke situation.

Clearly, this data is incredibly rich and has raised a number of important issues that need further investigation. A single article can only do faint justice to the depth of insight contained in these qualitative responses and analysis and data collection are ongoing. In particular, further investigation of the connections between issues of commercial imperatives, newsroom resourcing, pay, skill, training, and subsequent levels of information subsidy is warranted. To that end, work on this and related data will continue. In particular, this New Zealand survey data on attitudes is being triangulated with a series of interviews with journalists and communication professionals in New Zealand, and compared with similar data being obtained in Australia. Further research will explore how the enduring nature of the publicly adversarial yet privately often dependent relationship between journalism and public relations, particularly in the changing media environment, affects the end quality of journalistic output.

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