

Is Public Relations Journalism's Worst Nightmare?

PR and Journalism, Case of Agreeing to Disagree!

With Comms, Objectivity Depends on Your Final Year Major

By Ndaba Nkomo

It is common knowledge at least to some that journalism schools be it Africa's best, Rhodes University in South Africa, or world acclaimed Indiana University in the US, are training grounds for both hardcore 'cigar-smoking' news editors or Italian suits-addicted PR practitioners. From the very same entry requirements, lecturers, exams, and learning environment come two 'contradicting' careers – Journalism and Public Relations.

What exactly is objectivity? Who defines it and whose standards are used to measure it? When disseminating information be they journalists or PR professionals what is the measuring yardstick of truthfulness? Point of interest – is a business journalist writing a story based on one interview with a local BSE boss more objective than a PR practitioner who writes a release and quotes – Jacko Maree Standard Bank Africa Chief Executive, one of the bank's clients and the bank's PRO for a press release? The PR practitioner would have covered many sides of the story after all.

Journalists are in the business of informing, educating and entertaining the public. PR practitioners are in the business of making sure their clients are better understood. This may involve various tactics that include media relations strategies to manage perceptions. A journalist 'struggling' to get a business story to present on diary can find relief in a well-written press release or creative article accompanied by pictures. Job done by simply just downloading e-mail. It's a win-win, right?

May be not. As members of the fourth estate it is the duty of the media to monitor all arms of society – from the executive, judiciary, parliament to economics and social issues. Robust and uncompromising journalism has exposed scandals and unfair practices making a meaningful contribution to noble societies. From the Watergate scandal of the 80s in Zimbabwe to the drunken judges in South Africa currently and the unceremonious Enron debacle journalism has stood firm to defend the society's moral fibre. 'Objectively' journalism has fought and unearthed some of the world's biggest scandals.

The Sunday Times of South Africa does not accept or rather publish press releases. They are used as background information. If there is a real story the investigative journalists will take it up and do their own research.

So what does this mean for PR? Well the media like any other fraternity like accountancy for instance there is room for error. A vibrant PR department is constantly on the look out to make sure their business is rightly represented and positioned in public. Modern trends suggest that you cannot lie and cover up to make 'good' PR. Instead all communications has to emanate from fact and truth. There is nothing immoral about that.

When Nestle was accused of selling an unfit product for children the immediate result was not to deny but establish the facts and pull out the entire product range for further tests. An apology was given compensation provided to the affected, now that is PR.

Chartered PR Practitioners and other communications experts worth their salt know how to differentiate between a press release and a waste of the editor's time. Drafting an article informing the media about a power station deal like the Standard Bank and ICBC's bankrolling of

the Morupule B Plant in Botswana is not a tasteless story but a meaningful contribution to the country's energy fortunes. No editor can ignore that!

Different as the two can be journalism and Public Relations, they can work hand in hand for the greater good. If you take a closer look at this article between these two professions one was constantly written in capitals. I don't know what that means.

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