

## Loath to Admit: Pressures on the Ethical Disclosure of News Release Sources by Journalists

*Non-disclosure of news release sources deceives the public and is ethically objectionable. The S.967 Pre-packaged News Bill in the US endorsed the principle of self-regulation by journalists when disclosing the source of government video news releases. Senate committee hearings for the Bill raised generic ethical issues relating to the use of news releases as a vehicle for information exchange. Professional bodies for public relations and journalism advocate disclosure of source to the public, but their members perceive advantages in non-disclosure. Public relations values the credibility of implied news organization endorsement, and journalists resist being seen to be using public relations as a source for their news. If self-regulation of disclosure is to work in the public's interest, professions and news organizations have to commit seriously to ethical practice.*

Keywords: news releases, sources, journalists, ethics, pre-packaged news, self-regulation

### Introduction

In his opening remarks to the US Senate S.967 hearing on Pre-packaged News Stories, Senator Daniel Inouye said that the true value of information to society 'can only be realized if our ethical standards require, and our laws enforce, a level of transparency and openness that protect the American public from being misled' (Inouye 2005: par. 8). The first draft of the S.967 Bill amending the US Government Communications Act (May 2005) proposed stringent regulations to clearly separate

government information subsidy from editorial news. The final draft (December 2005) watered down the original Bill's requirements, effectively favouring reliance on ethical standards and reporters' discretion, over laws, in achieving transparent disclosure of government sources of news.

Many in the professions most directly affected by the Bill – journalism and various public relations specialties – will call this a victory of common-sense over unnecessary government regulation of the media. But would the public be better served by tighter regulation and guidelines for the use of the thousands (Bivins 2005) of print, audio, video and electronic news releases distributed to news media each day? Should journalists' discretion be more clearly guided by codes of practice relating to news releases?

The Medicare Video News Releases (VNR) case that prompted the US government to revisit VNR legislation stimulated debate about VNRs; it also raised some generic ethical issues relating to the news release as a vehicle for information exchange.

In a textbook on corporate reputation management Doorley and Garcia (2007) discuss the ethics of the VNR in terms that most PR practitioners and journalists find familiar.

... to the degree there are ethical issues inherent in VNRs, they are primarily issues affecting journalists' use of the VNRs and their disclosure of the source of the content. From a professional communicator's perspective, the ethical standards regarding a VNR are the same as those regarding a print news release: the source of the material should be clearly identified by the communicator, and the content should be accurate and truthful. If these standards are met, the VNR generally passes ethical muster (Doorley and Garcia 2007: 43).

They focus on the news release *per se*, and the responsibilities of each of the professions involved, rather than the professional conventions, imperatives and pressures that result in the presentation of news release viewpoints as news, without disclosure of the source.

This paper considers the practice and ethics of 'media release journalism' – the presentation of news release material as news, without journalistic scrutiny or attribution of source. It reflects on the formal positions expressed by

peak broadcast news journalism and public relations bodies in testimony to the S.967 hearing, and some of the unspoken professional realities affecting the desirability of the disclosure of news release sources. In particular it considers public relations expertise in producing print, audio and video news releases that are indistinguishable from editorial news, and the vested nature of information produced by public relations.

The paper argues that ethical self-regulation of disclosure must transcend journalists' need to fill larger news holes, the ready availability of third party news release material, and journalists' reluctance to be seen to be using public relations material. Unless self-regulation is supported by genuine commitment to disclosure by the professions and news organizations, 'media release journalism' and deception of the public are likely to increase.

#### **The Medicare VNRs case and GAO decision**

In January and February 2004 US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), through their PR subcontractors, pre-packaged VNR news stories (in English and Spanish) presenting favourably the effects of the Medicare law, without reference to the government as the source of the information. Each story package was distributed with a suggested script for the news anchor to lead in to the story. The first said 'the Federal Government is launching a new, nationwide campaign to educate 41 million people with Medicare about improvements to Medicare ... Karen Ryan explains' (GAO 2004: 6).

Not disclosed was the fact that Karen Ryan was a public relations consultant hired to play the reporter in the story (Alberto Garcia played the reporter in the Spanish version). The videos ran excerpts from the government's advertising campaign and interviews, with Karen Ryan narrating. The story closes with what became the most contentious aspect of the presentation: 'In Washington, I'm Karen Ryan reporting.'

The VNRs were 'clearly designed to be aired exactly as the agency produced them' (Poling 2005) and were used, at least in part, on 40 TV stations in 33 markets (GAO 2004: 9). They ignited a debate that led to an inquiry and decision by the US General Accounting Office in May 2004. The GAO decision found that although the agency had a right to disseminate information, the VNR campaign violated the

prohibition of the use of appropriated funds for publicity and propaganda because the VNR footage did not disclose their source:

In neither the story packages nor the lead-in anchor scripts did HHS or CMS identify itself to the television viewing audience as the source of the news reports. Further, in each news report, the content was attributed to an individual purporting to be a reporter but actually hired by an HHS subcontractor (GAO 2004: 2).

The GAO decision led to the introduction of a Bill to amend the Communications Act (S.967) in April 2005 and debate and hearings that focused on Government sponsored VNRs. However, the case raised some generic ethical issues relating to the practice of 'media release journalism', and disclosure by journalists of any news releases as a source of news. These issues are important to the professions involved in the exchange of information by news release, and the public who consume 'news'.

#### **The ethics of 'media release journalism'**

As Jempson (2005) has said, people need to be able to trust journalists to check sources and motives. When news release material is used in editorial news without disclosing the source, journalists fail in their ethical duties relating to the presentation of information to the public. When the source is not disclosed, news release material acquires the implied endorsement of a more credible and neutral party – the newspaper or newscaster – because readers assume that editorial is the creation of journalists. As gatekeepers for the public interest, journalists are positioned as having the professional responsibility for what appears as news. In the case of print news, average readers not familiar with the way journalists work would find it difficult to discern that a story was based on a press release (Zawawi 2001). However, this applies equally when video, audio and electronic news release material is used for news without disclosure of source.

Simmons and Spence distinguish between proper scrutiny, checking and attribution of news release material by journalists, and 'media release journalism' which involves 'the printing or broadcasting of media release ideas and material without fulfilling some or all of journalists' public responsibilities' to attribute source, avoid plagiarism, and disclose all essential facts and conflicts of interest that might affect independence (2006: 172). They say that media release journalism represents ethically

objectionable practice by journalists and news organizations, even if the material is accurate and true. It is ethically objectionable because journalists knowingly present information to the public from a source of lesser objectivity and credibility than news that is prepared and created by journalists. Thus the audience is deceived into thinking that news release content is news scrutinized and created by journalists.

The hearing on the S.967 Bill heard similar views. The Commissioner for the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) said that the issue of concern with news is that 'absent proper disclosure, listeners and viewers may believe that these stories are produced by *bona fide* news organizations, rather than third parties who may have a vested interest in the content of the story' (Adelstein 2005: par. 1). Government-funded pre-packaged news stories need to clearly identify the source for viewers, according to the GAO's Susan Poling. She said that it is not enough that the material is not objectionable, nor that the broadcaster is aware of the source of the material (Poling 2005). The Commissioner for the Federal Communications Commission said that consumers had 'a right to know who is trying to persuade them' and that Congress had been unwavering in its requirement that radio and television broadcasters announce who 'paid for or furnished' any 'valuable consideration' (Adelstein 2005: par. 5).

Journalists are not alone in their ethical responsibilities here. Where media release journalism occurs as a result of the placement of news releases, with the strategic intention that they will be used as journalistic comment without disclosure of the source (for example, in small and regional newspapers without the resources for independent research and corroboration), it constitutes ethically objectionable behaviour by the public relations practitioner.

... insofar as the public are subjected to deception as a result of the PR strategy of presenting, through the collaboration of lazy or unscrupulous journalists, media releases as journalistic comment, then the PR practitioners responsible for producing and disseminating those press releases, are party to the deception and thus culpable of unethical professional conduct (Simmons and Spence 2006: 177).

The actions of PR practitioners who take advantage of circumstances that result in media

release journalism are ethically objectionable, because they effectively collude with the journalist to perpetrate a deception.

### **S.967 Prepackaged News Stories Bill**

The first draft of the S.967 Bill included a requirement that government VNRs would in future require the conspicuous display of the words, 'Produced by the US Government ...visible for the entire duration of the pre-packaged news story', and prohibited the removal of the display of source (S.967, 2005). The Bill was designed to ensure 'that broadcasters and others airing stories are aware of the government's involvement, and, most importantly, that listeners and viewers understand the nature and source of the information being presented' (Adelstein 2005: par. 9).

By October 2005 the disclosure requirement in the Bill had been softened. The Bill retained a requirement to disclose source to broadcasters, but journalists and broadcasters would largely retain discretion in the disclosure of source to viewers and listeners.

Any pre-packaged news story produced by or on behalf of a Federal agency and intended for broadcast over the air or distribution by a multi-channel video programming distributor within the United States shall contain a clear notification within the text or audio of the pre-packaged news story that the pre-packaged news story was prepared or funded by the 'United States Government' (S.967, 2005: 5).

The disclosure requirement applies to users of the 'complete, ready-to-use audio or video news segments produced by the government but does not apply to users of "B-roll" footage or segments of the VNR used "within their own creative work"' (Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation 2005: 2).

### **Industry prefers self-regulation of disclosure**

The less strict disclosure requirements in the final Bill are consistent with the preferences for journalist self-regulation of disclosure to the public that were expressed by public relations and broadcast industry representatives at the S.967 hearing. The main argument used by the public relations (and its sibling VNR production) industry representatives against the initial Bill's strict disclosure requirement was that with specific proscription of the way disclosure should be announced, broadcasters would be less likely to use the VNR material at all.

Consequently the viewing public would not receive information that it should receive.

We believe these provisions may have the unintended consequence of actually impeding the free flow of important information to the public (Phair 2005: par. 9).

I am concerned the 'Truth in Broadcasting' Bill will decrease, not increase the information available to the public. It will limit, not expand the transparency of government activities (Simon 2005: par. 8).

Phair and Simon argued that proscription of the specifics of disclosure would result in less VNR uptake by broadcasters because the regulated government-label presentation of disclosure would not match the individual formats and styles of the broadcasters.

Rather than deciding whether the story, or a portion of it, should air, based on news standards, stations will be factoring in whether they are comfortable changing the look of their broadcast (Simon 2005: par. 8).

Disclosure to the public is ultimately the responsibility of broadcasters. It could come in many forms, depending on the content and context of the VNR and the broadcaster's news production formats, and as long as the result is to keep the public totally informed about the sources of information (Phair 2005: par. 11).

The president of the Radio Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) testified on behalf of the broadcast industry at the hearing. She did not mention issues of house news style restricting use of materials from third parties, but stressed the importance of retaining the independence of broadcasters in determining what is broadcast.

The determination of what to include in any particular newscast constitutes the very core journalistic function of a broadcaster, and is a matter far removed from government supervision. The government must be cautious, therefore, in taking any action that would interfere with the editorial judgments of electronic journalists or otherwise dictate news decisions or content (Cochran 2005: pars 13, 14).

Cochran's (2005) central assertions to the hearing were that improper use of third party material by electronic journalists occurs but is

insignificant in its frequency, and that the broadcast news industry already has adequate guidelines on the proper use of material from third parties (such as VNRs). She said that 'news organizations often receive topic suggestions and materials from third parties' but that for most operations these were not a significant source of news. She said that third party VNR material is mostly used as background footage for stories produced by news rooms, and only – very rarely – in their entirety. She referred to electronic journalists as 'trustees of the public' (par.12), and said that 'electronic journalists have every incentive to protect the editorial integrity of the audio and video they air without government intervention' (par. 15). Her testimony asserted that the RTNDA ethics code (before the Medicare VNRs case) included a clear requirement to 'disclose the origin of information and label all materials provided by outsiders' (Cochran 2005: par. 7), and that guidance on disclosure of audio and video material had been expanded in revised VNR guidelines released in April 2005 (ibid: par. 8).

All industry representatives at the hearing expressed support for the legislation's intent to ensure that the source of news release material is disclosed to the public, but favoured self-regulation by journalists and broadcasters over specific regulated enforcement of the way that the source would be announced. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and RTNDA strongly suggested that the ethical use of third party sources is vital to their profession. The PRSA expressed the importance to the PR profession of 'trust with the media and the public' (Phair 2005: par. 14), and the RTNDA said that 'electronic journalists have every incentive to protect the editorial integrity of the audio and video they air' (Cochran 2005: par. 15). The remainder of this paper considers the main industry arguments at the S.967 hearing, and working realities and pressures for public relations practitioners and journalists that undermine the ethical use of news release material.

### **Helping the flow of information, in the style of the news**

Industry representatives at the S.967 hearing presented the free flow of 'information' as a desirable outcome, without discussion of the quality of the information flowing freely to the public. Public relations plays an important part in making the activities and views of organizations and other entities accessible to the public through the media. But when information flows as news, the public's interest is best

served when it can make decisions about the credibility of the information based on clear identification of the source and balanced discussion of motives.

News release information comes from a source with an interest in presenting the information in the way that it is presented in the release. Public relations relies on the flow of information, but the provision of information is a means to an end, not the ultimate goal of public relations.

It [information] must always be seen as 'instrumental' or contributing to persuading and mobilising the target audience to buy a product, support an issue or vote for a particular candidate (Linning 2004: 67).

The ability to craft news releases in a style that is indistinguishable from news is a foundational skill in public relations. The transfer of information from organization through public relations officer and journalist to media consumers can occur rapidly and almost seamlessly. According to Poling, the popularity of VNRs may be attributed to the ease of their distribution (2005: par. 11).

'The goal of a VNR project is to receive the widest possible airings of the key messages within' (Simon 2005: par. 18). Public relations people are taught that 'reporters and editors have no obligation to use any of the information from a news release in a news story' (Wilcox and Cameron 2006: 357), and that the key to effective news releases is in the placement of the release.

...knowing when something is newsworthy and when it is not, and knowing your contacts in the media and their schedules and guidelines, are the most important elements of news release writing (Bivins 2005: 103).

Bivins tells readers of his public relations writing text: 'As a writer of news releases you will become a reporter' (ibid). Critics of public relations media practice have drawn attention to public relations college training 'where students are trained to write, act and think like journalists' (Holtzhausen 2002: 258), and students of public relations and journalism learn skills together without adequate explanation of the 'professional differences of attitude and motive' (Moloney 2006: 159).

The emphasis on writing skills and journalism

training is a dominant focus in the training of undergraduate public relations practitioners, particularly at schools and colleges of journalism and mass communications. Through this training the image of the public relations practitioner as journalist is created. Students are taught to use the Associated Press style book, and all the formats of news releases, video releases and other media forms. (Holtzhausen 2002: 258-9).

The public relations industry survives in large part because of its ability to provide a helping hand with media stories. The value of the placement of news release material varies with the audience and the medium, but the stakes and the motivation for public relations people are high. In her testimony to the S.967 hearing the PRSA president said PRSA believed that VNRs play an important part in strategic communications planning and the free flow of information, and that most of their 20,000 members and the 120,000 public relations practitioners in the US hold the view that sponsors of the causes and interests served by VNRs should be disclosed to the media (Phair 2005).

She also said PRSA believed that the public should be kept 'totally informed about the sources of information' (Phair 2005: par. 11). What was not discussed at the hearing was public relations practitioners' attitudes to, and perceived value of, non-disclosure of news material source to the public. News release material presented to the public as editorial news, without attribution of source, acquires the implied endorsement of the news organization. This enhances the credibility of the material and makes it a more powerful instrument of persuasion. Linning has said that the ability of public relations to secure third party endorsement for people who cannot or are not prepared to say things is public relations' greatest asset (2004: 65).

When news release material is published with a journalist's by-line and without acknowledgment of the source 'the public relations consultants concerned do not generally object to having their material presented in this way to an unsuspecting audience' (Richards 2005: 63). While the public relations industry peak body might claim in good faith to support full disclosure of news release as source, it better suits public relations campaigns if the helping hand with media stories is unseen, because the news release material acquires the credibility of the news organization.



### 'Not a significant source of news'

Calculating the exact amount of influence that news releases and public relations have on news is methodologically problematic because it tends to rely on self-reporting by journalists and public relations practitioners, or analysis and tracing of the origins of news, or tracking media use of a sample of news releases. Davis says that public relations' influence on news production has always been greater than 'scholars recorded, journalists admitted, or news consumers were aware of' (2003: 31). When asked about the extent of public relations' influence on the news, journalists point to garbage bins crammed with press releases as evidence of their media gatekeeping, while public relations practitioners talk of high success rates (Zawawi 2001).

Quantitative tracking studies have consistently found that public relations material has a large influence on news. In 2005 and 2006 the Centre for Media and Democracy tracked US television stations' use of 36 VNRs from three public relations companies working mostly for profit making corporations. They found 77 stations used the VNR material in different ways without disclosing the client source. Collectively, the stations had audience reach of more than half the US population.

In each case, these 77 television stations actively disguised the sponsored content to make it appear to be their own reporting. In almost all cases, stations failed to balance the clients' messages with independently-gathered footage or basic journalistic research. More than one-third of the time, stations aired the pre-packaged VNR in its entirety (Farsetta and Price 2006: par.1).

Much of the news read in newspapers is believed to originate in press releases (Wilcox and Cameron 2006) and researcher estimates of the amount of news content influenced in some way by public relations have been as high as 80 per cent in the US (Cameron, Sallot and Curtin 1996). An Australian study of major metropolitan daily newspapers found that 47 per cent of news articles were the result of press releases and other activity, and that the articles overwhelmingly reflected the perspective of the entity issuing the release, rather than a balance of viewpoints (Zawawi 2001).

In her testimony at the S.967 hearing Cochran said that third party materials are 'not a significant source of news for most operations' (par. 3). Referring to conversations with news direc-

tors, she concluded that VNRs are used in their entirety 'very rarely' (Cochran 2005: par. 10). 'Very rarely' and 'significant' have no precise definitions in this context, but these descriptions are inconsistent with other indicators, and Simon's testimony at the same hearing. He said that 5 per cent of the VNRs his company distributes air 'in their entirety', and referred to monitoring service claims that no more than 10 per cent of news is VNR footage (Simon 2005: par. 18). Griffo refers to claims from the CEO of Medialink that material from his company's VNRs has been used by every TV station with a newscast in the US (2004). The public's interests in understanding the amount of influence that VNRs have on editorial news were not served well by industry accounts at the hearing.

### Pressures to use third party material

The pressure to use news releases is increased where news budgets are tight, and there are demands on journalists to increase output. More output means less time to investigate, check sources, and corroborate facts. The decline in news-gathering resources is perhaps the most important factor driving the use of public relations material, and local stations with smaller budgets are often mentioned as the most receptive to VNRs (Poling 2005; Cutlip, Center and Broom 2006). The FCC Commissioner said that government and private corporation news stories are attractive to newsrooms trying to deliver more news with fewer resources for journalism, and described VNRs as 'one symptom of the commercialization of the media' (Adelstein 2005). Moloney described a 'structural process of marketization operating on newsrooms, which is sucking in PR material to fill larger news spaces' (2006: 153).

The State of the News Media (2006) describes an environment of declining resources for the gathering of news in the US. It reports widespread newspaper job cuts, local radio stations offering little reporting from the field, a narrowing of local TV news story content, and that blogs and web based news struggle to produce original news. 'Even in bigger newsrooms, journalists report that specialization is eroding as more reporters are recast into generalists' (State of the News Media 2006: par.12).

The report refers to the problem of the loss of traditional, inquiring, rigorous journalism, and 'the decline of full-time, professional monitoring of powerful institutions' (ibid: par.17).

The amount of time and other resources available to journalists to create their own news is a critical factor affecting the proper, ethical use of third party material such as news releases. Industry representatives at the S.967 hearing did not mention the temptation for journalists to use public relations materials as a way of filling news holes, or the temptation for public relations practitioners to target under-resourced newsrooms with pre-packaged news. Industry largely focused attention on policy commitments to the principles of proper conduct, without mention of the day to day realities for working professionals that increase the likelihood of media release journalism.

### Guidelines for the proper use of material from third parties

Journalists and editors can quickly decide on the utility of news release material, and have a range of options for their use. They can ignore releases completely, broadcast or print them without alteration or checking, or use the material as the stimulus for a story of their own creation. In their training, journalists are taught that news releases are not written as balanced news, that they represent the preferred account of the organisation issuing the release, and should not be treated as objective information. News releases are discussed as possible starting points or ideas for a story, but that without independent verification of claims made in the release, additional information should be sought. When independent verification is not obtained, but news release material used, journalists are taught to disclose source.

In many cases, the press release contains quotes from an official or source within the organization. If you can't reach the source to get comments yourself, you may use the quotes. But you should attribute them to the press release (Rich 2000: 76).

The Radio Television News Directors Association and Foundation Code of Ethics says that professional electronic journalists' first obligation is to the public and that journalists should 'present news accurately, in context and as completely as possible' (RTNDAFa 2006: par.5). The requirement to 'clearly disclose the origin of information and label all material provided by outsiders' (par.6) was expanded in April 2005 when RTNDA released new guidelines (RTNDAFb 2006) on the use of non-editorial video and audio material. The new guidelines require journalists to scrutinize the material

source and production values more closely, and to label all material from 'corporate and other non-editorial sources' (par. 4). They also provide suggestions on how to appropriately disclose the source.

The Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics (Society of Professional Journalists 2006) is much less specific about disclosure requirements, but includes three related points when it says that journalists should: 'Identify sources whenever feasible. The public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability' (par. 3); 'Never plagiarize' (par. 3); and 'Distinguish news from advertising and shun hybrids that blur lines between the two' (par. 3).

Despite the ubiquity of press and news releases as a means of communicating with journalists and media, codes of journalism ethics generally fail to instruct journalists clearly on their appropriate use. A survey of professional journalist codes in Australia (Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance 2006), the UK and Ireland (National Union of Journalists 2006), Norway (Norwegian Press Code 2005), and Canada (Fédération Professionnelle des Journalistes du Québec 2006) finds that codes neither mention press and news releases specifically, nor provide clear instruction on their use. The German Press Council mentions press releases specifically, but only briefly; '[press releases] issued by public authorities, political parties, associations, clubs or other lobby groups must be clearly defined as such if they are published without having been edited'. It also says that 'the credibility of the press as a source of information calls for particular care in dealing with PR material and in producing editorial supplements' (German Press Council 2005: Guideline 7.2).

Richards has said that there is a case for arguing that Australia's main code of journalism ethics should deal explicitly with the use of public relations news release material, but that codes are just one of many influences on the ethics of journalist behaviour (Richards 2005). He suggests that codes will be ineffective without programs involving all employees and managers in news organizations in processes that explore their meaning and application (ibid). One very important barrier to ethical conduct in this regard, deserving close scrutiny by journalists and their news organizations, but not mentioned in the S.967 hearings, is journalist resistance to disclosing public rela-

tions material as a source of news.

### **Journalists don't attribute public relations as source**

Industry leaders at the S.967 hearings testified that existing codes and regulations adequately protect the public's right to disclosure of third party news sources, and that journalists and news organisations should self-regulate on matters of disclosure to the public. Their testimony did not refer to the journalism profession's known resistance to be seen by the public to be using public relations material as a source of news. The reasons for the resistance are not the subject of this paper, but the resistance is important in discussions of journalists' ethical disclosure of third party sources, and the need for guidelines and regulation.

Researchers refer to the need for journalists to build confidence that they work in the public interest (Jempson 2005), to scrutinize information provided by public relations firms (Zawawi 1998; Moloney 2006) and to acknowledge their sources (Macnamara 2006).

Although many journalists have to deal with increasing news holes, reliance on public relations material is not considered good journalism, and journalists prefer not to be seen to be using public relations sources. TV stations don't like to appear to be using video material not produced by their own people (Wilcox and Cameron 2006: 83), and reporters who use the material contained in releases are often reluctant to attribute news releases or public relations companies as their source (Macnamara 2006).

...local television news directors are pressed to fill ever-larger 'news holes' with smaller staffs and budgets. Consequently, local news operations are increasingly dependent on public relation sources, although they are loath to admit that reality (Cutlip, Center and Broom 2006: 265).

Journalists' known reluctance to be seen to be using public relations contributions in the creation of news is a barrier to the ethical presentation of news release material to the public. Ultimately the ethical use of third party materials in editorial news will be determined by journalists' and their news organizations' insistence on scrutinizing and disclosing their sources. They need resources to scrutinize and willingness to disclose.

### **Conclusion**

There is ample evidence that news releases

from public relations have a substantial impact on the news the public read, watch and listen to. The level of this impact was arguably understated by industry representatives at the S.967 hearing. As Bivins says, PR people continue to provide news releases because they are effective (2005).

It's more than 10 years since Cameron, Sallot and Curtin's (1996) important review of public relations and the production of news. More research needs to be done to determine the nature and extent of the influence that third party news sources have on editorial news.

Failure to disclose source is ethically objectionable because it results in deception. Regardless of the perceived veracity or consequence of third party material, the public has a right to know its source. The important responsibility for disclosure of the source of government VNRs, and other forms of news release, rests with journalists and news organizations.

At the S.967 hearings, industry representatives did not mention some important factors that affect the ethical use of news releases. Resources for researching and creating news are diminishing and placing pressure on many journalists to fill larger news holes, and expertly crafted and targeted public relations news release material provides a tempting way to fill them. But journalists resist being seen to be using public relations material. Disclosure of third party source, where the third party is public relations, is inherently undesirable for many journalists because they feel it exposes some sort of professional inadequacy. So journalists are tempted to use public relations material, and tempted not to disclose source if they do.

When news release material is presented to the public without disclosure of the source, the message acquires the implied third party endorsement of the journalist and news organisation, thus increasing its credibility to the public. Public relations materials seek to persuade; non-disclosure of the real source enhances the credibility of the message. Thus, both individual journalists and public relations practitioners perceive their work to be enhanced when news release material is used without disclosure of the source.

That the S.967 hearing – which brought together the FCC and peak public relations and electronic journalism bodies to examine disclosure issues – did not explore these news



production realities, reflects a focus on the concerns of the professions involved to preserve the status quo, not on the interests of the public who attend to news.

In the longer term the blurring of public relations and journalism destroys both. Each needs the public to trust that journalists are independent for published or broadcast content to be credible (Moloney 2006). Moreover, if self-regulation of disclosure is to work in the public's interest, professions and news organizations have to commit seriously to ethical practice. Use of 'According to a press statement ..' needs to become a badge of journalistic integrity, rather than the mark of a second-rate journalist.

Genuine leadership commitment will be required if disclosure practices by journalists are to be improved from within the professions. Change will not be achieved by paying lip-service to principles. The codes of public relations and journalism practice should provide clearer and more specific guidance on the proper use of news release material, and be supported by ongoing professional and organizational accountability mechanisms that promote ethical practice.

If self-regulation of disclosure does not work in the public's interest – and the public's interest is not protected by effective external regulation of disclosure – the public, and indeed public relations, will have to look elsewhere for what we now call news.

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### Note on Contributor

Peter Simmons is Postgraduate Courses Coordinator, Organisational Communication, School of Communication, Charles Sturt University, Australia. His recent research and publications have focused on public relations evaluation and research, ethics of public relations and journalism, and the influence of communication practices on perceptions of justice. Contact details: Peter Simmons, School of Communication, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, NSW, 2795, Australia. Phone: 61 2 63384521; fax: 61 2