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Straight to the Source: An exploratory study of Australia’s regional newspaper journalists’ checks on validity and accuracy of sources.

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an exploratory study that examined whether journalists undertake the vital role of checking the validity and accuracy of information supplied to them in media releases. It also monitored how much information journalists used from press releases in their published work. The study followed Gandy’s information subsidy theory by surveying 10 local government media relations officers who regularly issued media releases via electronic mail or facsimile to a sample of 14 rural/regional newspapers. The data analysed found that rural/regional journalists were not adequately verifying information supplied in media releases and using a significant amount of this information verbatim.

INTRODUCTION

Journalists everywhere rely heavily on press releases as sources of news and they are a vital communication tool for organizations such as local governments to get their messages across to the public. There is a great deal of synergy in the relationship, but if journalists do not carry out basic enquiries to ensure that the information has come from the source it purports to, and if they also fail to test that the information given is accurate, then they are not only at risk of falling prey to media hoaxes, they are not fulfilling their role as public watchdogs. People in many regional and rural areas of Australia do not have access to the same diversity of media as people in major cities, so they are highly dependent on local newspapers for news and information about their community.

Regional and rural journalism in Australia has not been the subject of significant academic research. There are just eight metropolitan dailies in Australia but more than 320 non-daily country newspapers (Country Press Australia http://www.countrypress.net.au/). This figure does not include Australia’s 30 or so daily regional newspapers.
The role of the journalist and their credibility

Checking the accuracy and validity of sources is fundamental to the practice of good journalism. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001) argue that news accuracy is the foundation upon which everything else is built and if the foundation is faulty, then everything else is flawed (p. 43). The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance’s (MEAA) Code of Ethics (the main code of ethics in Australian journalism) states that journalists should aim to attribute information to its source (MEAA clause 3) (http://ethics.iit.edu/codes/media.alliance.aus.coe.html accessed on March 17, 2008). It also suggests:

“Report and interpret honestly, striving for accuracy, fairness and disclosure of all essential facts”. (MEAA Code of Ethics, clause 1)

Much criticism and research centres on journalists and their credibility. In Australia a 2001 Roy Morgan poll of public perception of professional honesty and ethics found newspaper journalists rated fourth from the bottom on 13 per cent, just ahead of advertising people, real estate agents and car salesmen. (http://www.roymorgan.com/news/polls/2001/3478/). Journalists have enormous responsibility to the community which relies on the media to keep them informed about the world they live in. If journalists are to be credible in the public’s eye, then checking the accuracy of information and whether the sources are genuine is essential.

Technology has largely changed the way journalists receive information with electronic mail (email) now a major communication-tool for news sources. A number of recent studies have focused on the validity of online news sources and mediums and found that journalists using new technologies have concerns about verification, unreliable information, badly sourced information and lack of website credibility (Garrison, 1999, 2003). Only one of these problems is technology specific; the others have always presented problems for journalists. Issues of validity and accuracy are often identified as ethical problems by researchers and journalists (Maier 2005), but no empirical research has been undertaken which specifically tests whether journalists, in the first
instance, attempt to adequately check the validity of their sources and accuracy of the information provided.

**The power of the press release**

Oscar Gandy’s (1982) theory of information subsidies has provided a useful starting point for understanding the relationship between media officers and journalists and how this has redefined the journalist’s role. Gandy argues that PR practitioners offer a form of subsidy to news organizations through media releases, press conferences, briefings, lobbying, special reports and managed events which allow media outlets to reduce the cost of newsgathering by employing fewer journalists to gather news material and at the same time maintain profitability by sustaining or increasing news output by generating more copy. In return, PR practitioners have their key messages relayed through an important communications carrier, mostly to the benefit of their employer or organization. Gandy says the role of the journalist has been transformed by this phenomenon. Their core business is no longer going out in search of information but rather staying behind their desks and acting as gatekeepers of the news that is assembled by people outside the media organization who have, in effect, had the newsgathering role “outsourced” to them.

**Local government as news sources**

Local government is one of the greatest generators of news for rural and regional newspapers. All municipalities across Australia employ media relations officers to manage their communications through various channels including in-house publications, websites, advertising and the local news media. Most press releases from local government are issued via electronic mail or facsimile, with some presented to journalists at scheduled media briefings or council meetings. Such a news source’s perspective is important to this research because local government media relations officers have first-hand knowledge of the newsgathering process (Maier 2005) and because they shape public opinion as gatekeepers who choose what council activities are promoted to the local media as news.
Public relations as news sources

Research conducted by Zawawi (1994) on Australian metropolitan daily newspapers showed that about 65 per cent of stories in the news section and up to 90 per cent of stories in the business news section came from public relations sources. Macnamara (2001) found that up to 70 per cent of the content of some small trade, specialist and suburban media in Australia was public relations-sourced.

In the US, a study by Sallot and Johnson (2006) found journalists estimated between 60 and 100 per cent of their work was sourced from public relations material but this research did not indicate whether any regional journalists had been involved in the study.

In the United Kingdom, Lewis et al (2008) undertook a major study of 'quality' British media and found that nearly 19 per cent of newspaper stories and 17 per cent of broadcast stories were "verifiably derived mainly or wholly from PR material or activity". A further 22 per cent were either a mix of PR and other sources and the authors said another 13 per cent of their sample appeared to contain PR materials but they were not able to identify where they had come from. The research included a content analysis of more than 2200 news stories which were then triangulated with interviews with 42 journalists to discuss the reasons why they relied so heavily on wire copy and public relations material such as media releases. Most journalists agreed that the number of checks that the typical journalist made to confirm a story was decreasing (Lewis et al, 2008 p. 40). The study found this heavy dependence on public relations and wire copy in which journalists become "processors, rather than generators of news" (Lewis et al 2008 p. 28) has been created by relatively fewer journalists having to write more stories across multiple media platforms which keep expanding with new sections, and content being introduced in a bid to maintain profitability in the face of declining circulations.

"In short, there simply is not time to check stories to be sure that the claims they make are true. Consequently public relations generated stories are not only influencing journalists'
newsgathering and reporting practices, but journalists are more likely to accept them without check or criticism. Less likely to supplement them with additional materials derived from their own "original" inquiries, more likely to view them as the terminus rather than the starting point of their inquiries. (Lewis 2008, p. 28)

Sissons (2006) argues British journalists have become increasingly and excessively reliant on news releases as staff numbers have been reduced on local and regional papers. Davis (2003) indicates that journalists feel increasingly compelled to react to what is made available free of charge rather than proactively finding and researching stories which takes time and valuable editorial resources.

**Agenda setting and media release journalism**

How news agendas are set has been the subject of academic inquiry since David Manning White's classic 1950 study on gatekeeping (White, 1950). Agenda setting theory makes a direct correlation between the placement of a news item or amount of coverage an issue receives and how it is perceived by media audiences (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). But Gandy (1982) says this limits our understanding to 'issue salience' and suggests looking beyond agenda setting theory "to determine who sets the media agenda, how and for what purposes it is set, and with what impact on the distribution of power and values in society". (p.7)

As news is increasingly generated outside of newsrooms by what has been described as a growing army of 'journalism literate PR professionals' (Franklin, 1997) researchers such as Simmons and Spence (2005) and Lewis, Williams and Franklin (2008) have found they play a major agenda-setting role.

PR practitioners have become expert at packaging material which is highly appealing to journalists. Often press releases need very little work on the journalists' part to make the message sound newsworthy. This situation diminishes the role of journalists to be vigilant in
checking the information for its accuracy, seeking other sources for cross checking and attributing any information used from media releases.

Interestingly, White and Hobsbawm (2007) indicate that journalists view public relations practitioners as dubious sources of material and that the immediate reaction of many British journalists to a public relations practitioner can be one of suspicion and expectations that material offered will be misleading or deceptive. This attitude would appear to be at odds with the well documented practice of 'media release journalism' which Simmons and Spence (2006), describe as:

"The use of media release content without fulfilling some or all of the journalist's public responsibilities to attribute sources, avoid plagiarism and avoid all essential conflicts of interests that might affect independence." (2006, p. 167)

Simmons and Spence's research aimed to evaluate ethical theories to prove that 'media release journalism' was indeed unethical. This research, however, is not attempting to explore or challenge ethical theory. Its primary aim is to quantify and illustrate whether journalists attribute sources and validate information supplied to them in media releases.

The press release as a tool of deception

Protesters and pranksters have deliberately tried to deceive the media in the past by issuing electronic press releases containing false information. In September 2005 The Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) Media Watch television program presented a report on "Paper eats hoax" a clear example of where the media had been tricked into running false information because of a failure to adequately check sources. An email which included a photograph of a giant python was sent to the Territory Times along with information that the python had been caught in an electric fence near Alice Springs and released by a group of army personnel. The
newspaper subsequently ran the story on its front page along with two photographs of the giant snake under the headline “Lamb-eating python” (Territory Times, 16 September 2005, p. 1). Media Watch (ABC, 2005) revealed the newspaper had been subjected to an elaborate hoax. The program contacted the army’s local public relations manager to check the validity of the source, something the newspaper should have undertaken when the release was issued. The public relations officer said she could not verify the information and said she had received a similar email in August 2004 as a joke, but the email had stated the snake was found near Jebel Ali, Iraq.

The Territory Times subsequently told Media Watch:

“We do agree we should have checked it out a bit better, but if it was a true story it wasn’t one we wanted to lose… We knew it was a risk. We sold out everywhere, it was unbelievable, we haven’t had one return… the readers know it’s bogus, but it’s amazing what makes people pick up a paper.” (ABC, 2005)

New technologies such as email can make a journalist’s job easier and faster but they must also be mindful of being fed inaccurate or false information, as Media Watch indicates with its series of examples of media hoaxes.

In his discussion of the credibility of the press and public relations practitioners in the UK, Mike Jempson (2005) examined how the British media and PR professionals’ public standing took a battering in 2004. First there was the BBC’s Andrew Gilligan’s report on the “sexing up” of intelligence reports to justify Britain going to war in Iraq, which sparked an inquiry into reporting practices at the BBC that resulted in a string of sackings. Then Gilligan’s single source for the story, Dr David Kelly, took his own life. In December of the same year the BBC fell for a hoax when it reported chemical company Dow had taken full responsibility for the Bhopal disaster of 1994 with a $US 12 billion compensation fund. It then broadcast an interview with a bogus spokesman. Jempson notes, the BBC had “acted on a statement on a ‘cod’ website run by
current affairs pranskers The Yes Men. No one had bothered to double check with Dow” (Jempson 2005; 268).

Jempson goes on to examine steps taken by journalists and public relations bodies in the UK to address the devastating effect these events had on public perceptions of the media and public relations, and notes how difficult it is to undo the damage. He argues that journalism ethics should be driven by the journalist’s relationship with the public:

“A good journalist adds value by verifying the information, and looking around the corners to find an angle that will place the story in context for the public... It is especially important that the public can trust journalists if part of the journalist’s role is to take forward public discourse by double-checking items placed on the agenda by interested parties. The public cannot know each journalist, and without a system of quality assurance they have no basis for measuring the integrity, or the independence from vested interests, of those who claim to operate as their ears and eyes”. (Jempson 2005, p. 270)

It is vital for journalists to authenticate all sources of information supplied to them, regardless of how ‘professionally packaged’ this information is. Regional and rural journalists work within large corporations whose primary aim is to generate revenue. The faster and cheaper news can be disseminated to the public then the more cost effective it is considered. This can put pressure on journalists who are tempted to cut corners. However, if vital checks are bypassed, the cost to the newspaper is its credibility with readers.

**Journalistic practices from the public relations perspective**

In the US, surveying news sources to assess media accuracy has been a part of mass communication research for about seventy years and to assess newspaper accuracy, researchers use the Charnley method (Maier 2005). This involves checking with news sources to determine whether there are errors in articles in which they have been a source of information.
As Maier (2005) notes:

“A fundamental assumption underpins this research: News sources by definition have first-hand knowledge of the news story and therefore are well positioned to be informed arbiters of error. Their perspective also is important because news sources often tend to be government, business and civic leaders who play a strong role in shaping public opinion”. (p.534)

Maier points out that Charnley’s model has an obvious limitation because what is seen as an error is completely dependent on the news source’s view and research shows news sources and journalists are often in disagreement on matters of error, especially when issues of interpretation are involved.

This project examined the following research questions:

1. Do journalists undertake the vital role of checking the validity and accuracy of information supplied to them in media releases? For example, if a media release is sent to them via electronic mail or fax, do they contact the apparent source of information in the first instance to ensure it is a genuine media release and the source of information is correct.

2. How much information do journalists use from press releases?

3. What are the concerns of public relations professionals who provide press releases to newspapers about the use of their media releases?

**METHODOLOGY**

A stratified sample of newspapers in Victoria was used in the study. A group of regional daily newspapers in Victoria was selected and smaller newspapers located within a close proximity to their larger competitors/counterparts were also used to provide an adequate variation in size and readership. The media officers working for local government who provide media releases to these newspapers were then selected. The media officers were asked to provide the media releases they sent to the newspapers in the local area during a randomly selected time period and
compare them with the resulting news articles in the local newspapers. The media officers were then asked to complete a research survey based on the data thus collected.

The sample of newspapers

A sample of 14 rural and regional newspapers (three of Victoria's major regional daily newspapers and surrounding smaller papers) was identified using newspapers.com.au: A guide to Australian newspapers and included in the following table (table 1):

Table 1: List of newspapers studied

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper</th>
<th>Distribution area</th>
<th>Circulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bellarine Echo</td>
<td>No information available</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Border Mail</td>
<td>Albury-Wodonga region</td>
<td>Daily 68,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casterton News</td>
<td>Casterton, Glenelg Shire local government area</td>
<td>1393 Weekly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colac Herald</td>
<td>Corangamite, Otway, Surfcoast local government area</td>
<td>Tri-Weekly 5965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geelong Advertiser</td>
<td>Greater Geelong region</td>
<td>Mon – Fri 26,568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>47,110 Saturdays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geelong News</td>
<td>City of Greater Geelong</td>
<td>Weekly 70,916</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamilton Spectator</td>
<td>Hamilton, Southern Grampians, Glenelg and Moyne Shires</td>
<td>Tri-weekly 6,030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mortlake Dispatch</td>
<td>Moyne Shire</td>
<td>Weekly 365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moyne Gazette</td>
<td>Port Fairy, Korilt, Yambuk, Warrnambool, Macarthur, Killarney</td>
<td>Weekly 1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portland Observer</td>
<td>South-west Victoria</td>
<td>Tri-weekly 3661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twin Cities Post</td>
<td>Albury, Beechworth, Berrigan, Bright, Wangaratta, Wodonga</td>
<td>Weekly 36,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shepparton News</td>
<td>No information available</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warrnambool Standard</td>
<td>Warrnambool and south-west Victoria</td>
<td>Daily Mon-Sat 12,769</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wimmera Mail-Times</td>
<td>Horsham, Wimmera</td>
<td>Tri-weekly 8,994</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The sample of media advisors

A purposive sample of 10 local government media advisers who supplied information to the above newspapers was then determined. Local government media advisers were selected to participate in the study because they are a major source of press releases in regional/rural areas.
These media advisers were selected by first comparing a map of Victoria featuring dots which indicated the location of newspapers to a map of municipalities listed on the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) website. Telephone contact was made with the municipalities located closest to the newspapers identified.

An invitation to take part in a survey was emailed to the 10 media relations officers of which eight responded with data. The email included a plain language statement and an attached questionnaire. Before participants responded to the questionnaire they were required to complete the following tasks:

1. Media advisers were required to count and collect the total number of press releases they issued to newspapers operating in the municipality during a five-day period in February 2008. This task is already performed by the media advisers as part of their professional duties.

2. Media advisers were asked to compare the media releases with the newspaper version of the story over a two-week period (to allow for staggered publication dates as some newspapers publish weekly, tri-weekly and daily (see Table 1), using their collection of newspaper clippings which they also maintain as part of their duties.

3. Media advisers were then asked to complete a survey sent via electronic mail.

The Survey

The survey consisted of four closed-ended and five open-ended questions to determine whether journalists were checking the source of their information, what part of the media releases were being used verbatim, as well as the subjects' general comments about their experiences dealing with rural/regional journalists.

The open-ended questions included "How many media releases were issued to newspapers during the five-day period", "Which newspapers did you issue the release to", "provide a brief
explanation of the content of each media release", "Which media releases led to an article being published in the newspaper within the two-week survey period" and "list additional comments you have of the newspapers in your municipality".

The closed-ended questions included "Did a newspaper journalist contact you to verify the source of the media releases?" (yes/no), "Did a sub-editor contact you to verify the source of the media release? (yes/no), "Of the media releases which led to articles being published in the newspaper, what (approximate) percentage of information supplied in the release was used by the journalist" (0%, 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%), "Of the media releases which led to articles being published in the newspaper, what approximate percentage of information supplied in the release was used verbatim" (0%, 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%) and "What part of the release was used verbatim" (Introduction/Direct Quotes/Paraphrased Quotes/Statistics).

The survey and the research design was approved by Deakin University's ethics committee in terms of the ethical issues of privacy, informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, no concealment or deception and no harm to participants. The survey was emailed to media relations officers in February 2008 and respondents were given two weeks to complete the tasks. Of the 10 media officers who were invited to participate in the study, eight returned completed surveys.

RESULTS

The data provided by the media officers were analysed according to the number of press releases issued during the period under study, the total number of press releases which led to published news articles, total percentage of media releases which led to published articles, whether contact was made to verify sources of information where a story was published and total percentage of times journalists attempt to verify source. These findings are provided in Table 2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of newspaper</th>
<th>Total number of releases issued to newspaper</th>
<th>Number of press releases which led to news article published</th>
<th>% of media releases which led to published article</th>
<th>Was contact made to verify source of information when a story was published: Yes/No</th>
<th>% of times journalists attempt to verify source</th>
<th>% of information used from media release in article (range)</th>
<th>% of information used verbatim from media release in article (range)</th>
<th>Types of information used from press release verbatim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Standard newspaper, Warrnambool</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>Yes (3) No (2)</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>75% (4), 100% (1), 50% (1), one result N/A</td>
<td>25% (2) 50% (2), 0% (1)</td>
<td>Direct quotes (4), Statistics (3) Paraphrased quotes (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colac Herald</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>77.7%</td>
<td>Yes (5) No (2)</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
<td>75% (4) 25% (2), 100% (1)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geelong Advertiser</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td>Yes (2) No (6)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25% (2), 50% (1), 75% (5)</td>
<td>25% (5) 50% (3)</td>
<td>Direct quotes (6), Paraphrased quotes (6) Statistics (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geelong News</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>Yes (0) No (3)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>75% (2) 100% (1)</td>
<td>75% (2) 100% (1)</td>
<td>Direct quotes (3) Paraphrased quotes (9) Introduction (1) Statistics (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellarine Echo</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>Yes (6) No (2)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>50% (2)</td>
<td>50% (2)</td>
<td>Direct quotes (2), Paraphrased quotes (2), Statistics (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamilton Spectator</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>Yes (1) No (8)</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>100% (6) 25% (1)</td>
<td>50% (1) 75% (1), 100% (7)</td>
<td>Introduction (6) Direct quotes (6) Paraphrased quotes (7) Statistics (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shepparton News</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Yes (1) No (0)</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0% (1) 25% (1)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wimmera Mail Times</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Moyne Gazette</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Yes (1) No (4)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>75% (2) 100% (3)</td>
<td>75% (1) 100% (3)</td>
<td>Introduction (5) Direct quotes (5) Paraphrased quotes (5) Statistics (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mortlake Dispatch</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>Yes (0) No (3)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>50% (1)</td>
<td>75% (2)</td>
<td>0% (1) 50% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portland Observer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
<td>Yes (0) No (2)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Castleton News</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>Yes (0) No (1)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Border Mail</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>Yes (3) No (2)</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>25% (1)</td>
<td>50% (2)</td>
<td>75% (1) 100% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Post</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>Yes (1)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100% (1)</td>
<td>0% (1)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of newspapers</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>Yes (17) No (38)</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Findings of data analysis
How the media releases were used

As indicated in Table 2 above, a total of 136 news releases were issued across 14 Victorian newspapers of which 54 led to a story being published. Over the two-week study period, the data revealed journalists attempted to verify the source of media releases on just 17 out of 54 occasions or 31.4% of the time.

Major regional daily newspapers in the study included *The Geelong Advertiser*, *The Border Mail* in Albury/Wodonga and *The Standard* newspaper in Warrnambool. The Geelong Advertiser performed the worst of these, verifying information from the local government press releases 25% of the time. The Border Mail had a 60% verification rate while The Standard checked information 50% of the time.

The worst performing newspapers overall were smaller non-daily newspapers such as the Geelong News (0% verification) Bellarine Echo (0% verification), The Mortlake Dispatch (0% verification) and The Hamilton Spectator (11% verification)

The median percentage of information used from the media releases in news articles was 75% while the mean was 64.7%.

The median percentage of information from the press releases used verbatim in the stories was 50% and the mean was 53.75%.

The most common type of information used from press releases verbatim included direct quotes (34 occasions), paraphrased quotes (30 times), statistics (18 occasions) and the opening sentence or introduction given in the press release (15 occasions).

Media officers’ views on use of their media releases
The media advisers were asked whether they considered they had "done your job well" if a newspaper used a media release verbatim. Six answered "yes" and two answered "no". One media adviser who answered no, offered the following comment:

"I want newspapers to contact me to gain further information and quotes, but I suspect they get lazy and 'cut and paste'."

The survey responses to the open-ended question "List additional comments in regards to the newspapers in your municipality" were examined to provide a descriptive analysis of the themes of data collected.

The main theme that arose from the analysis included journalists' lack of research and their tendency to "sensationalise" stories, inaccurate reporting, a lack of experience among rural/regional journalists and a tendency to 'misquote' sources. One media adviser declined to answer this question for fear of jeopardizing "our close relationship with local journalists". Another media adviser, who had worked as a journalist for six years before turning to public relations, raised concerns about potential plagiarism.

"...I get a bit miffed when I see one of my press releases almost word-for-word with a journalist's byline on it. I don't expect my name on the story but I think it's a bit cheeky and very lazy."

And this from the same media adviser;

"The stories don't appear to be well researched and the language in the stories leads me to the assumption they don't offer much journalism training to their cadets. The principles of news writing are not very obvious in the stories."
And this from another media adviser:

"Some journalists report inaccurately, have difficulty understanding information and don't pursue stories."

Another media adviser raised concerns that journalists were not contacting council regarding stories which involved the council but were given from alternative sources. The media adviser was also concerned by the lack of direct contact made by journalists:

"They receive story leads from external sources, but don't follow up with Council for accuracy. Also there is very little phone contact, all is done by email."

DISCUSSION

The study results show rural/regional journalists in the sample did not adequately verify sources of information from press releases. It was surprising to find that some major regional dailies such as the Geelong Advertiser, Border Mail and Warrnambool Standard failed to adequately check sources. As verifying information is fundamental to journalism, the data should have shown that sources were verified 100% of the time. Smaller newspapers have fewer staff and battle greater budget pressures and so one might have assumed they would not have fared as well as their larger competitors in the study. Regional daily newspapers, particularly those owned by News Limited and Fairfax, are considered to be excellent training grounds for aspiring metropolitan reporters. If they are not insisting on basic journalism skills at this regional level, it raises concerns for the future of journalism in Australia.

The study shows journalists are still maintaining the role of 'gatekeeper' in deciding what makes news. Of the 136 press releases issued to the newspapers examined in this study, only 54 of them led to publication or 39.7% of releases. While media advisers are getting less than 50% of their releases through the media, there are still concerns with the quality of the information journalists allow through the gates. The topics covered by the media releases in
the study were mostly “soft” news promoting programs and council staff activities in a positive way without highlighting any controversial issues. Therefore journalists cannot rely on media releases as their primary source of local government information if they are to undertake their role as watchdog effectively.

Regional newspapers are often the only source of local news for country residents. Journalists have a great responsibility to report critically, analytically and accurately about local government affairs and this requires more than just recycling press releases carrying the local government organisation’s point of view and agendas. The journalist’s role involves independently seeking information to hold local governments accountable for their activities, decisions and operations. At the very least, journalists must ensure they verify all sources of information to avoid being the subject of media hoaxes which undermine their credibility.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study indicates that the journalists at the rural/regional newspapers studied did not adequately verify information in press releases or even check that the information comes from a valid source. The survey responses indicate a concern among public relations practitioners about the poor levels of research being undertaken by journalists, their tendency to sensationalise issues and their failure to attribute information to its source which raises further issues of plagiarism. The research supports Gandy’s information subsidy theory (1982) in that PR practitioners offer a form of subsidy to news organizations via press releases which allows them to reduce the costs and efforts of newsgathering. The data also supports the notion of media release journalism (Simmons and Spence 2006) in that it illustrates journalists are not fulfilling their basic responsibilities of verifying sources and conducting independent research.

The authors recommend that more thought be given to training journalists in the fundamental principles of their profession at both the university and cadetship levels and that more resources need to be allocated to independent newsgathering.
LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The exploratory research provided a good test for the survey instrument, but the researchers discovered more questions could have been asked of the media advisers, particularly regarding the attribution of sources. Self-reports of media officers and their estimated figures (percentage of the content of media releases used in the newspaper articles) were also used rather than independent and systematic content analyses of the newspaper articles in comparison with their corresponding media releases. Media officers were asked to supply copies of the newspaper articles and press releases analysed in the exploratory research. Only two respondents provided the requested material and their survey responses accurately reflected this data.

AREAS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research is required to test the findings on a national scale to determine whether journalists across rural/regional Australia are checking the accuracy and verifying information in the form of press releases. An independent content analysis which compares media releases to stories published would also assist the validity of future studies. One-on-one interviews with journalists would also be beneficial to determine reasons why journalists may not be carrying out the basic reporting duties such as checking the validity of information.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kristy Hess and Lisa Waller are lecturers in journalism at Deakin University, Australia. They have a strong interest in the professional standards of rural and regional journalists.
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