

**[Public Relations: Rules, Gamesmanship  
and the Professional Project  
– Why academics must confront the realities of practice**

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Working Papers in Strategic Communication · 2014:1]



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*Since my intention is to say something that will prove of practical use to the inquirer, I have thought it proper to represent things as they are in real truth, rather than as they are imagined.*

Niccolo Machiavelli (quoted in Shea, 1988).

*Some textbooks treat PR as though it is a branch of moral philosophy. Such an approach leaves most PR practitioners bemused and is of limited practical use.*

Trevor Morris & Simon Goldsworthy, *PR Today*,  
The Authoritative Guide to Public Relations, p.41

Many would agree the grand narrative of modern public relations is that of professionalization. The story presented by professional associations and academics alike tells of a discipline that, in the course of the 20th century, groped its way out of the darkness of unethical, undemocratic, manipulative practice into the light of mature understanding, where strict adherence to values such as transparency, honesty, and integrity, as well as devotion to public and societal values, is recognized as the only viable long-term strategy (cf. Hoy, Raaz & Wehmeier 2007). Professional associations, such as the PRSA (USA), the CIPR (UK), the DPRG (Germany), and Sveriges Kommunikatörer (Sweden), assure us that professional behaviour in PR is not only desirable, but is the key to success. Almost without exception, academic framings of PR, first and foremost through Excellence Theory, argue along the same lines, and these ideas are then reproduced, in spirit or letter, in the majority of academic textbooks.

It is natural for scholars to be orientated towards their own discipline, but it must be noted that few social scientists outside the PR field actually buy the story developed by the professional associations and their affiliated academics. Eminent philosophers and sociologists such as Noam Chomsky (Barsamian & Chomsky, 2001; Chomsky, 2002) or Jürgen Habermas (1989) have devoted critical attention to public relations. Their accounts, although no doubt ideologically driven, do not construe the practice as a force for good in society – which, according to some theorists, would be the prerequisite for a real profession. On top of that, a whole genre of books reveals the ‘lies’ and ‘damned lies’ industrially produced by the multi-million-dollar-business of public relations: *Toxic Sludge is Good for You* by John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton (2002) is perhaps the best-known example.

PR scholar Kevin Moloney (2006: 28) remarked that the only verdict on public relations that the social sciences agree on is that the practice is a dangerous triviality with the potential to undermine democracy. They do not seem to notice, Moloney adds (ibid.), that something that endangers democracy cannot be trivial. What Moloney really seems to refer to, however, are the efforts of PR academics who in attempting to come to grips with ‘their’ practice, often avoid the big questions in favour of technical trivialities. As Miller and Dinan write: ‘While the PR industry expends considerable effort lauding and legiti-

mating itself and its “best practice” and many academics specialising in PR attend to the often apolitical technicalities of PR practice, the broader issues of what evasion, deception and manipulative communications are doing to democratic structures are avoided and neglected.’ (Miller & Dinan, 2008)

This paper is authored by PR scholars who feel that now is a good point in time to declare the teenage years of academic reflection about public relations over, once and for all. Persistent attempts to brand outstandingly successful practitioners who do not pay lip-service to the official version as ‘black sheep’ are becoming less and less convincing. This means that even PR academics who do not see their primary interest in criticizing the practice should stop taking the self-serving accounts of professional associations as a starting point. Narratives offered by professional associations may be a necessary legitimation facade in societies not free of hypocrisy, but they do not capture what public relations does. Once you take a closer look, it quickly becomes clear that accounts centred on unconditional truth, accuracy, honesty, integrity and the like simply do not give the full picture. That does not mean a society in which professional communicators are committed to truth is impossible in principle, nor that no practitioners are committed to truth. What the official version cannot explain, however, is the existence of a *PR industry* with rather well-paid *PR experts*. The sterile official version, in other words, *trivializes* the practice while failing to explain why corporations, in particular, pay handsomely for an apparently straightforward service.

The answer of the professional associations we have already sketched. The non-triviality, the argument runs, lies in the very capacity to resist the temptations to which amateurs succumb, and to see that adherence to professional values and ethical practice is the only viable strategy for long-term success. We believe it is time to question that argumentation, empirically and logically. We must ask whether ‘doing it by the book’ – be it textbook, guidebook or whitebook – really is the key to success in public relations. The core proposition of this paper is that it is not – or at least not in the straightforward way commonly suggested. We argue, conversely, that the officially sanctioned discourse about public relations and its resonance in academic textbooks is to a degree disconnected from the realities of the practice, and probably deliberately so. Therefore we challenge the way professional associations present the link between professionalism and success as self-evident. While the connection, in principle, might hold for, say, dentists or pilots, we see reasons to believe that it does not hold for PR practitioners.

We do not argue, however, that public relations is a practice without rules. That must be very clear. On the contrary, our suspicion is that the PR industry can only be adequately modelled as a practice that is largely self-governed by insiders and their enlightened strategic self-interest. The insiders are not exclusively PR practitioners, to be sure, but operators who are part of the PR game (here lieth the real reason, we believe, why the emergence of social media caused such a commotion – outsiders endangered the system). Our analysis leads us to conclude that the expertise of PR for which consultants are paid, and which is commonly referred to as ‘strategic advice’, boils down to *gamesmanship*. The professional judgement of PR practitioners ultimately is a judgement about what one can get away with in public and media. What is believed and what is not. How empty can a glass be for it still to be declared, *accurately* and *truthfully*, half-full? Where does providing only relevant information – to cut out the irrelevant is in the public interest, surely? – deteriorate into suppressing information unfavourable to the client? In which

contexts is it legitimate for the public interest to shift the emphasis away from facts to narrations, to fictions? Where does ‘having good, professional relationships’ with journalists end and where do punishment/reward structures, bribery and blackmail begin? Apparently, with a professional PR expert in your employ, you can get away with less – or more. All these behaviours and framings lie on an ethical continuum (see figure 1) that runs from the universally acceptable to the unjustifiable, indefensible and criminal. It is our contention that a significant proportion of those who succeed in PR practice, those whose services are valued most highly by clients, operate in a zone on the continuum that approaches (but is careful not to cross) the indistinct border between acceptable and illegitimate.

Ethical continuums						
<b>Information</b>	Truthful	Objective	Partial	Biased	Disinformation	Propaganda
	Accurate	Selective	White lies	Falsehood	Lies	Deceit
<b>Communication</b>	Transparent	Open		Opaque	Hidden	Command
	Visible	Blurring	Suppression	Deletion	Denial	
<b>Storytelling</b>	Literal	Narration	Mythologising	Invention	Distortion	Deceit
<b>Relationships</b>	Contacts		Collusion	Cronyism	Cartels	Corruption
	Friendships	Favouritism	Feudalism	Nepotism	Exclusion	Corruption
	Hospitality	Incentive	Inducement	Bribery		Corruption
	Open	Visible	Discreet	Invisible	Concealed	Dominance
<b>Awareness</b>	Listening	Scanning	Monitoring	Surveillance		Control
	Interest	Due diligence	Investigation		Espionage	
<b>Goodwill</b>	Understanding		Pressure	Compliance	Submission	Tyranny
<b>Negotiation</b>	Discussion	Pressure	Manipulation	Bullying	Intimidation	Coercion
<b>Persuasion</b>	Awareness	incentive	Inducement	Bribery	Blackmail	Corruption
					Sleaze	Violence
<b>Motivation</b>	Drive	Ambition	Ruthlessness		Gangsterism	Tyranny
	Principled		Flexible	Biddable	Available	Corrupt
<b>Negative PR</b>	Questions	Revelations	Attacks	Smears	Defamation	
	Highlighting Issues	Objective comparison	Partial comparison	Rumour	Deception	
<b>Character</b>	Informed	Clever	Roguish	Hypocritical	Deceitful	Criminal
	Regular	Streetwise	Opportunist	Conman	Fraudster	Criminal
	Principled	Flexible		Disloyal	Devious	Traitor

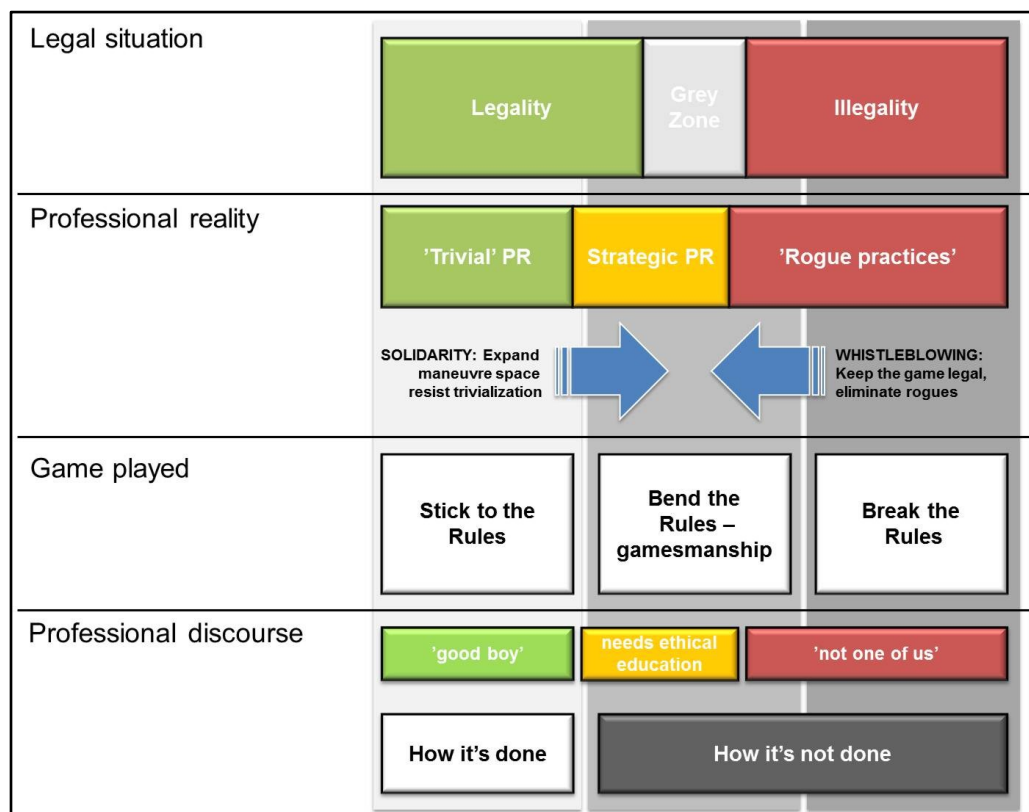
Figure 1.

The following pages take a closer look at this system. We pursue three indirect lines of investigation: The first explores the idea of modelling public relations as a gamesmanship-game *in abstracto*. The second, third and fourth substantiate that idea. In the second and third parts, we contrast the official expositions of ‘what PR does’ (part 2) with recent non-fiction insider accounts or authorized media portraits of senior practitioners (part 3). The controversy that followed in the wake of Tim Burt’s *Dark Art: The Changing Face of Public Relations* (2012), for example, demonstrated that the onus is on the defenders of the professionalism-equals-success paradigm to prove such grey zone practices are both rare or exceptional, and are in fact negatively connected with success. Finally, we contrast the ‘official’ versions of PR practice with fictional representations from popular culture. For this study we take examples from novels written by UK writers, some of whom are or have been PR practitioners themselves (Lancaster, 1996; Michie, 1998, 2000; Shea, 1988; etc). There are two reasons for this: first, if PR practitioners were to have committed legal offences they may well consider it imprudent to write non-fiction accounts about them – but they may wish to engage with them by transposing them into fiction (as is well-known from the genre of war biography). Second, to be effective, fictional representations must

resonate with the framings used by their audiences (who may not have actual experience of PR practice); thus we can argue that fictional accounts can more closely reflect the true nature of PR practice than the idealised picture painted by professional associations. (Furthermore, it may be the case that fictional accounts are influenced, even inspired, by practitioner biographies, such as Alastair Campbell's diaries or Max Clifford's book *Read All About It*).

## PR as gamesmanship

In game-theoretical jargon, *gamesmanship* denotes the attitude of a player who does everything to win the game short of actually breaking the rules since that would, if detected, mean disqualification. The opposite is *sportsmanship* – where fair play is more important than winning. Wikipedia (*Gamesmanship*, retrieved May, 15, 2013) defines gamesmanship as ‘the use of dubious (although not technically illegal) methods to win or gain a serious advantage in a game or sport.’ In perhaps the most cited definition, sports philosophers Lumpkin, Stoll and Beller define it as ‘pushing the rules to the limit without getting caught, using whatever dubious methods possible to achieve the desired end’ (Lumpkin et al., 1994: 92). Another philosopher of sport, Leslie Howe, succinctly defines gamesmanship as ‘the attempt to win one game by playing another’ (Howe 2004). The term goes back to a book, chiefly humorous, published in 1947 by British author Stephen Potter: *The Theory and Practice of Gamesmanship: The Art of Winning Games Without Actually Cheating* (Potter, 1978). We do not use the concept satirically here, however, but employ it in the technical sense it has acquired in game-theoretical language: pushing the rules to the limit (cf. McDonald & Kam, 2007 where it is applied to scholarly publication). To model public relations as a gamesmanship means, very abstractly, to construe the officially sanctioned rules – accuracy, honesty, truth, etc. – as the starting-point for a game but not its end-point. The ‘real’ game is about bending the rules without *breaking* them. This does not mean, and this has to be emphasized, that PR practitioners are scoundrels by definition. It means that PR practitioners do not tell *The Truth* in the sense a scientist or historian or philosopher aspires to (although it is probably never attained). They tell a ‘version of the truth’ which, in their strategic judgment, they can get away with. That happens under conditions of uncertainty, since there is always the danger of the bluff being called. In that case, the version of the truth is not accepted as ‘a version’ anymore, but is identified as a downright lie – with journalists and other commentators gleefully pointing at the gap between professional codes and realities of practice. If the bending of the rules is detected and identified, the practitioner has failed in his gamesmanship. However, gamesmanship by definition is not cheating in the technical sense, it just reveals the player is not a sporting – not always credible, or trustworthy. *Subjectively*, the practitioner might still believe that the version she told was the truth ‘somehow’, that she did nothing wrong; or she might concede to herself that she tried to get away with a lie and got caught – it does not really matter for the modelling of the game.



**Figure 2.**

Whatever the subjective attitude to one's own statements, the strategic calculus of the actors in the game is determined by the rewards expected from getting away with a certain, more or less creative version of the truth *versus* the probability of detection (i.e. calling the bluff) multiplied with the consequences of detection (e.g. being discredited). There is the implicit assumption, furthermore, that probability of detection is higher and consequences are graver the closer the rules are bent towards breaking-point. Furthermore, temptation is driven by competition. If you are not prepared to declare that the glass is half-full, a rival actor will – which might incline you take the risk.

The reason the game remains a game, and does not deteriorate into war, is the presence of another force, corresponding to disqualification in games, which presents itself as criminal liability or, worse, threats to personal safety. Practitioners might stick to the 'rules' as proposed by professional associations or bend them. At a certain point, however, bending a rule necessarily transgresses into criminality, as figure 2 shows. It is not a crime to give ambivalent answers at a press conference but once the matter goes to court, questions answered by representatives of the judicial system will require a clear answer, and lying under oath *is* a criminal offence – as is bribing politicians, blackmailing journalists, etc.

Thus, bending the rules can be reconstructed, by way of logical argument, as the middle-ground between sticking to the officially sanctioned rules on the one hand – and not transgressing into criminality, i.e. breaking the rules, on the other. Fig. 2, once again, captures that idea. In a sense, the borderline of bending the rules defines the real rules of the

game: the professional realities. The logical difference is that the consequences of criminal behaviour, if detected, are more or less known. The consequences are not in the hands of professional associations or insiders, furthermore. They are defined by law and are severe for the career of a professional. The *consequences* of bending the rules are ultimately a matter of *empirical investigation*, but we return to the question with some ideas. The same holds true for the probabilities of *detecting* cases of either bending or breaking the rules. Once again we are aware that they are matter of empirical investigation, but we believe there are logical reasons to assume that the chances of detection for rule-breaking are much higher than for rule-bending.

What we will try to show is that the temptation to work around the official version of the rules is high, probability of detection normally low, and consequences of detection by and large are negligible. But there are two twists. The first is that the danger-factor (probability of detection x consequences of detection) remains low only as long as you limit yourself to bending the rules. If you break the rules, the situation looks very different. The reason for this anomaly, we believe, is that in public relations only experienced insiders have the knowledge and insight needed to detect bending and breaking. But while they only have a limited incentive to call attention to rule-bending, they do have powerful incentives to whistle-blow about rule-breakers. Why? The reason why they have few incentives to whistle-blow about ‘bending’ of professional rules, i.e. behaviours which are not legally actionable such as lying, is that there would be few consequences anyway. Despite claims otherwise, we hold that any damage to the reputation of an agency that demonstrates a willingness to lie on behalf of a client is, in practice, negligible. Furthermore, we have to be aware that established practitioners *benefit* from professional solidarity since they benefit from an expansion of the vague manoeuvre space of strategic PR where gamesmanship acquired in long years of doing the job is required. The reasons practitioners do whistle-blow about rule-breakers, on the other hand, are simple: First and foremost, they don’t want to be part of a system in which you have to risk criminal liability in order to be successful. They want to keep their house clean and play the game legally and safely (that is why, in figure 2, the zone of strategic PR does not overlap with illegality). Moreover, there are now real consequences for a detected infraction – consequences that take a competitor out, eliminate a rogue.

While the first twist is about playing the game with a clear safety zone separating players from serious injury if detected (i.e. criminal liability or violence), the second twist is about ensuring the game does not deteriorate into *triviality*. What does that mean for insiders playing the PR game? Despite the necessity to uphold a convincing facade, attempts to define the official rules with scientific *precision* (which would make bending easily identifiable), and to *enforce* them with serious consequences to fear, e.g. the revocation of licence to practice, must be resisted and undermined. That is the experience, it seems, of scholars who have been working together with practitioners on ethical codes. And it is clear why. It is in the interest of the players to keep the game vague so what objectively constitutes rule-bending can be convincingly declared ‘sticking to the rules *somehow*’, at least subjectively. If it is defined and enforced that only a one-litre glass with a content of no less than 500ml can be called ‘half-full’, PR loses its room for manoeuvre. It is not in the interest of insiders to let their game be trivialized into *everybody-tells-the-truth-and-nothing-but-the-truth-and-then-let’s-see-who-the-public-believes*.



The result of the interplay of the two forces, a strategic interest to keep the practice legal and safe and to keep it spacious enough for advanced manoeuvres, is a perfectly reasonable system, and it is, to emphasize this once again, by no means sinister or uncommon. It consists of insiders who cooperate in upholding a socially acceptable facade (professional discourse) in the face of societal hypocrisy while creating, maintaining and enforcing their own, slightly different ‘real’ rules (professional reality). In this way, such rules make much more sense of explaining why PR is an industry with handsomely paid top-practitioners. The only problem is that some practitioners seem to expect that academics and scholars naturally should make a contribution to the facade and stay away from professional reality – a paradigm we do not share.

## Doing it by the book

The profession and professionalization of public relations is a long standing issue, which has been given a lot of attention by practitioners and scholars alike. Professions form when a group of people claim jurisdiction over a certain field of practice. The professional status may be invigorated by trade associations, ethical codes, formal education and in some cases by legal regulations (Larson, 1977). The following traits tend to characterize a profession: (a) a set of professional values; (b) strong professional organizations, which socialize practitioners into these values; (c) professional norms – such as those provided by codes of ethics – that can be used to enforce values; (d) technical skills acquired through professional training, and (e) an intellectual tradition and established body of knowledge (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The norms and self-conceptions that arise within the professional body contribute to maintain internal consistency and external legitimacy as they are discursively enacted in various arenas such as trade and news media, with clients and at work. In the PR field these framings face consistent challenge from sustained attacks on the ethics, morality and social legitimacy of its practices and practitioners (Edwards & Pieczka, 2013).

The somewhat sordid reputation of public relations nevertheless seems to belong to the past, at least according to many textbooks. As Hoy et al. (2007) observe the story told is of a virtuous progression wherein practitioners left their dubious persuasive tactics behind, progressing ethically and technically to foster a two-way, dialogue-oriented communication process. Thus, the grand narrative claims that public relations professionalism (i.e. adhering to the official codes of conduct) is not only desirable, but is also the way to success.

Trade associations reinforce this narrative globally as they echo in near identical codes of conduct and ethics (e.g. Abracom in Brazil, Anzca in New Zealand and Australia, Dircom in Spain, Sveriges kommunikatorer in Sweden and Prisa in Southern Africa). The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Managements (GA) Code of Ethics captures the core values of the profession by pledging: ‘To conduct ourselves professionally, with integrity, truth, accuracy, fairness, and responsibility to our clients, our client publics, and to an informed society’ (Global Alliance, 2013: 3). Another example of ideal professional behaviour is provided by The International Public Relations Associations (IPRA) Code of Conduct, stating that in the conduct of public relations practitioners shall: ‘Act with honesty and integrity at all times so as to secure and retain the confidence of those with whom the practitioner comes into contact with’, and ‘Take all steps to en-

sure the truth and accuracy of all information provide' (IPRA, 2013). Furthermore, The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Code of Ethics advises professionals to: 'Protect and advance the free flow of accurate and truthful information, foster informed decision making through open communication' (PRSA, 2013). Finally, in the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) Code of Conduct we can read about confidentiality, another professional pillar: 'Never use confidential and "insider" information to the disadvantage or prejudice of others e.g. clients and employees, or to self-advantage of any kind' (CIPR, 2011). The revenue of obeying these codes is stated by IPRA: 'Upon joining IPRA all members undertake to uphold these codes and in doing so benefit from the ethical climate that they create' (IPRA, 2013).

There is also an outspoken societal function and responsibility of public relations professionals in textbooks (eg. the Excellence Project) as well as in codes of conduct. For example, the GA states: 'In serving the interest of clients and employers, the GA dedicates ourselves to the goals of better communication, understanding, and cooperation among diverse individuals, groups, and institutions of society' (Global Alliance, 2013: 3). The International Communication Consultancy Organization (ICCO) Stockholm Charter announces: 'Public Relations consultancies are professional service firms who help clients influence opinions, attitudes and behaviour. Along with this influence comes responsibility to our clients, our people, our profession and society at large' (ICCO, 2013). Another example is found in the Kodex for Deutscher Rat für Public Relations (DPR) saying: 'Those belonging to the professional field of public relations fill an important societal function ...' (DRPR, 2012). Even though ethical behaviour and an altruistic drive for a better society stands out as an integral part of public relations professionalism, this does not obscure the fact that ethics is also good for business, something that is expressed on the PRSA web page: 'Bottom line, successful public relations hinges on the ethics of its practitioners' (PRSA, 2013).

So, does strict adherence to codes of conduct and textbook practice lead to success? In an ideal world it would. But if professionalism here is about something as commonplace as 'delivering objective information', 'not misleading audiences' and 'compliance with rules', public relations would have a hard time claiming superior expertise in relation to other professional groups, since these tasks can be carried out by almost anyone. What the current situation displays is a tension and a paradox within the professional project, which provides a foundation for claiming successful public relations is very loosely coupled to the official discourse. A benevolent interpretation would be that since discourses tend to guide thought and action (Fairclough, 2010), the official accounts to some extent actually contribute to the setting of frames for professional conduct in the field. This is probably true for many or even most practitioners. Nevertheless, institutional theory explains how practices often are decoupled from talk, simply because this is more efficient. Institutions and organizations adopt guidelines and practices rhetorically because they have to – for legal reasons, or in order to appear modern and legitimate (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). But in practice people often need to go about their daily tasks and business in a way that differs from official guidelines in order to get work done. This latter alternative may be a more appropriate way to understand the professionalism/success divide. Successful practitioners bend 'rules', be they codes of conduct or institutionalized discourses, to proceed and be successful. What we have then is an official account, which is more or less unanimously reproduced globally in a variety of arenas, a story that might guide how a great

number of professionals think and act in order to be successful. Nevertheless, we claim this may be only part of the story. Even if there are critical accounts, such as *Toxic Sludge is Good for You* (Stauber & Rampton, 2002), these tend to highlight only the blackest sheep. As we show with accounts of PR practice from fiction and non-fiction, there are a lot of other things going on that are not as bad, but are still at odds with, official values and codes of conduct, such as suppressing and distorting information, lying, corruption and intimidation.

## What PR ‘really’ does: Non-fiction accounts

Lobbying researcher McGrath points out that ‘writing authoritatively about lobbying is as difficult as writing authoritatively about the practice of espionage. Anyone (with) relevant current information is likely not to be writing about it but practising it, yet will not tell you how, or with what success.’ (McGrath 2005: xi). This difficulty applies to public relations research, too. In *A Century of Spin*, Miller and Dinan (2008) argue that ‘The powers of public relations are mysterious in the sense that they are not well known, they are shrouded in secrecy and deception, which often enables PR operatives and PR firms to pursue their objectives undetected. The efficacy of corporate PR has in fact been largely suppressed from the historical record.’

It is definitely a problem for PR research that public relations, in contrast to advertising or journalism, is a largely *covert* activity, undertaken outside the view of the public eye: the greatest successes of corporate PR are not on record, because their very success consists of exactly that: being off-record. However, if one is not interested in ‘relevant current information’ or narrations of singular cases but stable and established *patterns* of the practice, there are ways to gain insider insights without becoming an insider. One is to analyse of *insider accounts* which, no matter what they tell, reveal the *reasoning* of practitioners. Another is to take a close look at the few instances when the full range of PR activities are openly discussed.

In the United Kingdom perhaps the two best known PR practitioners, (although not recognised as such by the ‘profession’), are publicist Max Clifford, and Tony Blair’s former head of communications, Alastair Campbell. Clifford penned a third-person autobiography (with Angela Levine) under the title *Read All About It!* Campbell published three volumes of extracts of his diaries from his time in public office, *The Blair Years*. Besides Clifford and Campbell, there is a tradition of person-centred PR ‘insider accounts’, either authored by insiders themselves or by professional writers. Not taking into account the writings of the founding father Edward Bernays himself, we find, decade by decade, examples including *The Anonymous Empire* (Finer, 1958), *The Lobbyist* (Schriftgiesser, 1965), *The Pressure Boys* (Crawford, 1974), and *Power and Influence* by former Hill & Knowlton CEO Robert Dilenschneider (1991), amongst many others.

It is perhaps unsurprising that nearly all contain passages, be they confession, admission or advice, which are hard to reconcile with the professional project. Contemporary accounts, such as Tim Burt’s *Dark Art: The Changing face of Public Relations* (2012) in no way paint a more favourable picture. On the contrary, Burt reminisces about the PR industry in the 1980s and 1990s as being nepotistic, feudalistic and corrupt in a harmless and endearing way. He goes on to discuss whether the majority of agencies and consultancies stuck in this spirit are prepared for the harsher realities of the 21st century. Burt draws

attention to, say, specialists hired to erase unfavourable articles or other damaging imagery from the internet, and lucrative business intelligence where the ‘consultants’ with a background in intelligence services occupy a grey area between private detectives and forensic accountants.

It is worth emphasizing once again, here, that we do not claim that PR practitioners by way of their jobs or by definitions are liars or, even worse, criminals. The situation is more complex, and probably not very different from any other discipline. It might be that the seasoned practitioner who claims to have never told a lie in 30 years of practice tells the truth in some way. This, however, reveals the complexity of gamesmanship, for it might equally well be that this practitioner never told a lie in his or her *subjective* perception which is, of course, shaped by what is acceptable in the established professional reality. From the more rigorous and unforgiving outside view of the scholar, which we term the *objective* perspective here, it is crystal-clear, however, that there have been a lot of smaller and greater lies: glasses that are more empty than full being declared half-full, and so on.

Klaus Kocks, a controversial but successful German practitioner, was a key figure in a theoretically interesting series of minor ‘scandals.’ In 2008, Kocks was almost debarred from the Deutsche Public Relations-Gesellschaft (DPRG), for claiming practitioners are allowed, required and even expected to lie (Kocks, 2008). In an interview with news magazine *Der Spiegel*, Kocks made clear that lying begins innocently: ‘Imagine you’ve been working a couple of years doing PR for Opel, but now you are with Ford. Is that because you had a revelation and suddenly realized that Ford is better? Or do you concede the simple truth: “For four years I got paid to aggrandize their cars. Now I’m paid by someone else to aggrandize theirs.”’ (Kocks, 2007: 1, translated from German by the authors).

Kocks’s statement was supported theoretically by University of Münster-based professor Klaus Merten. Merten had earlier elaborated his ideas that PR was ‘difference management’ (Differenzmanagement) and as such ‘a technique of conditionally accepted deception of the public’ (Technik bedingt geduldeter öffentlicher Täuschung) in a peer-reviewed journal (2008b). In another paper and a speech, Merten circulated the idea that PR had a ‘licence to deceive’ (2008a: 1), that PR practitioners ‘professionally employ the elasticity of truth’ (2008a: 10). His propositions sparked the industry’s outrage (cf. Klawitter, 2008), predictably, and he was reprimanded by the Deutscher Rat für Public Relations (DRPR, 2008), the joint ethics council of the public relations associations in Germany.

The debate that ensued – ‘a bizarre quarrel’, in the words of *Der Spiegel*’s Nils Klawitter (2008) – did not revolve around the continuum between ‘the truth and nothing but the truth’ and downright, legally actionable fraud. The argumentation expounded by the most prominent members of the ethics council, by-then president Horst Avenarius as well as University of Leipzig professor Günter Bentele, emphasized that no-one denies there are PR practitioners who actually are lying, but that does not mean that lying becomes acceptable: the ethics code unambiguously condemns lying (DRPR, 2008).

But the real problem, we believe, does not lie with the acceptance of lies. It begins with the question where lying starts and what is accepted as *just not lying* – in other words, gamesmanship, or Merten’s ‘elasticity of truth’. With his Opel-Ford-anecdote Kocks points out that it is considered perfectly legitimate for PR practitioners to convince themselves of the quality of their employer’s products, as it is for car-dealers and other

sales-people. Indeed, it is part of the professional code that a practitioner should appear convinced of the quality of Ford cars, even if they themselves are not at all convinced. To portray a product in a favourable light does not conflict with the norm of accuracy, surely, because that's what you're expected to do – and everybody knows it. Leaving out the unfavourable and emphasizing the favourable, *is surely not lying, is it?* As long as you don't say anything factually false (for example, that the new Ford Fiesta will come with a 12 cylinder Ferrari engine), then you're safe. But what happens if you strip the professional code away? Assume the naïveté of the scholar, and it becomes crystal-clear that here is a practitioner saying something he does not personally believe, that does not give the full picture, and he might know to be untrue – and if that is not lying, then we scholars don't know what is. Kocks and Merten, it must be noted, conclude that PR practice is amongst other things about lying because they adopt the strict, unforgiving *scholars' definition* of lying. 'Liars always talk about white lies,' Kocks notes with barely concealed disdain for his peers. 'Probity consists in admitting to it' (2007: 1).

Kocks' claims could be dismissed as the ramblings of an *enfant terrible* ('Querkopf'), if there wasn't a wealth of other notorious but consistently successful practitioners saying the same thing. For example, publicist Max Clifford is quoted in PR Week (February 2007), 'confessing':

The only mantra I work to is that your duty is to your client. If I'm not comfortable lying, I won't do it, but there will be plenty of other agencies lining up to take the business. All PROs at all levels lie through their teeth. I lie on behalf of a cross-dressing MP, a prominent businessman who is having an affair with a man, and a gay footballer. Always the aim is to keep their identity out of the press. There's only been one footballer who was revealed to be gay, and he hanged himself. I know the ruin that will befall these people if news gets out. Here the truth is destructive – I lie because there is no choice. (Clifford, cited in Sharma 2010)

Although adept at gaining exposure, Clifford claims much of his work focuses on shielding his clients from the tabloid gaze, from keeping them out of the news. This, it must be noted, is another as PR skill seldom mentioned in the official version. Clifford openly states he will lie if that best serves the interests of his clients. He *could* attempt, in the spirit criticized by Kocks, to declare these 'white lies', but he elects to give things by their proper name.

Clifford was behind the *Freddie Starr Ate My Hamster* story, which became an iconic front page for *The Sun* newspaper in 1986. What weight does the voice of the man carry who made up the tabloid story that a minor celebrity ate a girlfriend's pet in a sandwich? The answer is not only that Clifford's weight derives from being successfully in business for 40 years. The answer is, moreover, that one of the most admired consultants in the highly paid, highly professional mergers and acquisitions sector is portrayed as doing something very similar. A clearly authorized portrait of Alexander Geiser in the quality daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* carried this headline and intro:

The Storyteller: Business as Fiction. Alexander Geiser is hired by top-managers to invent stories. Be it Continental or Deutsche Bank – real economy is fiction and has been so for quite a while. The best story triumphs. (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2012)

This portrait does not suggest Geiser lies or invents facts, to be sure. But accounts of his work in the mergers and acquisitions battle involving Continental or Josef Ackermann's

succession at Deutsche Bank make it abundantly clear that Geiser is not in the business of serving the public interest with plain and simple truth. ‘The best story triumphs’ is a punchline that applies equally well to Clifford as it does to Geiser. And it makes us aware, once again, that insider rules are not determined by PR practitioners alone. They are determined by the whole media-system, first and foremost journalists, that either has an interest not to knock down a good story – or does have that interest when the story is not good.

Contrary to the cases of Starr, Anshu Jain or Elizabeth Schaeffler, there was a clear interest for many in the media to bring down Alastair Campbell and the dodgy dossiers affair gave them an opening. In *The Blair Years*, Campbell presents himself as a reasonable, hard-working guy (albeit with a history of alcoholism, a mental breakdown and a crush on Princess Diana) facing bickering politicians and an often hostile, unreasonable press. His diaries are fascinating, therefore, for three reasons. Firstly, even though his critics might claim the diaries are sanitized – downplaying the author’s role in engineering public support for the invasion of Iraq (‘Dodgy Dossier’) – the account *as it stands* is hard to reconcile with the ideals of the professional project. Secondly, Campbell’s writing provides a valuable insight into the dramatic differences between self-perception and perception by others of a prominent PR practitioner. A minor point, thirdly and ironically, is that the whole exercise of publishing diaries contradicts CIPR codes which debar practitioners from using confidential and ‘insider’ information to the disadvantage or prejudice of others e.g. clients and employees, or to self-advantage of any kind.

The Hutton Inquiry, which examined the government’s involvement in the suicide of Dr David Kelly, *can be read* as clearing Blair’s government of ‘sexing up’ intelligence reports concerning Saddam Hussein’s capacities to employ Weapons of Mass Destruction within 45 minutes of the order given. It is fascinating and highly relevant for our argumentation, however, that the very same report can also be read as portraying the government as creating spin (albeit to an acceptable degree). So even if one accepts the conservative and government-friendly conclusions of the Hutton Report – perceived as whitewash by at least some media and, according to a poll, 49 percent of the UK population (see e.g. Cozens, 2004) – the actions of Campbell, proven beyond doubt in the report, nevertheless stand as a clear example of misleading the public while not actually lying straight into the people’s face – in other words, gamesmanship par excellence.

From the naive point of view of a scholar, the only information that matters is that the report was stronger than it would have been without government influence: that alone constitutes the disservice to the public. Why does the government have to meddle with expert opinions, the scholar asks? Isn’t it the *raison d’etre* of expert advice to be digested as such? Common-sense and realism, however, suggest it is of course *entirely reasonable* for Campbell to make the experts aware of the political agenda – and to demand that the case presented should be as strong as possible considering the available evidence. ‘As strong as possible’ presumably means ‘so that the ordinary man on the street gets the message’. Hutton, interestingly enough, tries to vindicate Campbell by portraying him as displaying gamesmanship, namely bending the rules (as strong as possible considering the evidence) but not breaking them (falsify the report). This time, however, the story was not bought – although it reveals what is considered acceptable in government circles. One reason may be that Campbell did not get away (he resigned under public pressure in August 2003) is that he had a history of more or less ‘subconsciously influencing’. A former

tabloid journalist, Campbell was widely regarded as tough to the point of bullying. His approach to media relations is illustrated by a memorandum to the GICS (Government Information & Communication Services) which demands government-employed communicators 'raise their game': 'Decide your headlines', Campbell allegedly advised, 'sell your story and if you disagree with what is being written argue your case.' (cf. Barnett/Gaber 2001: 122).

## What PR 'really' does: Accounts in fiction

Contrasting 'official' versions of PR practice with representations that appear in popular culture can shed interesting light on the way in which those outside the discipline perceive public relations to be. To be effective, fiction must resonate with the framings used by its audiences (who may or may not have actual experience of PR practice) and thus fictional accounts can offer a useful perspective on how the discipline is perceived. Furthermore, a slight displacement into fiction allows those with direct experience to refer to practices, attitudes and events with an element of distance that provides a buffer against hurt feelings, broken confidences, respect for colleagues and in more extreme cases, a defence against legal action. Indeed, it is plausible to take this further and argue that the fictionalised portrait can more closely reflect the true nature of PR practice than the idealised picture painted by professional associations.

Certainly, we can begin to identify both a set of characteristics that are consistently identified by authors who are attempting to portray 'professional' success and also behaviours that mark out approaches to the discipline that resonate with public perception. As well as drawing on the experience and imagination of the writer, it can be the case that fictitious accounts are influenced or inspired by practitioner biographies, such as Alastair Campbell's diaries or Max Clifford's third person autobiography, *Read All About It*. Fiction is often employed as a lens through which to expose and examine events and attitudes in a way that allows greater flexibility of expression, and avoids some of the negatives that might flow from too precise a factual adherence.

By its very nature, popular fiction is fuelled by drama (not least in crime and thrillers), or by absurdity in humorous writing. PR can appear in fiction either as a device or consequence of plot development, or to suggest certain character traits. In both cases, it is to be expected that the author will exaggerate certain traits for comic or dramatic effect. The argument here is that the amplification or focus on such traits, is dependent on there being a fundamental authenticity to portrayal. Thus, portrayals that harmonise with a perspective that suggests adherence to professional values and ethical practice as the only viable long-term-success strategy are unlikely to have limited dramatic value. On the other hand, fiction is drawn to those who are less inclined to the 'doing it by the book' approach. Accepting these parameters does not mean that insights drawn from the study of fiction have less value.

The first serious attempt to find new insights into the nature of public relations practice by an examination of creative output was Karen Miller's 1999 study *Public Relations in Film and Fiction*. Miller's work comes out of a research tradition (Spicer, etc), which examines perceptions of PR in terms of a legitimacy defined by often hostile journalists, illustrating the clichéd-but-true view that 'PR is not very good at its own PR'. Miller's study identifies a number of significant themes, including works that examine the ethical

behaviour of PR practitioners and in some cases, relates these qualities to their perceived effectiveness in their working lives: ‘Although practitioners are presented as despicable in many ways, they are at least good at their jobs. only rarely were they ineffective.’ But she has to add: ‘However, effectiveness should not be considered a sign of respect. Quite often, the least ethical practitioners are the most effective.’ (Miller, 1999: p. 15)

For this study we have taken examples from novels written by UK writers, some of whom who are or have been PR practitioners themselves. In particular, we focus on four novels which feature PR practitioners who are portrayed as successful. Interestingly, three are written by authors with experience of PR practice, (Graham Lancaster, David Michie, Michael Shea), and one by a former journalist (Sophie Kinsella) whose commercial success will have brought her into contact with publicity machinery on a regular basis. Notice all three practitioner-authors are men, and that all four successful practitioner characters are male. Bear in mind that PR is frequently used as a shorthand for triviality, for empty-headed consumerism, and its practitioners often portrayed as a shallow, ‘dumb blonde’ young women. (‘If only I were a cow, thought Grace. If only I were anything but someone who works in books PR’ from *Fame Fatale*, by Wendy Holden, 2002: 42).

The less astute are used as figures of fun, and mistakes, misunderstandings and limited world knowledge are staples in this genre. Boring and ambitious combine in this jibe from *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, by Sophie Kinsella (2009) which has Ellie is discussing her latest failed date:

‘He’s in PR. I’m in PR. "So?" So nothing. Apart from the fact that we spent the evening discussing ways of getting more publicity for the brand of verruca cream he represents. He told me that he wouldn’t rest until he had made it the country’s number one foot fungus treatment.’ (p. 140)

At this level PR is indeed trivial, and although its distortions of the truth in the service of consumerism can have damaging implications, the core purpose of portrayals is humour. Often it is only when the practitioner is portrayed as being either successful, or has ambitions of becoming successful, that ethical conflicts flicker on to the page. *Share This*, the CIPR’s guide social media, makes the observation that: ‘Having the right attitude is just as important as possessing hard PR skills.’ Likewise, writing in the UK trade publication *PR Week* (December 2009), Graham Lancaster, chairman of Euro RSCG Biss Lancaster, and author of the 1996 novel *Grave Song*, suggested that PRs need a mix of talents. These include a good intellect and quick, street-wise mind to assimilate masses of information quickly, as well as being obsessively inquisitive and a sales person *par excellence*. Such are the basic requirements to succeed in ‘the best job in the world’, ‘the senior service of all communications disciplines.’

Note ‘street-wise,’ which resonates with notions of gamesmanship mentioned earlier; it is used to refer to knowledge that cannot be gained from textbooks, rather must be earned the hard way by exposure to urban realities. Certainly, having the appropriate ‘attitude’ seems to be regarded by many fiction writers as a useful indicator for PR success. For example, Lancaster chose a 42-year-old divorcee, John Blake to be the central character of *Grave Song*. Blake is international director of Globecom, the third largest PR group in the world, earning almost £100,000 a year in 1996. His role is to court and win big international clients, such as Korean giant, SGT. And not only does he court and win the \$1.5m contract, he courts and wins chairman Sool Kay-Sheen’s beautiful, alcoholic, model



girlfriend, Jane Field. And he in turn is courted by MI6, to spy on Sool. This is dangerous territory. Blake will not emerge unscarred, but he will have fun on the way. Like when he finds Jane standing in his hotel doorway, wearing riding gear and holding a whip:

.her eyes now glazing over in a kind of aroused dreaminess he had seen before in some highly sexed women. Women wanting sex, not him.

I just hope you're not a typical PR man, Blake. You know? All talk. (Lancaster 1997: 80)

Glamour, espionage, danger... and self-deprecation are all on the fictional menu. Happily for Blake, he proves himself up to the task and Jane will confide thus in a girlfriend: 'He is funny. Funny-amusing funny. Also his world isn't so different from ours. PR and modelling. It is all about image, confidence and presentation.' (Ibid p. 198)

Lancaster's fictional Blake appears to have characteristics in common both with the ideal described in *PR Week*, and with Luke Brandon, the dashing anti-hero of *Confessions of a Shopaholic*. Brandon, 'head honcho' of Brandon Communications, is handsome and rich (journalists always believe PRs make much more money than for doing much less work). Brandon has 'such a scary reputation,' we are told. 'Everyone talks all the time about what a genius he is. He started Brandon Communications from nothing, and now it is the biggest financial PR company in London. (Kinsella, 2009: p.24).'

This 'scarily intelligent entrepreneur' is ranked No 31 in *Harpers & Queen's* Hundred Richest Bachelors, having by the age of 32, accumulate an estimated wealth of £10million: He lives in Chelsea and is currently dating the daughter of a French billionaire. (ibid, p191). Note the use of 'scary' and 'scarily', linked to intelligence and with the inference that this somehow confers an unfair advantage. Brandon, it seems to imply is adept at gamesmanship, but stays just on the on the right side of roguishness. He looks, we gather, pretty much as one might expect a dashing anti-hero to look. Luke Brandon is 'wearing an immaculate dark suit, his hair is shining, and his face is bronze with make-up. And there ain't an ounce of friendliness in his face. His jaw is tight: his eyes are hard and businesslike. As they meet mine they don't even flicker.' (Ibid p. 271). The description may come straight from central casting, but it is also designed to resonate with reader's picture of success personified. These, are assumed to agree, are the attributes to be expected in a highly successful (and young) PR tycoon.

The archly-named Jo Smiley, of *The New You Survival Kit* by Wendy Holden (2002), lives in a fashionable street in Islington. opposite a clearly disreputable minicab firm. She wanted to go to Cambridge but ended up at Manchester 'discovering underprivilege.' Jo is described as a highly paid 'professional pleaser', skilled in ensuring the comfort of potentially useful VIPs who has 'learnt in her years in public relations that the best way to camouflage any moment of inadequacy was to inject it with a gentle stream of meaningless agreement.' (2002: 82). Note again, without pushing the notion too hard, the successful Smiley lives on the border between fashionable and disreputable.

Brandon, Blake and certainly Smiley are lightweights compared to Mike Cullen, in David Michie's novel, *Conflict of Interest* (2000): 'The PR man had all the skills of a modern day Merlin and had knew exactly how to use them.' Michie has Cullen become the driving force behind Lombard Communications. Lombard is in a different league, the epitome of paranoid PR. Unless one believes in UFOs and conspiracy theories, Lombard is more powerful – and more sinister – than any agency in the real world. Established 15

years ago, it is the largest PR firm in the City of London, with more FTSE 100 clients than any other. Cullen founded Lombard on the premise that ‘to build up the best client list you had to hire the best people’ and ‘has created the Hitler Youth of PR.’ The staff are known as Lomboids, and have a reputation for relentlessness without equal.

Several novelists have encountered PR from the perspective of journalism. Those with some experience of handling communications for clients include Michael Shea, who was the Queen’s Press secretary, Martin Sixsmith, who went from reporting for the BBC to become a government advisor, and former practitioner Michie, who learnt his media relations skills with Fishburn Hedges. Interestingly all three created powerful males who use the dark arts of PR in ways which don’t figure prominently in ‘professional project’ textbooks, and Michie and Shea have both written non-fiction that draws from their own experience – Michie, *The Invisible Persuaders* (1998) and Shea, *Influence* (1988).

In his non-fiction Michie describes dirty tricks, media manipulation, anonymous briefings. *Invisible Persuaders* includes a chapter on *Accentuating the Negative: PR’s Dark Underworld* – and distils these insights into the monster that is Lombard, an organisation prepared not just to bend rules but to break them, and will plunge headlong into behaviour that is undoubtedly criminal. The conclusion must be drawn that for Michie, the one-time insider, to be as successful as Lombard requires a willingness to operate at the farthest fringe of gamesmanship, and that those who step too close to the edge will inevitably cross to the criminal.

As Lombard’s Kate Taylor explains: ‘We do control the media. That’s what our clients pay us for.’ He didn’t try to mask his surprise. ‘But, I mean how can you tell a reporter what to run?’ ‘That’s how.’ ‘Client list?’ She nodded. ‘If a reporter pisses us off he’ll never hear from us again. He’ll never get a single piece of information on any of those companies.’ ‘But surely he can call them direct?’ ‘It’s in our terms and conditions. If we represent a company, it has to be on the basis that all media calls are referred to us.’ (2000: 45). In stark contrast, *Shopaholic* views the PR machine through the eyes of the less than engaged financial journalist, Becky Smallwood: ‘I even pretend to make notes. It’s not as if we ever put anything in the magazine except the puff that comes on the press release. Foreland Investments takes out a whopping double page spread advertisement every month and they took Philip (the editor) on some fantastic research (ha ha) trip to Thailand last year – so we are never allowed to say anything except how wonderful they are. (Kinsella 2009: p. 30)

It is not easy to find a fictional practitioner who demonstrates a strong commitment to ethics. The usual position is either ruthlessness, for the successful, and a slight feeling of discomfort for a daily routine that includes vaguely excusable ‘white lies’ among the lightweight technicians. Full blown ethical conflict is rare. When Luke Brandon does take an ethical stance, choosing to denounce his own client on live television, the fact that in doing so he breaches professional obligations is passed over lightly: ‘To be honest, says Luke, with a wry smile, ‘I am not sure I’ll be representing Flagstaff Life any more after this.’ (ibid p. 284)

In the introduction to *Invisible Persuaders*, Michie points to a ‘very obvious difficulty’ in writing about spin doctors: ‘You are dealing with people who are trained professionals when it comes to looking an interviewer straight in the eye and delivering a version of events which may or may not accord with reality.’ This could of course apply to Michie himself, or to Michael Shea, the former Foreign Office diplomat, who was press

spokesman for [the Queen](#), in charge of Buckingham Palace's relations with the media during the courtship and wedding of the Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer. In *Spin Doctor*, (1995) Shea introduces us to the urbane Dr Mark Ivor, 'a professional strategist, a spin doctor, of whom it is said, the only views he has of life are those of his clients'. (1995: 1). Another character describes Ivor as like a cockroach: 'You stand on him and as soon as you remove your heel he gets up, shakes himself and scuttles away. Too clever by three-quarters.' (Ibid: 96). Ivor admits to manipulating people, situations, not for financial gain, but because I enjoy it. Altering future history: does that sound pompous? (Ibid p. 96). I avoid the headlines. People seek publicity or get built up by media hype: then they are massacred when they slip.' (Ibid p. 122). Note 'manipulating.' Manipulation is not a word that appears often in guides to best professional practice but one quite at home in Shea's 1988 non-fiction guide *Influence: How to Make the System Work for You*, which was marketed with the tagline '*A Handbook for the Modern Machiavelli.*' The jacket, adorned by a rather sinister portrait of the author, promotes a number of Rules of Influence including: It is seldom profitable to broadcast what you are doing in the influence game; Tell the truth but seldom reveal the whole truth; and Train yourself to appear genuine and sincere.

It is hard not to read Martin Sixsmith's *Spin* (2004) as a New Labour *roman à clef*, so it is reasonable to assume readers who try to match characters with real people might draw similar conclusions about the role, attitude – and ethics – of political communicators, including 'special adviser' Geoff Maddle and Director of Strategy and Communications, Charlie McDonald. Together they made Downing Street the most efficient, most revered and most feared PR outfit in the whole of Europe: 'Foreign governments sent their Charlie MacDonald wannabes to study at the court of the master: to learn how carrots, sticks, black eyes, blackmail, saccharine and smears, seduction and schmooze can all be deployed to keep the government at the top of the news agenda; how the media could be flattered and cowed into submission; how difficult journalists could be neutralised; and how inconvenient stories could be killed by kindness, by cunning or by cutting some bastard's balls off.' (2004: 30). It is Maddle who does the much of the hands-on dirty work: 'Success for [him] was when a story did not appear, when a dog did not bark.' (Ibid: 30). As we note earlier, this is an area of PR that, as some of its more persuasive critics point out, gets very little attention. 'Professional project' definitions simply don't talk about the art of suppression, but it is at the heart of *Spin* in which the Lancelot computer system provides ammunition for blackmail, and *Conflict*, whose Lomboids owe their success to a hugely successful (and hopefully entirely fanciful), supersecret and murderous media surveillance unit.

The fictional reframings engineered by Shea, by Lancaster, and most notably Michie certainly suggest the expertise of PR, boils down to *gamesmanship*, and that the professional judgement of PR practitioners ultimately is a judgement about what one can get away with in public. To an extent, eschewing ethics aids such characters, and bolsters the view that using PR as a code for distortion and lies has legitimacy in fictional realities.

Morris and Goldsworthy (2008) note that PR complainers want their industry to be taken seriously and resent the way it is satirised without realising that successful satire must have basis in fact. Fiction has no obligation to deal in fact – but it must be convincing, it must create characters and situations which resonate with perceived expectations. In this brief account it is demonstrated that for many novelists, not least those with experi-

ence of PR, gamesmanship is inextricably linked with success. Not only do the nice guys not finish first, they are often not even in the race.

## Conclusion

The professional public relations project underscores ethics, transparency and truthfulness as guiding principles for a successful practice but we argue that this picture, for various reasons, does not make sense. In mass media coverage, practitioner biographies and other non-fictional sources successful practitioners publicly bear witness to a practice that has little to do with unconditional commitment to these ideals. Fictional accounts, which have to resonate with the frames of reference of the audience to be convincing, also expose an image of the practitioner as someone who is more than willing to engage creatively with the official rules in order to please their clients. In addition, companies pay handsome amounts of money to consultants. Would they do so if the expertise they bought was as simple as providing unbiased information and safeguarding societal interests?

Our point is that public relations cannot be as straightforward as the official discourse claims. In this paper we suggest that by placing these anomalies within a framework of gamesmanship we may be able to conceptualize public relations' professionalism and success as something quite different. What the client pays for is not someone who tells the truth and nothing but the truth (anyone could do that); the client actually buys expertise in serious rule bending, carried out by actors who appreciate how far the official and unofficial rules can be stretched without getting caught. This line of reasoning leaves us with another way of understanding the professionalism/success-divide: In PR, professionalism is not about adhering to rules but more accurately about bending them – but *not* breaking them – in a true spirit of gamesmanship.

Our contribution in this paper constitutes first and foremost an exploration of the system of gamesmanship. The reason to pursue this matter leads back to academia, however. For PR academics, the divide between the official discourse about public relations professionalism on the one side and the actual, 'real' practice on the other has serious implications. For instance, it raises questions concerning public relations pedagogy, education and research. What are the consequences for students planning a career in communication if they are wholeheartedly taught the official version of public relations as having left the dark ages – and then the practice they meet differs substantially from their training? Will they be successful? Other consequences originate from the pervasiveness of the official accounts as they are constructed by scholars, practitioners and other actors. If the professionalism-equals-success discourse is continuously sanctioned as the truth, it will hamper our ability to question and fully understand the multifaceted practice of public relations. Our suspicion is that many of the problems PR academics face – such as limited acceptance by practitioners, continuous doubts about the value of 'studying PR' – are due to our inability, or unwillingness, to face up to this divide.

Finally we want to put emphasize that this paper is not a condemnation of PR practitioners, rather it is a plea for public relations academics to conduct their discussions with greater candour and demonstrate a more robust appreciation of real world behaviours. We must come to the point where students no longer have to read between the lines to learn how the real job is done in the real world.

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