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The hacks and flacks of old in Frith's 'A Private View at the Royal Academy, 1881' Wikimedia Commons

How arts journalism can thrive in the age of PR

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Public relations and arts journalism are inextricable. And so, unlike in other areas of the media, the influence that PR has on the arts sections of newspapers and magazines is not so contentious. But the scope of its influence has frequently been declaimed in the context of cuts to newspaper arts budgets – what original thought can there be in myriad identical reviews, some say?

The influence of PR on news journalism has long been the subject of debate. In 2008, Cardiff University's School of Journalism found the content of domestic news stories in our quality media was heavily dependent on "pre-packaged news". In 2011 a nameless News International employee told the Daily Mail that under the stewardship of Rebekah Brooks, the Sun and The News of the World were in thrall to the PR industry. "Scores, if not hundreds, of front-page stories were written by the PR men," he said.

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They would think up a headline and story and The Sun and News of the World would run it, word for word. Some of them were complete fiction. Meanwhile, proper stories by proper journalists were buried deep inside the paper.

And as Nick Davies records in his 2008 book *Flat Earth News*, at the time of writing the UK government had 1,500 press officers, issued 20,000 press releases a year, and spent millions on PR firms. The foreign office alone spends £600m a year on "public diplomacy".

Access and enlightenment

While such high profile stories are rare in the arts sector, the influence of PR on arts journalism is nonetheless a hot topic. In 2012, Rozalia Jovanovich wrote in the Washington Observer:

Now more than ever, PR controls access (or at least tries to) in the art world – when journalists know things, how we know things, whether or not we get to know things in the first place.

Just last month Sarah Kent wrote of art galleries in the UK:

Box office returns are of paramount importance, so to ensure a good press, galleries micro-manage media response. At press views, the curator will often take a hoard of hacks on a tour of the exhibition and tell them what to write – they traipse off to file obsequious reports scarcely having glanced at the show, and everyone is happy.

But it is obviously necessary that arts reviews rely on press viewings, screenings, and the like. On a basic level, a press officer will be responsible for sending press releases to journalists, inviting them to screenings or first nights and generally enlightening them to any activity that their client maybe involved in. Press officers “provide insight, quotes and access to spokespeople” that would otherwise be unavailable, as communications professional Amanda Guisband put it.



The paparazzi. internets dairy, CC BY-SA

This is a key point. Where else would an arts correspondent get interview access to a leading actor, a trip to a film set, or information on a project yet to reach pre-production? The PR company strictly controls that access. Let us not imagine that this is an entirely new development either. The elite have always appeared on stage and screen because they have something to promote, they have always been booked through agents.

Symbiosis

So there are two ways of seeing modern PR and its relationship with culture. The relationship between arts journalists and press officers is of course mutually beneficial. But whether this is a good or a bad thing depends on the critic. One may view it in benign terms, as the necessary process of engagement with public opinion. Despite the occasional reciprocated antipathy, both parties are aware of their symbiotic connection. One cannot survive without the other.

Then there is the view, common among many journalists and defenders of the integrity of the arts, that PR has a corrosive and malign influence. Writing in 2003, journalist and commentator, Bryan Appleyard, stated:

It is a disease, a virus that has infected all show business, celebrity and sport reporting. It is now threatening to infect all journalism and, in the name of truth, it has to be stopped.

A balance of influence must be struck. PR officers are crucial to arts journalists, but the table must not turn to the extent that ready-made articles and identical reviews are the result. This is of course difficult in the light of the steadily reducing number of arts journalists working for the national papers – areas of expertise being spread thinner and thinner – here the “here’s one we made earlier” press release is likely to come very handy.

Add to that the way in which the press officer’s role is getting far more complicated in today’s digital landscape. Mastering social media is the key to success. This means that the days of critical reviews meaning the difference between success and failure of a play, a film, or an exhibition, are gradually drawing to an end.

Reviewing isn’t dead

The emergence of Twitter and Facebook has meant that reviewers and critics can be bypassed altogether as celebrities use social media to promote and communicate directly to audiences. So tweets, status changes and information about forthcoming events can be regularly imparted without recourse to traditional media channels.



Press night is no longer the be all and end all. nattynattyboom, CC BY-NC-SA

It's no wonder then that arts correspondents may feel so threatened and irritated by the influence of PR. There is now a multiplicity of voices, opinions, surrounding the arts – the reviewer no longer has the authority of old. This means that the nature of reviews has changed, as Siobhan Waterhouse explained in *The Guardian*:

Arts publicists are starting to realise that rather than desperately crossing your fingers for a good review in the daily newspaper, reviews are now about creating dialogue, offering diverse standpoints, highlighting perspectives and giving people another reason to want to come to the theatre, performance or gig. Reviewing will never die out, it's just evolving.

This is the way forward for arts journalism, surely. The stage can be opened for multiple voices. Journalists and PR people working together, checking the facts of releases and adding journalistic flair and realism to what may be pure puffery. The crossover between blogging and reviewing should also be increased.

Embrace the dark side

It is pointless to continually decry PR as the “dark arts”. It's not going to go away. Universities run BA degrees in Journalism and Public Relations combined, and figures suggest that PR professionals outnumber traditional journalists by 4:1. Ironic as it may be, this fact may actually strengthen the position of the correspondent.

As PR guru **Marc Cowlin** has indicated, in this competitive environment, attracting the attention of a journalist is harder than ever. If you aren't employing new tactics in targeting and engaging journalists in your media relations you may as well stop altogether.

These are perilous times for the arts generally. In June **The Guardian** reported that more than four-fifths of English subsidised arts companies could lose their funding completely as a result of arts council cuts. This would decimate a number of arts organisations across the country and leave artistic and economically viable enterprises at the mercy of the market. **Sally O'Neill**, interim director of the Royal Opera House, has made a heartfelt call to for interested parties to lobby their local MP.

There is quality arts journalism out there – the problem is that it often occurs as a reaction to news about the arts, rather than arts events themselves.

Arts at the vanguard

It is not all doom and gloom. There is the **Observer's Anthony Burgess prize** for arts journalism, **Sky Arts 1 and 2**, the highly readable **Sunday Times culture section** and the **Culture Professionals Network** in **The Guardian** online. But in today's fractured media world where conventional newspapers and the terrestrial broadcasters have limited time and space to focus on anything other than virtually identical reviews of the same highly publicised vehicles, arts journalism must promote through a variety of sites.

This, of course, is already the case. In these times of austerity where everything has its price, and culture too is commodified, we should celebrate arts journalism and explore the new horizons. We need commentators and critics to cut through the marketing and provide evaluation and elucidation. In the words of **Robert McCrum**:

The arts journalist is the correspondent from that alternative front line. Where some writers are herbivores or carnivores, hedgehogs or foxes, the arts journalist is an omnivore. In the English tradition, the great omnivores, from Dickens and Shaw to Peter Ackroyd and Will Self, have the kind of appetite for culture, in all its uplifting variety, that seems to push the world of the imagination to the limit and then some.

The usefulness of the arts cannot and never should be determined by its economic worth. Human expression in an age of technological dominance must fight to survive and prosper – and arts journalism must be at the vanguard of this struggle.

*This is a foundation essay for **The Conversation's** new **UK Arts + Culture** section. If you are an academic or researcher with relevant expertise and would like to respond to this article, please use our **pitch facility**.*