**'Reconceptualising transparency in journalism: thinking through secrecy and PR press releases in news cultures'**

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## Abstract

This article re-examines debates about transparency in journalism by using a sociological framework that analyses how transparency is held in a dynamic tension with secrecy. I use a specific empirical case study as the grounding for my analysis and then proceed to expand its scope to consider significant developments in transparency in the media. I take as my case study the relationship between UK journalists and public relations (PR) practitioners. Specifically, I analyse the ways in which press releases are shaped by PR practitioners, targeted at journalists, and are taken up by journalists in a UK news media context in which such 'information subsidies' may be becoming ever more prevalent. Reframing transparency as one element in a compound phenomenon (the secrecy–transparency dynamic), I argue that practices of both transparency and secrecy are not merely *situated within* social contexts but are *active in creating* society and social relations. This approach pays close attention to how power operates in this shifting dynamic and offers new challenges for thinking about journalism's role in society.

## Keywords

## Introduction

This article re-examines debates about transparency in journalism by using a sociological framework that analyses how transparency is held in a dynamic tension with secrecy. I use a specific empirical case study as the grounding for my analysis and then proceed in the latter part of the article to expand its scope to consider significant developments in transparency in the media through the lens of the secrecy–transparency dynamic. I take as my case study

the relationship between UK journalists and public relations (PR) practitioners, focusing on press releases which remain a key tool for the PR industry to influence media content. I analyse how press releases are shaped by PR practitioners, targeted at journalists, and are taken up by journalists in a UK news media context in which such 'information subsidies' may be becoming ever more prevalent. As I discuss in the methodology section, the material used in this article is based on interviews rather than textual analysis of press releases as my aim is to explore how UK PR practitioners and journalists experience producing, receiving and working with press releases. This case study was selected as PR press release material informs a significant proportion of UK news media content, yet this fact is not transparent to the public. This has potentially far-reaching consequences for public trust in news media. In studies of journalism there has been increasing interest in transparency in news media production, but less focus on understanding the wider social significance of 'transparency' as discourse and practice and no analysis of how transparency is paired with secrecy as a social dynamic.

The article advances debates in several key ways. It adds to debates in journalism studies by introducing a sociological framework for understanding transparency that is embedded in UK social processes and social relations and that is sensitive to social change. It adds to debates about transparency in sociology – which tend to focus on areas such as data capture and governance, governmental practice, security studies, or social policy – by introducing a sociological analysis of news media's role as key vectors in the secrecy–transparency dynamic inspired by Georg Simmel's (1906) work. Simmel himself did not analyse mediated communication, so this article contributes new insights about news media to sociological research that uses Simmel's framework. The case study is based on UK material, as I discuss further in the methodology section below, but the secrecy–transparency framework can be utilised across different time periods and national contexts. Therefore, while socially situated in the UK, this case study acts as a prompt for other research to use this framework to capture other manifestations of transparency and secrecy in diverse contexts.

Transparency is an important focus for academic work across many disciplines. In various national contexts, transparency tends to be mooted as a self-evident good, a necessity for democratic culture, and a key (if contested) goal in the public sphere. However, in the context of news media, the principle of transparency is in tension with the

widespread, unacknowledged use of PR press releases which obfuscates both the origin of that material and the vested interests of those promoting it, while according it a veneer of critical journalistic scrutiny. On one level, this appears a straightforward opposition between an undesirable lack of transparency driven by PR practices and a laudable search for the facts driven by journalism. But there are broader socially embedded discourses and practices at play. Reframing the analysis of these issues through sociological understandings of the secrecy–transparency dynamic can capture this wider significance.

Secrecy tends to be understood as the antonym of transparency and is generally figured as negative, or at least potentially problematic if used for socially detrimental or unethical ends. To fully understand the specific manifestation of transparency in any one culture at any one time, we must focus on secrecy–transparency as a compound phenomenon, the elements of which are held in a dynamic tension which continually shifts and responds to broader societal changes. Secrecy–transparency can be therefore understood as a composite entity in which the salience of each element will vary according to time and place, as will their manifestations in any particular social context. This framework pays close attention to how the dynamic organises power relations and posits, following Georg Simmel's (1906) work, that practices of both transparency and secrecy are not merely *situated within* social contexts but are *active in creating* society and social relations. This has a significant impact on how we might think about the relationship between power and information today.

The next section discusses the methodology of the project on which this article is based. The following section introduces the conceptual framework and moves on to discuss the literature on transparency as it relates to journalism and PR. The subsequent section analyses interview data and contextual material to explore the changing relationship between UK journalists and PR practitioners and examines the use of PR press releases. The final section frames an analysis of the broader significance of this relationship through sociological theories of secrecy–transparency and reflects upon the significance of this framing for understanding the interface between power and information.

**Methodology**

The empirical data on which this article is based comprises 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews undertaken in 2020-21 with UK journalists, editors, PR practitioners and representatives of PR trade bodies. The topics of transparency and secrecy can be sensitive and challenging to study as they may involve discussions about trade secrets or exposing practices of ambiguous ethical character, and may thus deter some potential participants. My participant recruitment aimed to capture a range of perspectives but was also, for pragmatic reasons, influenced by serendipity (I recruited some participants through snowballing from existing participants). I approached journalists and editors from UK national news outlets (including broadcast and press), PR practitioners from large and smaller agencies as well as in-house practitioners (working within companies or institutions) and the trade bodies of the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) for industry-level responses.

Participants varied in terms of age and ethnicity, but were predominantly middle class. As this was a qualitative study with a relatively small sample, no statistically significant findings can be identified in terms of demographics. Participants could chose to be named or remain anonymous, and approximately half chose anonymity. The interviews were transcribed and analysed with Atlas.ti software using a series of codes based on my project design and research questions, although I also introduced some codes based on issues raised in the interviews (in an inductive approach). In the following, participant quotations from interview material are distinguished from quotations from literature by marking them as P1, P2 etc..

This article focuses on how journalists and PR practitioners discuss their practices relating to the production, circulation and take up of PR press release material and, due to space constraints, does not focus on a textual analysis of press releases. This forms an empirical case study or vignette from which to explore the more general analytical relationship of transparency to secrecy. I have discussed issues of transparency and secrecy relating to other aspects of journalists' work such as Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and Non-disclosure Agreements (NDAs) elsewhere (Cronin 2023).

The selection of the UK as the context for this study was largely pragmatic as the empirical work of this project was unfunded and I am UK based. Media ecologies are specific to particular national contexts reflecting, for example, legislative frameworks and funding

models, and the ways in which transparency as a discourse are socially embedded will vary considerably between contexts. It is evident that not all nations are oriented by principles of transparency. This article therefore provides empirical case study material that adds to debates about journalism in the UK but also introduces an analytic framework that can be mobilised in different national contexts. Simmel's (1906) account of secrecy and transparency makes clear that while they are fundamental practices in all human societies, the relationship between them, and their social manifestation, will vary considerably according to historical period and any particular geographical context. This suggests that while there is significant empirical variance, Simmel's conceptual framework can be productively mobilised for analysing a range of periods and contexts.


**Conceptual framework: the secrecy–transparency dynamic**


Debates about transparency in the media often use Habermas' (1991) account of the public sphere as their framing. By offering an alternative framework of Simmel's (1906) work I am contributing a new perspective to analyses of transparency and the media. Equally, sociological accounts drawing on Simmel rarely focus on the media, and thus this analysis offers new insights to sociology. More specifically, I propose that we can understand the significance of the evolving relationship between journalism and PR through sociological understandings of secrecy and of transparency and the dynamic tension that exists between them. Further, the case study of PR press releases provides an entry point to rethinking the significance of transparency in journalism more generally. Georg Simmel's (1906) classic account has inspired social science analyses of secrecy and remains one of the most nuanced and productive ways of exploring secrecy's interface with transparency.

Simmel (1906: 441) argued that all societies and individual connections are based on relationality, one element of which hinges on knowing something about another – ensuring a common ground and a degree of trust – but also on forms of ignorance: 'all relationships of people to each other rest, as a matter of course, upon the precondition that they know something about each other'. At the same time, societies' relations are based on the absence of certain knowledge or the practices of withholding knowledge. On an individual level, this can be seen in the 'intensity and shading in the degree in which each unit reveals

himself to the other through word and deed' (Simmel 1906: 441). Each relationship, therefore, involves reciprocal knowledge but also certain reciprocal concealment. In this way, Simmel considered secrecy a universal form that can be found in every society at any period of history.

Simmel took care to point out that secrecy is not in itself negative or morally suspect: secrecy 'has nothing to do with the moral valuations of its contents' (1906: 463). Secrecy is a social form and, indeed, what he considered a core skill of humanity:

> Secrecy… is one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity. In contrast with the juvenile condition in which every mental picture is at once revealed, every undertaking is open to everyone's view, secrecy procures enormous extension of life, because with publicity many sorts of purposes could never arrive at realization. Secrecy secures, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside of the obvious world, and the latter is most strenuously affected by the former. Every relationship between two individuals or two groups will be characterised by the ratio of secrecy that is involved in it.
>
> (Simmel 1906: 462)

Secrecy enables individuals and groups to pursue their ends by restricting knowledge of their intentions (and resources, interests etc). For Simmel, secrecy was such a core feature of social relations that he considered it possible to categorise all social relationships precisely by the degree of secrecy they exhibited.

Simmel argued that secrecy actively *creates* social relations because it forms groups of those who are party to the secret (and any benefits it may bring) and those who are excluded from it. Knowledge of the secret bonds one group and ties the cohesion of that group to the secret:

> The strongly accentuating exclusion of all not within the circle of secrecy results in a correspondingly accentuated feeling of personal possession. For many natures possession acquires its proper significance, not from the mere fact of having, but besides that there must be the consciousness that others must forgo the possession.
>
> (Simmel 1906: 464)

The appeal of the secret is not simply the fact of knowing it, but the fact that others are excluded from knowledge of it, according that select group a special status and specific powers.

In this way, secrecy not only creates groups but organises power relations, the specific form of which will vary according to time and place. Secrecy also confers an aura upon that which is withheld (the content of the secret). This is what Simmel calls 'the charm of the secret': 'just as the moment of the disappearance of an object brings out the feeling of its value in the most intense degree' (Simmel 1906: 465). This sets in play a dynamic tension of concealment and the desire for revelation which combines, 'the retentive and the communicative energies' that exist in all social relations (Simmel 1906: 466). Simmel contrasted secrecy with what he termed 'publicity', or the making public/making known of issues, information or interests. It is the dynamism in the relationship between the drive for secrecy and the drive for publicity – the lure of the secret – that creates social relations.

'Publicity' takes various forms across cultures and time periods, and in today's Euro-American democratic societies, arguably one of its most dominant discursive forms is 'transparency'. As outlined in the following section, transparency has become a core social principle in many societies, valued for its consonance with democratic practices. Simmel's account suggests that an analysis of the specific form that the secrecy–transparency dynamic takes at any one point and in a specific culture will offer valuable material for understanding those societies. It sheds light on the structuring of social relations and the formation and maintenance of power relations through the access to – and denial of access to – knowledge, and the creation of groups and institutions. It is important to emphasise that in Simmel's framework, publicity (here as manifested as transparency) should not be seen as the opposite of secrecy, nor the solution to what tends to be framed as the 'problem' of secrecy. Transparency exists as a composite with secrecy and co-evolves with it. They must therefore be thought together.

**Transparency as principle and practice**

In many democratic national contexts, transparency has become a key principle that is thought to foster democratic culture, meaningful public engagement, accountability and a range of organisational practices that are framed as progressive, such as corporate social responsibility. Organisations are under pressure to stitch principles of transparency into their practices (Christensen and Cornelissen 2015) as transparency is figured as an unambiguous good or, as Birchall (2011: 8) puts it, 'a virtue' which can accumulate 'transparency capital' as reputational value for an organisation or institution. In general terms, transparency tends to be framed as access to information or data (see Birchall 2021) and, indeed, there exist many organisations using tools to enhance such transparency, for instance, in *Transparency International's* anti-corruption work.[1] Yet framing transparency simply as access to information can mitigate against acknowledging its other manifestations, such as organisational transparency (see Albu & Flyverbom 2019; Weiskopf 2023).

While many organisations and democratic governments may subscribe to general principles of (circumscribed) transparency and may therefore alter their data policies – sometimes driven by legislation – such initiatives may not deliver robust forms of openness. Transparency understood as governmental openness, for instance, may be framed by governments as, 'a condition achieved by the state' rather than any initiatives that may foster genuine two-way engagement between the public and government (Moore 2018: 420). Here, the enactment of transparency measures has a rather patrician orientation, imposed by, and assessed by, government according to its own terms. Some organisations gesture towards transparency, simply ensuring the consistency and coherence of their organisational disclosures as a performance of openness rather than a commitment to genuine openness (Christensen and Cornelissen 2015: 144). They can engage in transparency practices as a form of 'visibility management' which involve decisions about 'who can observe whom, which activities are opened up and kept closed, and which objects and processes are subjected to transparency efforts and which are not' (Flyverbom 2016: 111, 112). Further, in a very counter-transparent mode, transparency measures may be strategically deployed by an organisation as a preventative measure to deflect calls for enhanced regulation of its sector (Etzioni 2010). Efforts to engage with principles of transparency can also result in what Stohl, Stohl and Leonardi (2016: 123) term 'the

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[1] Transparency International https://www.transparency.org.uk/. Accessed 15/3/24.

transparency paradox' in which the release of vast volumes of information can in fact hamper understanding by overwhelming possibilities for analysis of that material, thus stymying transparency. While the transparency paradox effected by information overload is sometimes unintentional, they suggest that some organisations may deliberately use this as a technique of 'strategic opacity' to conceal sensitive information (Stohl, Stohl and Leonardi 2016: 133). In PR practice, this technique is known as 'snowing' or 'data-bombing' (see Cronin 2023).

Viewed through this wider lens, transparency can be understood as a form of neoliberal governance which can justify certain practices and ensure the continuation of specific modes of governing (Fenster 2017). Such approaches to transparency draw on Michel Foucault's classic work on panopticism, power and governance. Foucault (1980: 152) situated the form of disciplinary power instantiated by panopticism within a wider societal 'project of a universal visibility' in European societies from the eighteenth century onward. Here, visibility did not lead to liberty or democracy but was rather part of an exercise of '"power through transparency", subjection by "illumination"' (Foucault 1980: 154). Transparency, therefore, is an ambiguous principle, the practical application of which can have a range of paradoxical, unintended, or unexpected consequences. It is also clear that transparency alone is not the solution for problems with democracy more generally, and accountability more specifically (Birchall 2021; Etzioni 2010).

In debates about journalism, transparency is considered almost unanimously as a key element of democratic culture (see Curran 2022; Gans 2003; Reese 2021; Rusbridger 2019). Transparency is often understood in both academic analysis and by journalists themselves as the 'ways in which people both inside and external to journalism are given a chance to monitor, check, criticize and even intervene in the journalistic process' (Deuze 2005: 455). Studies of transparency in journalism have taken a range of angles examining, for instance, its impact on credibility (Chadha & Koliska 2015; Karlsson & Clerwall & Nord 2014), its potential as a cure for lack of public trust in journalism (e.g. Karlsson 2020), the significance of editorial text for establishing transparency and trust (Haapanen 2022), the potential of data journalism for enhancing transparency (Zamith 2019), or the degree to which transparency about (inadequate) sourcing and verification practices decreases public trust in online journalism (Manninen 2020). Modes by which transparency might be achieved have been assessed relating, for instance, to the impact of transparency tools in

making news selection visible (Karlsson & Clerwall 2018) or publicising journalists'
backgrounds (Johnson & St. John III 2021). But engagement with transparency practices in
journalism is not always motivated by the intention of increasing societal benefit:
transparency can also be deployed as a strategic performance to enhance journalistic
authority (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau 2022).

In studies of journalism, transparency as a concept is also used in highly variable ways
and is contested both as a norm and as a goal:

> On the one hand, transparency is discursively constructed as a legitimate norm of the
> journalistic field. In its strongest form, it is the new objectivity, the natural heir
> apparent as the ruling principle of journalism in the twenty-first century. It is the
> natural product of journalism in the age of the internet, able to deliver a vast set of
> journalistic and social goods. On the other hand, it is an overbearing, disordered force.
> It is overboard, its advocates are overwrought, and the public is left overwhelmed. It
> provides the opposite of what it promises—instead of clarity we are left with
> obfuscation. Worst of all, it is naïve; and it is soft. All of which is to say,
> that transparency, for all of its discursive advancement, is probably not
> a *settled* institutional norm.
>
> (Vos & Craft 2017: 1516)

Transparency can be a useful entry point for understanding the relationship between
journalists and PR practitioners. Equally, the relationship between PR and journalism offers
important insights into how the secrecy–transparency dynamic operates in news culture.

**The relationship between journalists and PR practitioners**

Although the relationship between UK journalists and PR practitioners can be characterised
by certain continuities over time, we can also identify some key transformations. Many of
these changes derive from shifts in news culture, media finance models, digital innovations,
and journalistic practice. Indeed, there is a growing number of alternative news media
(Cushion 2023). UK journalism is under intense financial pressures, as many studies and

reports have noted (e.g. Cairncross 2019; Media Reform Coalition 2023). In the UK and beyond, the 24-hour news cycle demands increased content with tight deadlines and journalists must produce material for social media and other digital forms alongside their standard reporting (Le Cam & Domingo 2015; Waisbord & Russell 2020). Compounding this pressure, the industry employs fewer journalists as news outlets attempt to reduce their costs (Cairncross 2019). As a journalist at a national newspaper in my study noted, 'we have been much more tightly focused…. We can't afford to waste time and resources' (P 33).

In parallel, there has been a marked decline in investment in investigative journalism. This is the sub-field most associated with journalism's critical edge and its capacity to hold individuals, corporations and governments to account (Leigh 2019), but is one of the most resource-intensive forms of journalism. All the journalists in my study commented that while good investigative journalism still exists, it is restricted to the most well-financed media outlets. In an interview, Jim Waterson, *The Guardian* newspaper's media editor, described how, 'in terms of the …. nitty gritty of getting into a very long investigation, and pulling off a team of people and committing to a story, there are very few outlets with the ability and capability to do that' (P2).

As the pressures on UK journalism have been widely discussed in academic literature I will not provide an extensive review. For the purposes of this article, I wish to highlight how such shifts open up a space for PR to extend its influence. As an industry, PR comprises various specialisms such as Public Affairs (focusing on lobbying) and events organisation, but it is the area of PR media relations that has particular significance for studies of news culture and journalism (for an overview see Bourne 2022; Edwards 2018; Moloney & McGrath 2020). Media relations PR centres on securing media coverage – in both mainstream and alternative media – through creating content (often in the form of press releases) and pitching that material to journalists. It also involves managing client visibility on their 'owned media' (their web sites and own social media feeds etc), monitoring and enhancing client reputation, and managing various official communications.

As well as growing in scale, the UK PR industry has, arguably, enhanced its capacity to influence news content (Cronin 2023, 2018; Moloney & McGrath 2020). The Census 2021

records 43,525 'public relations professionals' in England and Wales[2] compared to 24,630 'newspaper and periodical broadcast journalists and reporters'.[3] As I explore below, this media and financial context means that journalism in general, and especially local journalism, becomes heavily reliant on PR press release material, used either as a steer towards potential stories or more directly as news content, in what has been termed 'information subsidies' (Gandy 1982).

The relationship between journalists and PR practitioners is both interdependent and rife with tensions (Davis 2013; Lloyd & Toogood 2015; Sissons 2016). In my study, journalists and PR practitioners described their relationship as multi-layered and ambivalent. A minority of journalists remarked that some PR practitioners and their press releases can serve a positive function in supporting news culture provided that they are open about their interests and that their material can be trusted. However, most journalists in my study had a more critical view. A PR practitioner gave a typical response: 'it's quite a parasitic relationship where I never really felt like any of us really liked the other' (P27). Participants noted that journalism relies to varying degrees on PR press releases, and PR practitioners require access to journalists to place PR-generated material in the mainstream media. But while there is a certain mutual interdependence, there are also profound tensions: PR practitioners are oriented by their clients'/employers' interests, such as enhancing reputation or sales and diminishing reputational damage by obscuring negatives or diverting attention towards other stories (Curry Jansen 2017). Unsurprisingly, journalists often experience such activities as obstructive. As a former journalist describes:

I would say there was a time when most press officers, especially for public bodies, [saw] it as their job to facilitate reporters in doing their job. I mean, obviously, they

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[2] Office for National Statistics. Census 2021.
https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/howmanypeopledomyjob/2023-05-31

[3] Office for National Statistics. Census 2021.
https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/howmanypeopledomyjob/2023-05-31

were also there to defend their outfit, but now I do see it as a blocking operation very often. It's very bureaucratic, very hard to get through [to sources]. (P1)

As Alan Rusbridger, former editor of *The Guardian* newspaper, told me, 'that's essentially why you need journalists – to try and get the information and find out what it is they don't want to tell you' (P21).

At the same time, social media have enhanced journalists' capacity to contact potential sources in ways which bypass the gatekeeping activities of PR practitioners. As Jim Waterson notes, journalists at certain outlets can use their leverage in productive ways:

Access is easier for someone in a high-end publication like *The Guardian* or *The Financial Times* or something like that. I can very quickly get direct contacts through social media, on *LinkedIn* or *Twitter* [now *'X'*], to people who previously would have been hidden behind corporate press officers. (P2)

But more generally, journalists described the PR–journalist relationship as 'always adversarial' (P26, journalist at a national newspaper and former PR practitioner). Many journalists stated that PR practitioners were increasingly obstructive and unresponsive in that, 'they just won't answer basic facts, you know, confirming a very simple fact and they just won't be able to answer it' (P26). In turn, PR practitioners described how hard it can be to contact journalists and interest them in a story:

Journalists are quite difficult to deal with, particularly on the busy end of it and the very professional end of it. And quite rightly so. You need to be able to pitch ideas to them at the right time and in the right way. But too often, particularly in agency PR, it can quite often just be 'spray and pray' – just sending out stuff to news desks all over the place and then ring them up afterwards.

(P14, representative of a PR trade body)

Participants reported other changes such as a reduction in the number of press conferences and more selectivity in terms of what material is presented by PR practitioners to the media.

Overall, it is clear that PR–journalist relations are multilayered and very often riven with conflicting interests (see also McNair 2004); in the words of John Harrington, editor of the trade publication *PRWeek*, relations are 'always kind of fraught or can be fraught. Sometimes they can be very collaborative' (P19).

The ambivalence of the PR–journalism relationship is clearly derived from a range of structural issues, including vested financial interests, the operations of a market society, political orientations and their impact on news coverage, changes in the digital landscape, and social and political demands for transparency. But, as I suggest in the final section, we also need to understand such relationships as part of a broader set of discursive practices – those of the secrecy–transparency dynamic. These are derived from, and in turn act to shape, power relations, democratic culture, and what Foucault (1991: 73) called a 'regime of truth' or a society's '"general politics" of truth'. The following section focuses on a key vector of PR influence in the media sphere: press releases.

**PR press releases**

My study has explored how diverse pressures on journalism have led to an increased use of PR press releases. This trend has been noted for many years, as can be seen in classic accounts (Fishman 1980; Gans 1980) and more recent studies (Boumans 2018; Forde & Johnston 2013; Franklin 2010; Jackson & Moloney 2016; Lewis et al 2008a, 2008b; Macnamara 2016; McChesney 2012; Moloney & McGrath 2020; Philips 2010). Although there has been much debate within the PR industry about the supposed demise of the press release, it remains one of the key means by which PR practitioners pitch material to journalists in order to secure media coverage. As one PR practitioner put it, the press release is still, 'an important vehicle for an official statement' (P10). Indeed, the journalist Roy Greenslade commented in an interview that there were far fewer press releases in the past, and there was more opportunity to verify their content:

> Now, I grew up with press releases. Well, there weren't that many press releases, that's the truth, but you'd get perhaps a little note or a call or whatever, we're doing X or Y and then you could question them about it. That doesn't happen now…. The PR

[practitioner] will say to me, 'look we are honest because you know what our agenda is, we're promoting this, X or Y, or whatever, and then it's for you as a journalist to decide whether we're telling you whether it's right, whether it's wrong'…. But what we're not doing too much in journalism [now] is actually making that value judgement. (P20).

Greenslade's point was reflected in other journalists' comments which describe how the pressures on journalists have resulted in a decline of the critical perspective that professional journalists are able to bring to assessing information.

PR practitioners attempt to capitalise on journalists' time pressures by offering packaged copy. Press releases are strategically written in a style and format that can deployed in news content with very little amendment (see also Wheatley 2020). As participants in this study (and my previous study Cronin 2018) describe, PR practitioners are skilled in producing such pitches as many have had previous careers as journalists and therefore know how to attract journalists' attention. As press releases have negative associations among journalists as 'pre-digested', uncritical material, some PR practitioners are rebranding them 'news releases': 'I prefer to use the term "news release", because what's contained within that piece of copy is news, it's not just information. And it's news that's tailored to suit the media that it's been sent to' (P6, PR practitioner). While many journalists may be unimpressed by such rebadging, they are nevertheless placed in a position in which such material becomes attractive. Journalists commented on the large number of press releases they receive every day by email – often 50 to 60 – alongside various attempted contacts via social media (see also Mashiah 2021). Pressures on time, the reduced number of journalists employed in any one media outlet, and increased workload mean that press release material becomes an increasingly appealing news source. As one former journalist commented, in some (especially local) journalism, 'they're just turning round press releases' (P1). The head of a PR agency describes how they pitch a press release and the success rate they might typically achieve in terms of securing news coverage for their client:

If you want to be successful in terms of getting things in the media from a PR perspective, you need to be able to think like you're in the media. You need to think like you are selling something on behalf of someone who's paying you, and I think that's where success and failure lies….. So anything that we've sent out, whether it's nowadays video,…. graphics, written copy, it's all about thinking about how it's going to be used. [We've done] some research on activity that we've sent out, and in general about 80% of news content we send out is used as it is – so it's not changed. It might be topped and tailed, which is normal practice, but it's not really changed much. (P6)

As many of my study's participants commented, the press release is often used in its entire, original form, with minor edits to its framing at the beginning and end of the piece. Another PR practitioner describes how different versions of press releases are crafted and specific journalists are targeted with a personal email. This results in a very good take-up of the content in which the press release is frequently published with very few, if any, amendments:

We'll probably…. do, say, one to four different versions depending on where it's going. So we might have, like, a local release, a legals release, and then another release which is like a trade angle…. we'd never send it out to like 200 people and …. each release will probably go to a maximum of three to five journalists. And it will be with a personal email as well…. And we get a very good response with that. Yes, it takes us longer but, actually, if you're getting better results it doesn't matter. (P18)

It may be the case that PR material is used more extensively in some sectors than others. For instance, one PR practitioner working in the technology sector suggested that, 'pretty much everything is fed from PR to be honest. Hardly anything is sourced' (P10). This raises the important question of sectoral variance in the uptake of press release material, and more empirical research is needed in this area.[4]

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[4] See Kristensen (2018) for an analysis of information subsidies in cultural journalism.

It should also be noted that the affordances of digital media mean that traditional press release material is supplemented by social media content as, 'even a Tweet counts effectively as a press release nowadays cos it's the voice of a company speaking to the public' (P10, PR practitioner). In effect, social media give PR clients access to the public sphere in ways which can bypass journalism:

There is a growing awareness among higher level PRs representing corporates or prominent individuals that they have a different route to market which doesn't involve being filtered through the lens of a critical journalist who might not give them the headline that they want. You can go directly though social media. You can go directly to the public through other means.

(P2, Jim Waterson)

But mainstream UK news media still maintain a significant influence (Cairncross 2019) and as press releases are still the dominant means of distributing material and pitching to journalists, it is important to consider their impact on news culture, particularly in terms of transparency. To take one example, a former journalist described how the pressures on journalism have impacted on areas such as court reporting[5] and have inflated local journalism's reliance on police press releases:

If you look in any local newspaper or website, they'll have stories about…. local people who've been convicted of crimes in the magistrate's court. Well, all you're getting is a list of people who were found guilty. No reporter's ever been to that court. There's…. no account of what the defence of that person was. There's no report of what their plea in mitigation was…. you don't hear any of that. It's just 'so and so, such and such was done for it'. What's the source of that? It's the police. It's a police press release: *we're doing a good job. These are the criminals we've banged up*. Are they going to send you a press release about the ones that were found not guilty because the police hadn't done their job properly or have been found to have been

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[5] See also Chamberlain et al (2021).

giving false evidence or a notebook didn't stand up? You're never going to hear about it. So that's a disgraceful failure of journalism, really, because we're just getting a totally one-sided account of what goes on in the courts…. What it means is they're completely dependent on the press office. They only report the stories that get press released, don't they? (P1)

Such points highlight not only changes in journalistic practice over time – in this case, the decline of court reporting at a local level – but the broader significance of PR press releases in news culture in terms of transparency. The public is unaware of how such news content is sourced and verified (or not verified), and is therefore unable to evaluate its reliability, its significance, or the vested interests that may drive it.

**Rethinking transparency in journalism**

The preceding discussion of the data, and the conceptual framework of secrecy–transparency, reframes the significance of the PR–journalism relationship and the impact of press releases in news content. It suggests that we need to extend the analysis beyond assessing to the degree to which PR–journalist relations are collaborative or fraught, or the percentage of news content that is derived from PR press releases. Those are important issues, but they need to be set within broader questions about the interface between journalistic/PR practices and wider societal operations of secrecy–transparency which are themselves shaped by and, in turn, shape, power relations.

Seen through this lens, it is evident that journalism is a key player in the practices of what Simmel called 'publicity', manifest today in one significant form as transparency. As outlined above, journalists and academic critics alike emphasise journalism's role in ensuring democratic openness. As a PR practitioner in my study commented, 'if [journalistic] scrutiny falls, then transparency falls with it' (P29). Journalism seeks to uncover and make public facts, events, interests and analysis, and this (idealised) role is considered crucial to the practices of democracy (Schudson 2020). Openness comes to be valued both as a core principle of, and support for, democracy. As Simmel noted, 'Democracies are bound to

regard publicity as the condition desirable in itself' (1906: 469), and as Birchall puts it, 'transparency has become a sign of cultural, political and moral authenticity and authority' (2021: 69).

But Simmel also emphasised that publicity is paired with secrecy in a mutual and shifting relationship. Journalism has an intriguing place in this dynamic. As in Simmel's account of 'the charm of the secret', journalism is drawn to that which is concealed and it thrives on revelation. Each revelation stimulates the desire for further revelation – for if some secrets are brought to light, what else is yet to be uncovered? Journalistic and public interest is piqued and a rolling dynamic of concealment and revelation is heightened.[6] In this way journalism is thoroughly implicated in *both* secrecy and in transparency, operating as the hinge between them. PR's media relations techniques are designed to enhance positive publicity for a client (in securing the 'earned media' of news coverage through press releases, alongside a range of other techniques such as Search Engine Optimisation). But they also conceal negative aspects (for a more detailed account see Cronin 2023; Curry Jansen 2017). Journalism not only seeks to reveal and demystify – and thus push against PR's drive for reputationally-oriented publicity or concealment – but is also implicated in secrecy and its power relations through its engagement with, and oftentimes reliance on, press release material, the provenance of which is concealed from the public.

As indicated in earlier sections, researchers from diverse disciplines have argued that transparency in itself is insufficient to the task of securing democratic openness or a truly informed public (Birchall 2021; Etzioni 2010; Fenster 2017). This casts doubt on the value of simply using transparency tools that make legible how news stories are selected or render visible the background of journalists. Similarly, it is insufficient to foreground the scale of the use of material derived from press releases in news copy. Instead, there should be more emphasis on securing *accountability* (of governments, corporations, institutions, individuals). In the context of journalism, these deficiencies of transparency measures have been noted: as Schudson (2020) remarks, transparency is but one (often inadequate) route to accountability. Alongside what many perceive as an erosion of the critical lens of journalism, and the parallel rise in influence of PR press releases, many journalists in my study commented on an increasing lack of institutional, corporate and governmental

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[6] For a more detailed account of this dynamic in the media see Cronin (2023); Dean (2002).

accountability. As former journalist Gary Younge noted, 'there are more areas of unaccountable power than there were' (P22). Many commented that large corporations are closing down their communications and 'below the line' comments sections on their web sites. They do not feel the need to respond to press queries and, because of their own channels such as web sites and social media, do not require access to journalists as gatekeepers for media coverage. The interface between power relations and secrecy is here clearly manifest.

But to understand the significance of transparency in journalism more broadly – and thus why transparency measures alone are insufficient to the task – we must analyse not only how transparency and secrecy are yoked together but how they operate to *actively create* social relations in Simmel's terms. On one level, we can see how developments in PR practices of obfuscation or diversion, which are themselves built on the affordances of shifting media and technologies, will impact on journalistic practice which aims to uncover, demystify and analyse. In parallel, PR practice adapts to changes in journalism in order to better target journalists and secure media coverage (for instance, using social media rather than email to contact journalists, or offering specific types of copy through press releases). Further, we should consider that the social significance or meanings of secrecy change, just as publicity's meanings have shifted over time (today foregrounding 'transparency' as a dominant version). The principle that journalism uncovers information in the public interest is core to the profession's raison d'être, but as Alan Rusbridger told me in an interview:

Who decides [what's in] the public interest? So in matters of…. national security, the government will argue, 'well, we're the elected government so therefore we decide what the national interest is'. Well, you know anyone who's got five minutes reading of press history will know that that's a sort of nonsense argument. You would never have got the Pentagon papers…. [because] somebody would have been able to say it's not in the national interest to publish that. (P21)

This illustrates how the socially determined boundaries of what is, or should be, secret shift according to the dynamics of power – evident both in governmental control and in journalistic endeavour. For instance, the UK government announced in July 2023 that it is committed to 'implementing a number of recommended reforms to improve accountability

and transparency in public appointments' which will also tighten rules about lobbying and enhance visibility of vested interests.[7] But at the same time, there are ongoing discussions about amending the UK's Official Secrets Act which may make journalists vulnerable to prosecution in their attempts to research stories.[8] In parallel, what transparency means is subject to change. Openness and transparency are often associated with visibility (Brighenti 2007; Edwards 2020). But today the truth status of that which has been made visible has been disrupted by AI-generated content, deepfake videos and, more broadly, what has come to be understood by the public as 'fake news' (see Damstra et al 2021). Equally, ideas about the transparency of information are evolving such that there is now more expectation that information will be contextualised and interpreted for greater transparency, that processes (and not simply data) will be revealed, and that vested interests will be rendered more visible. Although these might well be journalistic precepts, they are not always enacted.

Relevant here is Foucault's argument that power and knowledge exist not as separate units but as a hybrid (power–knowledge) in a form of generative magnetic field which is capable of enacting change: 'Relations of power–knowledge are not static forms of distribution, they are "matrices of transformations"' (Foucault 1990: 99). Therefore, if Simmel (1906) was correct in arguing that the secrecy–transparency dynamic *makes* social relations – rather than simply being situated within them – then it is evident that both journalism and PR have significant roles in shaping society: they broker access to understandings and those understandings create social groups (and exclude others) and thus form power relations. This is a broader point than the well-established argument that news media are central in creating a public sphere or supporting democratic culture (see Habermas 1991). Framed in this way, press releases are not simply 'information subsidies'

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[7] 'Strengthening Ethics and Integrity in Central Government'. Cabinet Office. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1172005/CP_900_-_Strengthening_Ethics_and_Integrity_in_Central_Government_Accessible.pdf Accessed 15/3/24.

[8] The Law Commission (2020) Protection of Official Data Report. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fd0ea998fa8f54d60878a3b/Protection-of-Official-Data-Report-web.pdf. Accessed 15/3/24.

that signal shifting power relations between PR and journalism. They are part of a broader dynamic which creates groups and organises power relations, as Foucault suggests, both within the information sphere and beyond it. This points to how changes in secrecy–transparency in news culture, and the communication landscape more broadly, will impact significantly on society, while also highlighting how transformations in society will impact on PR, journalism, and the relationship between them.

Framing the issues raised by this article in terms of secrecy–transparency provides an alternative and more subtle starting point for understanding journalism's socially-situated role, its challenges and its potential. Newly intensified political capital centred on 'transparency' and its relationship to news media and democracy demonstrates the significance of such questions today. Further, analysing how transparency operates in journalism and PR gives crucial insights into social relations in terms of shifting and contested rights, corporate power, media ownership, changing technological affordances, and capitalist governance.

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